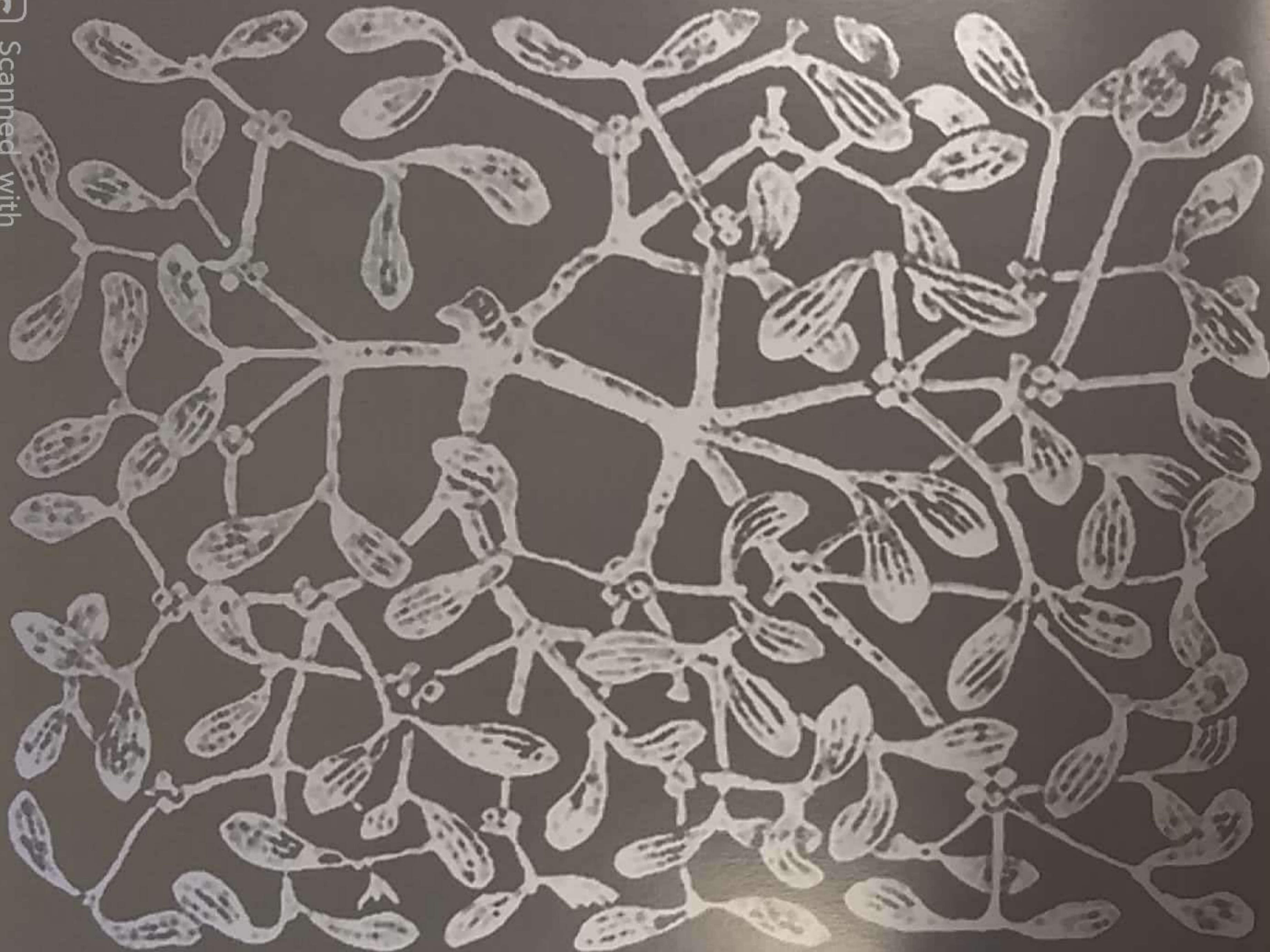


THE 41<sup>ST</sup> ANNUAL AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

writers'  
festival





THE 41<sup>ST</sup> ANNUAL AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

# writers' festival

MARCH 30-31<sup>ST</sup>, 2012



March 2012

**DESIGN AND PRODUCTION:**

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**SELECTION COMMITTEE:**

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Fiction and One-Act Play: Lauren Watel

This year's Festival Magazine was inspired by "Little Red Riding Hood." First published by Charles Perrault in 1697, the classic tale has many versions and interpretations. Our "Little Red" is strong, courageous and ultimately victorious. She does not need a Woodsman to come to her aid. The intense dialogue between Red and Wolf lingers as she travels along her path. As tensions rise to a dramatic climax, Red shines as she prevails, showcasing her resourcefulness, creativity and inner strength. Triumphant, the two travel onward in mutual agreement.

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Send any correspondence or inquiry regarding the Writers' Festival Magazine to Professor Amber Dermont, Department of English, Agnes Scott College, 141 E. College Ave., Decatur, GA 30030.

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Joy Harjo, Benjamin Percy and Jacqueline Goldfinger '00.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected by outside judges as finalist entries in the competition. The visiting writers make final decisions during the Festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the first place finalist in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival 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 Elizabeth Kiss, Dean of the College Caroln Stefano, Eleanor Hutchens '40 and the estate of Margret Trotter for their support. We also thank Professor Rachel Trousdale for organizing and overseeing the Writers' Festival Contest, Kirby Hager Johnson '06 for supervising and inspiring the design team, Christine Cozzens for her guidance, Demetrice Williams for event management support, Jennifer Champagne '14 for her inspired contributions and our outside selection committee for their time and careful reading.



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

Agnes Scott College  
141 E. College Ave.  
Decatur, GA 30030

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poetry

## UNIONS

Hank Backer  
Georgia State University

The rain coming again. Pooling here and there,  
the rising mist of everyone's prayers.

Sunset finally. When the sky and the earth  
hold luminous and darkening hands in prayer.

Two orange blossoms sag over a chlorinated pool.  
Love: my only always prayer.

Gauze of darkness tight around the porch light:  
decent eyes close when speaking a prayer.

A blind dog begs me for scraps, its mouth  
full of the first kind of prayer.

A moth with blind white eyes stares everywhere,  
choking on dust and its own quick prayers.

Somewhere, someone staring at the moon. So what?  
A sickle that never answers your prayers.

Ten fingers laced together—the question  
and the answer to every prayer.

Starlings sinking toward the center of a wire:  
fifty faces pressed down in prayer.

## EPILOGUE

Sydney Bolding  
University of West Georgia

You should know I didn't feel anything  
watching the mother of my father die,  
mouth apart in mid-yawn. Even death,  
I thought, must be boring. Only the residue  
of her name on the dry-erase, one light lit,  
flickering. You should know, too, I grabbed  
for the plug, for the tubes in both nostrils.  
Her son said no, selfishly waiting for the flat-line.  
Good thing his mother couldn't see this.  
It would kill her. And you should know  
I walked out, asked at the directory  
for a strait-coat, directions to the loony bin;  
that I didn't care for the funeral home  
turned botanical garden—roses, daisies, tulips,  
and all that. A red carpet, for Christ's sakes.  
Who wants to feel like royalty, parading  
down Chatsworth highway in a gleam of black?  
You should know I didn't attend—those men  
slinging dirt, filling the hole. You should know,  
instead, I ask for pardon, which is what this is.

## PEARLS

Alicia Marie Brandewie  
Emory University

When Hans bought the jewelry set—three pearls,  
each cradled at the tips of four gold petals—  
he was thinking only of his younger daughter.

A present from his solo return, his last, to Europe,  
the homeland. He had made the trip only once before,  
a family vacation when his little girl was seven.

He did not think of the possibility that she would become  
a jeweler, no longer wearing manufactured jewelry,  
and the earrings and necklace would be packed away.

Or that his granddaughter—born after his death—  
would find them in her mother's collection of scrap,  
and she would wear the drops in the American South

among girls in full strands—passed through generations  
or bearing expensive brands—but from the tilt of their heads,  
highlighting their luster, there would be no difference.

## PENGUINS

Jennifer Mary Brown  
Georgia State University

I wish I had winked at him on  
the sidewalk that evening when  
he said he had a penguin-shaped  
hole in his chest whenever

I wasn't around. Earlier, us giggling  
almost lovers outside, a bullet-proof  
tiny habitat, a glass jar bombed by  
those quick diving, fluffed feathers

of the Antarctic that I imitated all afternoon.  
In a small moat, still adorable in desperation,  
arching performing sea lions abound!  
The unkempt yard of a single polar bear;

atheists on the Sabbath as we were.  
He scratched his beard and we ambled,  
I hiked up my plaid skirt with brown ruffles,  
him in a grey cardigan and Irish cap,

itchy brown wool socks to my knees.  
Down Park Avenue, a Saturday  
afternoon in October, at the same age  
we looked like a May-December.

(At the zoo, months before the  
real beginning, when my  
flushed bursting heart fit in that  
aquatic hole inside of his.)

## SAFEWORD

Trista Marie Edwards  
University of West Georgia

"Most of our clients, I'm sure you are aware, are upscale."  
-Mistress Raven, Pandora's Box, NYC.

The senator demands I call him dirty  
Jew-boy when I bind his wrists to the wall,  
strike his elected flesh, raid his skin.  
In interview, pre-session, he bared red  
lipstick from his pocket. Use this, he said.  
I smear Kike, in Vintage Wine, across his chest,  
the waxen point trips over gray hairs.  
I wonder if his wife misses her lipstick.

He's not the first to insist, these men emerge  
every week. I nuzzle my boot into his  
hand, until I hear his teeth grind and squeak.  
I want to remove the weight of tongues,  
words that cling like menacing cuticles.  
Instead, I proceed. He eyes the red word  
on his chest, in the mirror next to the Saint  
Andrew's cross. His arms fold over the word,  
over his father, over his father's father.  
I wait for the word, our agreed upon mercy,  
but his lips only quiver as I belt my hand down  
his backside, he takes it with a grunt,  
as if every hit were for them,  
those who couldn't say stop.

## SEVENTEEN

Trista Marie Edwards  
University of West Georgia

In the woods she trips on an old mattress,  
soiled with neglect, specked with ticks.

The word fuck, graffitied in blue, as if  
its purpose were doubted. Her father treads

heavy behind, belt in hand. She stops,  
presses her hands to her thighs, dress torn at the hip,

legs gashed from briars and wrist bruised  
from her father's grip. She recalls, once,

his hands crafting a birdhouse, her 4th grade project,  
tactful angles, white finish, the autumn chill

that skimmed her neck and the touch of his  
cotton jacket as he wrapped it over her pale frame.

Some would marvel at how easy they appeared  
to ignore the technique of his hands, their constant moving.

Now, she remembers her room—his shampoo,  
tangled sheets, the 4-H trophy that fell off the shelf.

In the woods, her cheeks are pink like bubblegum,  
no longer flush with sex, but stung with February.

She picks up again, heads towards the highway,  
into the starry dark until she forgets to look back.

## GOODNIGHT, CHILDHEART

Laura Nelray Lilly  
University of Georgia

Here, come closer,  
lean in your ear for a  
whisper, to tickle your thoughts  
as you hear the whips,  
the undulation of curtains above the vent.  
There is a secret ship across the street.  
It is covered with a tarp,  
but I know even with the ground, steady  
and solid under our feet,  
it has sailed.

Now it is for sale, but it will not sell and  
will not be sold.

Do you hear the hum and squeak of cicadas?  
The rhythm and squeak of boards must have been like that,  
the music of the sea and squeak of sand.

I bet you could hardly hear that over the sound of stars,  
sound as good as rippling sails  
which buzz your ear hairs with dew,  
quiet and comforting and smooth.

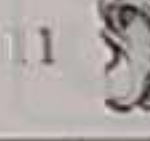
Make you certain  
You're safe, but this ship is not.  
It has torn through waves filled with terrapin  
striped with calligraphic grass patterns.  
It has tossed passengers will and nill but  
it does not sail now and will not sail though the sign says  
it will sit and wait,  
for passengers of pocketbooks are careful voyagers.  
It is funny we sometimes think they don't hear us,  
but they do.

And we too have been their goodnight thoughts.

## THE DOLLGIRLS

Calli Long  
Berry College

Broken, bloody feet parade  
in front of me, shimmering  
and sheathed in satin, at the bottom of downy silver  
swans, fairy wings and peasant girls  
while I count ribs, whose whimpering is drowned  
in the watery melodies  
pouring, seeping, trickling  
from the blackened pit hiding so conspicuously  
beneath the tulle-veiled heaven  
above. They have no faces.  
That is not what they are for.  
Instead I see translucent skin, a canvas  
as blank as the moon, pulled too tightly  
by hair pulled even tighter, stained lips sewn  
up into sugar plum smiles and glowing  
eyes framed by children's finger paint. It is a heavy mask—  
heavier than the jewel encrusted confections  
stapled to their flesh, and heavier still  
than their protruding bones, as silent and unmoving  
as the gills of a landed fish, the only things holding them  
to the ground they dare to defy.  
They have no faces.  
That is not what they are for.



## CROATIA

Andrea O'Rourke  
Georgia State University

Rain dripped from the recessed doorway. He undid her coat, talked, snaked about. *Vaffanculo*, she swore, and looked at cork oaks weathered into still black worms. He poured *mirto*, clean as baby breath, into frosted glasses, siphoned her wits until his words were streaming schools of fish. She edged back—*No, cazzo, tu resti qui*—and slammed the door. His lip twitched, the glass spilled, his body stiff, lifelike as a Pompeian. That was an old movie on channel two.

Meanwhile, open windows let the clouds in, muscular, fibrous, the air reeked of ox dung. An angel hung on a fishing line, limp over the kitchen sill, dangling over a soup bowl filled with lake water and a shiftless, floating lotus. At the window, the pond-eyed gypsy begged for coffee and sugar, her fingernails clogged with dried squid ink. She'd hum *Delem delem*, and it seemed as if the rain was the pulse of makeshift shanties—scraps of ridged vinyl and burlap—her people squatting around the ashes, horses roaming, grubby children slingshotting tin cans distant as boats, and a bull that saunters by, swings his massive bullhood.

Later, in the city, after we mastered the curfews, taping blankets to windows, the hysterical air raids, we'd run out, strain our eyes guessing where the planes were coming from. Men couldn't throw *boće* in the basement, so they sat on beer crates, played *briskula* instead, listened to the radio. Kids flocked to a pinball machine, an old toy, learned how to flip-slam until their palms ached and the worn metal ball was beat to a shade of dull lead. The soccer field gaped vacant and stubbly, a derelict, the sea tight-lipped like a thug. I'm not sure during which blackout the old woman pulled the rosary out, but there it was, on top of the folk music of patriotism, more drama—thumbing beads—each tiny skull at a time: one knot at its neck, another at its crown.

## SPARRING

Andrea O'Rourke  
Georgia State University

No word. A stack of unanswered calls pile like swathing layers of cotton hand wrap—perhaps a road trip with some busy American

who flaunts just enough foreign blood to count for charm, not oddity. Someone with no opinion on doves and shotguns, whose diction never fails as her breath fogs up your windshield.

The washed asphalt smells of rain now, and elm leaves hang too heavy to tremble like that day when gods and their mistresses came down hidden in rain drops—

little spectators with bated breaths ogled our quiet talk, made the elm, slick in its satin rain robe, splash its locks drenched in sweat. You said you loved the pungent fern-scent

of churned dirt and how, if you were in town, we'd rub each other raw in your hall's alcove: half-hidden, half-caught, our mouths dawn-mist over a river,

lips open, a dark wet triangle eddying back to the throat. Now the tight gullet, fixed as yesterday's daily slapped on the glazed sidewalk, the spilt Dixie cup of affection.

That spot in the dark, even though it is dark itself, where now I ward off blows, bob, hook like a boxer in training with the focus of the most solitary effort: just me, my uppercut.

Solitary not as in sad, or lonely. As in once.

## A THANK YOU NOTE TO THE SELVES IN THE WORLDS WHERE ALL SCENARIOS ARE PLAYED OUT

TJ. Sandella  
Georgia College & State University

We have indicated that it is possible to have a complete, causal theory of quantum mechanics... after awhile we would have a large number of individuals, sharing some memories with one another, differing in others, each of which is completely unaware of his "other selves" and under the impression that he is a unique individual. - Hugh Everett III, Physicist, 1957

My father didn't take off his belt and score my back raw, didn't leave imprints of his class ring across my cheek, didn't land facedown in his mashed potatoes, dead of a heart attack or a stroke, leaving his not-so-grieving family to fend for itself.

My mother didn't hate him, never lost to cancer in 1994, or left me to stew in a dirty diaper. She didn't feed me Xanax or stuff me in the washing machine on high cycle.

My sister didn't die of a drug overdose and wasn't drowned in the bathtub. She wasn't the victim of a pedophile uncle or cousin, and was never beaten by her meth-shooting boyfriend.

I didn't steal that '88 Camaro with the candy paint and tan leather bucket seats, and I was never sent to juvie. Alcohol and weed never led to harder drugs and I never chased away anyone who tried to love me.

So thank you dismembered universe of alternate endings. Thank you, sweet brothers and sisters, for the sacrifice you have no idea you've made. Thank you physicists, preachers of perspective, for sending pain into ether, for this abruptly new and broken world of possibilities.



## LEARNING TO PRAY IN SPANISH

Christine Swint  
Georgia State University

Secrets cling to her like a damp sheet.  
It's summer on the Oconee,  
and July currents wrap silver arms  
around boulders. Clay-stained  
eddies tempt her to the riverbanks,  
to slip beneath the surface.

Is anyone looking down on her  
as she swims with Jesús in the sun?  
He says, *Two hawks in the sky mean love,  
three hawks will bring bad luck.*  
*Padre, Hijo, Espíritu Santo.*  
Hot stone dries their backs  
as they lie face up, fingers laced,  
counting hawks above the pines.

Pot smoke drapes them like a gauzy sheet  
where they hide by the Oconee.  
Jesús wraps her in his arms  
in the back seat of his clay-stained  
Impala, in the woods near the banks.  
He presses words against her ear and she traces  
his back with her fingertips—

*Princesa, reina, preciosa.*  
His mouth tastes like fast-moving currents.  
*Padre, Hijo, Nuestra Señora.*

They're behind a curtain of sumac, watching light  
swirl through the haze, gossamer shafts  
cutting crisscross through the trees.  
Smoke-high kisses, the clear shimmer of water.

Her long hair drapes them like a silk sheet  
under the trees by the Oconee.  
Men fish in silence, not lifting their arms  
or turning to see who's there. Her clay-stained  
sneakers mark the path near the banks.  
She lifts her face to the breeze.  
What's the word for most high?  
*Dios, Señor, Padre, Hijo.*

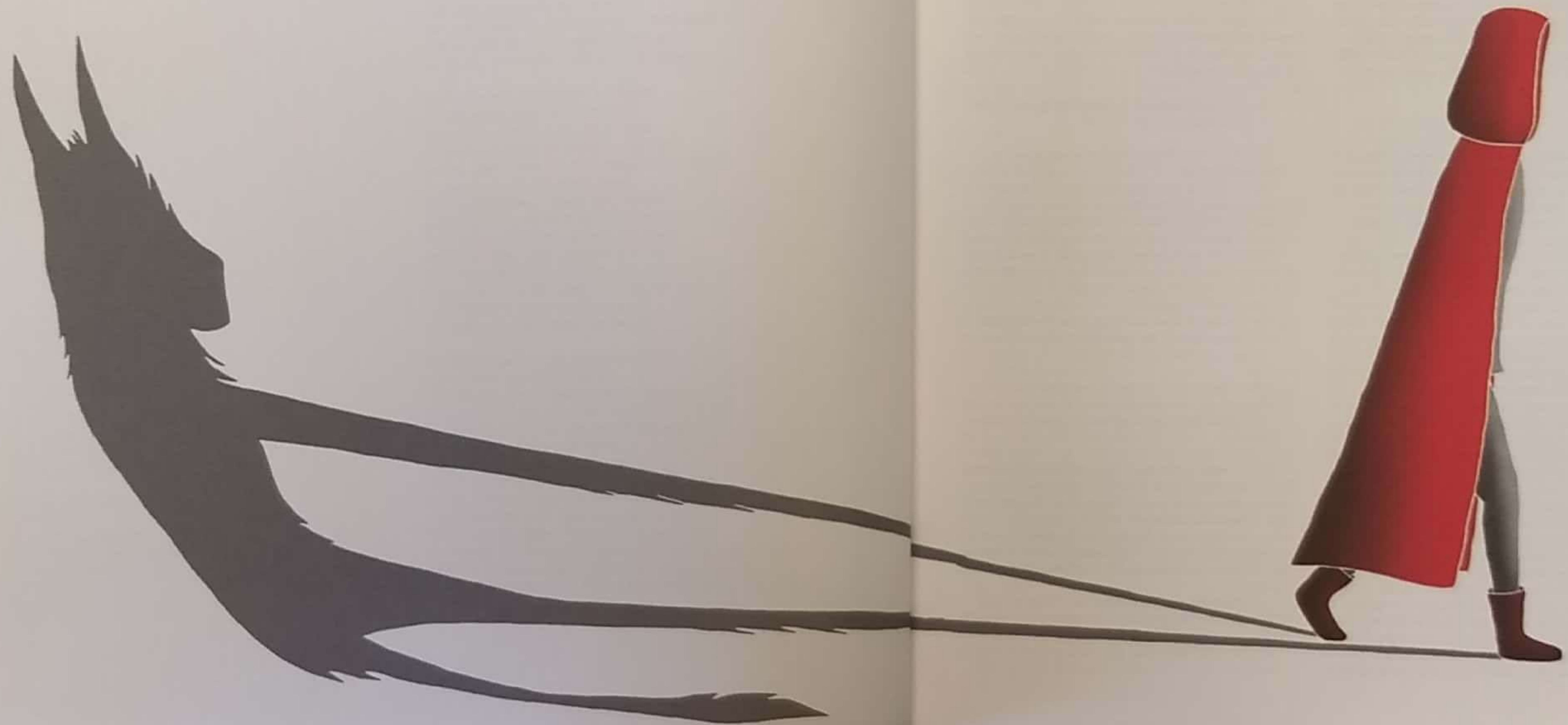
Something about the spindly pines,  
the clouds, the burnt-sienna needles  
and bark chips littering the path,  
the rocks, the blood-red ravines, are charms  
against dim kitchens waiting for them  
at sunset, when they each leave for home.

Kudzu covers power lines in sheets  
on the roads near the Oconee.  
She slides close to Jesús, their arms  
touching as he drives down oil-stained  
streets, away from the root-tangled riverbanks,  
to somebody his mother knows.

What about Jesus, Mary and Joseph?  
*Jesucito, la Virgencita y todos los santitos.*  
A gray-haired doctor presses the pear  
inside her, helps her up from the table,  
his hand still warm from her innards—  
*You're just six weeks along—it's not too late.*  
Clutching the paper gown closed,  
she covers her face with one hand.

A storm tears through leaves in sheets  
and pockmarks the Oconee.  
Behind the wheel, Jesús crosses his arms,  
almond eyes brackish. Grief stains  
her cheeks with mascara, and the banks  
overflow above the tree roots.  
*Angel de la guarda—pray for me—*  
The mud-brown river covers the shoals  
where they sunbathed in July. Hail  
pings the roof, and "Stairway to Heaven"  
whines on the radio. When the rain slows,  
she swings the door shut, waits. His car rolls up the hill.  
And she imagines—right where she wants it to be—  
a hawk above the river, lifting a snake past the trees.

nonfiction



# TWO FOUNTAINS

Anna Cabe  
Agnes Scott College



“There is this shot in the opening scene of the movie, *Mississippi Burning*, where you see two water fountains. One is broken, and chipped, and water is dripping from it. The other is modern, and shining. A white guy goes up to the nice one, and the black kid goes up to the old one. I remember saying to myself, “If I was in the scene, where would I drink?” — Sam Sue, “Growing Up in Mississippi,” *Asian American Experiences in the United States*

\*\*\*

The Manila Men and I came to the Southeastern United States in different centuries for different reasons, sharing only a heritage of dark coloring and wet heat. Those eighteenth-century Filipino sailors on the ships of their Spanish conquerors probably saw the distant coast of Louisiana and saw freedom. They hightailed it through the bayous and founded the village of Saint Malo. They were masters of their own fates.

I — six years old, scrawny, female — was held captive to the whims of the twentieth-century job market. After my father's stroke cracked his confidence in his ability to perform anesthesiology and brought him to the less-lucrative field of internal medicine, he and my mother, a general practitioner, struck out for brand-new shores: the Mississippi Delta.

We had no thought of fountains. Having emigrated from the Philippines to New Jersey then Los

Angeles then Chicago, what was one more move in America?

\*\*\*

Welcome to the Greenwood, Mississippi, Cotton Capital of the World. Demographics: white, 33.1%, black, 65.3%, Asian, .3%. According to Google Maps, Greenwood is 21 minutes away from Money, Mississippi, site of the famous Tallahatchie Bridge in Bobbie Gentry's 1967 hit song, “Ode to Billie Joe.” Money is the site of Emmett Till's 1955 lynching. The 14-year old allegedly made passes at a white woman.

\*\*\*

My parents, deeply suspicious of the quality of public schools, particularly those in this isolated place, enroll me in the one decent private school in town, Pillow Academy. My entire first grade class consists of fewer than one hundred people. I am the only Asian, East or Southeast. There are also a number of, to my first-grader's eyes, racially indeterminate people whose backgrounds I later discover range from Lebanese to Syrian to Native American. After a couple of generations in Greenwood, though, they all have the same cast of Deep-South, accents, hunting, vicious loyalty to this or that Mississippi football team, and all.

When I am six and new in town, I learn quickly that I'm different from my classmates. I wear dresses; they wear soccer shorts. I top my rice with various soups and stews; they top theirs with gravy. I don't hunt; one girl explaining the appeal of it to a squeamish teacher acknowledges that it's “sad,” but that she finds it “fun.” I, like my teacher, think of Bambi.

Yet, despite the surface differences in skin tone and behavior, I'm allowed to attend the school, unlike, say, the 65 percent of the town who's black. I don't notice until after I left, years later, the date of Pillow Academy's founding: 1966. Prime time for white flight from the public schools, the tip of the iceberg when it comes to race relations in town.

My dad confides to me later that he heard of a fairly prominent black family who attempted to enroll their child in Pillow Academy, only to be rebuffed because their child would be alone there

and would have a difficult time. I imagine this being said in a peculiarly polite way, inflected with the voice of an old plantation-owner shaking his head at an uppity and recently released slave. Black people are rarely if ever spoken of when I am at Pillow, and I still wonder that any black person would ever want to come to this school, this last hold-out environment like this?

This vague belief will turn out to be wrong. I randomly reconnect with an old friend (part-Latina) on Facebook when I'm already attending a Memphis high school:

Her: Do you remember how segregated it was in Greenwood and at Pillow?

Me: Yes, I do. What kind of segregation in particular?

Her: . . . Well the blacks vs. Pillow. It is alot worse now. But there are some very brave students at PA. We have 3 families of blacks and I love them!!!!!! I actually have gotten to spend time with one of the boys and he is so awesome...unfortunately the kids in our grades like to start rumors...you know that.

Me: Yeah, I remember.

So I've heard. I was floored to see an African-American girl in the pictures at Pillow. Hey, integration has arrived!

Her: Yeah, its about time don't you think? One of my best friends, Kyle, is one of the new African-Americans and we get messed with alot.

This, I must point out, happened over Facebook. This is not *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara, with Mammy and Prissy relegated to the kitchen. This is not the childhood of Maya Angelou, in which the separation from the “whitefolks” is so total that she remarks, “I remember never believing that whites were really real.” This happened over Facebook.

Greenwood no longer had “White” and “Colored” fountains when I was there, but then, everyone, it seemed, kept to their place.

I cannot tell you what my place precisely was.

\*\*\*

“Chinese really didn't have a place in society. Economically, they were better than the blacks, but on a social scale, they didn't amount to much. I think blacks saw us as Jews. We all sort of played marginal economic roles. There were quite a few Jews in town. They weren't accepted by blacks or whites either. I don't think whites knew what to make of us. . . I left Mississippi in 1973. There was no future for me there. I was so alienated that even if I thought there was something concrete to be done there, I have such bad feelings for the place I wouldn't go back. Being Chinese in Mississippi was definitely a handicap.” — Sam Sue

\*\*\*

Our Filipino community is drawn tight, tight, tight, as a knot in a string. None of us, I think, would have chosen to be there, except for jobs (with the local hospital and the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman) and in some cases, love. One of my most beloved titas, aunts, married a white Southern man back in the day, and stays, even after her husband died, even though the dirt road to her small country home is crumbling, and she can't drive, needing to depend on the kindness of friends and relatives (of which she has many) to take her to places. No one understands it.

Eventually, the community dwindles, bolting for the brighter lights of Memphis, Florida, California, spurred explicitly by Mississippi's tendency towards health-care-related messiness and implicitly by the isolation and limitations of a town of 15, 205 mostly white and black people in the middle of the cotton fields. When they leave, I feel lost. I have never learned Tagalog, but the sound of two dozen chattering, Filipino-accented voices acted as a wall against this alien culture. Now, I was naked to its assault, from my fourth-grade teacher admitting she was “partial to the South” during Civil War history to Confederate flags springing everywhere, thick as grass.

They're not knowingly cruel people, though, these Greenwoodians. At a grade-school trip to the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, a black boy looks at me and asks, “Are you Chinese?”

One white classmate looks at him askance and

says, “She's Filipino.”

But there's a gulf.

A game I learn from my classmates:

“Me Chinese, Me play jokes, Me put pee-pee in your Coke.”

Another one with hand-motions:

“Chinese” Pull at the sides of the eyelids.

“Japanese” Pull down the eyelids.

“Dirty knees.” Point at the knees.

“Look at these.” Point at the underwear.

I participate, of course, and feel no offense. I am neither Chinese nor Japanese after all.

\*\*\*

“Strips of bacon spelling ‘PIG’ and ‘CHUMP’ were found in front of a South Carolina mosque Sunday. In post-9/11 America, pork — which is unclean in Islam — is a primary form of anti-Muslim protest.” — *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2010

\*\*\*

A Pakistani or Bangladeshi boy joins my class when I am around ten years old. I am fascinated by him, as someone who is not as touched by the deep-fried Southernness of the rest of the class, nor that we ever speak much. But he is there, and he is both a comforting and unsettling presence, to know that someone as brown-skinned as me exists here at Pillow Academy. That I am not a lone speck of dirt in the snow, blown away from some other place.

After 9/11, while no one in my class openly taunts him or a Christian Syrian, one of those whose family stretches back and is more or less a Rebel born, there are reports of at least a couple people yelling at them for being “Muslim,” an act which all of us in our grade condemn, since they are two of “us.” There are even more people of Middle Eastern descent in the school, including a girl with a hijab who is a speaker at an assembly one day. I look at her scarf wide-eyed, even though my nanny has a Muslim friend who wears one also, because she's not a grown-up but a high school girl. A teenager.

It was the adults whom I really remember after 9/11:

My Catholic fourth-grade teacher who is also my Sunday School teacher during 9/11. I make the

point that many Muslims and even many Christians and Jews say that Allah and God are the same. She looks at me in a certain oh-you-innocent-little-child way and asks, “What if they're not the same god?”

So does my sixth-grade Catholic English teacher, who makes comments about Muslims, pointing out they only want to, in so many words, “kill us or convert us.”

I must have been accepted in some way or they, those good white Christian folks (and truly, they were kind to shy me, showering me with books and buffering me from petty childhood hostility), would not have spoken of such things to me like that. Later, later, though, I begin to be aware of the fact I am not “them” either. There are, certainly, members of my family who have espoused such views both privately and with them about Muslims and blacks. I'm *like* them being Catholic, Christian, but I am not “them.”

I am not part of their “us.” I cannot, do not, drink at their fountain.

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Memphis: famous for Graceland, Beale Street, barbecue, the Mississippi River, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., by James Earl Ray on April 4, 1968, at the Lorraine Motel. As of 2000, 0.79 percent of the city is Asian.

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In eighth grade, I move to Memphis and later attend St. Benedict at Auburndale High School, a Catholic institution, crammed with Poles, Hungarians, Irish, Italians. Again, I count and realize I am one of 7 Asian students out of around 230 in my graduating class. There are approximately the same number each of Latino and black students.

My school, though, does its best to wring out every drop of diversity when they can. I was once pulled out of a chapel service to pose for an advertisement. In it was one white boy, a biracial girl, a Mexican boy, and me. I see the advertisement in a newspaper and have to laugh at their subterfuge, pretending they're not mostly white deep inside their red-brick walls.

Still, Memphis is light-years away from Green-



wood, being a veritable metropolis with a sizeable number of non-hunting non-WASPS. This is reinforced when my white AP Government teacher, former nun and former staffer to Al Gore's dad, regales us about a time when she was a little girl during Jim Crow and decided to drink at the "Colored" fountain because she thought that it meant the water itself was colored.

"This woman came rushing at me, to stop me," she said. "I kicked her."

I can breathe more freely here.

But it remains: After five years here, when I am a senior, when I have, tentatively, begun to think of myself as one of "them," I get into Brown University while the white valedictorian is waitlisted. Some white girl I consider a friend casually says, "Hate to say it, but I wonder if you being Asian helped."

To be fair, affirmative action is a nationwide debate and not exclusive to the South. Asians also are actually overrepresented on college campuses and therefore don't benefit much from affirmative action policies.

It still stings, to discover that I haven't outrun scenes like that and probably never will, no matter where I go. My father, after all, barely escaped the Los Angeles Riots in 1992, when he was working at a hospital in the middle of all the action, when the tensions among whites and blacks and Latinos and Asians blew into a wildfire, and a couple of black coworkers had to escort him to the highway so he wouldn't be mistaken for Korean and be dragged out of his car. The South may have a well-earned reputation for racism, but it's by no means the only place where people look at me and ask "Where are you from?" which translates to "You're not one of us."

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"What do Sweet Potato Queens, Steel Magnolias, Ya-Ya Sisters, and Southern Belles have in common? They're Grits"—Girls Raised In The South!

Now you, too, can benefit from the unspoken rules, rich traditions, and distinctive style of the Southern woman. . . Inside these pages you'll find advice, tradition, recipes, humor, quotable wisdom, and vital lessons such as:

- How to eat watermelon in a sundress
- How to drink like a Southern lady (sip...a lot)

- How to say darlin' like you mean it From tending your heirloom iron skillet to avoiding a Southern girl's deadly sins (bad hair, bad manners, and bad blind dates), this handbook is a bible of Southern style for the Grits\* girl in all of us." — *gritsinc.com*

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My parents try their best. They pack me and my siblings off to the North to relatives every summer, in Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana, so we wouldn't get Southern accents and start saying, "y'all." As educated, well-traveled foreigners, they can't help but look down on our neighbors in Greenwood (or bluntly, many Americans as these nephews and nieces of Uncle Sam had trouble identifying most other countries on a map in a study and alarmingly, even some American states). Some of them, after all, have barely left the South or even, when living in Mississippi, the state.

But the mark is already there. Reminiscing about hushpuppies to an Indiana family friend, I am chastened to discover a blank face. Those delicious little fried balls of cornmeal exist primarily south of the Mason-Dixon Line (Possible origins: Slaves were told to whistle to prove they weren't sampling food in the kitchen. To keep barking dogs from drowning their whistling, they threw them proto-hushpuppies).

Also, my delight when I discover my sophomore English teacher has family and connections with Greenwood (she's an Ole Miss Rebel, by the way). I start yelling names of the leading Greenwood families across the room. She knows most of them, and my classmates look on in astonishment as we casually toss out tidbits about this family or that family and whose son or daughter I went to school with.

I feel, oddly, happy, that someone else knows Greenwood is real, not a living history museum of Ye Olde Southern Segregation. Not that she, my teacher, a true GRIT, thinks of it that way.

GRITS, Girls Raised in the South, is a merchandising brand founded by Deborah Ford. I see memorabilia everywhere I go when I am in Mississippi, even tucked into my family's favorite fish-fry place, Larry's. Since the models were always blonde or brunette, white-skinned, I never think to myself that I am a GRIT.

One week during high school, I go up to Massachusetts to visit colleges and am startled when a professor, who has some roots in Virginia, casually points out that he hears "the Southern in [my] voice."

I have been in the Deep South since I was six. Of course, I'm a GRIT, although I'm not sure I, mango-eating, green-tea-sipping, am what Deborah Ford envisions as the prototypical Southern girl.

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"In the first comprehensive accounting of multi-racial Americans since statistics were first collected about them in 2000, reporting from the 2010 census, made public in recent days, shows the nation's mixed-race population is growing far more quickly than many demographers had estimated, particularly in the South and parts of the Midwest. . . In Georgia, it expanded by more than 80 percent, and by nearly as much in Kentucky and Tennessee. — *The New York Times*, 2011

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I have spent over a decade of my life refusing to say, "y'all." I have counted the days until I can waltz on out of here.

Why the hell am I still here, then, and even deeper South in Atlanta, Georgia? Some cosmopolitan Chicagoan relatives of mine like to mock Southerners alongside a billion anonymous Internet commentators and Northern and West-Coast media personalities as racists, rednecks, hicks, trailer trash, white trash, crackers (note the conspicuous absence of black people from the equation; they apparently don't count as native Southerners). Before, I used to join them.

But when I unexpectedly find myself in Atlanta, it is different: a city reborn as international after the 1996 Olympics and a haven into which fleeing global refugees pour year after year. It's no Chicago, but it's no Greenwood either.

Maybe it's just because I'm in Decatur, a particularly blue and intellectual dot in the city, but it's hard to sneer at the Southern-accented "y'all" when you realize that the person you're talking to is either a) working at the Carter Center, b) about to protest Georgia's draconian anti-immigration poli-

cies at the Capitol, or c) the recipient of a Fulbright, Truman, or other fancy scholarship.

Or maybe it's because when I eat barbecue in the North, I just have to say the magic words — "I'm from Memphis" — and restaurateurs shower me with free brisket and sauce, even if I sneer at one restaurant's attempt at Southernness: Checked shirts? White picket-fence? A wall that consists of a solemn print of a nondescript country road? A server who says, "y'all," even though I'm not entirely convinced he's been further South than southern Indiana? I like the restaurant's tender Kobe brisket but deride the sauces. Come on down to Corky's, folks, and you'll get sauce good enough to spread on rolls.

Or maybe it's because I have gradually realized, frankly, that not every white Southern conservative is George Wallace Reincarnated and that I gain nothing by stereotyping others as I have been stereotyped.

I can't say I'm comfortable using "y'all" or that I would be recognizably Southern if I venture outside of the Southeast. I'm too "Asian": I'm not a sorority girl or a hunter in camouflage or a Southern belle debutante (at least, I refused to do cotillion when I was invited; I did do a Filipino debut when I was eighteen). Yet, I'm not sure if all of the Souths I grew up with would be recognizably Southern if I presented them to an outsider.

Slowly, painfully, I'm coming to terms with my fourteen-odd years of history in the South, my supposedly incompatible mix of Filipina and Midwestern and Californian and Northeastern and yes, Southern. I have lived here far longer than those other places, after all.

But the South and the rest of the country, then, will have to admit I'm Southern, too, that I'm a part of them. That we — the Latino immigrants agitating for their rights at the Capitol, the Koreans clustered in Duluth, those Manila Men who landed in Louisiana all those years ago, the African-Americans who marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., or not — are *them*.

That we are an *us*.

We are the history, the present, and the future of the South. Not white, not white-and-black, or even white-and-brown-and-black, but some chaotic mess of elbows and marriage and friendship and bitter enmity and "bless her hearts" and those damn

antlers hung up over every mantel and colors mixed so hard and fast that you don't know what to call anyone anymore because you're plain exhausted of trying to nail blood down. The stuff flows after all.

It's too strong to say I'm proud of being Southern. But, if you ask me where I sip my water, I have to say I prefer sweet tea, thank you very much.

# Mother/Mother

My son is learning how to talk. I've lost count of how many words he has; most of them sound the same anyway. All done and let's go and bath time all have the same intonation, a quick up and then down punctuated in giggles. He is still working on his sounds. Duck and truck frequently sound like fuck. My mom tells me when I was little, I liked to watch the garbage trucks roll down the street and I would stand at the window and yell at the top of my lungs "The fuckers are coming! The fuckers are coming!"

My son isn't making sentences yet, but he has his ways. When I'm in the kitchen, trying to piece together peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, he wedges himself between my legs and the cabinets, arms up in desperation, whining

"Help me, help me, mommy, mommy!"

Help me and mommy sound identical. So identical that when he cried out "help me" to my childless best friend, she responded quickly with "Boy, I'm not your mother."

## Pregnancy Mother

I am not my son's mother. Not biologically anyway. Biologically I am his second cousin or his first cousin once removed, I can never remember the difference. His mother is my cousin, but I am his mother. My husband is his father. We are a family.

We decided to become his parents one night over pizza and too many beers. We knew he'd been taken into foster care, we knew there was this thing, this 5-week old being out there related to us, without a home, and we made a pro and con list on a napkin and even though the con list was longer, we decided to call the social worker the next morning and say yes.

Sometimes I feel like we conceived him that night, sitting at the oversized booth, picking at our food, ordering another beer. That we scooped egg and sperm into the little olive oil plate at the center of the table and stirred the mixture with our bread until an embryo formed.

We carried the embryo with us for two months, the gestation period of a Boston Terrier.

I prepared for motherhood the only way I knew how: I bought a book and I spent an hour each day

wandering through the baby aisles at Target. At home, I stayed up late reading about baby poop and baby sleep. At Target, I watched the other pregnant mothers pace between the breast pumps and the onesies. I watched as they scanned boobies and sippies and extra nipples onto their registries. I picked out what I would scan with my gun.

My husband didn't want me to buy anything. He said we should wait until things were certain. We were still being checked out by the state and we didn't know what would happen and he just kept saying Wait, Wait. But I couldn't. Each trip I made to the store, I would sneak a little baby thing in with our toilet paper and dog food. In the first month, I collected a set of little washcloths, a black and white striped onesie, a pack of size 1 diapers, a little blue elephant that played "Rock-a-bye-baby." I couldn't stop myself from buying for him.

At home, unable to sneak in a crib or a changing table, I repurposed the little space and furniture we did have. I pushed my husband's desk to the far left of his office and moved all of his old school notes and video games into boxes in the closet. This left the bookcase free for the baby. I pillaged books from the rest of our house - an illustrated copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, a Swiss edition of *Asterix et Obelix, The Dangerous Book for Boys* - and piled them on the middle shelf. I filled an old plastic organizer with the diapers I'd snuck for the bottom row, printed and framed photos of my owl tattoos for the top.

When I was home alone, I would sneak into the room and stare at the bookshelf and the piles of hand-me-downs we'd collected from family. According to the book I read and reread each night, I was nesting.

The nesting felt like it lasted forever. The I'm-maybe-about-to-be-kind-of-a-mother feeling hung above me everywhere I went. The gestation began to feel like an elephant's.

And then he came.

## Mother

*I am my mother's daughter. Her only child, biological or otherwise.*

*At 22, a doctor told my mother that she probably*

Emily Lake Hansen  
Georgia College & State University

*couldn't have children. The thick knots of blood she found in her panties each month were signs of polycystic ovarian syndrome and it would be highly unlikely, he said, for her to conceive. She went off birth control the next month and decided that was that.*

*When she found out she was pregnant in early spring the next year, it was, as she told me over and over again all my life, a miracle.*

*She spent her pregnancy mostly alone. My father was deployed from the fourth month on - in fact, he didn't see me for the first time until I was almost seven months old - and therefore there are only two stories about her pregnancy, the only two she can remember, or at least the only two she is willing to tell:*

*1. Every day, from month five to month nine, she would go to the 7-11 by the hotel where she worked at the check-in desk and get an extra-large cherry slurpee and a bag of skittles.*

*2. Her mother, my grandmother, was too nervous to drive to when my mom finally went into labor and so my mother drove her mother, herself, and her big contracting belly to the hospital. And then when they finally got there, my grandmother looked around and whispered to my mother that they should go somewhere else, that this place was dirty.*

*I was two and a half weeks late. And nine and a half pounds. I'm sure by the I was born, my mother also felt like she had an elephant's gestation. Like she had waited forever and then all of the sudden, there I was.*

## Infancy (0-3 months)

### Mother

"Mom," I said, crying on the phone. "Help me." I'd been calling my mom for hours on the phone and she wouldn't answer. The baby wouldn't sleep. He'd come to us the day before and had slept okay at night, better than the books had told me he would, but now it was the afternoon and he was supposed to be napping, and he wouldn't. He had only eaten an hour ago and he shouldn't be hungry and he would fuss anytime I put him down.

"Mom, help me! He won't sleep."

I was holding him on my lap, one hand behind his tiny little head, the other underneath his knees.

the phone cradled between my shoulder and my ear. It was a Saturday afternoon and I had been up since 6 and I had only eaten a few bites of toast and I couldn't reach my coffee cup without having to set him down and then he would cry.

"Mom! Help me! I can't do this."

It was our first weekend with the baby, and although we'd had visits with him before, during our gestation period - I'd changed diapers, made and fed bottles, burped him and caught the resulting lines of spit up in a rag on my shoulder - I had never actually taken care of him for longer than an hour. I had no idea how to be a mother. There was nothing biologically for me to kick into, I had no hormones surging through my body, I had no way of overcoming my feelings of terror. I just wanted him to sleep.

When it was time to take the dog out, my little 13 pound mutt with a nervous bark and seasonal allergies, I begged my husband to let me take him, to watch the baby by himself for ten or fifteen minutes. When he reluctantly agreed (he had spent the day doing house chores he never did otherwise so he could help without actually helping), I sprinted out the door with Sammy and didn't look back. I walked him around and around the block, letting him stop at each bush. I never realized how easy it was to take care of him. I had always called him my baby, but he wasn't a baby. He didn't need my help to fall asleep.

As we kept walking, I started to talk to the dog.

"I can't do this."

He sniffed a patch of grass.

"He's just so little, and maybe I'm not supposed to be a mother. I missed the Real Housewives last night. There are more baby bottles than beer bottles in my fridge."

Sammy lifted his leg.

"This was a bad idea. I want my life back."

The dog tugged on the leash.

When I finally went back home, my husband looked like I had twenty minutes earlier: exasperated, overwhelmed, the baby cradled on his lap, all sense of what is lost. We didn't speak, but I'm sure we were thinking the same thing. I'm sure that on his next walk with Sammy, he had the same conversation.

### Mother

The hormones that had caused tiny puss filled cysts

*to form and then burst in my mother's ovaries now caused her to take to motherhood rather instantly. My grandmother stayed for two weeks after the birth, but my mother accepted no help. She would be the one to change the dirty diapers, to get up with me at 2, at 4, at 5, at 7. So, my grandmother busied herself otherwise. She crocheted baby blankets out of thick yarn and baby booties out of thin. She made pot after pot of half-caf coffee. She rearranged closets and let my mom's 6 year old black cat sleep with her on the couch.*

*My mother was thankful when she finally left the first week of October.*

*For the first four months, my mother slept on a tiny twin bed just a few feet from my crib, unwilling to let me be in a room by myself, unwilling to trust the monitor or the batteries in the monitor or the cat, who might, she worried, jump up at the door handle and somehow open it up and try to sleep in my crib and smother me in my sleep.*

*Without a partner, she carried me everywhere. She'd hold me in one arm while she folded laundry, while she cooked herself dinner (now mostly from cans), while she ran to the bank and the supermarket.*

*When my aunt visited later on in the Fall, my mother decided to take a shower without me strapped in my swing just outside the shower door. She hesitantly laid me on the bed next to her sister and walked into the bathroom alone for the first time in months. Two minutes later, as my aunt tells it, she was back, still unshowered, still smelling like breast milk and sweat.*

*"She's okay, right? You're watching her?"*

*My aunt nodded. New and immobile, I was still on the bed where I'd been left. My aunt still right beside me. My mother went back to the shower. She called out every few minutes:*

*"You're still there? Still watching my baby? I don't hear her! Watch her!"*

*The shower lasted 7 minutes. She didn't dry her hair.*

## Infancy (3-6 months)

### Mother

"There is something wrong with his butt," I said to my husband over the phone. I'd been doing the mom thing for over a month, almost two, and I knew that this was not the way his butt was supposed to look.

"It's probably just diaper rash," my husband retorted.

I looked down at the baby, wriggling his tiny, chubby body on the plastic mat we'd set up at the foot of our bed during the day for diaper changes. He kicked his legs in the air and tried to reach for his foot, the newest skill he was practicing. His feet were fascinating.

"I don't think so."

It was red and a small patch of tiny raised dots were starting to form on his right butt cheek.

"Just watch it for today, at least," my husband responded.

"Fine," I said. "Bye."

I stared for a second longer at the patch of pimply bumps and then slathered on a layer of thick white diaper cream and closed shop, fastened the diaper and snapped the onesie closed.

In the morning, the little bumps had spread to the other butt cheek and up onto his back. A few had even popped up on his stomach.

My husband panicked. "Okay, you should take him to the doctor's now."

The doctor took one look at the rash and "Yeast." He wrote a prescription and was out the door. "It should clear up quick. No big deal."

For baby and I, it was a big deal. I was still getting used to dealing with daily baby things: nap struggles, spit up, figuring out when exactly to eat my own breakfast. And now there was something wrong, something extra to worry about. I still couldn't call him by the name my husband and I had decided on back at the pizza place, but he had become in many ways "my baby boy." When I texted Aaron from school, I asked him how "baby boy" was doing. When we finally fell into bed at midnight after work and baby and trying to eat dinner, we talked about the things "baby boy" did that week. I missed him now when I left the house. I worried about him while he slept in the other room, would crack open the door sometimes in the middle of the night just to check on him. And now there was something wrong with baby boy. And he was miserable.

When we got back home from the doctor's and the pharmacy, I called and cancelled the sitter who was supposed to show at noon and release me from my stay-at-home shift. And then I e-mailed my professor about class. I just couldn't leave him. "My son," I wrote in the e-mail, "is sick and I can't make

it today." It was the first time I had called him "my son;" it was the first time I couldn't bear to leave him.

For three days, I stayed home with him in the middle of the week, reading extra stories, laying with him under the singing star on his play mat, making up names for his toes. Every diaper change, I coated his butt with an anti-fungal ointment that left a yellow sticky film on my fingers.

Over the week, I watched the dots disappear from Alexander's tiny body.

#### Mother

*On the plane ride back from Florida after Christmas, where she'd spent two weeks visiting with her parents and showing me off to their neighbors, my mother became violently ill. I was only four months old and flying with me alone had been hard enough (my father was still deployed, still too far away to help with anything), and now she was two minutes away from blowing chunks all over her seat.*

*She searched the seat pocket in front of her for the air sick bag, rummaging through the safety pamphlets and the airline magazines. None. She clutched her stomach and looked down at me, sleeping, my head nuzzled in the crook of her left arm. She was unsure of how she could maneuver me, still sleeping, down the aisle and into the microscopic bathroom and somehow twist and bend down and over so that the vomit would land only in the tiny airplane toilet and not all over me. She pushed the button for a stewardess.*

*"Yes?" said the woman.*

*"I am not feeling well," my mother began, pausing to collect herself. "I need to go to the bathroom. Is there any way? Can you hold my daughter?"*

*The stewardess sighed. "No, ma'am. I'm busy. And I'm not sure it's allowable anyway."*

*A man from the aisle in front of her interjected. "I can hold her if you want."*

*My mother's stomach churned and flipped. She had no choice. For an hour the man held me standing right by the bathroom door as my mother vomited and vomited. He told her over and over again from the other side of the lavatory. "I've got her, she's fine. She's fine."*

*By the time my mother had finally gotten us home, after the plane had landed, and she'd gotten us into our little car and driven us home, she was exasperated. And then, the lock to our apartment was frozen and her key wouldn't go in, no matter how many times she*

*tried. She called a locksmith from the pay phone down the street.*

*When he showed, she and I were both crying on our doorstep. He fixed the door and then helped my mom get all of her packages inside. And then we were alone again.*

*Fifteen minutes later, there was a knock on the door. The locksmith was back, grocery bags piled in his arms. He had gone to the store and bought everything he thought a mother and baby would need: milk and stovetop oatmeal, gatorade, for my mother's stomach, two little glass jars of baby food, instant coffee, a tiny bottle of aspirin, and a loaf of white bread.*

*My mother decided it was time for her mother to come back for that visit. It was time for the deployment to be over.*

#### Infancy (6-9 months)

##### Mother

In mid February, my pre-baby friend came for a visit. She hadn't seen my house since Alexander's arrival, and so I spent two days cleaning and re-cleaning it, trying to make it look like my house again. Alexander had started crawling right before Christmas and by Valentine's was pulling up onto the coffee table and chucking my coffee table books one by one onto the floor. Crawling baby was a whole different world and while Alexander had already taken over my life, he suddenly also took over my space. A baby gate separated one side of our apartment's tiny kitchen from the living room and the other side was blocked with a bin full of little toys.

The first thing my friend said when she walked in my front door, even though I'd moved the toy box and picked up all the cheerios from the carpet, was "Wow, he's really taken over the place, huh?"

My friend spent three days with us while attending a conference at a university a few blocks away. She was away most of the time she was visiting, but when she was actually there she would sit with her computer in her lap at the corner of the couch and spread out all of her papers across the coffee table, leave her cup of hot tea on the arm of the couch. I was constantly moving her things.

*"If you leave it there, he'll tip it over."*

*"If you leave it there, he'll rip it up."*

*"If you leave it there, he'll delete all your files."*

*"If you leave it there, he'll tear out of the pages."*

*"If you leave it there, he'll drink the last of your*

*wine."*

When he would cruise up to her along the couch, gesturing widely towards the shiny lights on her computer, she would shoo him away. "Shoo, shoo, hiss," she said over and over again.

It's like she was talking to her cat, my husband would whisper to me later, while making dinner.

I looked over at the two of them in the living room: my best friend, sitting on the couch, trying to read through her work for the conference, her tights still on, her legs up on the coffee table, hair curled neatly, mascara only on her eyelashes and my son, standing wobbly against the tv stand, drumming his drooly fingers on the magazine rack.

It wasn't conscious, but I didn't call her back for months.

##### Mother

*By the time my dad had finally gotten back to the States, I was 8 months and almost walking. My mother thought she was ready for help. She showed my father how to change diapers, how to restock the diaper caddy the right way, how to heat up the mushy bananas and rice cereal I ate for lunch, where to put his shoes so I wouldn't put them in my mouth. She slept with him most nights in their bed, but some nights would sneak into my room, back onto the twin bed, just to be with me again, alone.*

*After being home a month, my father suggested that the two of them go out to the local carnival, without me.*

*My mother waited a week to tell him yes. And so, they hired a sitter, a friend of my mom's who had her own older children, and set a date. That night, she let my father hold me for an hour while she took a shower and dried her hair and put on makeup and wore a dress. When she was ready, she stood in the living room staring at me for fifteen minutes and then shouted at my dad, "Go!"*

*The fair, in small town Virginia, had all the fixings: funnel cakes, a tilt-a-whirl, a test your strength machine with a mechanical gypsy who told your fortune, oversized hot chocolates, and a mini ferris wheel that circled round and round above the fair.*

*My mother lasted an hour before she took the last bite of her fried dough, brushed the powdered sugar off her face and into her hair, and told my dad she was done.*

*Back at home that night, she slept in the tiny twin*

*bed, waking frequently to watch my chest rise and fall.*

#### Infancy (9-12 months)

##### Mother

I spent three months planning Alexander's first birthday.

His first word was "doggie," said directly to our dog Sammy as Alexander tried to grab and then rip out a handful of fur, and so, I was determined to have a dog-themed party that would be elegant and adorable and not feature a single dalmatian, which seemed to be the only dog-themed party gear available. I ordered \$60 worth of cupcakes from a fancy bakery a few blocks away and arranged for little cupcake toppers to be made in Sammy's likeness. Sammy would stand on the top of each gigantic cupcake in mid-chihuahua spin.

My mom came up for the party. And as I frantically tried to cut up fruit and make a banner out of brown paper lunch bags and craft paint, my mother took to cleaning. Alexander was down for his nap and would be up in just an hour and the guests would start arriving shortly after that.

I was a wreck. I had already gotten myself ready to avoid having to do so in rush, but I could feel my hair begin to stick to my neck with sweat, feel my clothes begin to wrinkle and gather as I ran around the house doing this thing and that.

"How do I look?" I asked my mom, standing still for a moment.

"You look like a mom."

I still wasn't. Nine months into parenthood, a year into Alexander's life, and I still wasn't biologically or legally a mother. The first birthday is supposed to be a celebration of the parent's ability to make it through the first year, but when Alexander turned one, we'd been his parents for just shy of nine months; we hadn't made it yet to our one year anniversary as a family. You look like a mom was probably supposed to mean that my outfit was ill fitting, that my hair was undone, that my makeup was sloppy, but from my mom to me at that moment, it was the truth I still had trouble admitting to myself. I was standing there going crazy over every detail, making sure the presents were wrapped and stacked just right, anxious to see Alexander dig into his first cupcake and smile and giggle and devour every bite. I was a mom.

Even if the State hadn't said so yet.

##### Mother

*I had three first birthday parties: one with my dad's parents, one with my mom's parents, and one with my mom and dad's friends at the Navy base. I ate a big piece of store bought strawberry cake at the first, a homemade chocolate cupcake at the second, and a small slice of confetti boxed cake at the third. My mother didn't even want a party. She just wanted to watch me run in and out of the new plastic play house they'd bought for me and make me a special spaghetti dinner. She wanted to watch me shove my first, and second, and third piece of cake into my face all by herself.*

*At the parties, all her family and friends told me "Happy Birthday" and smiled at her "Congratulations." For my mother, the congratulations weren't necessary. She knew the hard part wasn't over - I still got up at night - and she already knew what their congratulations kept telling her: she was a mother.*

##### Mother/Mother

A few weeks after the adoption is finalized, I'm still dealing with motherhood. Something is wrong with my car, the engine is roaring, and my husband can't get it to go up the hill. The car being broken means I can't get to school, it means I can't get Alexander to school, it means I can't go grocery shopping, it means I can't do the millions of things I'm supposed to do every week. Aaron parks my car on the street and starts walking to his so we can still go to breakfast. His mother is in town to celebrate the adoption and is supposed to meet us at a local bakery for brunch.

"Coming?" He asks, looking at me, arms crossed.

I am too angry to just get in his car and pretend like my life didn't just get even harder than it usually is.

"I'll just walk!" I shout at him. I look down at Alexander in his stroller. He's tugging at his hat, trying to pull it off, muttering "help me, help me, mommy, mommy" under his breath. "Want to go for a walk, monkey?" I smile at him, my tone shifted 180.

"I'll meet you at the restaurant," I say to my husband, beginning to stroll away. As soon as I round the corner away from our apartment, I begin to cry. This is still so fucking hard.

A block into the walk, once I've crossed the street and made me way onto the walking path, I pull out my phone.

"Mom?"

"Hunny, what's wrong?"

I'm not crying actively when she answers, but she can always tell the difference between when I call to talk about nothing and when I call because I need her.

I tell her about the car. I tell her how if we don't pay for a rental, I won't be able to get to school, how I'll get in trouble there, how I'm already not doing enough, how we can't afford a rental. There are tears again. And it's not about the car anymore. "I'm not a good enough wife, I'm a good enough student, I'm a good enough teacher, I'm not a good enough mom, I'm not doing anything good enough."

"Yes, you are. You're doing your best," my mom whispers.

"I just want to be his mom."

Some days, all I want is stay in my pjs and play trains and trucks with my son and take him to the park and watch cartoons and listen to him learn to talk, teach him new words, ask him what sound a dinosaur makes over and over again, not have to worry about anything except him.

A few years ago, when I was knee deep in figuring out my life, having quit the job I thought would be the job, the thing that would be my life's work, I asked my mother how she had dealt all her life without having some greater purpose. She had never worked anywhere besides a hotel or a store in the mall or else she had stayed home. I had a college degree, but I was answering phones at a travel agency and saw no way to redesign my life to make it mean more.

Her answer was pretty simple: "I had you."

I didn't get it then. I didn't understand how anyone could not need some job or some outlet to define their life by, I didn't get how what I did for a living could not define who I was.

I am not a stay at home mother, not the way my mom was anyway, but I understand now how it could have given her purpose. I understand that loving a child is different than loving anything else.

My job right now is to write this essay, tomorrow it will be to teach, Sunday it will be to go to the grocery store and wash all the laundry, but my son, who is tugging at my pajama pants trying to feed me a cheerio from his snack cup as I stand at the kitchen counter to write, the only safe space left for my computer, is the reason I do everything.

# cadaver LAB

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Another version of myself wanted to be a doctor; wanted to cut out the part of a patient that had gone awry. If the 19-year-old version, that overachieving version of myself, had stayed in charge I'm confident that's who I'd be. Instead of in grad school studying for my Master of Fine Arts, I would be in med school, maybe at Michigan State University—not so far from my hometown.

Growing up, I always thought of myself as a squeamish girl; in 7th-grade when my teacher, Mr. Malefyt, gingerly removed a cow heart from the mystery jar he kept covertly hidden on his desk I immediately left the classroom.

However, in 12-grade Senior biology I realized how very little guts and gore actually bothered me—together, with my lab partner, Mary, I skinned a long-soaking formaldehyde rabbit; he'd been white; we named him Wilbur.

From Wilbur, the base of my knowledge of the human body formed. I mastered terms like superficial, dorsal, insertion, supination, pronation. I realized that humans were put together in layers—after your skin, the muscles are your next-best line of defense against the tumble you take over the coffee table after a night of one too many shots of vanilla Burnetts.

Later, after 3 years of college and several failed attempts at finding an easier profession than medicine, I made one last ditch effort at doctorry—I took the human cadaver lab on Tuesday nights in the fall semester of 2008.

We aren't talking about Wilbur here. We are talking bodies of people that used to be alive. We are talking about Dexter Morgan's post-kill lab; pieces strewn throughout the room: a full body on the table near the door, a spinal cord to illustrate the nerve roots on the bench near the west wall, a leg that precisely shows the great saphenous vein running from toe to thigh. We are talking greying and bluing and pinking parts—bread that has started to mold under a heat lamp.

To help us forget that what was once alive now lay for us, prostrate, ready to dissect, the skin of the faces was removed. The only flesh that remained was the tip of the nose and the eyelids. Most of the time this worked, but every once in a while I found myself transfixed on the eyelashes, it must have been the shuffle and bustle and the rest of the body molecules circulating but it seemed like the Sand Man still visited each night while the cadavers dreamt; crusties still accumulated in the corner of their eyes—the cadavers must have known what was happening to their earthly bodies.

As we worked our way through the unit: first muscles, then organs, and finally veins & arteries, I found myself farther and farther behind my peers. I wanted to feel nothing, but no textbook could have told me that a spinal cord, when it's in your hands, looks like a jellyfish or plastic bag—if you saw it in the ocean you would definitely swim away. Or that the veins and arteries in your hands are completely unique to each individual. They're a jumble in your wrist, no distinct layer. Or that the pneumatic device I'd learned in anatomy class: *Oh Once One Takes The Anatomy Final Very Good Vacations Are Heavenly*, only suggested the order the cranial nerves: Olfactory, Optic, Oculomotor, Trochlear, Trigeminal, Abducens, Facial, Auditory, Glossopharyngeal, Vagus, Spinal, Hypoglossal—much like elementary school students queued on their way to lunch, the line is only a suggestion it's not a commandment, not 100% certain.

I got a C- in the class, no white lab coat for me. The overachiever was gone. I'd believed that semantically would protect me from the actual, complex psychology.

*This is the part I remember about muscles.*

At a yellow cottage on Hess Lake in Newaygo, Michigan I go for a walk with Ryan. It is a few days after Fourth of July. I am 19. Ryan is 16.

*There are three types of muscles: smooth, cardiac, and skeletal.*

This walk isn't a happenstance but rather a deliberation. In my mind the precise events of the evening are elusive. But I know this: Ryan and I sneak off towards the woods. I don't even have to talk Ryan into going for a walk. He's a co-conspirator, a kindred spirit.

*Endless possibility stretches out before me; I might be a doctor in the making.*

In the woods now. The sun is too deep to be seen, but the golden leaves that mat the floor of the forest and the heavy-handed oak leaves above, encapsulate us.

*Anatomy is the only course in my first year of college that makes me feel on fire, inspired.*

I charge ahead unabashedly.

"Do you want to kiss me?" My voice bounces off the oak tree, lassos around the cottonwoods, and lands in the space between.

*I see this version of myself as Dr. Rori Meyer.*

He had been leading the way, but just before the question reaches him he turns to face me. A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, the puppet strings of a marionette, but he pulls back against it. The look in his eyes—calculative, he might not want to play his hand too soon. His blonde hair curled in the humidity of the evening. His long piano fingers rest on the trunk of a nearby pine. His blue eyes speckled with flecks of gray. Recently, he stopped being fat. Tone and definition have eaten away at the excess portion his subcutaneous layer.

*Cardiac muscles are found in your heart, of course.*

"You know my birthday is coming up soon." This statement, for some reason, embarrasses me. I don't want inane chatter, I want to get to the

point, past the means, to the end.

He continues, "Are you getting me a birthday present?"

"I don't know Ryan, we're kind of just friends of friends, right?" I pause and add, quietly, an irrelevant afterthought, "I have a boyfriend."

He ponders. "Yes. But you always stood up for me when we were younger, when I was fat...You didn't let people get away with it." He pauses for a moment before he says the next thing, "I have always been surprised at the connection that we have."

It is the way he says this. There is someone else in his voice, a different person than the Ryan I want to believe I know; the artist, the opera singer, doomed or blessed to follow his craft to the very ends of the earth.

I don't meet his eyes. "I guess I always thought of you as a little brother, kind of." "A little brother? Oh god, tell me you don't think of me as a little brother."

I swallow, "not a little brother, maybe, more like a...."

*Smooth muscle is found in places like your eyes and the small of your arteries, smooth muscle is involuntary, it just does.*

I have lost control of this situation, "How many girls have you kissed, Ryan?" I ask, already knowing the answer but needing to redirect.

Ryan leans against the tree behind him, "Two." For 16 this fact isn't altogether unimpressive, "You really think of me as a little brother?"

"No. I already told you...you, ya know...you've gotten like buff in this past year."

"Buff", what an odd colloquialism. I wonder where this word ever came from. It has nothing to do with actual anatomy.

Real muscles have a pink hue, but not bright pink, more of a chewed up, bubble gum look.

*Skeletal muscle is found in the muscles connected to your bones via tendons. Skeletal appears striped, striated.*

I suddenly distinguish the tone of his voice. Not cardiac. Not smooth. Skeletal. Striated. Layered. The structure attached to the bone. Angular and calculated.

His body draws me in but his voice forces me to pause. I can't get any words out. I can't manipulate this situation. Ryan isn't quite the putty

I hoped for. I think for a moment I see a spark in the dusky air. Fireflies? No, it's far too late in the summer for fireflies.

I realize I desperately want to touch his skin, get as close to the muscles that live underneath, as possible. I want to pinpoint the derivation of the electricity. Maybe he radiates it. I crave some sort of intimacy. This thought scares me. Hadn't I just wanted to get a quick kiss and then go back?

He watches my green eyes, I suppose, so that he might know if I am being facetious, playing a cruel trick and waiting to humiliate him, or if my attempt at flirtation rings with sincerity.

The dusk between us is virtually nonexistent.

When Ryan's lips meet mine I know that I should feel relieved. After all, this was the point wasn't it? To touch him? To finish the flirtation I started? I had plotted the steps to get here but now that I was here I don't know how to get back to forward motion.

After opening the door to our first kiss there is always that sense propriety, it's not cheating if it's Ryan. That means there are hugs that linger just a little too long. That means there are glances across a crowded room. That means when he squeezes past me to go make another drink I only pretend to move out of the way.

I do not become a doctor. But I hold onto the anatomical knowledge of the past. Our actions have no end, they seep outwards, cancerous cells gone awry.

*Here's what I remember about organs, the guts of the body.*

*It is now New Year's Eve. Nearly 2011. I am 23.*

*The heart is protected by a thick chest plate comprised of ribs and sternum.*

*Ryan and I sit at the dining room table. No one pays any attention to us.*

*The esophagus is lined with squamous, epithelium that are constantly regenerating.*

We drink all night. We start with Burnetts vodka, then Margaritas made with Sauza, silver tequila and Daly's strawberry mix, and now we sip Bud Light because by this point the taste doesn't matter, the only thing that matters is the continuation of consumption.

*Everything else in the body, the muscles, the bones, function to protect the innermost parts.*

I wear a tattered University of Michigan jersey and black yoga pants. I have thrown my pin-straight brown hair into a loose ponytail—I do not look sexy.

*This version of me is so naive and innocent. I call her Sister Rori.*

We rapid fire back and forth.

"What's your favorite color?" I ask.

"Blue. Yours?"

"Cerulean. What's your favorite song?"

"Nessun Dorma. Yours?"

"Everything by Lifehouse." The tequila affects my brain. "You look hot tonight."

There was something about the glottis and the epiglottis in those anatomy books, something I used to know, something about the false and true vocal cords. This must be my false vocal cords talking.

Ryan doesn't respond right away, his eyes have started to gloss. "I think you want more."

I think we are still flirting and say, "What makes you think that?"

"Because we connect, sexually." He reaches across the table and grazes phalanx number 2. I know no one saw and for just a second I let myself drift backwards through time, let myself feel his touch, feel the spark. He sees this and even though he's drunk and getting drunker I know he's made up his mind. He will have me.

He pulls me into the bathroom.

"C'mon just like when we were younger."

I give in to the kissing. It's just a kiss.

He says, "You're not as clever as you think you are. You're not the only one manipulating the situation." I wonder if his false vocal cords are talking.

I realize that I am not in charge. He holds my wrist between his thumb and forefinger, the torque of his strength bruises the scaphoid bone in my wrist.

I push back against him. Oh my god, he thinks I want to fuck him. But I don't.

He doesn't mean to, but as we collapse to the floor his elbow catches the bone, the maxilla, just above my lip. My tooth catches, and snags.

and I can taste the blood inside my mouth. I lie on the floor for a second and remember that I used to know the names of all 206 bones of the body. I feel like nothing but bones, wide open, pulled apart. The bones protecting my heart have shattered. The illusion of safety vanishes.

I come back to the present. Ryan is saying something.

"I hear you give a great blowjob."

"What? No."

"C'mon Rori, you got me all excited. You can't just leave me here, like this." He presses his cock against my thigh. I agree to help him finish, but not with my mouth. Afterward, he passes out.

I leave the bathroom. The apartment is dark—empty.

I walk into my closet and though it dilates my pupils I turn on the light. There is a pile of t-shirts in the corner. I fall to my knees and put my mouth to them; and scream. I scream until there is nothing left under my skin, until I can feel my bones shaking.

And then I feel nothing. I realize that I am alone. I realize that if I keep crying Ryan might find me again.

I instinctively hide in the laundry room.

The pendulum of sobriety is coming back the other way, the concrete parts of my brain are resurfacing—I imagine the tide going down over the gryri and folds of the gray matter.

Ryan looks for me in the kitchen, in the living room, cautiously opens doors and feels around the bed for me, he goes and looks out on the deck. He opens every door, leaves no stone unturned. I imagine Ryan wandering around.

Before our game of questions he had been eating Cheetos. The cheese greased into the prints of his fingers, the distal phalanges, and now, he wanders around my apartment catching his hands on a table, a chair, a lamp, the coffee table; I'll find traces of orange dust tomorrow when I clean, like Cheetos, Chester the Cheatah broke in, a grifter in the night.

The door opens and the light snaps on.

"Where are my socks?" asks Ryan, slurred words, "I'm going home and I can't find my socks."

"You shouldn't drive." I keep my statements short.

"I just want my socks." He's aggravated, he's

forgotten that he's looking for me, forgotten that 15 min ago he pulled me in to the bathroom and tried to coerce me in to fucking him.

I want him to go so I find them under the dining room table and hand them over, "Be careful," I say.

"You too," he says and I wonder what that means. But then I think he is probably means nothing, he just mirroring what I've said because he is too drunk to know the difference, to know that what I have said doesn't require reciprocity.

I am not a doctor. I cannot diagnose myself. I forget to listen to my insides. I forget I have any insides. I think of myself as bag of skin—good enough only for touch, for pleasure. I lose myself in this thought and seek a way to quantify my vantage point.

*This is what I remember about arteries and veins.*

I refuse to listen to myself ever. I refuse to tell anyone. And I refuse to let either of those things bother me. Instead I concoct a new version of myself. I call her Abrielle.

*Arteries bring blood away from the heart.*

Abrielle is so incredibly confident. The name Abrielle comes to me after someone calls me Abby by mistake. I twist it so it fits. I figured if I looked like an Abby then there must be some version of me that is.

*Veins bring blood back to the heart.*

Abrielle realizes just how easy men truly are. She wears short shorts and tight tank tops—just a little bit white trash, she lets her bra straps show without concern.

*In pictures and diagrams arteries are red because they are oxygenated.*

Because I want to go down with it, to bring an end to the thing I started I, or rather, Abrielle creates a resolution.

It is July 8th. I am 24. Ryan and I pretend we are drunk after 2 whiskey and Cokes each. But I am not drunk and neither is he. The grey matter is intact, unsunk.

We have come full circle—five years after the original tryst I will end this tonight.

*In pictures and diagrams veins are blue because they are deoxygenated.*

I don't want my roommate to hear. I pull Ryan into the closet—that spacious walk-in, there's no

pile of t-shirts this time.

I ignore his muscles.

I ignore his fingers.

I ignore his voice.

I try on sexy lingerie. He sits back and watches, his eyes flit over each frilly piece of clothing I take off and put on and it gets easier to become someone else. He can have my body because it's all he's ever wanted. He can have my body because it's such a small part of what makes me Rori. I want to get rid of this. The emotions that I've been ignoring erode me. Have destroyed my muscles, my organs. I want to get rid of being hurt, if I hurt him then my own hurt goes away. I close my eyes. I want him to feel just for a second what I felt, voided.

During the sex I only look into his eyes once. They are a bluish grey in the light and make me think of the cadavers I once inspected. For a moment I think Ryan is the cadaver in the overarching metaphor of life—he is dead inside and that's why he subsists only on a sexual high.

But I then I realize that I am the cadaver. Abrielle is a figment of my imagination. A vapid and emotionally shallow version of myself. I am aware of my earthly body but I feel so far away from it that I don't care what happens.

I am vindictive. I give him what he wants and convince myself that it has somehow made him feel horrible and empty. But maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he'll just find another girl to sleep with, another girl to erase whatever impression I made. Afterward, I am surprised to find that I still feel nothing. But I am almost certain there is finality.

The biggest reason I gave up on my dream of becoming a doctor was because of the arteries and veins. I could not keep the ones from the wrist to the elbow straight. Whenever I have black ballpoint pen I trace the veins in my wrist and try to remember their names, but I only remember a few key words: median, cephalic, cubital. The words fray at the edges. I want to believe that knowing them somehow makes me better, makes me smarter, but outside of their appropriate context they are simply a parlor trick. They are flashy and impressive, but sometimes I wield them carelessly and with only the basest of medical knowledge.

We, or maybe just me...I create other people who mess up, it helps the distance grow. Separates

my conscious from who I want to be. Makes me innocent and them culpable. I repeat myself. I make up myself along the way. I invent new versions of myself to hide in. We convince ourselves that if we could just go back through one more time we could get it right. That if we are unhappy with something we've done then there must be a way to fix it. Trace the lines so carefully that we won't mess up. Take a fine-toothed comb over the past. That is, until we have to resolve it once more, until we have to cut away pieces to make it fit into our own personal puzzle. You can tell the truth if it never seems to end, it just goes on forever, a constant wave against the hull of a boat.

When truth unfolds it fades away like a radio transmission slowly floating above earth's atmosphere. I don't want to believe in that part of myself, so I don't. If we get the past out it's forgettable. Until it's not. Memories wait around. They hide in an irrevocable location that lies dormant until the most inopportune of moments. I try not to keep skeletons in my closet. They're too fragile. You never know who might open you up and shake you to dust.



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# THE ARCHITECTURE OF FORGETTING

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Leah Kuenzi  
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## 1. No Impairment

The first time I heard the word was like visiting the ocean for the first time.

You took me to Fernandina Beach when I was nine. The sky was threatening to pelt our rental car with angry sheets of raindrops and the palm tree branches whipped around ominously in the wind. I wanted to cry, because we were so close to the water, and our day was about to be ruined by an unpredictable summer Florida day. It rained hard for two minutes, and the sky opened up to cascading blue, a shade just lighter than the vast ocean in front of us. I marveled at the endless crash of foamy waves against the sand and ran straight for the water. We spent four hours floating, bellies up, in the deep end of the ocean, salt flooding our mouths with each big crash. That night as I lay in the hotel bed trying to fall asleep, my body was rocked by phantom ripples that filled me with dread and nausea. I wanted, in that moment, never to see the ocean again.

When I heard the word, the diagnosis, I was again rocked by phantom waves.

I knew it was bad, but I didn't know why.

I spent three hours that night reading page after page of the search results on Google: medical websites, blogs, prescription information, coping methods, questions to ask the doctor. I found a guide for children of patients with Alzheimer's disease: assisting your parent with preparing a will, transferring power of attorney, guidelines for choosing the best nursing home. Nothing on this website was of help to a 13-year old who still considered "will" and "attorney" to be grown-up words. They must have assumed that 13-year old children's parents don't get Alzheimer's disease, because 13-year olds have 40-something-year-old fathers, not 70-something-year-old fathers.

Before bed, we used to read a story about four young cousins who found a rabbit injured in a trap. They took it in, bandaged its wounds, nursed it back to health, and set it free in a meadow after it was healthy again. Each night I told you that the girls were silly for letting the bunny go, because if they kept it, they would have a pet to love them and play with them. You made up a new ending for me, one where the girls decided to name the rabbit Fred, and it hopped around their house and ate

carrot soufflé and they all lived Happily Ever After. Google did not have the answer I was looking for. It only had the bad kind of ending, the one I wanted to change. I sorted through page after page of results, and each time the ending was the same.

I think it's unfair to learn about sickness like it's simple. Everything before you got sick taught me the same lesson: stitch it, operate on it, medicate it, remove it, shock it, replace it, whatever you do, it will eventually be better. It will eventually heal.

So I guess you can see why I thought there was a fix for what ailed you. I guess you can see why I didn't understand and couldn't fully grasp the seriousness of your diagnosis.

Six months after I first heard the word and allowed its meaning to sink into me, I decided it couldn't be true. You were as sharp as ever: you kicked my butt every time we played Scrabble, you told your favorite "dirty" joke (three pigs fell in a pit of mud) to every stranger we shared an elevator with, and when we were driving across Wisconsin on a vacation, a route you hadn't driven in at least ten years, you could tell me, at any given point in the drive, where the next wayside rest area would be. I deemed your diagnosis incompatible with your day-to-day life and stopped worrying. You were fine.

This is probably why I got clobbered the first time your memory let you down.

## 2. Very Mild Decline

You were supposed to pick me up outside school after I finished setting up the stage for our upcoming choral concert. I was just starting eighth grade. Seven o'clock came and went and I walked back and forth across the concrete sidewalk ledge, kicking pinecones across the parking lot to pass the time. I thought it was weird and shrugged it off. I caught a ride with a friend and her mom dropped me off at your house. You were lying in bed watching Seinfeld with all the lights off. I asked you why you didn't come pick me up. You stared at me, head tilted, blankness behind your thick-rimmed bifocals. When I realized what had happened, I asked no further questions. I went to the kitchen and filled a glass to the top with cold tap water, decided I wasn't thirsty, and poured it back into the sink. The sudden onrush of phantom waves pushed

me over into a kitchen chair. I didn't try too hard to fight them. I just let them rock me back and forth.

## 3. Mild Decline

My brother Scott lives out of state but does most of the communicating with your doctors. The doctors suggest doing things with you that are familiar, things you have done many times, because you are more likely to remember them and these activities will help us to interact in "nonthreatening ways." It is getting harder to talk to you but Scott encourages all the kids to do something that will help you remember: Hans bakes your favorite oatmeal cookies every week; Steve's and Cindy send a scrapbook. I come to your house every Friday night and we watch Yours, Mine & Ours. The old VHS copy is long gone, so I bring the new DVD I bought. You ask me the same question each week; whether or not I watch I Love Lucy. You tell me that if I like Yours, Mine & Ours, then I would definitely like the show. You tell me about the episode where Lucy and Ethel are hired at a chocolate factory. I assure you I watch the show when reruns air on TV Land. Yes, that is my favorite episode.

Six months into our routine, you stop laughing at your favorite joke, the one where Henry Fonda's character describes the scene at his wedding: "It was a typical wedding: enemies of the bride on the right, enemies of the groom on the left." I up my viewings of the movie to every day for a full year.

My Mom tells me I am grieving, and insists that I see a family counselor. But I am doing my homework and getting good grades and I haven't taken up smoking or drugs or drinking, so I don't want to see any counselor, don't see the need to. Mom tells me that my behavior is obsessive and wants me to stop watching Yours, Mine & Ours. I refuse.

What can a 14-year old really refuse to do when her parent insists otherwise? Not much.

In counseling, the therapist prints out a list from the Alzheimer's Association website, a list of 101 activities that you can do with the person in your life who has the disease. I hate her for using the word. She throws it around in our sessions like she's talking about the weather. She calls you a "patient with Alzheimer's." I hate her for this, too. When she repeats this phrase over and over again, I replace it in my mind with the words "my dad whose

memories are disappearing." This is more real, less padded, easier to feel.

That night, I study the list. Look at family photographs. Play dominoes. Ask the person about his or her favorite childhood book or cartoon characters. Sing songs. Take a walk around the yard. Make a cherry pie. Half of the items on the list are recipes, and the other half are activities that I typically perform with the children I babysit. I picture little kids, six and seven year olds, who visit their Alzheimer's-suffering grandfather at Christmastime. These are not father-daughter activities.

I toss the list in the trash and press "play" on the DVD remote.

## 4. Moderate Decline (mild or early stage)

Over whipped potatoes and Salmon La Maison in a fancy French restaurant, Scott told me that you were leaving. He had secured a place at a nursing home in Wisconsin, just down the street from his house so that he can keep an eye on things. I never much cared for fancy foods. I was a kid who was content to eat chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese until my tastes changed or I died from malnutrition. Now that my tastes have changed, with favorite foods including brussel sprouts and sunflower seed pâté, Mom laughs at me and tells me about the time you made steak for dinner and I vomited all over the kitchen floor. You were baffled because the quality of the steak was so high and you had cooked it so perfectly. She said you weren't mad, though. You just laughed and defrosted some chicken nuggets.

I don't remember spitting the steak on the kitchen floor but I remember spitting the salmon on the pristinely white table cloth.

I wasn't mad at Scott, but I didn't talk to him for the rest of the visit. I gave him a pitiful hug at the airport, one that said: "I have to hug you in case your plane crashes and I never see you again, but I'm still not too fond of you right now."

If I told you about the day you left, then I would have to write it down.

I am not ready to write it down.

I got lost on the way home from the airport. I had driven the route three or four times before, and had been a passenger on that route countless times. I took I-85 North instead of I-85 South,

ended up on the Perimeter, and took one full loop around the city before I realized what I was doing. I was just swimming in my thoughts with my foot on the accelerator and zombie-eyes on the road in front of me. I finally realized my mistake when my car sounded an angry alarm, notifying me that I was almost out of gas. I stopped at an unfamiliar exit, filled my tank, and took one final drive around Atlanta before heading home.

5. I stopped knowing what stage you were in because Scott, or maybe it was David at that point, got busy with looking after his own family, and I couldn't afford airline tickets. Mom wouldn't drive me to Wisconsin or permit me to drive there by myself, even though I was old enough and had a license. Here is what I do know: You got worse.

I wrote about you in my high school graduation speech. I knew several months before I graduated that you wouldn't be there, although one of the things Scott said to me before you left was that he would try to bring you back to Georgia for the event. Scott wasn't there either. I wrote a detailed section about how you always nurtured my love of literature, filling my bookshelves with chapter books before I was ready for them, telling me that I was smart enough to understand anything. I wrote about our Scrabble games, and about the time you scored 57 points on a single word, which word I don't remember.

Isn't that strange? I forgot the word.

I had to do practice readings of the speech in front of my teachers, and everyone commended me for being brave enough to talk about you. Each time I practiced the speech, I got through the section just fine. I even memorized it. On the night of the speech, I simply skipped over all the pretty words I wrote about you, passed them right by. My teachers asked me why I did it after the speech was over.

"I don't know," I said. I really didn't know.

I fell in love. I stayed in love. I'm still in love. I'd tell you that you would like him, but you probably wouldn't. You told me you would never like any guy I brought home. I believed you, and some things never change.

I sold the sofa I got from your apartment after

you left.

Left, more like got taken. They categorized your things, arranged them into piles: model cars, unframed photographs, furniture, odds and ends. Youngest picks last: I got the photo albums back; all the ones I made to help you remember. I sold all the material crap, the furniture, the bars of silver, the china plates. A stranger responded to my ad on Craigslist within an hour of my post, paid me \$50, drove to my house, and hauled it all away. *Good riddance*, I thought, as the stranger's truck pulled out of my driveway.

One of the photo albums I got back is brushed silver, engraved with the word "Family" in fancy script writing. The other has a wooden cover with an oak leaf etched into the center. I never turn the pages: ever since I've had them on my desk, each album is opened to the same photo.

One shows me in a straw gardening hat holding a carton of pink pansies. Your hair is already gray at the temples but your eye is steady. Your hand is steady. We are on the deck at our old house. Your right hand holds the trowel, caked in potting soil, and your left hand touches mine. I am not looking at you. I wish I were looking at you. In the other album, you are already sick. We are lying in your armchair. I cannot see the TV, but our eyes are wandering past the camera and I know we are watching our movie. Henry Fonda has just met Lucille Ball in the grocery store. Your favorite line is coming up soon. I can hear it.

There are other photographs, too. There is one of us on a cruise ship, at a fancy dinner where they served seafood in cream sauce and mushroom risotto with roasted asparagus. There is a little bit of the sauce on your blue dress shirt. I remember how difficult it was for you, once you got sick, to get dressed. You started 30 minutes before we had to be somewhere and still barely made it in time. All I can think of when I look at this photograph is the wheelchair, your half-smile, and that day's struggle with your suit coat.

I saved these photographs, too, but I only want to remember us in one kind of way. I only keep the good memories close.

The armchair. The only "thing" I wanted, I didn't get. Something that now sits in my brother's house, in a damp basement corner, where my nieces and nephews grind in crumbs and snot and paint

pen ink.

There is a line in *Yours, Mine & Ours* where Frank Beardsley's character lectures the whole family about learning to share, ordering them to stop arguing over which child belongs to which parent, which toy belongs to which child: "Let's get one thing straight:

There's no more mine and there's no more yours. From now on, everyone and everything is ours."

I did more research on the disease, tried to learn about all its intricacies, all the medications and what benefits they provided. I learned that your memories weren't really gone, just inaccessible because of plaque buildup and fatty deposits between the nerve cells in your brain. New technologies (the article I read assured me that these were theoretical areas of development and were at last 10 years away) could reverse the damage caused to the brain cells and allow Alzheimer's patients to re-access their forgotten memories. I wished that this information would fill me with hope and optimism that you would someday get better, that you would get back all you had lost. But I had been promising myself for two years that your disease was exactly as bad as it seemed, and I wasn't about to let my guard down for the prospect of a theoretical development.

I had to buy a replacement copy of the *Yours, Mine & Ours* DVD because the old one started skipping whole sections of the movie after I accidentally bumped it on the edge of the DVD player enough times.

I spent \$15.94 at FedEx to overnight the Father's Day package that I put off sending for the whole week. I put it off because I didn't want you to get the package. If you got the package, it would be decided once and for all if you still knew who I was. In the end, I decided I wanted you to have it. In the letter I wrote, I told you that I attend Agnes Scott College. I'm studying English Literature and Creative Writing and I just had my 19th birthday. I don't tell you anything real, anything that really matters. I sign it "your favorite daughter," a common joke you used to make. I'm your only daughter.

6. I can only guess that this stage is called "Doesn't Remember A Single Thing, Person, Place or Thought From Their Entire Life." Rather, that's

what it should be called. There is probably a proper term, something like "Late Stage" or "Severe Stage."

When the nurse set up the Scrabble board in front of us, you stared at it for several minutes with questioning eyes. I handed you seven tiles and set them upright on the wooden holder. I've always sucked at Scrabble. The nurse handed me a tiny bottle of diet soda and a paper bag of stale, rancid popcorn. You shifted your gaze to her for a moment. Nothing. She has taken care of you every day for the past three years and you still look at her like it's the first time you met.

I thought of earlier that morning, the rye toast I forced down to settle my nervous stomach. I thought of all the people you used to know, people who shared countless Thanksgiving dinners and matinee movies and chats on the back porch: Uncle Lester, Aunt Sharon, Aunt Judy, Cousin Sara, Grandma Charlotte, countless people who told me to say "hello" for them, people who assumed like I did, that surely somehow, you would remember us all. I thought of the square of chocolate I had grabbed on the way out the door that morning, how sweet it had tasted, the last bits sticking in my molars.

I lay the first word, "Phone." I didn't even bother writing down the score. I knew we wouldn't get very far, and I didn't care who won. You stared at the board, dozed in and out of sleep, stared at me so vacantly that I don't even think you knew I was there. After 30 minutes, you put down a word, "Intra." You hung your head and ten seconds later were snoring.

I got up and went to the deck with the bag of rancid popcorn. I let hot tears fill my mouth with the salt of the ocean.

"Intra" is not a word on its own, rather a prefix meaning "among" or "between."

# ON THE WARD

Keely Lewis  
Agnes Scott College



When the medical forms ask why I was hospitalized back in '07, I answer, Just a *misunderstanding*. It was only a misunderstanding, like when Mom says to meet her in the Sparkle grocery store and I walk to Kroger instead. I'm sure most people in my situation say the same. *Situation*. That's another nice, neat word—useful for begging out of explanations no one needs to hear anyway. I know that the people who ask questions about my *situation* are more interested in documenting my symptoms and behaviors, in reviewing my test scores, in scanning my affect for abnormalities. They want to help me *resolve my issues*, especially if I am *thinking of hurting myself*. They are confident that, whether I want it or not, they know exactly what kind of *support I need*. And they are more than willing to bestow said support upon me (provided that all the insurance forms are filed).

But before any support is given or issues are resolved, these professionals must know what's wrong with me. Don't misunderstand—it isn't personal. My profile can be found verbatim in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*. No input on my part is necessary. They want to know, in diagnoses and billable codes, why I sat on my high school's roof some nights. Why I took a vow of

silence and ate only carrots for three weeks straight. They want to know, with the same mixture of curiosity and feigned sympathy as the town gossip, exactly how crazy I am. But since I grew up a small town girl, I fold my arms in front of me and keep my stories to myself.

As most resident spectacles will tell you, being crazy has its downsides. Examples include thinking you are the Antichrist, losing most of the civil rights guaranteed to U.S. citizens, and being unable to practice your lines for the Spanish talent show aloud. Trust me—the librarian will listen in for a few seconds, then whisper to your English teacher, who will tell the secretary, who will phone your parents, your psychiatrist, and the principal. Speaking to people no one else can see is a sign of mental illness. Yelling in Spanish, doubly so. A new prescription will be faxed that afternoon.

AAAA

One of my hobbies is comparing the behaviors of caregivers to those of their patients. Like the double-blind taste tests between brands of soda, often the only difference I find is the label. Psychiatrists and counselors, afraid of losing the prestige of their positions, quiz me on Latin phrases, poetry, important dates in World War II, and distinguishing features in the branches of socialism. One asks, for no discernible reason, for my IQ scores. *I went to Harvard and am fluent in German*, he tells me. The reason I'm suicidal is because high school is an awkward phase in people's lives, he insists. I just need to be more optimistic. When I tell him my medication isn't helping, he says that nothing will. *I founded a clinic and have four degrees*, a second says, by way of introducing himself. He will only engage in conversation if it is related to his daughter, a veterinarian in Indiana. *I've published thirty-nine sonnets to date*, crows a third. When I'm sixteen, my mother tells him my first poem has been published. He says I mustn't get too cocky, then hands me an order for a blood test and tells me my quarter-hour is up.

My first therapist is called Bob, and to compensate for his lackluster name he has bleached his hair with peroxide. He loves the Beatles, is a devout Nazarene, and was a quarterback on the Potter High School football team in 1969. His laugh re-

minds me of maple syrup: slow and warm and deep. Bob calls me every night to make sure I haven't died or run away. When I come into the office, I stroke the velour couch and stare at the pictures of trees and monster trucks that he has taped to the walls. Many of Bob's patients are raped and battered children whose parents are court-ordered to bring them to counseling. The trees all have holes gouged in them and the monster trucks are colored blood red.

During one family session, Bob asks what I want my parents to do to help me. I tell them to send me to the Mojave Desert and let me wander around until my skin bakes off. They send me to Belmont Pines Hospital instead. Two weeks before the trip, they become jittery and avoid looking at me. While they are out of the house, a woman named Mallory calls and says a bed is ready. I ask her to explain. *I can't*, she says. *Just tell your parents a bed is ready*. I write down the memo and demand answers from my father when he walks in the door. *You're going someplace safe*, he tells me. He still won't meet my eyes. The next morning I am awakened at 7:30 and told to pack a few changes of clothes. *Don't wear a belt or bring razors*, Mom says.

During the car ride, I try to convince myself that the hospital will make me better. I imagine psyche-revealing art projects and receiving the right doses of the right medicine so I don't pass out or get tremors or try to hook up with people selling candied nuts in the mall. My parents, too, believe what Bob and movies have told them about psychiatric hospitals: nurses will comfort me when I cry in my sleep and I will forge meaningful friendships with the other patients, using teamwork to overcome our problems. At least, we all say to ourselves, *at the very least it is safe*.

When we arrive at Belmont Pines, the plush carpet and photos of carefree children on the walls feed my few particles of hope. The only unnerving detail of the waiting room is the keypad that leads into the wards themselves. After forty minutes of silence, a nurse deposits us into a second waiting room (threadbare and stained this time) for another two hours. The intake process is longer. The nurse laughs at me when I elaborate on questions she calls *yes or no* and demands that I rate my emotional pain on a one-to-ten smiley face scale. She tells me to stop treating the interview like a philosophy test.

I'm near tears from frustration by the time I'm admitted. Another nurse arrives with more forms for my parents to sign. *Congratulations, you're in, she says. Now dump everything out of your backpack and take off your shoes.*

Lockdown is officially called PICU: the psychiatric intensive care unit. When someone starts punching furniture or won't stop sobbing about demons, he or she gets put on lockdown. But if the nurses are feeling testy, even someone who complains about the food too often can get escorted away. Everyone starts out there, at least for a few minutes. When I arrived at Ward C I was ordered to stand behind a held-up sheet, take off all my clothes, and wait until someone permitted me to cover myself again. After a debate between two nurses about whether or not my underwire bra was contraband, I was allowed to put on my civvies and leave PICU. When kids really get put on lockdown, though, they have to change into t-shirts and sweatpants without drawstrings and sit on the pubic-hair-covered linoleum all day without talking. If they're good, they are allowed to color photocopies of kittens and flowers. If they misbehave, burly nurses sedate them and carry them to the Quiet Room, complete with blue padded walls, one double-locked door, and nothing to occupy them but their own anguished thoughts. Even the sickest among us know better than to get put on lockdown.

Comfort is never a nurse's priority. Neither is civility, for that matter. Their jobs are those of overseers, wardens. Nursing in the mental health world means keeping patients in line. Following a game of Anger Management Bingo (during which Monique screamed that Brandi was a cheater), the nurses on the teenage ward march us through the double keypad/scan card doors, down the smudged Plexiglas hallways, and into the gym. They decide that we must play kickball. It is a difficult venture, however, because we also must play in socked feet. Shoes are not allowed on the ward—they can be fatal in the hands of the insane—but kick balls are perfectly safe. Many kids want to play basketball or toss footballs around, and I want to practice karate for my upcoming black belt test, but abstinence is not an option. After much stubbing of toes and subsequent cursing, arguments over the score, a scuffle deciding whether the pitcher's aim was

for the runner's foot or his head, and organized pleading for activities time to be over, one nurse blows her whistle and screams for us to shut up. *You will play kickball until I tell you to stop, and you will play it silently. Anyone who disobeys will be put on lockdown for defiance.* In an instant the gymnasium echoes silence, each of us terrified that a single grunt while running the bases will get us escorted away. Sometimes exercise isn't the best mode of stress relief.

Years after I am released from Belmont Pines, I refuse to read *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I wince when friends call the physics teacher psychotic for assigning too much homework, remembering the way Jared shivered and lurched toward the creatures we refused to acknowledge. I wake up at 3 AM with fingers numb from gripping fistfuls of blanket and a jaw sore from gritting my teeth in the night. After catching my breath, I pad to the bathroom and scatter my pills on the counter-top, turning each one over so that I can read their impressions. Ten milligrams, twenty, two hundred and fifty. More money in drugs than a month's worth of rent. My spirit is hemorrhaging. *Maybe if I swallow fast enough, I can get all of them down before they knock me out. Maybe I can finally die.* I consider waking my mother and telling her that I'm scared, but I remember the ward and know better this time. She'll only throw me back into Hell. The pills are put back in their bottles and I sit cross-legged on my bed until morning.

AAAAA

My first counseling appointment in eleven months is orchestrated following an unusual bout of obedience during my first year of college. My school is perfect: a tiny, liberal women's college with Gothic architecture, a social scene comprised of oddballs, and a serious commitment to Southern hospitality. Yet despite my residence in paradise, I do not appreciate life enough to commit to it long-term. Death is still in my front pocket, next to a stick of gum and my ID. I prefer to make my decisions apart from unsolicited advice, but after my roommate, mother, professor, campus nurse, youth pastor, high school physics teacher, and visiting Buddhist mystic all tell me within a month's time that I need therapy, I decide that perhaps they are

seeing something I haven't. With much reticence, I schedule an appointment with the college coordinator of psychological support.

Because I am a veteran of the mental health system, I am suspicious of all attempts at friendliness. I am no longer fooled by phrases like, Please make yourself comfortable and What brings you here today? Both mean Pretend you don't realize I'm watching you. I know that every psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, and nurse I see will scrutinize me while trying to appear cavalier, and I make it my goal to alienate them as quickly as possible. I show up to my meeting with wearing a top hat, a turquoise shirt so bright that it glows, a pocket chain just long enough to be menacing, and a spike-studded cuff. A lady in a pastel sweater set guides me into the office. Her professional-grade smile radiates canned serenity. It's almost as if she isn't taking mental notes to be recorded in a file later. "How are you today?" she coos.

"I'm fine, thank you. And how are you?" I sipper back.

"Why, I'm doing well. Thanks for asking," she says, a bit thrown off. She glances at my forms. "So..." she pauses for tact. "You've had thoughts of hurting yourself recently?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And do you have a plan of how you'd hurt yourself?" It's as if she's asking me if I remembered to pack my toothpaste for a sleepover birthday party.

"Of course I do. It's not that difficult. You could come up with a plan right now if you wanted to, if you haven't already. There are plenty of ways a person could kill herself. The trick is being creative enough to invent an original method." This is not the right thing to say if one wants to be considered in one's right mind. She leans toward me from her armchair, creases forming in her brow line.

"Have you ever tried to kill yourself before?" she asks, worry replacing practiced calm with every syllable.

"Well, it depends on what you define as 'trying,'" I say offhandedly. I cross my legs and jiggle one foot while speaking. "If you mean an effort resulting in a trip to the ER to be resuscitated, never. If you mean holding my weapon of choice in my hands and thinking long and hard about it, then maybe a hundred times. But if you mean just

'having a plan,' as you say..." I pause, considering. "I guess that would average out to about once an hour every day from the time I was fifteen years old. Sometimes I make up a new plan every five minutes, and sometimes it's just every couple of days. Like I said, it really depends." I appear shaken to the director, but really I'm smug. If I'm going to have a psychiatric file, I might as well make it an entertaining read. It would be terrible to be mistaken for some generic troubled youth.

"You know," she says, readying herself to rescue me from my imminent self-destruction, "I think you and I should get in contact with Student Disabilities Services. I'm sure we can get you the support you need from the school—accommodations for your coursework should any issues arise. And I'll give you a referral for a therapist, of course. I have one in mind already, and he's just fabulous. Everybody loves him. But I think you should check in with me once a month, as well. All you need to do is sign a few more forms, and I can set up the rest."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I'm sure that won't be necessary." I smile. "The academics are challenging, but I can manage on my own."

The director's eyes bulge, horrified at the mental image of my corpse on the front page of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, a headline underneath reading "Local College Student Kills Self with Textbook."

"I really think you would benefit from our Student Supportive Action Team. If you'd just sign these papers, your therapist, professors, resource advisor, and I could all communicate with each other and know exactly how you're doing all the time. It would help us know how to help you better."

Power. Control. The director is willing me to surrender my life to her benevolent dictatorship: *Though I don't know you, I know what's best for you. I've read your file and checked off your symptoms on my chart. It's obvious that you can't take care of yourself. I have decided that you need me to survive.* Her attitude, all too common in the mental health world, is why I call therapy Remedial Life Lessons 101, and why I hate going. Strangers decide that I am incompetent of living an acceptable life. They decide they are obligated to intervene. It becomes their moral duty to strip me of my independence.

"That won't be necessary," I repeat, firmly this time. "Now if you could just give me your referral,

I'll be on my way."

Tight-lipped, she hands me a card containing the referral's name, address, and telephone number. She sighs, wishes me a good day, and wipes her conscience of my inevitable suicide, which she has scheduled for early November.

As my first appointment approaches, I become increasingly anxious. Up to this point, therapy has been one part punishment, two parts useless, and entirely mandatory. I turn down acquaintances' offers to "listen whenever you just need somebody" as a matter of pride. But when I am alone, away from the masses of do-gooders, the reason why I attract so many referrals sinks in. *My misfiring neurotransmitters could be studied for chaos theory. My current impulses lead to a promising career in exhibition art. I have spent a quarter of my life feeling crazy. I am not okay.*

If this shrink is as clueless or self-absorbed as the others, I'll retire from therapy, I vow. I will excuse myself from all future couches and find a better way to keep going. Still, I am afraid. *What if he's one more letdown? I ask myself. Then, What if he's not?*

After a few days, I can't decide which prospect is scarier. Despite my efforts to scorn psychology as a field, I have not quashed the hope that it is possible to be helped—yes, even to be saved. But this hope is almost smothered in skepticism, and soon the very idea of walking into another counselor's office becomes fraught. To keep some control over the situation, I try to find out who this person is and if there's anything about him he would rather I not know. Since most shrinks seem to believe that conquering my attitude is the best way to start a therapeutic relationship, I decide to arm myself for the ensuing sparring match. I must remain equal.

Any bully knows that a target's most obvious feature is often his or her biggest source of insecurity. Though I am usually a respectful person, I make an exception for authority figures when I believe I am more informed and invested in the outcomes than they are. In this instance, I will resort to intimidation. Every mental health-related person I have ever met has fallen into the category of inept authority figure (Dr. Fluent-In-German, et. al), so when I get to the office I decide to skip this therapist's posturing and go straight into mine.

As soon as the psych director referred to Fred as *fabulous*, I knew he was gay. No one ever calls a

straight man fabulous. There are probably federal laws prohibiting it. A visit to his website to print off the forms confirms this hunch: the background is peach. Peach is a shade of pink. Back home in West Virginia, little boys aren't allowed to color the pigs in their reading workbooks pink, because exposure to pink causes immediate attraction to other boys. Before meeting him, I plot to exploit his most obvious feature.

Unfortunately, Fred is a very nice man. His eyes are blue like blown glass and dimples appear through his beard stubble when he smiles. From all indications, he was born and raised in khaki pants. He pours hot water into his tea mug before ushering me into his office. Tea instead of coffee. *Gay.* The room is impeccably decorated, 180° away from the flickering fluorescent-bulbed rooms all the other shrinks had. *Gay, but a perk.* He settles into his chair and squints at the microscopic printing on my forms.

"Wow," he says, and I wait for the inevitable remark: *You've been to quite a few counselors in the last few years, haven't you?* I still haven't found a glib answer to that one. It still stings, like it's my fault that no one has been able to help. Instead, he says, "So your parents are both ministers. What was that like growing up?"

I blink, uncertain of what he means. "It was fine. I mean, being a preachers' kid is no different to me than being a plumbers' kid would be." It is the largest lie I've told in at least six months, but I don't have much choice than to tell it. I am not willing to become disloyal to my family so quickly. Ministers and their children get caricatured too often as repressed killjoys for a question like his to be answered honestly. My family is much more real and complicated than the Bible-thumpers on the news, and definitely not initial session material. We chat a bit more, but I find it hard to speak without saying anything. At one point I slip up and refer to myself as a freak. Fred pounces.

"Why do you feel so different from other people?"

"I, uh...um...well, I just think differently from other people. And when I was in kindergarten, I was the only kid with a birthday in September. And I'm left-handed." I hold up my hand and shake it as proof. Fred looks amused. Mercifully, he does not pursue the matter.

After thirty-five minutes, he still is not frustrated or defensive. Though he's clearly smart, he hasn't tried to outmaneuver me; it's like he doesn't want to beat me. I am lulled by his voice and confused by his gentleness. Threads of trust sprout in the back of my mind. I panic. As time runs out, he asks if I have any questions for him. I cast around the room for one last spike to lob at him, and find it around his finger.

"Who does your ring belong to?" I ask, half hoping to shut him up for good. *Maybe he'll kick me out and I won't have to deal with him again.* My attempt at casual makes the campus psych director look like an Oscar nominee.

"My partner of seventeen years. He's an emergency room pediatrician. We have two kids, ages ten and thirteen." All of this without a pause or blush. All of this without a hint that he knows my question was supposed to offend, or indeed that the question could offend. He's just calm, waiting for me to ask something else. Fuck.

"I came with my armor on," I say, knowing exactly how small I sound. He smiles.

"We can talk about what that means next week."

AAAA

I'm huddled on a beige couch (all psychologists' couches are beige; beige is a very therapeutic color) and Fred is opposite me, four feet away. His name, depending on how stubborn and insecure I feel, is now Shrinky-Dink, ShrinkoMatic PsychoBlast, or Fuck-Fuck-Fuck-He-Knows-That?-Fuck. I never call him these names. I don't even look at him much. After three sessions, I decide that glancing at his pant legs counts as eye contact. Eventually I may work my way up to staring at his tea mug. Therapy is all about progress. The area rug under the couch is vaguely Native American, and sometimes when I don't want to think about myself anymore I imagine what kinds of shoes his other patients wear. This is a private practice in a complex with glass doors and fake-wood paneled elevators, so their shoes must be correspondingly classy. I show up in purple combat boots.

Today we are discussing vulnerability—one of my least favorite concepts after dependence on others. At present it is merely a theory, due to my refusal to do anything radical in therapy, such as

feel emotions. I have decided that my inability to cry or get angry in front of Fred is due to a rare, as-yet-undiscovered genetic mutation in which tear ducts shut down like vaults in Swiss banks whenever the affected person might emote in public. Fred is not convinced. There are many things I haven't convinced Fred of. He doesn't believe that I'm an alien, that I'm evil incarnate, or that I'll die alone in a box on the street. He's even gone so far as to call me resilient. I think he's overly optimistic.

Fred asks me what would happen if I cried in his office. I explain that, naturally, he would think I was weak and would hate me forever, banishing me from the shiny complex building if I persisted. Crying in front of others is inappropriate. He raises an eyebrow at me. Or at least I imagine a raised eyebrow.

"Okay..." he says. "But I'm your therapist. I'm not some guy you met at Starbuck's. This is my job."

Noncommittal grunt.

"Keely, I have a teddy bear under that chair in the corner. There are tissues right here by me. I've even got a whiffle bat somewhere if you feel like bludgeoning someone in effigy. You're allowed to feel things here. You're supposed to. You. Are. Safe. Do you hear me?"

Softer, watery grunt.

"Can you take a few deep breaths with me? In... and out...in...and out." He breathes. I don't.

"Do you think you could sit back in the couch a little bit, and sit up straighter instead of being hunched over so much?" Fred asks. I look like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*. Slowly, as though doing so risks detonating a bomb, I scoot five inches back in my seat. My arms lock at my sides, bracing my body for the shock of sitting upright. My neck torques toward the opposite wall to avoid his gaze.

"We need to work on your breathing. Maybe you would feel better if you took in more air."

AAAA

I stop pretending I'm fine on the first week of August. Due to a lack of jobs and summer housing in my college's neighborhood, I came home from school four months earlier to work mornings as a secretary in a notary office and afternoons as a janitor at a reading day camp. The pay at both jobs is

higher than minimum wage, and working helps me feel like an adult instead of a teenaged mooch. Every Sunday I put on a skirt, then cross the driveway to pantomime the personality the congregants have come to expect. Eventually, I begin to resent my duties in denying my family's crises.

Over the course of six weeks, Dad has begun applying for jobs in Missouri and Arkansas. He has felt stagnant at his current position for over fourteen years, and neither of his churches can pay him the minimum standard salary. My sister, Eliza, announces that she is moving to Australia at the end of the year. Her husband plans to transfer his job in Washington D.C. to a similar department in Perth; Eliza is uncertain of how to continue her graduate education in Australia, but feels obligated to follow him. Mom is diagnosed with a subtle form of cancer after a lucky call at a check-up. The more the doctors examine her, the more extensive her course of treatment becomes. In time, she is told to prepare for two surgeries, radiation, and chemotherapy, procedures lasting until the following May. Suddenly, the immutable facts of my family's existence—our home in the parsonage, our geographic togetherness, my mother's survival—all come into question. A high-pitched silence pervades every Lewis conversation. Mom, Dad, and I each spend increasing amounts of time reading and taking walks alone. We convince ourselves that fervent research and prayer will help us determine how to regain a sense of stability in our lives, yet talk about the emotions governing such attempts at rationality never crosses our lips.

My parents and I decide that turning my childhood bedroom into a sewing room for Mom will help us all ease longstanding tensions. After we finish painting the walls and hauling in furniture, she announces that the light is wrong for sewing. *But at least now it's nice and yellow,* she says. *It's much better than that moody purple you painted it when you were thirteen.* I agree. My old room was disquieting, even at eight in the morning. It was the color Barney the Dinosaur would turn if he became violent on set. At night I move heaps of old clothing off the bed and sleep in the catch-all room.

After Mom's diagnosis, I write diatribes by lamplight. I am furious when church members appoint me as her sole caregiver, and loathe consoling the more fragile parishioners who grieve her illness

like it's their own. Punk music blares through my headphones, and I stare out the window for hours. The very thought of prolonged human interaction irritates me. Twice I raise my voice at my father, a crime at home. My parents tell me I need to go back to counseling, and advise me to call Fred the next day.

I hold out for a week and then acquiesce. It's good to hear his voice. At the end of the conversation, he asks for my address to send me the bill. *Put some confetti in the envelope,* I tell him. *Or stickers. Dinosaur stickers!* My family is threatening death and diaspora. I'm tired from typing data into endless forms and I have to clean toilets in fifteen minutes. There's no point in being serious anymore. I don't have any glitter in my office. *How about a yellow paper clip?* he asks. *Only if it's a sparkly yellow paper clip,* I reply.

A week and a half later, I find the bill on the stove next to the newspaper and some coupons for cereal. Inside is a silver frog on blue cardstock, cut out from a thank you note or mailed advertisement. *This is the only sparkly thing I could find on short notice,* a slip of paper explains. When I go back to school, I tape the frog to my mirror.

# On Pleasing a Male God

Caitlin Thomas White  
Agnes Scott College

"Will you tell me a Bible story?"

I am a little girl lying on my stomach in a sunny room with wooden dollhouses and tiny, white-painted chairs. Dutifully swaddled in tights, a puffy-sleeved dress and pink leather cowgirl boots, chubby face propped on wee hands, I peer at the woman, my Sunday School teacher, who chastens me:

"Pull your dress down, sugar. Sit like a lady."

I do.  
Obedience. This, from what I could tell, was what God expected of little girls. I worried at the times I thought up spontaneous blasphemies, like, "What if God is really evil and Satan is nice, and he's sad because everyone thinks he's the bad guy?" But I hoped that I pleased God anyway, with humor in this case. God was a blue-eyed, smiling, bearded man who liked me. I could tell. I imagined him chuckling over me. "Oh, that Caitlin," he'd say good-naturedly, "One day she'll learn."

"Will you tell me a Bible story?"

I am a woman of twenty, lying on my back in Anna's well-blanketed, New England bed. She nestles against me, thrilling me with the subversion: we are in love, which the Bible vaguely forbids, and she earnestly wants me to tell her a Bible story.

Anna grew up Unitarian, not steeped in one dominant tradition like I in the Presbyterian Church, USA, so the familiar ease with which

I tell her stories of Joseph (the one patriarch I can stand), of Delilah and her conquest, enchants my beloved. It was Anna who stirred the story of Ruth and Naomi in me, the day she looked at me with solemn gold eyes and said, "Caitlin. I want to live wherever you live." The chill of God's word came trickling down through Ruth's mouth, saying:

"Where you go, I will go and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

Tonight I tell Anna the story of Esther.

The story was revealed to me in the tenderest trials of my faith, Sunday School. Back then, all that needed to be said was that Esther was a kind and beautiful queen, a Jew, who married a Gentile king and persuaded him to spare her people from genocide. Her name was a soft-voiced version of Easter. I crayoned in a coloring page of Esther, with her flowing, dark hair and gum commercial grin. When I showed the picture to my parents, I told them what I knew of Esther, in her tickle-me-pink and wisteria raiment, and they, like God, were pleased.

"Will you tell me a Bible story?"

The way that I learned to engage sacred texts soon delved much deeper

than Crayola, into the tangled root systems of the trees that gave their lives so that the Esther coloring page might live. Interrogation of the scriptures is encouraged in the PCUSA, which considers itself, "Reformed and always reforming," whose creeds include phrases like: "God sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within us, giving us the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to be Christ's faithful disciples in the world."

Leaders and teachers in the church modeled this principle throughout my early Presbyterian education. The Rev. Dr. Tom Currie, who baptized me as an infant, was a jolly goatherd and often protested the parable of The Sheep and The Goats in Matthew: "All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."

The moral of the story is that sheep are obedient and therefore righteous. Goats are wild and willful and, as a result, eternally damned.

"Goats are superior," Tom Currie objected, "Sheep are dumb. It's a bad analogy."

By junior high, Sunday School teachers offered lessons with the proposal that the Bible might be interpreted variously, and not always literally. Eve might be a metaphor rather than an individual. The results of her actions, real or mythical, defined us in our faith: we had access

always be by your side, every step of the way."

We were already juniors in high school before we stumbled into challenging each other's hermeneutics, specifically the age of Methuselah. The grandfather of Noah is said to have lived 969 years before he died, a fact that Davey brought up one Fourth of July for reasons I forget.

"But his age might not be given in 365 day years," I pointed out as we walked around the local park, waiting for fireworks. "They probably measured age differently. It was a long time ago."

Davey was puzzled. "The word of God is infallible," he said, his freckled brow furrowed. "It doesn't matter," I said, "It's a story that's been passed down through oral tradition. There are bound to be cultural differences."

Our disagreement was small, but shocking. Like finding a hair in your food. Not until college would we recognize that the hair was laced with deadly poison.

I went to a progressive women's college to study Creative Writing and Theatre, he to a Southern Baptist college to study Math and Chemistry and Education. We shared experience in that we both took on many extracurriculars and strove for perfect grades, so that we were compelled to spend Thanksgiving breaks hugging each other, comforting each other in end-of-semester academic stress.

We were both keen students, but in clashing environments. I delighted in joining a diverse community of bold, passionate women. He immersed himself in a fundamentalist Christian view, and burned with shame that he had at one time

thought of me with lust, for which he blamed me. I learned to think critically, to engage unusual ideas with sensitivity, to interpret texts with much deeper than literal meaning. He learned to swallow facts, to stick to his guns, to shove his beliefs down people's throats. "May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

But we were separated: sheep from goats.

"Will you tell me a Bible story?"

It was because of Davey that I read the book of Esther.

In the summer of 2011, the Presbyterian Church USA voted to change the language of its ordination standards in the denominational constitution so that gays and lesbians could be ordained as ministers, elders and deacons. I posted a New York Times article about this decision on Facebook, along with my support for the change:

"I'm so proud and excited that my PCUSA has now officially recognized that ANYONE can be open to God's call! Amen! Woohoo!"

Public proclamation of my support was a means of celebrating with other liberal, progressive Christians, but I also had vaguely personal reasons for gauging the common reaction to the amendment. I was already an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. My persistent interest in faith and its meaning in my life had convinced me to consider seminary. And a door in my imagination had clicked open that enabled me to picture myself happily married to a woman or a man. The possibility that I might either commit myself to a woman or become a minister seemed unlikely, and their coincidence almost impossible. But

it was a coincidence that was now affirmed by the institution in whose influence my theology marinated.

Thirteen people quickly liked my status. Then Davey pierced and deflated the hope that redeemed me.

**Davey West** It's a shame they won't be able to teach the entire Bible. Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:27, and 1 Corinthians 6:9. "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield [sic] for those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar." Proverbs 30:5-6 May 11 at 12:30pm · LikeUnlike

We had already broken our relationship beyond repair, but at this point, I could not let go of our once great friendship. I still followed Jesus. Whether or not his dad was God, any god, this smart, selfless carpenter taught me to forgive and love my enemies.

**Caitlin Thomas White** I can understand your concern, but I think it is a greater shame that loving disciples of Christ may have been barred from serving as ministers, elders and deacons in the past because of a single aspect of their identity. I encourage you to read the articles I posted above, and to consider with an open mind the resources the denomination provides on this issue: <http://oga.pcusa.org>. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to the one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." Ephesians 4:4-6 May 11 at 1:03pm · LikeUnlike · 4 people Loading...

My loving attempt at peaceful discourse pleased the smiling, blue-eyed face of God from childhood, but his face was soon replaced with the face of an angry male god, an Old Testament god. This was a male

god who hated, who smote, who roared curses through the mouths of Oppression's justifiers and spat steaming tobacco juice into the faces of the oppressed.

His face was like Davey's, freckled and plain, with a mouth that smiled only ironically and eyes that burned angry amber orange as his wiry hair and prophet's beard. This god was my enemy.

**Davey West** You cannot be a part of the body of Christ until you repent from sinful actions. If you are living in sin the Bible is clear that God does not hear your prayers. Allowing someone with unrepentant sin to serve as a leader in our churches is allowing them to live a lie and not stepping up to our responsibilities as Christians. 2 Timothy 3:16 To allow the lost to lead us is to steer our churches further from God's Word and further from the ability to reach out with the message of true salvation to those who are lost. If you think you can serve God and witness to others while not repenting of things the Bible defines as sinful you are being misled and you are raising up false disciples who will believe being a Christian does not mean we have to 100 percent follow the example and teachings of Christ, only the ones that don't conflict with "aspects of our identity." May 11 at 1:43pm · LikeUnlike

He continued to hurl scriptures at me, and happy, smiling God suggested that I end this before it got too nasty.

**Caitlin Thomas White** Davey, my position is also rooted in faith. It just happens to be different. Neither of us is going to change the other's mind. I would be interested in discussing this further with you, but I respectfully request that that dialogue take place in some form other

than responses to this Facebook post. May 11 at 10:27pm · LikeUnlike · 1 person

"Will you tell me a Bible story?" Breathing heavily in the battle's aftermath, heart racing, I closed out of Facebook and tried to establish a plan. I knew that having a few more sacred verses in hand to throw back at him would do no good; we would never agree on interpretation. Nonetheless, I decided to read the Bible. To see what depth I could get from the texts Davey used to "prove" that I was sinful, that my faith tradition was false doctrine.

My goal was to read the holy book amber leather cover to cover, but I got fed up with the philandering patriarchs. Adam's tattling, Abraham's rudeness, Isaac's polygamy. So a few days after our Facebook debate, I took a break from Genesis to bake Davey some brownies. He had broken his collarbone. He gave me permission to visit him with the homemade dessert and a card. I think, though I cannot be sure, he said thank you. Doped up on pain medication, he smiled perhaps once in the twenty minutes I spent attempting to make less awkward small talk in his living room. It was not a kind smile. As we said goodbye, the eerie suspicion crept into my mind that I would never see him again.

I returned to the patriarchs on the long road trip from South Carolina to Vermont, where I'd be working at a summer camp for girls. My mother and I shared the driving, and I read bits of Genesis when it was my turn in the passenger's seat. Lot was the worst. In Genesis 19, one of Davey's citations on Facebook, two angels visit Lot and the men of Sodom come to his house,

beating on the front door.

"Where are those men who were with you earlier today?" the men cry, "Bring them out so that we can sleep with them!"

Guess what Lot says? "No, please, don't do this thing. I have two virgin daughters who have never slept with any man. Take them instead, and do what you want with them."

Thoroughly disgusted, I skipped ahead to Esther. She was a woman of courage, I remembered. She would not disappoint. The first words of "Esther" I read, now sitting in an open-air lodge at camp (where I would soon meet Anna) were, "Queen Vashti Deposed."

Vashti. I vaguely remembered the name uttered in the pulpit by a minister who didn't stay long at our church. Folks didn't like him. Too academic. Too much thinking about faith and not enough reaching out and doing like Tom Currie did, shepherding. But I remembered this sermon, ten years old in my memory, as I read the Book of Esther. Vashti was Xerxes' first wife, before Esther. Once when the royal couple held a great banquet, Xerxes sent the seven eunuchs who served him to fetch Vashti from her room.

"Bring her before me in her royal crown," Xerxes commanded, "I want to display her beauty before the people."

Though this isn't clear in the Bible, the minister said that "displaying her beauty" could mean Vashti had to come before the banquet nude, wearing her royal crown indeed, and nothing but. His commanding language harkens back to the mob of Sodom: "Bring out those men so that we can sleep with them!"

But Vashti refused. Her disobe-

dience so angered Xerxes, that he began looking for a new wife.

Which is, of course, how Esther came onto the scene, vamped up by twelve months of beauty treatments (six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics), pleasing Xerxes above all the other virgins who stood before his court. So the winner of a beauty contest landed herself in the perfect position to save her people.

Esther earned her husband's trust when she warned him of two eunuchs plotting against his life, overheard by her uncle Mordecai. Still, when the king's advisor Haman recommended a Jewish genocide, Esther had no more right than Vashti to disobey her husband. If Xerxes punished Vashti for refusing to get naked, he could certainly harm Esther, a Jew, for interfering with public policy. Esther was reluctant. But her predecessor set an example of boldness, and this was no time for Esther to flake. Besides, her uncle Mordecai called her out:

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

His final sentence echoed in my head. The words filled my stomach and chest, slowed my breathing. I had been hired as the head of the Performing Arts department at camp this summer, a monumental task that included casting and directing one hundred six-twelve year old girls in a musical with three weeks rehearsal. Not only was I shaken by my failed attempt to save

a once dear friendship, I felt ill-prepared for the tremendous job I had been given.

So had Esther, I was reminded. So had Moses and Samuel and Jesus for that matter.

"Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

I was supposed to be there. I had been chosen to lead the little girls in their theatrical endeavors. I would fall in love with Anna there.

"Will you tell me a Bible story?" The Presbyterian church where I now teach Sunday School for three and four-year-olds is far more liberal and diverse than my home church. When Anna visits for the weekend, she helps with the class, which is mostly little boys this year. Today, the only girl is May, whose mother graduated from the same women's college I attend.

"Pull down your dress, May," I recommend when she returns from the bathroom with her skirt flapped stubbornly up to expose the seat of her black tights. She giggles and ignores me.

"Come on, May," I coax, reaching out to straighten the dress. She continues to giggle, the shrieking, delighted giggle of mischievous children. She dodges me and runs away. Eventually, the dress figures itself out. May hugs me, as always, before she leaves the classroom. Without her winter coat.

"May left her coat," I say casually to Anna, showing her the tiny floral coat as we walk from the Sunday School room to the sanctuary.

"She's so cute," Anna says, smiling.

"She's kind of bad," I respond without thinking, then quickly backtrack, "Well, not really bad. Of

course that's not what I mean." As camp counselors, Anna and I have been trained that this is not a helpful thing to say about a child.

"She just doesn't like to sit down and do what she's supposed to do," I amend. I can relate. According to a lot of people, I am not "supposed" to love Anna. But I see fit to celebrate May's mutiny, not stifle it. She is no sheep. She will find her own way into God's love and grace, as I have. Impertinent women have always been part of God's plan. Vashti defied Xerxes so that Esther could become Queen so that she could boldly request a pardon for herself and for her people. If Vashti had been obedient, an entire people would have died. The same if Esther had not spoken out against her husband.

God did encourage my daring, childish theologizing of heaven and hell, my pink cowgirl boots, my disobedience. It saddens me that conflicting belief in God divided me and my best friend. But if Davey is steadfast to the Word, maybe someday he will forgive. And while Davey, knowing that I'm now dating a girl, seems likely never to talk to me again, God, who made Anna and me surely knowing that we'd be together someday, will speak again and again. If God is ageless, living and eternal, then the Word of God lives too. It is not limited to one interpretation based on stories of the lives of people who lived long ago.

I no longer envision God as a man. But walking hand in hand with Anna through my church, I imagine a divine smile, pleased that I have figured this much out.



fiction

# THE PLACE I WAS BEFORE

Kevin Adler  
Georgia State University

Most customers who sign on for flight lessons in the Cessna 150 I call Lucille aren't looking to learn how to fly. They want to tour the sights, the sights they've seen a thousand times before, the landmarks they've never left, only from a different angle. They'll ask to fly over their own house and then remark on the condition of the roof, or over the high school and lament the good days. If I'm lucky, they'll give me a choice and I'll fly outside of town, over Long Lake, and tip a wing. The bedrock bottom glimmers a hundred feet below the surface, clear as glass, and the slow forms of lake sturgeon stalk the floor like shadows of the clouds.

This morning I decide to fly over my own house, so I can't pretend I'm any different. Someone had canceled a taxi to Peaks Island and instead of kicking around the office and flirting with Brenda, our secretary, I took off alone. Two minutes out, I'm buzzing over the roof of my house. It's a sunny day, a few wisps of clouds at my wing. My daughter is in the sandbox and our dog, Jimmy, looks on. Jimmy spies me first. I can't hear him, but I see the

throes of his warning bark, which alert my daughter—smart girl. She cups her hands into a visor and looks up. Soon enough, Jimmy trots into the cellar bulkheads to tell my wife, Patty, the news. I make another round and blat on the engine so she hears, but she doesn't come out. Soon, even my daughter gives up and returns to Anthony and Cleopatra or whatever she's orchestrating in the sand. Patty, though—maybe I just caught her at a bad time. I imagine what I would do if I noticed a strange car parked in the drive, how many times I'd fly in circles over the house before whoever was inside showed himself or the plane's tank ran dry. I had these thoughts more often when we were first married, but they rarely occur to me now. Most would say that's a positive development.

On the flight back I push above the cloud line, thinking it'll introduce a swagger to my step. Back in the office I approach Brenda. There's nothing serious between us, only teasing. She's playing solitaire behind the counter. It's just the two of us in the office between the ceiling fan's hum and the rap of a housefly against a screen door.

"I'm starved," I say. "You want a regular from Sam's?"

She sometimes orders the crab roll and saves the pickle for last. Dessert, she calls it. She's watching her weight. Have to at my age and single, she says. But she's got a great figure to my eye. Sleek as a missile.

"Your two o'clock called," she says, business-like. "He'd rather come at one, if that suits you."

"It suits me fine. So's that a yes?"

She acts as though she hasn't heard me. "On lunch?"

"I brought from home." She tucks an invisible hair behind her ear and gets back to clicking cards. I toss my hands up and leave.

I take lunch alone on the deck at Sam's overlooking the Carrabasset River, thick with the smell of sulfur and whitefish. In the corner, an old couple holds hands over the tablecloth while they eat. When my freckled young waitress arrives, I order a pepperoni pizza, personal size, and a bottled beer. She makes a smart face when I order the beer—she's a friend of Brenda's and she'll call back to the office and tell her about the beer—but she comes back with it lickety-split. I tip well when I finish and

make my way back to my beautiful bird, by which I mean Lucille—not Brenda.

Because I come back just shy of one, Brenda delivers a frosty look my way. She's fluttering around the office, making copies, sending faxes, straightening five-year-old magazines glued together with spilled coffee and donut frosting, all with the haste of a woman half her age. Then I realize it's all for the benefit of the kid sitting by the window, my one o'clock. He's a good-looking kid, tall enough, and smartly dressed. "You must be the one o'clock. This is your first lesson here, right?"

"Yes," he says. He stands and shakes my hand. "I'm Jay." Brenda's looking at us, but I ignore her. "Have a seat," I tell him. "We'll do some paperwork. Then we're up and out."

I fill out the forms—insurance business and flight information. Brenda's been on the ball. She has it all laid out and staggered, and the kid has signed everything. When I'm finished, I snap the pen to the clipboard. "Ready?"

"Sure," he says. "Give our regards to Broadway," I tell Brenda, but now she's ignoring me. I give the screen door a shove and the kid and I head out into the sun.

Once we get to the plane, I pull the side step down. "All aboard," I say, and he smiles like a sport. I settle into the cockpit and explain the gauges—the odometer, altimeter, the protocols and ratios. As I'm talking, I calculate the prep work in my head—I can do it in my sleep by now—but I notice he's interested in what I'm explaining. I continue, speaking up so he can hear me over the engine. He follows my hand, gauge to gauge, as if he'll have to remember it once we're up in the air.

"Ever thought you'd be flying a plane?"

"Not till now."

"Well, everything's ship-shape. Let's aim for the cleavage of those clouds straight ahead before they start sagging." He laughs. I expect it's easy to make him laugh. It's a quality I like in a person. The runway is clear. No one coming or going. It's not unusual for me to taxi up and down the jet-black tarmac all day, only Mr. Boston's coffee brandy for company, and no one to stop me but Brenda, who'll radio in to ask me to run to Dunkin' Donuts, and that's when I tell her if she had any sense she'd invest in her own franchise and run a

shop straight from the office, spend all day keeping herself in business, and she says, If you had any sense you'd stop giving me advice and start taking my order, and I'd grab her two-handed by the waist and pull her in for a quick and hard, black-and-white movie kiss. That's it. Then, maybe, it'd be out of our system.

I let the kid get a good feel for the strip, taxi around, trace a few donuts. I'm in no rush, and before I know it, he's having a grand time. He's an easy pleaser, too.

"She's no hot rod but she's not a mule, either," I tell him. I take the yoke and line us up at the end of the runway. Lucille makes the familiar complaints at first, but she gains speed soon enough and we're up and at 'em before we can say, sayonara.

On the climb, I'm placing bets on where he'll want to go. He'd won a free lesson, a promo from WBLM—the BLAM!—for calling in with the lyrics to a classic rock song. This was Brenda's idea. She even chose the song.

"Anywhere special?" I ask.

"What's that?"

The engine's still too loud. "WHERE TO?"

"Wherever," he says. I bank toward the lake. Everyone ought to have a look at it from above just to see what they're missing, and it's a clear day for it. I straighten out and crack the side window down. This always comes as a surprise to the passengers. I have to assure them that we're not high enough to run out of oxygen. In fact the air is purest at a certain height. An old man a mile upwind might be mowing his lawn and we'll smell cut the grass like it's stuck between our toes.

"What was the winning song?" I ask him, rolling the window back up. "What got you here?"

"It's a little embarrassing."

"What is it?"

"Hotel California," he offers shyly. "I had to guess the lyrics that come after the timbale fill." He drums it on the dash: bum-brrrum-bum-bum.

I queue in: Last thing I remember—I was—running for the door.

"That's it. Those are the lyrics that brought me here."

I'm not disappointed with Brenda's choice. I wonder how she decided on the song, what it meant, but I don't want to think too long about it. I'm en-

joying the kid's company and even though he's too young for regret, I want to avoid the lull that sometimes happens on these runs, the stretch where I'm chauffeuring a passenger over the geography of their lives and it hits them, looking down—the difference between how things were and how they are, or how they are now and how they once wanted them to be. It's my aim to keep the ball rolling.

"Since we're up here, I might as well teach you something. That way, if I croak, you'll at least know how to aim yourself back."

He laughs kindly again. "Could be something to write about for my college apps," he says. Then he adds, "Actually, I just got one acceptance letter."

"Oh yeah?"

I start him off with the yaw. Monkey stuff. Depress the rudder pedal and the nose will follow suit. We do a few circles, clock and counter, and soon he's asking for more, so I give him the yoke and let him bank a bit. Not much, just ten degrees at first, enough to get his wings wet. "Keep it up," I say. "Don't be bashful." I nudge the yoke secretly on my end, wagering how he'll react. The plane starts quaking and shaking like a box of puzzle pieces. The clipboard falls from the visor and papers scatter. "Shit!" he says, panic-stricken. "What'd I do?" His face pales and when I can't keep it in any longer I yell over the noise, "Use the left rudder! Go on. Straighten the nose!" He does and we pull out splendidly. Now that he's lightened up and got the taste for it, I explain the physics of the ordeal, how the plane shook like a wet dog because he'd directed her wings one way while the nose was still aimed straight. "The wings will fight the body," I tell him. "You've got to guide them together or you'll fall out of the sky in bits and pieces."

We level off with a perimeter around the golf course and after a time I ask if he's prepared for college.

"Already packed," he says.

"I never went," I say, "but my advice is go as far away as possible and stay there. If I could do it over again—I stop there, realizing that I don't know what I would do differently. I might have floundered through college and come out unscathed, but there's a time for everything, and what good is it to imagine becoming someone you're not? 'Anyway,' I

tell him, "you know what I mean. You got a girlfriend you're leaving behind?"

"You could say that." He looks out the window. "That can complicate things."

"Mmm."

He simmers for a while. Meanwhile, we're still circling the golf course. Below, a lone golfer I've seen out here before sets his ball on a tee.

"I don't know," the kid starts up again. "The complicated thing is that maybe she's the one I'm supposed to be with, if there's only one."

"There isn't," I say. I didn't want a heart-to-heart to ruin a good flight, and it seemed true enough. "Just say the word and we could end it all right here. We'll take that old man down with us, save him from slicing another ball into the sand pit."

He laughs. "I guess I'm being dramatic."

"There's still time on the clock to redeem yourself. Any last requests?"

He thinks about it.

"What? What's on your mind?"

"Well, I don't think I'll be back for another lesson. It's not as though I'm looking to get my pilot's license."

"Granted."

"I was wondering if plane does any tricks. I mean, can you do anything crazy? I don't know how much you can do with a plane like this."

I think about it. "We can't do flips or rolls, if that's what you're thinking." I'm at a loss for a moment. Then I find the perfect thing. "Tell you what. I think I've got something that'll fit the bill."

He perks up. "Yeah?"

I wouldn't have considered it with any other customer, but he seems like a sport, and I want to do my part to send him off right.

"You can't tell a soul about it. At least not around here."

"Promise," he says.

"There's a challenge involved, too." I tell him to put the clipboard in the glove box and take out a pencil, one that's not sharpened. "No need to lose an eye in the process."

"Is this a joke?"

I explain that we'll start at low altitude and pull up like we're taking off from the runway. When we're in the climb, he'll wedge the pencil between his upper lip and nose, wearing it like a mustache. When the plane is pitched near vertical, the engine



will stall and we'll be weightless momentarily. The stall horn will sound and the pencil will float before his eyes. "Seatbelt secure?" He gives me the thumbs up. Because I'm feeling up for it, I tell him if he can catch it in his mouth I'll give him a twenty.

"Alright, it's a bet," he says.  
"It's impossible is what it is. It'll quiver right before your eyes like a screwball, then Bam—it's over."

I turn a wide arc and start the descent toward the golf course. We dip low and roar straight over the old man as he's driving from the tee. I'll be sure to hear about it later.

"No hands," I remind him.  
He tucks the pencil in place and his digs his hands beneath his legs. I want to laugh out loud but I've got to focus. I give Lucille everything she's got and we start the climb. I was his age when I made my first full-power stall, all brass and balls. It shook me, but I pulled through.

We climb pretty high before she starts pulling loud. Soon, we slow to a vertical creep. I look at the kid. He's wild-eyed, and about to get just what he ordered.

The engine hiccups and spits, and the propellers come into focus. The last rotation slows to a halt over the dash and we see the cloudless sky beyond. That's the quietest sound you'll ever hear. "Whoa," says the kid, setting the pencil free. The stall horn sounds off and I slam it like an alarm clock. Now we're weightless. I steal a glance at him. He's snapping at the pencil like an animal. I nearly start a fit of laughter. Then we're falling. The nose dips and the horizon shoots over the dash and then we're looking straight down, heading into the first spin. I know exactly what I'm doing. He's got the pencil in his mouth—he's actually caught it—and he's bracing himself between the door and glove box. When we launch into the second spin, he chomps the pencil in half, and I have to swat the eraser end of it from my cheek.

My first flight instructor used to tell me it's never as your guts feel. I show the kid how much I've learned by spurring the engine to life with the throttle and easing us out of the spin, smooth as sipping Chablis. I have kid the swearing and smiling and stomping his foot the whole flight back to the runway.

I imagine sometime in the coming weeks he'll

have to take his girl for a walk on the lakeshore. They'll meet in separate cars. It'll be easier that way. They'll sit together on a sandy log washed up on a shore hidden from the trail. She'll cry softly. He'll cry, too. She'll realize that her mother was always right about him: he thinks he can do better than her daughter. And maybe she's afraid she can only do worse. It's a recipe for heartache. Off shore, the severed head of a whitefish bobs in the moonlight, its spiked spine surfacing in the dips of the waves. The smell of it urges them back to their cars. They can hardly suffer it long enough to say goodbye again.

We circle the perimeter of the course and I surrender the controls for a while. The kid has nerve. He's something of a natural, but I don't tell him. When the runway rolls into view, I give him a good deal of the landing. I hardly touch a thing and he sets us down like fine China. We taxi to the office, but before we go in I fish a twenty out of my pocket. "No, no," he says, swearing it off. "It was worth every penny." I offer my hand and he shakes it like I've delivered his first born. I tell him if he thinks landing is a thrill to come back next summer and I'll let him take off.

Inside, Brenda asks if the kid and I had ourselves a good time.

"Grand," I tell her. "Why do you ask?"  
She's had a few phone calls, she says.  
"Anything interesting?"  
"Maybe so. Also, your wife called," she says. "You need to stop at the grocery store."  
"Duly noted."

Wednesday night is taco night back at the house. We'll load them up with lettuce and tomatoes and hot sauce and let ourselves go. We don't hold back. I'll go back for thirds and knock one over the counter for the dog. Later, after I carry my daughter to bed, stuffed, I'll slip under the covers early with Patty. She'll be reading.

"Let's take a camping trip," I'll say. "Kids, camper, dog—the whole package." We haven't been in a while.

"Okay," she'll say. She'll keep reading to the end of the page before she turns to look at me, and then she'll motion me in and we'll end up where we've been a thousand times before and I'll never figure out where I might have gone better.

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## STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE IN A CAFE

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Briana Gerdeman  
University of Georgia

An oldish woman sits at a corner table facing the wall. Keeps turning around to check the door. She's waiting for her granddaughter to meet her. She's nervous. It's past when the granddaughter should have gotten here, and she's not answering her phone.

She's nervous because this is the first time her granddaughter has been allowed to go someplace alone. The woman sometimes wonders how she ever raised such a cautious, fearful daughter that became such a rigid parent. Of course, the woman has never agreed with her daughter on how to raise the granddaughter, but she put her foot down on this. Thirteen is certainly old enough for a sensible girl to walk four blocks to have a cup of tea with her grandmother.

But now, the woman worries. What if her daughter was right, and their lovely girl has gotten lost or been kidnapped or...?

And on a less compassionate level, the woman worries because if something does happen, she will be the one to blame. She doesn't like to be proven wrong, especially not by her stubborn daughter. Of course, the girl's safety is the main reason she's concerned, but she'd like to win this argument too.

Two men in suits, sit side by side so they can both see the game on TV. Business partners — make that future business partners — having a drink after work.

The younger one sips his beer. He's in his 30s, carefully groomed blond hair, well-dressed. As they talk business, his mind is half on other things. His partner is making goals for five, ten, fifteen years ahead, and the younger man nods his assent, but

he knows he will have moved on long before then. This company is a stepping stone to him, and he feels a vague sense of derision and pity for the older man who is planning to make it his life's work.

The older man, with salt-and-pepper hair, a short-sleeved dress shirt under a well-worn jacket, sips his Coke. Although the younger man thinks his feigned cooperation is convincing, the older man sees right through it. Just wait, he thinks without humor but without malice. I thought the exact same things when I was your age. You're invincible now, but then your girlfriend gets pregnant or your dad needs you to pay for his medical bills or the market takes a turn for the worse.

The younger man makes a show of paying for both of them, and they leave.

A young man dressed in business casual, with a backpack on the chair next to him, doesn't look up from his book. He's just finished his job at the bank, the job he was offered right out of college for being the head of his class in business school. But he's still studying, this time for his classes in astronomy — the subject he has always loved. People ask him why he studied business instead of astronomy. You're smart enough to do whatever you want, they say. But he knows business pays, and he has himself to support and his mother and sister to help out. He's practical. He hasn't lost sight of his dream of studying the stars, even if it takes him ten years of night classes to add up to a second degree. He just knows it's easier to pursue your dreams when you're well-fed and have a roof over your head.

A mother and her adult son sit diagonally across from each other. Their distance at the table belies their emotional closeness. They talk and laugh, the mother enchanted by everything her son says, the son happy to entertain her. They twist their paper napkins into flowers, and he gives his to her. It is

this closeness that has driven a wedge between the mother and her husband ever since the son was born. The father saw that his wife loved their son more than she loved him. She saw his resentment, and it only served to turn her away from her husband and make her shower her son with attention.

As mother and son artfully arrange their paper flowers in her empty coffee cup, the father watches TV at home.

A man with a puffy, pale face writes laboriously in a notebook. By day he owns a laundromat, the business he inherited from his overbearing wife's father. But he has always wanted to be a writer.

His wife has made it no secret that she thinks writing is a waste of time. So on Friday nights after work, when he tells her he's going to the bar to meet his friends, he comes to this cafe and scrawls lines in his notebook.

He's writing a story about me.

# REAL LADIES

MM Kaufman  
Agnes Scott College



The day was stifling that Minnie came to visit. The humidity hung so heavy in the air it was like pushing through damp curtains just to walk down the steps to the drive. I tracked her progress by the rattling of Aunt Ruth's car. I could always tell they was approaching long before they had a chance to spot the house, hidden by a wall of Spanish moss.

You could hear that car coming from miles away.

I hadn't seen Minnie in years when Momma told me she was going to come stay with us for a while. By the way she said awhile I knew it was going to be as long as Momma could stand the daily phone calls from her sister Ruth. Momma was always on edge when a well-known visitor was coming but let in a perfect stranger and she was right as rain. And strangers did come. Living on the set back part of the island, far from the big houses on Edisto Beach, there wasn't any sense in locking doors. Folks would come and go - usually to use our dock set on a part of the marsh that often had some of the deepest water.

Momma stayed masked behind the screen door right behind me and hollered, Lacey!

I'm right here, Momma. I'm right here on the other side.

Oh. Well. You're gonna be nothing but a puddle by the time they get here. Come inside. Wait with

me.

Her eyes shifted nervously taking in the dirt road as she cracked the door open and then let it slam. She slapped the linoleum floor with her flip-flops as she made her way back to the kitchen. I always knew it was summer by the rhythm of her sentences and shoes. Quick. Directive. Constant. Driven by the heat.

Big ole Minnie was everything but what her name suggested. Even as toddlers she shadowed me in every which way direction a child could grow. Thankfully, we didn't fight that often unless it came to food. Minnie would fight me day in and day out if it would end in her getting an extra biscuit. Wasn't no point in fighting back. Momma herself gave up chastising the girl and instead started slipping me food like she was a guard and I her favorite prisoner.

Minnie was three years older and always one step ahead to what she called being a "real lady." Momma took us to see a play one time that the community players put on about four years ago. The theatre was renovated from an old Cullum's and the play that spring was Little Women. For that whole summer Minnie would only respond to Joe and only call me Beth. I don't remember much from the play other than Beth dies and Joe had more guys after her than a cow patty does flies. Not only was Minnie older but also from the city, even though Charleston was only an hour away Momma never liked to leave the island.

Momma always talked about Minnie as a girl not to worry about, not like she herself had been anyways she said. I pressed her on this every time but she often didn't respond to my questions. Rather she'd start to answer and drift out of the room never finishing a sentence unless she was drinking with a fisher or crabber on the dock or making long distance calls to Ruth. Maybe it was my height because her eyes never seemed to settle on me. Most girls at school hit their gross spurts around thirteen and I had just a whole year 'nother to go.

Papa had gotten a job offer out on the West Coast years ago and since he hadn't had one for

years no one was about to put up any arguments. Momma acted real sad before he left but once he was gone it was hard to imagine life hadn't always been this way. We didn't have many photographs of him up anywhere in the house. Maybe it was the same out there for him, a reality that replaced ours instead of followed it. We never heard from him except for the money he put in Momma's bank account each month. I got cards and socks at Christmas and oranges and lottery tickets on my birthday, right at the start of summer.

That was usually around the time Minnie visited, when her mother couldn't get relief by shipping Minnie off to school every day. But it didn't matter to Minnie whether she went to school or not 'cause she was always teaching and I was her star student, always early to 'class' with a pen and paper in hand.

Playtime ended but her teaching never did. She may have been able to squish me under her big toe but I was always toting right behind her mimicking her every move:

balancing on the scale, feigning disgust at the numbers, using Momma's nice iron on our hair, burning our necks till she chased us out back, making honeysuckles crowns that we then made neat out of.

I was real excited for this coming visit of Minnie's though not just 'cause it'd been so long but she had written me a letter saying she knew the secret to being a real lady and it wasn't no period neither.

Even in the letter I could tell she was taunting me, that she wasn't really going to tell me the secret to womanhood if she even knew it. But I knew she couldn't come to visit here for more than a day before I could wrestle it out of her. That's why I was sitting on the front steps all morning, just running over strategies in my head. My best plan so far was buying a carton case of ding-dongs from the corner store and hiding them from her till she caved. It probably wouldn't even take a whole case though. Minnie was so big she'd lick a train track for a single ho-ho. I didn't even notice when Aunt Ruth's car came pulling up the drive.

Yoo-Hoo! Aunt Ruth came busting out of the car

hardly before she took her foot off the gas.

*I see you there, Miss Lacey! Are you the welcome wagon? Where's the cattle driver?*

*Umm Momma? She's inside. I think she's washing the curtains or something?*

*Washing the curtains?*

It was a lie. It takes less energy to lie. But Momma had had herself worked up all day about Aunt Ruth's visit so maybe it wasn't far from the truth.

*You ain't gonna greet me, lil' bit? I see you ain't got an ass yet.*

I was squinting real hard in the sun but still I couldn't see Minnie, just some skinny girl with long shiny braids in her hair and one hand on her hip leaning against the hood of the Cadillac. I looked past her to the backseat of the car. Where was Minnie? This girl made me nervous. The way she wore her sunglasses low on her nose and kept one thumb in her cut-off shorts pocket set me on edge in a way I didn't understand.

*Loo-Loo girl, you better come down here and stop gawking at me like I'm some one-legged jump roper.*

Lord Almighty, it was Minnie. Well, part of her at least. There was about eighty pounds missing. I thought of all the Christmas cards Aunt Ruth had sent over the years. In all of them Minnie was fair like porcelain with hair almost as dark as the frames Momma put the pictures in but the Minnie in front of me looked like the negative of those photographs. Her hair was a rich reddish brown with golden strands of blonde and her skin was warm, tan and smooth like she had been bathed in brown sugar.

This musta been what she was talking about being a real lady, maybe it just meant being less lady. I'd never had much to lose, not an extra pinch of skin in sight. Something Minnie had never let me forget. She always said cause of the way Momma cropped my hair real short around my ears and the narrowness of my hips that I might as well be her little brother. Her favorite method of torment was always to pinch at the hollow part of my chest where breasts would be, could be someday. Minnie, 'cause of that weight, had had a decent pair since she was five. I'd been hoping by this visit my hair would have grown and my hips filled out a little but after turning for

hours in the naked in the mirror that morning I knew I'd still be a sitting duck for Minnie's insults.

*Oh, hey Minnie. What happened?*

*Happened? Girl, you're too much.*

Minnie leaned into the backseat through the window. She didn't have to bend over far for her underwear to come peeking up over her shorts. It looked real uncomfortable too. Minnie must have seen my eyes widen 'cause she turned around looking real satisfied and dropped her suitcase at my feet.

*Loo, that's called a thong. You ever heard of one of those?*

*Yeah, yeah all the time. Is that what you were talking about in your letter?*

*About what? Oh! Well, let's just say that's part of it, but I'm not saying anything to you now. Look at you, I bet if I bent you over I'd see some Elmo panties hugging that non-existent ass of yours. Maybe I should carry this I don't want you seeing any thing too old for you in there.*

*There ain't nothing too old for me.*

I heaved her suitcase up off the ground real sassy.

It wasn't until I dropped it in my room that I realized I got tricked into carrying her suitcase up two flights of stairs. I guess Minnie hadn't completely changed.

All through dinner Momma and Aunt Ruth just talked on about boring stuff while Minnie listened and acted real interested. She kept playing with her knife, gripping it in different ways, rubbing her fingers up and down from edge to handle, real fidgety like, so I knew she could care less about what they were saying. I spent the whole time watching her trying to figure out what it was that was different about her. It wasn't the fact that she was skinny now. She was just rade in a different way. It was something more, she did seem like a real lady now. It was something to watch from the living room as Momma, Aunt Ruth and Minnie all chatted over the dishes in the kitchen. Maybe Minnie didn't know much on what she was saying but she certainly didn't seem out of place. That kitchen was cut off me somehow, that much I knew.

They didn't notice when I didn't follow them in to clean so I figured Minnie wouldn't notice if I just snuck up to take a peak through that suitcase. Wasn't any different that when we used to root through Momma's underwear drawer. But even that Minnie

had grown tired of eventually.

I started with the outside zipper pocket shaped like a big daisy. I carefully sifted through the neatly folded piles of stringy underwear, cartoon pajamas, Seventeen magazines and jean shorts. Just as I pulled out a little plastic square Minnie crept in with a slide grin on her face.

*So, I guess there ain't no getting past you, little slut. Huh?*

*You found my stash. You know what that is right? I take it you're still a virgin, little girl.*

*I'm not a little girl. What is this?*

*It's a rubber, the guys wears it on his thingy. When you do it ya' know? You've never done it have you Loo-Loo?*

*No, I've done it plenty of times.*

I studied the small square that was now wet from the sweat off my hands. I ran my fingers around it's jagged edges turning it from side to side like any second a genie might pop out and grant me three wishes.

*Is that what makes you a real lady? This?*

I didn't look at Minnie when I spoke but at the stray cat that lived on the roof next door, as if the cat was a better judge to answer. I could see it staring at me through the open window. Its eyes glowed yellow picking up the glow of the distant streetlamps. If you didn't know it already existed you would have no idea it was there at all.

*Yeah, sure it is. And who you been doing it with?*

I panicked. My face was starting to turn red and I felt like a fever rash was running down my back so I gave her the name of a boy in my class who had just moved up north to West Virginia. No way Minnie would be able to ferret out that one.

*Oh, well that blows. Middle-school boys aint shit in bed anyways. Let's find you a real man. Who's the big shit around here?*

*Judd, from the Hardware store. I mean I see him driving around with girls lots. He's brought a few of them to the dock here before.*

*Hmm, this Judd making all you girls cream your little panties? Well, he ever notice you or what? I ain't gonna waste my time helping you if it's a lost cause which judging by the sight of you it already might be.*

*We was in the same math class the second time he took it. I mean, I don't know if he still remembers me. Or whatever.*

Judd was a few grades ahead of me - already in high school. He had just turned sixteen, just a year older than Minnie, and had gotten a used Trans-Am for his birthday. He gave rides to some other girls in my grade, the older ones who had already turned thirteen during the school year. He smiled at me when I went with Momma to the hardware store but it wasn't a friendly kind of smile. It was a smile like he knew a dirty secret about me, like any second he might announce it on the store's intercom. But really I'd never thought much of him till now.

*Remembers you? Well, why don't we set up a little date while I'm here. One he can't forget. Don't worry cousin I'm here to help you out 'cause that's what ladies do for other ladies.*

That night I fell asleep to the sound of Minnie's voice listing all her lovers, describing their rendezvous's. They all sounded misty, like the movies on Lifetime that Momma watched, like they had to have happened in some foreign city. When I woke up the next day, images of the Paris streets in my history book were floating across my eyes like my head had been tipped back into a dark pool. I rubbed them away along with the sandman dust in the corner of my eyes.

Minnie did in fact prove to be an expert in the field. She dressed me that day with her suitcase all the way down to my bra and underwear although I didn't really need a bra so she stuffed it with some shoulder pads she cut from Momma's only good Sunday dress. Minnie said it was alright because it wasn't like we was going to church anyways.

She called the Hardware store to see if Judd was working and asked for some kind of specific screwdriver to be put on hold so he'd be waiting for us at the customer service. She told Momma we were heading to the general store for ice cream and without a look at us or the way we were dressed she nodded her head as she sunned herself on the back porch - removing her bathing suit top when the neighbors left their decks. From the other side of the screen I could see the eddies of the deep wrinkles than ran down like the pattern of a river between her breasts, hanging heavy on her chest. She had laid her left hand on the reflective screen

she used to sun her face. Years after, the trace of her wedding band could still be seen in a small pale circle on her thin and boney finger.

I walked a few steps behind Minnie trying to emulate the way her hips seemed to float on the tops of her legs instead of sit - they didn't even seem connected. Some young guys who looked like they must have just come from doing lawn work drove by in a pick up truck and hollered, "I'd like to take a bite out of that ass." I felt hot blood surge under my skin and felt I'd only go back to a normal temperature when Minnie flicked them off. But instead she whipped her head around with the biggest smile, waved and yelled Thank you gentlemen!

She prepped me outside the store.

*Now, here's the plan. You go in and flirt and tell him to meet you at that old public restroom by the campground and that I'll stand guard for ya'll ok?*

My mouth was filling up with so much spit I thought I might gag on it. Minnie kept staring at me but I couldn't lift my feet. I must have stepped in some wet cement.

*Why you so nervous? You have done this before, right?*

I didn't know what it was exactly I was supposed to have done but I knew I'd rather die then reveal myself to be the child Minnie thought I was. I kept reminding myself that after this Minnie and I would both be real women as she said, and not the little kind anymore. She said you had to be a woman before you could ever be a real lady.

*Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's just been awhile and, and it was dark before.*

As I said it I realized just how bright it was outside. It was like God was taking a picture of me from the sky but the flash just never stopped going off. I couldn't keep my eyes from squinting. I imagined the sweat was like glue filling up my crow's feet or the ones I would have one day like Momma did. I started looking around frantically like she might appear any second.

*Look you want me to go in and set it all up? That might be better. Playing it coy and mysterious. I like your style, cousin.*

I tried to nod but the cement must have made its way to my neck too. Between the sweat-like glue and cement I thought Minnie might have to carry

me.

*Look, are you a real lady or not? I don't have to be wasting my time with this, ya' know? You were the one going through my suitcase and all.*

*No, no, I do. I am. I am.*

*Good. Now I'll go in and you go wait in that restroom, O.K.? Just lock the door and I'll bring him over in a jiffy.*

*Minnie!*

She flipped her hair over her shoulder as she held the door open looking back at me. I knew my eyes were telling her everything in that moment. That I hadn't ever done it. That I hadn't even thought about it. And that god help me I didn't wanna do it now. Minnie stared back at me real hard, cleared her throat and for a flash she looked the softest I think I'd ever seen her look in my life. She looked as if with the right spoon you could scoop out the heart of her easy like the fleshy center of a cantaloupe. I knew then she understood, but it was just a flash.

*You head on now. I'll bring him over in a minute.*

Years passed before Minnie brought Judd to the abandoned camp restroom. I think I aged more then than I have in my whole life. I kneeled on the sink and watched them pull up together in his Trans-Am, parking for a minute under a tree until they walked over. I couldn't see them through the tinted windows but just the big stickered letters on the back window. It was a pretty script like cursive and read The Bad Boys Club. The letters in 'Boys' were starting to peel off. I don't know what all she said to him when they walked over but it must have been enough 'cause he didn't seem to need directions when he came in.

Really, it was all like a bad trip to the dentist, which is to say any trip at all. Like going to the dentist to have a tooth pulled. I felt dizzy with something like a drug, like the laughing gas the dentist gives you. Except, I wasn't laughing. I didn't say a word or hardly look at him, but I could hear his voice like it was coming through a static radio station. Like the signal couldn't quite reach from the dentist' overhead speaker, through the laughing gas, to me. Everything leading up to it is a daze. I remember leaning back in the dentist' chair, a fake pink leather like the faded pink of the tile floors in the bathroom, and then an intense pressure that

I couldn't fight against. I just closed my eyes and kept listening to the dentist saying, almost done now, almost got it.

As the effects of the laughing gas wore off I realized that I was lying on the pink tiles of the bathroom floor and Judd had wrapped himself around my back. He was breathing deeply and I was worried he might suck me up in him too. I could feel his stomach inflate real slow with air and then flatten against me. It was like having a life size bullfrog strapped on. At some point he must have got up and left because the next thing I remember is Minnie coming in and yelling at me to grab some paper towels and clean up the floor. I sat against a stall door and watched Minnie race back and forth from the sink to the stained tile floor. She was moving fast like she hoped if she got it all up quickly maybe it could have never been there at all. I'd never seen her eyes so wide and glassy. That's when I knew that Minnie hadn't been no real lady. Not at least the way she said. She yelled at me to put my clothes back, that we would be late for dinner. Her voice was as dry and breakable as chalk.

Minnie ran ahead of me the whole way home.

I didn't tell Momma nothing but as soon as I walked in through screen door she looked at me and froze as she set the silverware out. She didn't say a word but before I knew it Aunt Ruth's Cadillac was rattling into the drive the next morning. I don't remember saying goodbye. I just remember the clouds of red dust that flew up in the air behind the wheels of the car as it spun away. The dust never seemed to land but just settle around me a like cloud I couldn't shake, like the sad cartoon characters that are marked with a rain cloud following them overheard. I too was marked now.

*Lacey, want me to French-braid your hair tonight?*

There was more to the question than she could say and I was grateful she didn't. She stared running her fingers down my back and I could tell they were shaking, like she was petting a dog she was scared might bite her any second.

*Sure Momma. You can do that.*

*I almost forgot. Your Daddy sent you this.*

She handed me an envelope with nothing but a lotto' ticket inside. It was covered with pink little hearts just waiting to be scratched. I looked back in

through the screen door as Momma walked back inside turning on the television as she sat down on the couch.

*Lacey, you coming? It'll be getting dark soon honey.*

A wind picked up and I let it take the ticket from my open palm.

# DAYCARE

Merrill Montgomery  
Agnes Scott College

Mom insisted that we open a daycare. She downed her whiskey sour and looked at me with bloodshot eyes and said

"I want a fucking daycare, Margie."

We were sitting in the kitchen of our house off of Elm and 5th street, three blocks from the methadone clinic and behind the SUPEREXCELLENTFOODSTORE, which sold neither food nor anything of excellence. Occasionally people would drift through the ally and our backyard on their way from the methadone clinic to the SUPEREXCELLENTFOODSTORE, which was usually where all their problems started in the first place. I said,

"Mom, I don't think people would leave their kids at our house."

My mother looked at me and said,

"They will or they won't but I want a daycare. I want children"

I was thirty, and I lived with my mother, or she lived with me.

"Okay," I said, and went upstairs to change into my nursing uniform.

"How does 'Half Way to Heaven' sound?" Mom asked as I came down stairs again.

"For what?" I asked, pulling on my shoes in the doorway.

"For the name of the daycare."

"What?"

"You know, because kids are like half angels and half terrestrial beings."

"Mom, when people see this place, they are going to think that their kids are halfway to heaven because they are that much closer to being killed in a drive-by shooting." Mom snorted,

not in an appreciative way.

"Say what you will. There are kids in this neighborhood who need looking after."

I left for my nightshift and at Sunrise Lake Villas, where my six-week Nurse Aid course let me change diapers on 85 year old men and learn all about the horrors of aging. I used the time-card that said "Yvonne," because the turnover rate was so high that they didn't bother with personalized time cards. Verna, who was younger than me and had an actual nursing degree watched me vomit in a trashcan after a particularly rough diaper change and said: "Come on, Margaret, let's take a break."

"This place makes me want to kill myself before I get old." I said.

She fixed her makeup in a compact mirror. For whom, I wondered.

"Tell me, honey. The only thing that makes me feel okay about my job is watching you do yours."

"What did you do before you moved back home?" Verna asked, rubbing away a smudge of lipstick from below her chin. "Did you work at an old folks home?"

"No, I worked in a gallery, as a receptionist."

"And now you're doing this?"

"I got certified as a nurse aid to help out when my sister got sicker. And they were hiring after she died, so here I am." When I said aloud, I was struck by the honesty of it.

"I didn't even know you had a sister." Said Verna, and I shrugged just

because crying seemed wildly inappropriate.

"She'd been sick for a long time. She had spina bifida, so I guess really she was always sick."

Verna tapped a cigarette into her palm and went to light it.

"Those things will kill you." I said.

"Isn't that what we want?" Verna was smiling like a challenge.

I stopped in at the SUPEREXCELLENTFOODMART on my way home. It was only just six AM and I bought a 40 and something called SleepEzzze, which I figured would probably kill me no faster than Verna's cigarettes. The man behind the counter, a guy named Hal who I went to high school with said,

"When did you move back home?"

"Three months ago." I said.

"You're working at Sunrise Lake Villas." He laughed at me, motioning to my uniform. "Weren't you voted most likely to succeed in high school?"

"I don't remember." I said and paid for my sleeping pills and 40, but I did remember, we both did. I gave my 40 to Rodney, the homeless guy who slept between my house and the SUPEREXCELLENTFOODMART, just so I wouldn't feel so sorry for myself. He didn't totally wake up when I shoved the bottle into his arms.

I said, "Here, Rodney. Save you some time panhandling."

"No, that's wrong." He said. "The wainscoting should be purple. Everything should be purple."

My mother was still or already awake, in her bathrobe, a coffee cup in her hand. She was standing in the living room in the dark. I leaned in to smell the coffee cup, and wrinkled my nose.

"Jesus, Ma. Already?"

"I figured out the name for my daycare."

"What?"

"Angel's Abode."

"Enough with the fucking angels, Mom. Kids aren't little angels, they're tiny sociopaths."

She gave me a hard look, proud, obstinate.

"You were an angel when you were small."

"I was exactly the same as I am now."

"When you let me take care of you, you were an angel."

"Have you slept?"

"Remember pancake pizza? I'd make you pizzas out of pancakes and strawberry jam and whipped cream."

"Yeah, mom, I remember. Have you eaten?"

"I was going to make you pancake pizzas. But we don't have pancake mix."

One of us smelled like piss, and I didn't know if it was she or I. I took her coffee cup away and sat her down on the sofa, went to get her a banana.

"I'm not hungry," She said as I handed her the banana.

"Sure you are."

She took a bite.

"I so sorry." She said to me. "I'm so,

so sorry. Have I been a bad mother?"

"No mom, you've been a great mother. Please, eat the banana, and let's go to bed."

I left to take a shower, and by the time I got back, Mom was asleep on the sofa, the banana still not finished.

I took the sleeping pills and crashed out up in my childhood bedroom, across the hall my sister's empty room. I had a picture of a spaceship, a horse poster and a crucifix on the wall, and in my dreams, Jesus and the horse tried to figure out how to best mend the holes in Jesus' hands, because he was the only one with opposable thumbs and the only one who could drive the spaceship. They filled the holes with crushed bananas.

Rodney said, "Do you need a first mate?"

And Jesus and the horse did. Everything was purple.

Downstairs Mom was dragging things around the living room, and I got out of bed feeling like I'd been kicked in the head by a tap-dancer. Fucking SleepEzzze. The living room looked like a toy store had exploded in it. Old toys of mine and of my sister's, ratty and mold-stained were scattered around the living room along with a lot of toys I hadn't seen before. Mom was wearing sweatpants, and had her hair in a greasy palm tree.

"Where'd you get all this shit?"

"Why is it in our living room?"

"It's for the daycare! Margie, I'm going to have this daycare."

"You can't drink and watch kids mom, you'll get sued."

"I'm not drinking," My mother said triumphantly, huffing air into my face. "You look like hell. How about Mary Margaret's School For Little Angels?" She asked.

"I'm not a Breathalyzer, mom, and

don't you dare pin my name onto your daycare."

"Is that all you have to say, snark-face?"

"You have to get a license."

My mom shrugged, pursed her lips. "I'll only get in trouble if the law knows about it."

"Solid, Ma. God, I feel like shit."

"I knew it. Mama always knows. I made you coffee."

"You made you coffee." I said, pouring myself a cup.

"Ungrateful. Will you help me make daycare fliers to put up in the neighborhood? You were always so artistic."

Mom looked at me over the brim of her coffee cup, hopeful and happy for the first time in months, years.

"Fine." I said, grudgingly, my desire to keep that look on her face and my desire to stave off the disaster waiting to happen fist-fighting in my mind. Having a sumo style smack-down in my head. SleepEzzze was presiding, banging a gong in my temple at regular intervals.

*Mama's School For Little Angels*, is what I got bullied into putting onto the fliers. My mom danced around drinking coffee as I drew a sketch of cupid-like angels and a curvaceous woman in a hoop skirt who looked nothing like my mother.

"I'm so excited about this." She said. "I'm going to go make copies at the library when you go to work."

"Ok. Good luck."

"Thank you Margie-baby, you're the best."

"I'm not, mom. But thanks."

My older sister was born with her backbone laid open like a flayed fish. Just the bottom part, but having a flayed fish backbone, even a partial one, really messes up how well you're

able to function.

She used to read to me, when I was really small, before I started school. The books she read me were simple ones, one syllable words, lots of pictures. She was maybe nine or ten, and reading far below grade level.

"Can't we read better books? This is the gazillionth time you read me that one."

The book, as I remember it, was a boring one about a trip to a Tree House.

"I can't." She said. "I'm sorry."

"Why can't you?" The older sister of one of my friends read us books about princesses.

"I just can't!" She said, her face turning red, her fists balling. My mom came into the room from the kitchen, hearing my sister yelling. She looked at me questioningly.

"I didn't do anything! I just wanted her to read a different book."

My mom sighed.

"Some things are just harder for your sister than other girls." My mom told me.

My sister looked from me to our mother, and threw the book on the floor.

"I can read fine!"

I watched my sister limp away up the stairs, and for the first time I realized there was something wrong with her. It wasn't the fact that she couldn't read like other girls her age, or the fact that her legs were wrapped in braces that told five year old me that my sister was sick. It was my mother standing there, telling me that things were harder for my sister than for other girls. Before our mother came in the room, my sister and I were two normal little girls fighting, but after, she was sick and I was normal, and in that moment we both lost something that we would want back for the rest of her life.

As mom put up her illicit daycare fliers, I went back to my job watching people die. In a way, it was fascinating to see all the different routes people could take to the same destination. Diabetes was popular with the middle-aged crowd, where as drug use was the hands-down winner for the people my age and younger. Of course, there were people with inborn malformations and genetic diseases, like my sister, but for the most part there were just old people who had been abandoned by their families, if they had them at all, sick people, and people who had either destroyed their bodies through drugs or in accidents.

On my break, I went to visit Verna at the nurses' station. She was filling out paper work and looking harried.

"People keep coming! We're going to have to put patients three to a room. This is so stupid."

Verna got up from her desk.

"Look at these people. Look at Mr. Javensen over there."

Mr. Javensen, who had suffered a stroke or something, was staring fixedly at the floor, his mouth gaping, his body twisted and motionless in the wheel chair he was positioned in.

"He's not alive, he hasn't been for years, and because we give him medicine to keep his heart beating and his lungs contracting he sits in that chair making the powers that be rich. If he wants anything, it's probably to die. And nobody wants him. And we just keep cramming people in this hell hole."

Verna was whispering, but her face was flushed. For some reason, I felt better looking at Mr. Javensen, less guilty. I looked at his vacant expression, his contorted frame, and some weight lifted off of my chest.

"We could go to the hospital and hand out fliers that say, Die Now, Or

Forever Be a Vegetable." I wasn't sure if I was lightening the mood or just being an asshole. Verna laughed.

"Or Die Now or Generate Income For Another Miserable Twenty Years." "or, "It's in Your Best Interest To Either Die Now or Get Better."

Verna shook her head and rubbed her eyes with the butts of her hands, with a puffing exhalation of both mirth and frustration.

"I was wrong earlier when I said this was hell. It's just purgatory." She said.

"Limbo Lake Villas has a nice ring to it. Perhaps we should propose it to the management?" I said, punching Verna lightly on the arm.

"Man, as long as the census goes up, they don't give a shit what this place is called."

"How life affirming." I said, and wasn't actually sure how sarcastic I was being.

I walked home in the grey light of very early morning, past the used car dealership that had gone out of business while I was away, past a bunch flimsy board houses with bars on the windows. A few men stood around casting disinterested glances in my direction. They all looked tired, like they too were about to call it a night. Some of them had been dealing drugs in my neighborhood since high school, and I wondered if they recognized me. I hadn't changed that much, I thought, but nobody seemed to know who I was. I was just one more skinny white woman with a limp pony-tail and a crappy job. In some ways I missed being wild little Mary Margaret with the messed up sister, the alcoholic mom and no dad, but mostly I relished the anonymity. Everyone had forgotten about me, except of course Hal. Fucking Hal.

Pinned to the electrical pole in

front of the SUPEREXCELLENT-FOODMART was one of the fliers I'd made earlier, except my mother had scrawled "Free!" underneath our house's address in sharpie.

"Oh Christ." I said, to nobody in particular.

Hal was standing in the SUPEREXCELLENTFOODMART's doorway, like he'd been waiting all night for me to get off of work so he could badger me. He heard my exclamation and pounced on the opportunity to engage in conversation with me like a starving cat on an obese mouse. Like someone who thinks they might have found someone who is even more of a loser than they are.

"What is it buttercup?" He said, leering at me with his squinty blue eyes.

"None of your business, Butterfly." I said, skirting past where he stood on the way to the ally.

Rodney was sitting up and awake, the empty forty next to him.

"Hey Rodney!" I said, and waved. He waved back.

"Hey Margie! Did you leave me a gift yesterday?"

"Yeah, I did. I feel like an enabler."

"No Margie, you're just saving an old hobo some suffering." He laughed. "You know they say, that which does not kill you will probably eventually give you liver disease. So I'm hoping for death."

"Nobody says that Rodney." I said back, and he shrugged.

"I do."

By the time the SleepEzze wore off, there were children every-

where. Running up the stairs to my bedroom, to my sister's bedroom. Children everywhere. Like roaches.

Screaming in the front yard, in the back yard. I sat bolt-upright in bed, my heart pounding.

I went downstairs, pushing past a couple of raggedy looking kids on the steps. I found my mother on the sofa in the living room, a toddler sitting by her feet. She was rocking slowly back and forth, eyes wide. She smelled like alcohol.

"Jesus Christ, mom, what the hell are you doing?"

"She's not here." She said. "I can't find her."

"Who's not here, mom? Who can't you find?"

"My angel. My angel isn't here."

A little boy ran through the living room, picking up a doll and throwing against the ground. My mom whimpered and shrunk into herself, clawing at her face.

"Whose kids are these mom? Why are there so many?"

"I can't take care of them all. I can't take care of two. I can't." She was pulling at her hair, hauling on it like she hoped she could pull her own head off by it. "I hoped she would be here. So stupid."

"Stop, mom. Stop. Mom."

My mother stopped pulling on her hair, she stopped rocking. I sat next to her on the sofa, and put my arms around her.

"She's not coming back, Mama, she's gone for ever. And it's not your fault. A lot of really fucked up stuff is your fault, but Angela's dying, that one isn't." Somewhere, a fight between two children broke out, one child started crying. I laughed despite myself.

"This fucking disaster was a collaborative effort, but we didn't kill Angela, Mama. We didn't."

"How do you know?" My mother asked, turning jaundiced eyes to meet mine.

I picked up the toddler by my feet and held her in my lap.

I wanted to tell my mother that I

was there when Angela died, when the infection finally killed her, and for a moment she smelled like a baby again. Like a newborn. All fresh, and powdery. For just a few fleeting seconds, we were two sisters in a room, no past, no future, all things wiped clean in the transitory moment between fragile life and whatever is beyond it. On the precipice of death, Angela and I were children again, and I didn't think of her in terms of her disability, only on the terms of her being my sister, being the girl who read a story about a Tree House over and over again because she wanted to, not because it was all she could do. Maybe it was only in my head that we were at peace, but right before she died, she smiled.

I didn't tell my mother that, though, because I was selfish, and because I didn't want her to take it away again.

"She told me she wanted to die." I said, and it was a lie.

"Really?" She asked me.

"Yeah momma. Really."

My mother looked from me, to the baby in my lap, to the children trying to yank each others limbs off in the kitchen, and she laughed, a chuckle at first, then a full on roar. The children stopped fighting and looked at her in wonder, the baby laughed along. My mother leaned back against the sofa, breathing hard, eyes closed, smile wide across her face.

"It's not my fault." She said. "It's not my fault."

T H A T

S O U N D S

L I K E A

G R E A T

B A N D

N A M E

Robert Mynatt  
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My life is a procession of one pathological disorder after another. For one, I have the unique ability to depress everyone in a room when I walk in. I'm already sexually impotent at the age of twenty-one, and all of my ex-girlfriends never forget to mention it in their breakup speeches. My ideas regarding anything at all are either cynical or trite without any original thought. Every time I get high on opiates I have a penchant for watching iCarly and eating Easy Cheese with Nutella on a bagel. I smell like fried onions and sweat walking up one flight of stairs. And while I could go on, I should probably tell you the most pertinent disorder I have: I'm unable to have a conversation without being compelled to say at least once, "That sounds like a great band name."

While it doesn't sound all that debilitating, or even like a legitimate disorder, since you're probably not going to find it in the DSM-IV with a list of symptoms and treatments, it still takes a toll on all social interactions. It's a mathematical certainty that I will say "That sounds like a great band name" in the most quotidian of circumstances with the high probability that it will be either nonsensical or inappropriate. And even when I consciously remind myself to not say it, please, God, don't let me say it, it's like I will myself into saying it without even realizing it. Call it a brief fugue state of social disassociation, because I sure in the hell don't know what to call it.

But I understand why it might be hard to comprehend why out of all the words and languages and sentence structures that I could conceivably say with no conscious effort I would somehow say such a ridiculous, even silly, phrase. To this, I must defer to the thoughts and opinions of my second girlfriend in college, who shared with me all my flaws and transgressions as a human being, including, most of all, the reason I say "That sounds like a great band name." The last night I ever saw her. The night she wanted to crush my impotent, acorn balls in with the sharpest pair of heels she could find.

Janice had short brown hair, a defined jaw, small teeth, and read Victorian snuff books in her spare time. We agreed early on in the relationship to only show our affection only on Tuesdays, and so when a full moon appeared on a rare Tuesday

we explored what each other's bodies meant and smoked a lot of weed. We played out the relationship like a sitcom, acting out characters that sounded like us, walked like us, even ate the same food and had sex like us, but, in the end, were not us.

We fought a lot. Mostly about my pathologies. I didn't disagree with her, but I felt the need to justify my actions, thoughts, and person, which annoyed her, frustrated her, and led us to quarrel most of the night before ignoring each other for a couple of hours. Then I'd crawl back to her after smoking a joint, apologize, and let her take a hit before making out with her. Tongues like fish, she swam through my tonsils and I slobbered over her as well.

It was neither a healthy relationship nor a particularly unhealthy one either. We just filled a void for the other. Nothing serious. We were each others' collegiate extracurricular activity, and I was fine leaving it like that.

One particular Tuesday when we were sleeping naked and curled up to one another, I suddenly felt a sharp clutch on my thigh. It hurt, but the pain subsided and I was more concerned about going back to sleep than putting on a Sherlock Holmes costume and investigating. The sharp clutch returned, and then I blinked my eyes open and recognized the faint image of Janice's frame sitting up in bed. She was crying, though I didn't know why. In some deep recess of my mind, I thought she was crying about our relationship and how everything I did reminded her of her absentee father. Her nails still dug into my thigh. I tried removing her hand, but it was latched on pretty tight.

"Jan, babe, what's the matter?" I asked. My voice was still raspy and tired, and so my words came out broken. I could barely understand myself, so I don't know how she did.

"It hurts!" she yelled. She turned back at me, tears streamed from her eyes while saliva drooled off her lips. Mucus leaked from her nose in a glimmering trail down her philtrum. I put my hand on her back, thinking that it might have been comforting, but she shrugged me off. She didn't want to be touched. Or at least not by me.

"Is there anything I can do? Ibuprofen? Advil?" She glared at me as if I was the dumbest piece of shit in the world. She then grabbed her abdomen and squelched and moaned, repeatedly whisper-

ing to herself, "I killed it. I killed it." She breathed heavily. It was like her entire body was going through anaphylactic shock.

I tried to lay her down, and it was then that I noticed blood staining her hand. "What happened?" I asked. She didn't answer at first, her lips trembled. No matter how relaxed I tried to get her, she could not stay still. I thought the worst. I thought she was bleeding to death, or becoming a viscous blob that might consume me if I got too close. The logistics of how didn't concern me at the moment. I asked her again, "What happened?"

"Bloody zygotes! They're killing me!" she yelled into the darkness.

I couldn't help it. I tried to, but, like I said, it's pathological. It's idiopathic. It's beyond my control. I'll never forget the horror on Janice's face when I said it. Her eyes condemned me to the worst fate in the world. I think if she had the option to kill me, then she would. "Bloody Zygotes, huh," I mused to myself. "That sounds like a great band name."

Janice became another note in the procession of my long history of screwing up every relationship I've ever had. She kicked me out of her room right then and there. I didn't hear from her for a week. When I did, it was in the form of a letter. It started with, 'The reasons I believe you should commit suicide...', and then ended with a prognosis that read in a cold, medical tone: '...you're sick, you need a brain biopsy, please fuck off!'

At this point, I imagine you might be asking yourself, how the hell anyone could date me, much less stand to be within the general vicinity of me for longer than a few minutes. I couldn't honestly tell you why, or at least not satisfactorily or objectively. I'm just your poor ol' schlemiel that doesn't know any better. But maybe that's just an excuse.

I started a performing career when I got out of college. Nothing big, or fancy, just something to do as I passed the time. It helped that it also provided me with some income. But it was all introductory level. I lived mostly off of Nutella toast, Little Debbie products, and cheap coffee. I had a small flat and a bed and a view of a construction site that no one ever seemed to work on. My specialty for the production company I worked for was playing the Misfit character in Flannery O'Connor stage

adaptations of her short stories. They weren't actually written by O'Connor, but a childhood friend that lived nearby who liked to pretend that her old friend was still alive. We knew nothing about her other than her name was Darby and she had high cholesterol.

It's hard doing adaptations, and there is a definite reason why Flannery O'Connor wrote them in short story format rather than as plays. And that could possibly be a contributing reason why we get mostly negative reviews in local papers. Then again, I'm not some great performer. I studied psychology in college, but retained none of the insights of the human psyche that I was taught. Instead, I generally end up saying, "That sounds like a great band name," after a couple of lines.

At first the stage manager yelled at me during one dress rehearsal, "Stop fucking doing that!" I tried explaining to her my pathology, but she didn't want to hear it. She wanted results. She threatened to fire me, to black list me, to make sure I never worked another stage ever again. But performing stage adaptations of Flannery O'Connor's short stories is a specialty that not many other performers want to do, and so she had no understudies to replace me. Instead, she found coping mechanisms to deal with the stress of working with me.

Janice, who was a completely different Janice from my second girlfriend in college, went to therapy. I don't recall her ever divulging why, but I suspected it had something to do with being pampered as a child and not being able to handle the reality of being second best at best in many, if not all, circumstances. She chewed on her blonde hair, bit her nails down to the nubs, and rarely slept more than three hours a night.

It was during one of her therapy sessions one week that, as she put it, "I had to fucking talk about you this week."

To which I asked, confused, "What does that mean?" At the time, I didn't even know why she went to therapy. I had my guesses, but nothing confirmed.

"You! You! You! You silly little man!" she yelled from the catacombs. Her voice echoed throughout the rest of the theatre. I'm not going to lie, her beligerence was kind of magical. But maybe that was only the theatre. "All your stupid, little comments are driving me nuts. I'm unable to enjoy work now,

because without a doubt I know you're just going to do something stupid! And so, finally, I just had to mention you to my therapist."

I don't know why she decided to tell me all of this, or if it even had any meaning, but no one had ever actually told me that they had to talk to their therapist about me ever before and so I was a bit intrigued. I sat down on the edge of the stage so I could hear her better.

"Yeah, so what did your therapist say about me?" I asked.

"Well, she said you were an egomaniacal woman-hater with homoerotic tendencies."

I wondered what Janice was saying about me to her therapist, to our coworkers, to people in general behind my back.

She flipped her hair back nonchalantly, and then leaned back, apparently satisfied with my response.

"Did she really say that?" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah, of course she fucking said that! Why would I lie about that?"

"I dunno," I shrugged. "Why would you tell me in the first place? I thought the sanctum between a therapist and a patient was supposed to be private."

"It is. Don't get me started on everything we talked about you. According my therapist, you're a bubbling nugget of disorders on the edge of erupting and you're probably going to kill yourself or someone at work."—I think she meant herself in particular—"She expressed genuine concern over my well-being because of you and thought I should confront you in hopes that you'll get some help before it's too late." She said this all nice and calm. Her body language said everything she didn't want to. Janice was uncertain about whether or not she should tell me; her inability to look me straight in the eyes told me that. She kept bouncing her foot on her knee. And she tapped her nails along the metal railing next to her. But she was satisfied with herself, and relieved, in a way, that she was telling me all of my faults.

I didn't have the heart to tell her that I knew all of these flaws of mine years before. I guess it's the apathy that keeps me from fixing them, or the inability to follow a straight line of inquiry with any logical conclusion without being distracted by something or other.

"Are you even listening to me?" she asked.

I nodded.

She continued to go on and on, really drawing out everything that was wrong with me, making it into some big monologue that you might expect in some horribly scripted movie. All of it predictable, all of it critical. But I sat there and took it out of some self-deprecating need to listen to everything that's wrong with me. Or maybe I just like hearing about myself. You can never really tell with these sorts of things.

"You're a sick person," she diagnosed me. "Everyone has their problems, but you, well, you're just a basket case. You're just an empty piss jar waiting to be filled."

She appeared to be finished with her diatribe, and looked to be relieved, or fulfilled. But, due to my ongoing pathology, I felt obliged to say, "Empty Piss Jar, huh. That sounds like a great band name."

Janice didn't like that I was making light of the situation. This was her evoking some deep, dark demons from within her, and apparently they had no sense of humor. She yelled, called me more names I'm sure her therapist didn't advise to use, and then fired me on the spot. She didn't have the authority to fire me outright without the permission of the director, but I knew it was probably time to move on. She would've resented the hell out of me, and it would've made working there that much more uncomfortable. So I felt like taking Janice's advice to find professional help.

This might sound crazy, or nonsensical, or even unbelievable, but I sure don't have enough creativity to make a story like this up. I go and find a nice sounding therapist, Dr. Finnester. She's nice and all, real congenial about everything I tell her within our first hour together. I was so nervous, it felt like a date with no expectations to sleep with one another. And so I lied about most things about myself, bolstered them up to make them sound better than they actually are, to make myself sound better than I actually am. She probably saw straight through it all, but I kept peddling out lie after lie like they're going out of style.

Then she said something about how happy she was to meet me, and then handed me one of her many business cards and told me to call if I needed anything. It was all professional, but I couldn't help but think she might be hitting on me. The card had a simple frame and said: Dr. J. Finnester. Therapist.

And her number was on the back.

Out of curiosity I asked, "What's the 'J' stand for?"

To which she replied, "Oh, just Janice."

Just Janice, I thought to myself, that sounds like a great band name. Thankfully I didn't say it out loud. In fact, I didn't say 'That sounds like a great band name' once during our entire conversation. But I didn't think I was cured. Not at the time. If anything, I just attributed it to some weird fluke that probably wouldn't happen again.

Dr. Janice Finnester saw me for nearly five years. She diagnosed me with Anxiety Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, Insomnia, Neurosis, Major Depressive Disorder, Anti-social Disorder, among a laundry list of other mental disorders that took up fifty pages in a typed report on my progress after three years. In that time period I had been given medication for lack of attention, hyperactivity, sleep, depression, mania, hypoactivity, hypomania, blue pills, red pills, green pills, and a combination of all three. I went along for the ride most of the time. And at other times I was on the verge of passing out. But by the end of it, or the middle, or maybe even at the beginning, I fell in love with Janice, my therapist.

Perhaps the strongest reason as to why I fell for her was how she described most of my pathologies, especially the one in which I say 'That sounds like a great band name', to which she stated:

"It appears to me that you're experiencing micro-periodic psychosis characterized by grandiose ideas and opinions not tempered by reality. I'd advise that you take a cocktail of anti-depressants, barbiturates, and more and more pills." She didn't actually say that last part, but it certainly felt like it. Most of my other pathologies she called out-and-out delusions that I made up on my free time.

"Free time?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "From the sound of things, you have way too much time on your hands." She was probably right. "You should find a hobby, or a job, or something to occupy your time on a day-to-day basis. Doesn't need to be too complicated. It just needs to work for you."

I interpreted this last statement as a come on and kissed her. She pulled back, flabbergasted. Said something about how unprofessional it was, to which I said—and I'm pretty proud of this—"You

can't live your life on professional decorum." But she saw straight through it and threw me out of her office and told me she'd recommend another therapist for me. It hurt. I barely got out of bed for a week and smoked two packs of cigarettes a day.

Then I got a call from Dr. Finnester. She told me to stop calling her Dr. Finnester, and then we chatted, got along, and went out on a date the next week. The relationship went pretty fast. She treated me like a patient, and found something erotic about that; using professional language in the bed and writing scripts for random sexual medication (not real, of course, stuff like, '200 mg of coitus,' and whatnot). I was her little robot to fix up and polish and have sex with, a fusion between business and pleasure. It was all real fun. And I loved her, so there was that.

Most of our conversations centered around diagnosing fictional characters. Our favorite was Dostoevsky's Underground Man from Notes from the Underground. There was something about his neuroticism that instantly attracted me to him, and she loved treating the guy like a blow-up doll to diagnose and flex her therapeutic muscles. I guess it was a fitting topic for such a relationship.

Also, I stopped saying 'That sounds like a great band name.' I stopped thinking it, as well. And then most, not all, of my pathologies went away. Trickled down the drain one by one. No more counting the number of sips it took to get two-thirds of a way done with my green tea—since most of it by then is just backwash. No more 'accidentally' breaking dishes to give myself something to do in the morning rather than be productive. With the prompt exit of 'That sounds like a great band name' out of my lexicon, so also did many other character traits that haunted my social, physical, and mental life go out the door.

Perhaps, though, the worst part of our relationship, Janice and I, was when I asked her to marry me. A schlemiel like me. What did I know about marriage? She said yes, probably out of pity. It was on our three year anniversary (as a couple), and I had fixed us dinner. Broiled tilapia with cheddar cheese on top and steamed broccoli on the side. It wasn't the greatest meal in the world, certainly not four-star chef material, but I made it and to her that's all that mattered.

Within a week she had planned it all out. A

spring wedding. A small wedding. She wanted Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor to play as she went down the aisle, real classy and elegant like. I didn't think it was necessarily wedding music, but she insisted so I agreed. White cake with icing shaped like roses along the edge. At the cemetery where her parents were buried so they could 'watch'. No bridesmaids. No groomsmen. Some of her colleagues and a close group of friends. I didn't really know anyone who would want to attend my funeral, much less my wedding.

I was about to be a married man. Unsurprisingly, I developed a few nervous twitches. Some of the old nervousness back in the blood stream. Janice told me it was nothing to fret over, just a normal reaction to a major change in one's life. My nervousness, though, I've always believed was somewhat clairvoyant. Or a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I couldn't stop, though. And her patience could only last so much. Weeks after she said yes to the big question, we started fighting. Yelling, really. She rationalized it all out, saying that it was just because we were about to get married, that it was all normal. Everything was normal. We would be fine, she kept trying to convince herself.

She wore her mother's wedding dress. She was slightly slimmer than the dress, but still she fit well into it. With a few pieces of tape and some pins and needles, you could barely tell the dress was originally too big for her.

Standing there waiting for her felt like a denouement with an anxious, though predictable, ending looming over us. We chose a different venue. The preacher, and undertaker of the cemetery, and most everyone else we talked to about it, agreed that having a wedding at a cemetery, no matter what cemetery it was, would probably not be the greatest idea. So we chose her back yard.

After Janice walked the aisle and a few tears had been dropped, the preacher started the service with a mechanical tone. It was all real long, and my mind kept wandering since I didn't take my medication earlier. I wanted to be as clear headed as possible for this. So the preacher's words drained out of his mouth like codeine without the numbness.

Then he said we should read our vows to one another. Janice went first. It was while she was reading her vows that "That sounds like a great band name"

popped into my head. I tried suppressing it. I tried concentrating on the sweat going down my back. I tried concentrating on her lips as she said, "...I will love you always and forever. You are the most amazing person I know. Let our union today never fall..."

"That sounds like a great band name," I mumbled. It vomited right out of me. I tried saying it as discreetly as possible, but she heard. She stopped, looked into my eyes, and said:

"What did you just say?"

"Nothing, please continue."

"No, tell me. I feel I have the right to know. No hiding anything, we're about to get married."

"That's precisely why we should just forget it and move on."

"You know I won't until you tell me."

"Alright, alright, I said, "That sounds like a great band name."

She slapped me. Said, "You know what your problem is? Your 'pathologies', as you call them, are nothing but an attempt for you to hide away in your little mental seclusion and not get hurt. But then you end up hurting everyone around you. You make me feel special, like you've changed, and then you go and regress back to "That sounds like a great band name"? What's wrong with you? This is our wedding day! My wedding! And I'm standing up here, pouring my heart into my vows to you, and you interrupt not to say you need some water, or that you need to go to the bathroom, or any justifiable excuse. No, you stop me to say one of your stupid phrases. If this is any indication as how our marriage will be, then I can't go through with it."

And then she left.

I told you it was predictable. Janice after Janice. One fuck you after another. On continual repetition, like a broken Tivo that doesn't know when to stop and move on. I could tell you it's probably my child-like maturity, my inability to take anything seriously, my lack of social skills, my struggle to find my identity, or all of the above and none of the above. It doesn't really matter. It's the Greatest Mind-Fuck. The best band name ever.

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## THE BIRDS OF BESSEMER CITY

Christen Thompson  
Agnes Scott College

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Me and Mama moved to Bessemer City, North Carolina after Granddaddy died. We lived with him in Virginia since I was born, but when he died Mama said we were free to go wherever. So we did. We were flying down the road and "Bessemer City" came up on the green sign.

"Lookie there, Ruthie" she said, "that sounds like a good place. Let's pull over for a stop." We were on our way to Florida. Mama had a cousin there we were going to stay with for a while. I'd never heard of the cousin. But she liked Bessemer City so much we stopped and we stayed there. And that's where I've been ever since.

"Bessemer," she said. "Doesn't it sound nice? Like you could just wrap yourself up in it." I knew what she meant, but not because I agreed with her. I'd heard the word before. I looked it up in a dictionary we took from granddaddy's house. The pages smelled like moth bolls and cedar and felt dusty under my fingers. Granddaddy always said how everything means something, so I thought maybe our new town would be there. It wasn't, not really. See, "Bessemer" is how you fix iron. How you make it solid. I told her what it meant.

"Well that's what that book says," she put her finger square on the center. Her nails were shiny and red. The knuckles stuck out, swollen. "But that don't mean it can't be nice, right? Like a blanket. Like a gossamer blanket." Mama would tell people we lived in Gossamer City, not Bessemer. I didn't know that word either, so I looked it up, too. Gossamer means, "A fine, filmy substance made of cobwebs spun by spiders." I thought Bessemer sounded better, but she made the mistake over and over. I made notes next to the definition and pretended granddaddy would tell me about them later. I don't know why anyone would wanna curl up with a bunch of spider-guts.

Mama paid for a week at a motel while she looked for a job and a house for us. There weren't too many houses back then. Mama did get a job, though, and it was a good one. On her resume she told them she majored in nursing, even though that's only half true (she dropped out of school), so she got a job working in hospice care. She liked it. Said it made her feel useful to help people who weren't thinking about anything but dying. Made her job easier.

We got a lot of blankets from that job. People

would give us their family's blankets because they said they reminded them too much of their loved one that passed. I didn't understand that at the time, how something can remind you too much of someone you loved.

Granddaddy didn't have a lot of blankets. He only had the blankets from when he had to buy them from the air force. I didn't like those. They were scratchy and smelled like jet-fuel. Like rotten eggs. But I was born on one. That's one of The-Things-We-Don't-Talk-About. How I was born at granddaddy's home because he wouldn't have no unwed 16-year-old child of his having a baby where the town could see.

When we lived with Granddaddy, Mama came home and into my room late at night and smelled like smoke and kissed my head. Sometimes Mama would be gone for weeks at a time and I would go stay with my Aunt Carol. Carol also talked to Granddaddy about getting Mama to grow up and well by God at least get the girl a father and clean up her act and stuff like that.

One day Mama woke up and said we should go to church, so I said OK let's go to church. Before we moved to Bessemer City we never were much of church-going people. Actually, I'd never been to a church in my life. I never told the kids at school, because all of them prayed before they ate and had "Jesus" pins on their backpacks. I bought myself one after the first week of school so I'd be like the other girls. I prayed with them too, but mostly I just moved my lips and bowed my head. I think Mama wanted church because of all the old people. I think working with the hospice people made her want to feel closer to the thing they were heading towards.

The Great Bird Fall of Bessemer City happened on my ninth birthday. We'd been in Bessemer City for three years and one year previous Mama started dating Fred. He came over after he got done with work at the foundry like he did every night back then. He brought me some roses and told me happy tenth birthday, but I didn't correct him. He didn't get a lot of stuff right, but it was OK with me if he made me older by mistake.

Mama hospice-d Fred's Mama, that's how they met. We got my favorite blanket from her. It was a quilt with pink and white and brown in a big

starburst. He showed up on our doorstep after the funeral like a lot of them did. He was still in his suit. I opened the door when he knocked and he was hugging the blanket and crying. Mama came to the door, looked at Fred and pulled him in the house. He cried on our couch with Mama until dinner. Mama joked about overtime, but then he took her out to dinner the next week and brought me some candy.

After my birthday dinner they both tucked me into bed. I heard them go in Mama's room and then lock the door. I didn't like to be in the house when they locked the door, so I slipped out of bed real quiet and went out the back door to look at the stars. Fred's Mama had also let us have her cat, Ginger. She was asleep in a bush so I sat next to her outside.

But I wasn't out there long because the birds started to come down. They looked like they were flying towards the ground, being sucked towards it. Not like they were falling. Some of them had their wings outstretched as they flew, but they were all head-first. Like something was sucking them down. They looked like they were always meant to be doing that and I watched them rain down. Later on, other kids talked about how much it scared them, but it was so wonderful to watch. It was like they were dancing, how they fell one after the other. I heard their little necks go crunch, crunch, crunch. I had to go inside though, because Ginger kept chasing after each of them and Mama didn't like it when Ginger killed things. It wouldn't matter to her if they were already dead. Mama hated Ginger. I got back in bed as quiet as I could, but I know Mama heard me, 'cause Fred came and checked on me, but I faked being asleep. I opened one eye and saw his belly in the doorway. I heard him open the back door and see what I had just seen. Seen those wings spread out with those big red splashes on either side. Seen their tail-feathers spread wide and then erupt from their bodies and pepper the ice-frozen ground.

The next morning there was a note outside my door. The note said, "Grow wings, baby doll," in Fred's handwriting and there was a feather taped to it. One of the black ones. I don't know why, but I knew I needed to hide it from Mama, so I scooped it up and put it in the sock drawer before she woke up. Sometimes you just know what your Mama doesn't need to know. I walked into the kitchen and Fred

was reading the newspaper. He didn't usually spend the night.

"Why are you here?" I asked him. It sounded mean, but I was more happy than surprised because he made good scrambled eggs. My voice was hot and thick and I needed to brush my teeth.

"Good morning, miss thing," he said, and smiled. He had a big moustache. It was kind of red.

"Morning," I said. I sat in a chair next to him. He had the paper on the first page, and there was a story about the birds.

"How'd they know some birds fell in the yard?" I asked. Fred looked and raised his eyebrows and got that same voice my Sunday school teacher got when she was talking about Adam and Eve.

"Well, sugar, they fell other places, too. Lots of them. All over town."

"Hm," I said. They had felt like my birds. I didn't want anyone else to have them. I wanted to tell the girls at school about them, but now they would know. "Why'd they fall, Fred?"

"Paper says they got scared and flew into the ground. Someone set off some firecrackers near a big roosting spot for them. But I don't know about all that," he said. Whenever I found feathers in the playground, the girls at school would tell me that birds were diseased. I stashed them in the in a hole in the outside wall of the school when they weren't looking. I had hidden probably ten feathers there by the time of the Great Bird Fall.

Mama walked in and gave me a hug. "I'm sorry this had to happen on your birthday, baby, I know how birds scare you" she said. Birds scared Mama, not me. Aunt Carol told me that when Mama was little, she'd had a pet bird, but it died within a week.

Over the next few weeks, scientists came and went, trying to make sense of all the birds, but the whole town was kind of changed. We never stayed in school a whole day, and stores closed early. Lots of people had burned the birds in their yard, but sometimes there would be a line of them in the middle of the road, splayed out. They had been preserved, but no one knew how or why or by who. But everyone would come to look at them, except Mama and me. She never let me go, but Fred told me about them when Mama wasn't listening. No one would touch the birds until the police came to move them when traffic got too backed up after about an hour. Then people took to walking around (which wasn't hard;

school was across town and I could walk there in 20 minutes).

When the neighbor's dog died they said it was like the birds dying and so everyone kept their dogs in the house, but there was no use. She would slink out whenever we opened the door and bring back more dead birds and leave them on the front door. You could smell them through the whole house.

One day when Mama had to work and school was canceled (again), Fred took me into town. We walked and spent the whole time talking. Well, I talked, mostly. Fred didn't talk much when Mama wasn't around. But he asked me questions. I told him how I wanted to be a pilot like Granddaddy and fly all over the world. When we got to town we saw the birds. This was three weeks out from when they dropped, but these birds weren't rotten. They were perfect and laid head to tail in front of the post-office, just like Fred had told me. He smiled when he saw them.

"What?" I asked. He looked down at me at panned my head.

"Kind of nice, how they have to stay with us. They're real pretty, aren't they?" he said. They were beautiful, actually. On the way home we stopped by Fred's house. On Sundays after church Mama and I would come by and play checkers in his dining room, but we hadn't been by since the Bird Fall. It used to be his Mama's house.

"You like the birds, Ruth?" I nodded. He knew I did. He had given me more and more feathers over the past weeks. Earlier that week I'd mentioned to one of the girls at school that Fred had been giving me some bird feathers. I hadn't been thinking, it just kind of came out. She said "That guy who picks you up from school sometimes? He's so weird. Gives me the heebee-jeebees." But I didn't think Fred was all that weird. He just thought the birds were nice, was all. And I thought they were nice, too.

He smiled and we went inside. His house was small, and the walls were pink and had white moldings. There were pictures of family member after family member all over the walls, staring out from brass and gold frames. Speckles covered their faces. The carpet was dingy like it hadn't been vacuumed in years.

He took me to his dining room, and birds were everywhere. Pinned to the wall, with their wings

spread out like the ones in the street. They looked like little black and red angels. Fred stood at the head of the table and crossed his hands on his belly.

I walked up to the wall and touched the feathers. They were silky, and little oily. "I been collecting birds for a long time. My Mama and I would dry them out and mount them. She sent some to museums. She was pretty well known for it," he said. He sat down and stared off a bit.

I thought of Mama. She hated all the bird-business. In the three weeks since the Great Bird Fall, she had taken the feathers whenever Fred left them outside my door. They fought about it. After a while she told him "It's not about the birds anymore, Fred. I don't like it and you keep doing it." But then he just snuck them to me.

He walked to the china cabinet and opened the door. Inside were bowls upon bowls. Where once maybe there was pretty china from his Mama's wedding, now there were bowls of birds. He took one out.

"Want to learn how to preserve them, Ruth?" I shook my head. Yes.

Inside the bowl was a bird, pushed below the surface of the water. Around the water's edge, little crystals had formed. "Salt," Fred told me. To preserve the birds, you push the bird below the salted water and let it rest for a couple weeks until it can be set out forever. His Mama taught him, and they pinned bunches of birds together. They used to be all over his house. Then he put them in the street and took the new ones from the Bird Fall to replace the old ones. Old Pickled birds littered the streets of Bessemer City, and Fred had set all of them out. I guess it was like the blankets; he needed to get rid of them. But he needed to replace them, too. He knew that birds were special, like I knew they were special. Now these blackbirds were his. And now they could be mine, too, like I knew they were.

Fred opened the china cabinet and took out a deep frame. "This is a shadow box," he said. Beneath the glass top was a red-winged blackbird, just like the ones from my yard. He opened the lid. Its wings were spread out, and it lay on its plump little belly. I picked up the bird so careful, like when I held Aunt Carol's baby once. It sat in my hands, looking like it was flying. I could feel the wind. To hold something once so wild, that had the world beneath its wings and a whole sky in front of them felt like magic. Like

I was magic. Like I held that wildness and it could be mine.

I never told Mama about the birds or the bowls or nothing. Fred asked Mama to marry him on her birthday and she cried. She said because she was happy. She called Aunt Carol and started planning the wedding right then and there. She wanted to get married right away. Aunt Carol came down and seemed more relaxed than I had ever seen her. Like Mama had finally grown up and found me a daddy.

But a week before the wedding, Mama started acting like she did when we lived with granddaddy. When she would run off. Like she was getting ready to go somewhere, all the time. She found the shadow box bird Fred had given me and smashed the frame. She had a glass of whiskey and it sloshed on my carpet. She took the smashed frame into the living room and threw it on the floor at Carol's feet.

"See, Carol. This is what I'm talking about. How do you expect me to stay here with someone who pins birds? Who preserves animals? Who works with GD metal. I should have gone straight through to Florida," she said. I didn't know what she meant. Seemed to me everyone was made just the same, and someone who pins birds is just like someone who disappears sometimes. I guess Mama disagreed.

"Sissy, sit down, you'll wake up Ruth," said Aunt Carol. And then I heard something I tried to un-hear for a really long time.

"I should have left her with you," said Mama. She started to cry. "I could be gone. Carol why can't I just be gone?" Mama cried on the couch for a while and then I went in my room and cried for a while. Mama and Fred got married the next week and things were okay for a while until summer set in and it got warmer. Mama always left when it got warm. Traveling season, she called it.

The night before Mama left for good I had a dream. I was in a field of knee-high grass and dandelions just before the sun set. Then I was flying above the frozen field and Mama was laying down on a feather bed. When I woke up, the sun shined through my blinds hot. There was a note next to my pillow that said "I've gotta go for a while, be good, baby doll." I brought Fred the note and he cried like he did when his Mama died, but this time he held me in his lap and we cried together. Mama sent postcards from a flight attendant school for a while,

but those stopped. Then it was just Fred and me. Fred-dad and me.



drama



# ANTHROPOPHAGY



Will Carter  
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[The scene opens on a bare stage with three men standing around the body of a man. The three men are high class dressed in the attire of men from the upper crust of society from any era of history or future era. Their state in time is no matter. The man on the ground should be in tatters. He has an arrow in his back. He goes by Gabriel. The three men are as follows Hubert, Rupert, and Wimble, very meek and pathetic]

	HUBERT		RUPERT
I do not think that we should engage in such an action.		Wimble says no.	
	RUPERT		WIMBLE
You fool. We'll die!		No.	
	HUBERT		RUPERT
Then, we'll die.		What?	
	RUPERT		WIMBLE
Wimble?		Yes.	
	WIMBLE		RUPERT
Yes?		Make up your mind!	
	RUPERT		WIMBLE
Well?		I can't.	
	WIMBLE		RUPERT
Yes.		Excuse me?	
	WIMBLE		HUBERT
Wimble says yes.		He can never come to a conclusion.	
	WIMBLE		RUPERT
No.		Never?	
	RUPERT		HUBERT
No?			
	WIMBLE		
Yes.		Never.	

	RUPERT		WIMBLE
Is this true?		Two.	
	WIMBLE		RUPERT
No.		Be quiet Wimble!	
	RUPERT		HUBERT
Hubert, you really should stop-		How will we get things done?	
	WIMBLE		RUPERT
Yes!		We simply won't include Wimble.	
	RUPERT		HUBERT
What?		But he's one of us.	
	HUBERT		RUPERT
You see?		But he's so irritating.	
	RUPERT		WIMBLE
This will makes things difficult.		Am not!	
	HUBERT		RUPERT
Most difficult.		Are too!	
	RUPERT		WIMBLE
How will we agree upon who gets what?		You're right.	
	HUBERT		RUPERT
We'll divide it evenly.		Thank you.	
	RUPERT		WIMBLE
Evenly?		Am not!	
	HUBERT		[Rupert hits Wimble.]
Three parts.			WIMBLE
	WIMBLE		Oww.
Two parts.			RUPERT
	HUBERT		Now silence yourself.
Three parts.			[Wimble sulks pathetically.]
	WIMBLE		RUPERT
Three parts.			God, how did we come to be in this state?
	HUBERT		HUBERT
Good.			Haven't we always been here?

Where? RUPERT

Here. In this condition. HUBERT

Not at all. I use to be a man of importance. RUPERT

You still are. HUBERT

You're not serious. RUPERT

Completely. HUBERT

Then you're more of a fool than I thought you were. RUPERT

I am content to be such. HUBERT

You're content to be a twit? RUPERT

If it makes me happier. At least I'm not depressed all the time like you. HUBERT

I am not depressed. RUPERT

You surely are. You walked around a moment ago remarking how disheartening it is that leaves turn brown, mortality. You screamed mortality. HUBERT

It is saddening is it not? I mean think about it. RUPERT

I don't want to. HUBERT

Wimble, isn't it depressing? RUPERT

Most depressing. WIMBLE

Thank you. RUPERT

It makes me want to dance. WIMBLE

[Rupert hits him]

That hurts. WIMBLE

Why can't you come to a conclusion? RUPERT

[Wimble shrugs]

You really should be nicer to him. HUBERT

I'm perfectly nice to him. RUPERT

You beat him! HUBERT

On occasion. RUPERT

Why? HUBERT

He annoys me. RUPERT

It's not his fault. HUBERT

People are not born that way. RUPERT

But he was. HUBERT

He made himself that way. RUPERT

Unable to come to conclusions? HUBERT

Yes. RUPERT

Why? HUBERT

How in the world should I know? RUPERT

That's what's wrong with you Rupert. HUBERT

I beat people? RUPERT

You can't accept. HUBERT

You tolerate too much. RUPERT

You can't love. HUBERT

It's over rated. RUPERT

It's love. HUBERT

Over stated. RUPERT

But- HUBERT

Please, Hubert. I've had enough. RUPERT

Me too. [Pause] Please keep talking. WIMBLE

Be quiet Wimble. RUPERT

I'm tired of listening to this conversation. [Pause] Speak! WIMBLE

I'll hit you Wimble. RUPERT

Rupert? HUBERT

Yes? RUPERT

Do you believe in God? HUBERT

No. RUPERT

You don't? HUBERT

I do. WIMBLE

[Rupert gives Wimble a menacing glare, and Wimble mutters]

I don't. RUPERT

Why should I Hubert? HUBERT

The proof is everywhere. RUPERT

What proof? HUBERT

The proof is in the trees, the sky, the open air. RUPERT

What about the proof against him? HUBERT

What proof? RUPERT

War, death, squalor. RUPERT

That's proof that man is- HUBERT



Alone. RUPERT  
Too depressing. HUBERT  
Life is! RUPERT  
It most certainly is not. HUBERT  
Of course it is! RUPERT  
I'm enjoying myself immensely. HUBERT  
Charade, charade, all a charade. RUPERT  
How dare you! HUBERT  
You're a liar, a fraud. RUPERT  
Take it back! HUBERT  
You are a falsifier. RUPERT  
I am perfectly happy! HUBERT  
You are most certainly not. RUPERT  
[Hubert lunches at Rupert, taking him to the ground. He shouts in his face.]  
I am happy! HUBERT  
Ok, ok. You're happy. RUPERT  
Ok? HUBERT

Ok.  
Good.  
[They get up.]  
That was uncalled for.  
Wimble.  
You were in the right.  
Wimble.  
Terribly out of line!  
Be quiet.  
Hubert knows best.  
I will not hesitate to beat you.  
[Wimble sulks.]  
Why must you be so violent?  
Because I am.  
And what about him?  
What about him?  
Isn't he?

RUPERT  
HUBERT  
[They get up.]  
WIMBLE  
HUBERT  
WIMBLE  
RUPERT  
WIMBLE  
HUBERT  
WIMBLE  
HUBERT  
WIMBLE  
RUPERT  
[Wimble sulks.]  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT

No.  
Why?  
Because I was born short tempered.  
And he was born inept in decision making.  
That's not a real disorder.  
It's perfectly real. Why else is he unable to conclude?  
He's annoying me on purpose.  
Purpose?  
Yes. I've done something to him.  
You did?  
Yes.  
What was it?  
Something terrible.  
Yes, yes.  
Something awful.  
Expound.

RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
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RUPERT  
HUBERT

I can't.  
Why not?  
I don't remember what it was.  
Ask him.  
He won't tell me.  
Why not?  
He can't remember either.  
I'm sure through enough thought.  
Hopeless.  
What was that?  
It's hopeless.  
But I thought...  
Oh no, I'm dying don't worry.  
Splendid.  
So within...?

RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
RUPERT  
HUBERT  
GABRIEL  
[Muffled]  
RUPERT  
GABRIEL  
[Sitting up]  
HUBERT  
[Confused]  
GABRIEL  
HUBERT  
RUPERT



An hour or two. GABRIEL  
You'll be extinct? RUPERT  
Close to it. I'll be on the edge. GABRIEL  
The edge? HUBERT  
Of death. GABRIEL  
Oh, good thing we didn't... HUBERT  
You didn't what? GABRIEL  
[Rupert gives Hubert a hard look. He lies]  
Oh nothing. HUBERT  
You all really should stop this bickering. You're making death a most painful process for me. GABRIEL  
Isn't it supposed to be? HUBERT  
Death? GABRIEL  
The arrow? RUPERT  
Yes. GABRIEL  
Doesn't that hurt? RUPERT  
No. GABRIEL

Oh, but I thought... RUPERT  
I die everyday. GABRIEL  
That's what I feel like sometimes. RUPERT  
Really? I thought I was the only one. GABRIEL  
Every day's a drag. They all run together like a march to my funeral, mundane and oppressive. RUPERT  
Oh. GABRIEL  
What? RUPERT  
I thought you were like me. GABRIEL  
I am. I die everyday. RUPERT  
No, I die everyday. Arrow, sword, poison. GABRIEL  
Oh. RUPERT  
That must be hard. HUBERT  
I've gotten used to it. GABRIEL  
How does one get used to death? RUPERT  
How does one get used to life? GABRIEL  
You just do. RUPERT

I just do. GABRIEL  
Seems like you've been put in a very disagreeable position. RUPERT  
There are people worse off than me. GABRIEL  
Like me. RUPERT  
Or Wimble. HUBERT  
What's wrong with Wimble? GABRIEL  
He can't come to a conclusion. HUBERT  
I most certainly can. WIMBLE  
Wimble, must you? HUBERT  
I am so indecisive! WIMBLE  
Thank you. HUBERT  
Conclusions! Give me a chance! I'll make a conclusion! WIMBLE  
Now what are we supposed to do with that? RUPERT  
Live with it. GABRIEL  
But he's so offensive. RUPERT  
Aren't you offensive? GABRIEL

No. RUPERT  
Yes. HUBERT  
No. WIMBLE  
Wimble? HUBERT  
Yes. WIMBLE  
Stop it. RUPERT  
No. WIMBLE  
[Rupert moves to hit Wimble. Gabriel stops him.]  
Must we? GABRIEL  
Yes! RUPERT  
How can one beggar call another dirty? How can one sinner say to another that he is immoral? GABRIEL  
Stop it. RUPERT  
Stop what? GABRIEL  
You try and give us wisdom. RUPERT  
Yes. GABRIEL  
We don't want it! RUPERT



But all I'm trying to do-  
 GABRIEL  
 Soop it!  
 RUPERT  
 There's no need to get upset.  
 GABRIEL  
 We don't need to be told how to live you know.  
 HUBERT  
 Fellows, please.  
 GABRIEL  
 We can live our own lives! We can barely dress ourselves!  
 WIMBLE  
 Just lay down and die and leave us in peace.  
 RUPERT  
 I want to share what I have with you.  
 GABRIEL  
 No!  
 RUPERT  
 If you just realize that death is a must-  
 GABRIEL  
 Shut up!  
 HUBERT  
 I must insist-  
 GABRIEL  
 [Turning to address Hubert]  
 [Rupert tackles Gabriel from behind, and he and Hubert began beating Gabriel. Wimble is unsure. He moves in to kick Gabriel, but moves away in indecision. After a while, Rupert and Hubert stop. They are panting and sweating, and Gabriel is dead, lying face down.]  
 Is he dead?  
 RUPERT  
 For today.  
 HUBERT

Splendid.  
 RUPERT  
 Yes. All is well.  
 HUBERT  
 Well, not everything.  
 RUPERT  
 What's the matter?  
 HUBERT  
 Life's still lacking in substance.  
 RUPERT  
 Do we need that?  
 HUBERT  
 Yes.  
 RUPERT  
 Why?  
 HUBERT  
 Mankind needs organization, purpose. Or else why are we here?  
 RUPERT  
 Can't we just be?  
 HUBERT  
 What good is that?  
 RUPERT  
 It doesn't have to be anything.  
 HUBERT  
 The world lacks order, and, without it, there's bedlam.  
 RUPERT  
 Yes.  
 HUBERT  
 And bedlam's agreeable?  
 RUPERT  
 It's inescapable.  
 HUBERT

You want to sit back and let man destroy himself?  
 RUPERT  
 Is there anything else to do?  
 HUBERT  
 Just don't be so placid.  
 RUPERT  
 I can't be anything else.  
 HUBERT  
 It seems you are completely in harmony with your stupidity.  
 RUPERT  
 It's all I have Rupert.  
 HUBERT  
 I can see that.  
 RUPERT  
 [A moment passes]  
 What about our portions?  
 HUBERT  
 I think I should get double.  
 RUPERT  
 Double?  
 HUBERT  
 Double.  
 RUPERT  
 Triple!  
 WIMBLE  
 Wimble's on the right track.  
 RUPERT  
 Nothing for you!  
 WIMBLE  
 Wimble, I am going to beat you.  
 RUPERT  
 Double.  
 WIMBLE  
 Better.  
 RUPERT  
 This is a democratic society.  
 HUBERT  
 Since when?  
 RUPERT  
 We are all equal.  
 HUBERT  
 Not in worth if that's what you're saying.  
 RUPERT  
 Of course we are.  
 HUBERT  
 You would tell me that as a man I am no better than Wimble?  
 RUPERT  
 Most certainly.  
 HUBERT  
 That pitiful creature?  
 RUPERT  
 I am a man of worth!  
 WIMBLE  
 You wouldn't be good enough to fertilize his grave.  
 RUPERT  
 [Pointing to Gabriel]  
 I am worse than feces.  
 WIMBLE  
 Wimble, don't listen to him.  
 HUBERT  
 I am better than excrement!  
 WIMBLE  
 Will you quit defending him?  
 RUPERT



HUBERT  
No one else will.

RUPERT  
No wonder he can never come to conclusions. You do all his thinking for him.

HUBERT  
So I am in the wrong for trying to protect his life?

RUPERT  
He's a case for euthanasia.

[Wimble is puzzled]

HUBERT  
For God's sakes Rupert, he's one of us.

RUPERT  
He's a mongrel! A cruel joke of genetics!

HUBERT  
He's a better man than you.

RUPERT  
Now you've lost your marbles!

HUBERT  
I say Wimble and I split it half and half.

RUPERT  
What!?

HUBERT  
Will you at least settle for even portions?

RUPERT  
But Hubert, didn't I do all the work?

HUBERT  
Yes, but-

RUPERT  
That's the reason why I should get all of it.

HUBERT  
We're a community!

RUPERT  
Says who?

HUBERT  
Me!

RUPERT  
Well, I don't give a damn what you think Hubert. I think you're a thick headed fool, who couldn't tell up from down, your mind from your heart!

[Hubert punches Rupert]

HUBERT  
We're a community Rupert.

RUPERT  
What in the world is wrong with you Hubert?

HUBERT  
I'm tired of you.

RUPERT  
I'm more than annoyed with you.

HUBERT  
Then leave.

RUPERT  
I will!

HUBERT  
Good.

[They both face opposite directions]

WIMBLE  
You know fellows.

[They're silent]

Hubert? Rupert?

[They continue to look forward]

Guys, I've come to a conclusion.

[They respond in excitement, turning around instantly and rushing towards him]

RUPERT  
Let's hear it!

HUBERT  
The spell is broken!

RUPERT  
Well?

WIMBLE  
The conclusion I've come to is...that I cannot come to conclusions.

RUPERT  
Wimble!

WIMBLE  
What?

RUPERT  
You had our hopes up.

WIMBLE  
I did?

HUBERT  
It's alright. With hard work-

RUPERT  
We actually thought you were being serious.

WIMBLE  
I was being serious.

RUPERT  
Really?

WIMBLE  
I was full of jest!

RUPERT  
Oh god.

WIMBLE  
Stone faced, poker faced, seriousness.

RUPERT  
Stop it Wimble.

HUBERT  
Wimble, please just let us know when you have a real conclusion.

RUPERT  
I say we kill him.

HUBERT  
Stop that sort of talk Rupert.

RUPERT  
More to go around.

HUBERT  
He's one of us.

RUPERT  
I just don't understand you.

HUBERT  
What?

RUPERT  
Do you believe in salvation?

HUBERT  
Salvation? What kind?

RUPERT  
Spiritual salvation.

HUBERT  
Of course I do.

RUPERT  
Are you predestined for salvation?

HUBERT  
Yes. I am born into what I will become.

RUPERT  
Aha!

HUBERT  
What?

RUPERT  
A contradiction in your whole universal human worth gibberish!

A paradox? HUBERT

RUPERT  
You say there is destined salvation for some and destined damnation for others, yet you say everyone's equal? You're the biggest dunce I've ever met.

HUBERT  
Just because one person's damned, and one person's saved does not mean they're not equal.

RUPERT  
I guess I cannot connect the dots Hubert.

HUBERT  
A damned man has damned himself. All men are equal because all men are damned.

RUPERT  
But some men are saved!

HUBERT  
But not by their own right.

RUPERT  
Then why are they saved?

HUBERT  
Because they're supposed to be.

RUPERT  
You speak of world of puppets, an order of strings, and yet. And yet, you embrace bedlam? God, you're a contradiction with legs my dear Hubert.

WIMBLE  
I have another conclusion!

RUPERT  
This one better be worth my time.

HUBERT  
Let us have it Wimble.

WIMBLE  
I hereby conclude...that I am indecisive.

RUPERT  
There's your chaos, your bedlam.

HUBERT  
Wimble?

WIMBLE  
[Confused]

HUBERT  
No applause?

RUPERT  
His very nature is without order.

WIMBLE  
They won't give me claps.

HUBERT  
Because he can't come to conclusions?

WIMBLE  
I think I deserve claps.

RUPERT  
Precisely! The man's at war with himself, and you believe in God? Ha!

WIMBLE  
I'm worthless. No one should applaud me. I deserve the fire.

HUBERT  
He is what he's supposed to be.

WIMBLE  
I am full of grandeur! I deserve more than claps! I deserve...Nothing...

RUPERT  
Shut your mouth you bumbling excuse for a human being!

HUBERT  
How can you hate him for what he is?

RUPERT  
I hate him for what he's made himself.

HUBERT  
Pitiful?

RUPERT  
Precisely.

HUBERT  
Where's your compassion?

RUPERT  
Born without it.

HUBERT  
Your love?

RUPERT  
Sold it.

HUBERT  
You're a wretched man.

RUPERT  
At least I'm a thinking man.

HUBERT  
You've made love to your brain and crucified your heart.

RUPERT  
I must say if I've made love to my brain. I certainly don't remember it.

HUBERT  
You're hopeless.

RUPERT  
It's hopeless.

WIMBLE  
There's hope yet!

RUPERT & HUBERT  
Shut up!

WIMBLE  
I'm devoid of hope.

RUPERT & HUBERT  
Good!

RUPERT  
Hungry?

HUBERT  
Famished.

WIMBLE  
I'm starving.

RUPERT  
Good.

WIMBLE  
Stuffed, completely stuffed.

RUPERT  
If you don't stop, you won't be getting anything. Utensils?

[They all reach around for forks.]

HUBERT  
Do you think he'll taste good?

RUPERT  
Hopefully better than yesterday.

WIMBLE  
The feast, the feast, the feast upon ourselves!

[They all stick a fork in Gabriel. Lights off]





# THE QI TO SUCCESS

Phoebe Perry  
Agnes Scott College

## List of Characters

**Lydia:** The librarian of a small Catholic elementary school in Valentine, Nebraska. She is twenty-six.

**Hank:** Owns an auto repair shop in Valentine, Nebraska. Veteran of Literary Lizards. Champions the traditional approach to Scrabble. He is sixty-eight.

**Sylvia:** Visiting Scrabble champ from Ainsworth, Nebraska. Fiercely competitive; keeps up to date on all rules and regulations of Scrabble. She is eighty-two.

**Rat:** Wears glasses that are too large for her face and shoes that are too small for her feet. Hank's protégé. She is nine.

**Zinc:** Junior at Valentine High. Joined the Literary Lizards in order to improve his verbal score on the SAT. Rat's brother. He is seventeen.

**Lucas:** Computer software programmer. Doesn't like Scrabble. Hopelessly in love with Lydia. He is twenty-four.

## Scene

The library of St. Mary's Elementary School in Valentine, Nebraska.

## Time

December 1999. Early evening, before supper.

**SETTING:** The library of St. Mary's Elementary School in Valentine, Nebraska. There are bookshelves surrounding the lounge area. The lounge area includes metal chairs, modern couch, coffee table littered with magazines,

a larger table with matching chairs behind the lounge area and two comfy chairs to either side of the couch. A large computer monitor from the 90s is off to one side of the stage. There is a rug underneath the coffee table and chairs. It is early evening, before supper, December 1999.

**AT RISE:** LYDIA, a twenty-six-year-old librarian, organizes papers and checks her watch. RAT, a nine-year-old with spectacles too large for her face, sits on the couch reading *How It Works*. ZINC, a high school boy with a letterman jacket on, sits next to RAT reading *SAT for Dummies*. LUCAS, a twenty-four-year-old computer programmer wearing a t-shirt tucked into his jeans, sits at the large computer monitor entering data. HANK, a sixty-eight-year-old man in a mechanics uniform, packs his pipe.

LYDIA

Hank, you can't smoke that in here.

HANK

Why the hell not?

LYDIA

It's school policy. Plus, what if your match wasn't put out all the way? It could burn down the entire building.

ZINC

That'd be sweet.

LYDIA

It would not be sweet, Zinc. It would be devastating.  
(takes a deep breath in)  
We're going to start as soon as everyone is here.

HANK

That means you, boy genius. We don't have time for the geezer to have a smoke, we don't have time for fiddlin' with doo-hickey.

LUCAS

This is IBM's latest Deskstar computer with a 37GP hard drive. That's the world's largest personal computer hard drive, Hank. Far from a doo-hickey.

LYDIA

Seriously, Lucas. We don't have time for this.

LUCAS

Okay, give me a second. I've just got a few more scores to enter into the database.  
(presses the last key)

Done.

(LUCAS joins the group sitting around the coffee table. By this time HANK, RAT, and ZINC have put down their respective reading materials.)

HANK

This new-age furniture gives me the creeps. It's sterile and modern. Bleh!

(to RAT)

Those words are seven and nine points respectively. Rat, it takes diligence to memorize the value of each Scrabble tile but by golly it's worth it.

RAT

Yes, sir--six and three respectively.

HANK

Atta girl!

LYDIA

It's important we have everyone here. I'm glad you all made it.

HANK

What happened to practicing at the old Tucker Library? The Literary Lizards have practiced there since 1945. If it weren't for the kid I would be freezing my faculties off on the Tucker steps as we speak.

LYDIA

If you had read the e-mail, Hank, you would know that the old Tucker Library is being torn down to build a strip mall.

HANK

I don't have no "e-mail." If you want to contact Henry Farnum you best mail a letter.

RAT

Or call Farnum Mechanics at 402-435-7371 between nine and four on weekdays. Don't even try on weekends. It's completely unpredictable!

ZINC

Rat calls Hank like ten times a week to talk Scrabble.

HANK

(laughs and slaps his knee)  
Dang near breaks the operator's fingers, don't she?

LUCAS

Operator?

HANK

Yeah, Operator.

LYDIA

(takes a breath in and continues)  
As you all know the Literary Lizards have had a difficult time with member retention.

RAT

Because everyone dies.

LYDIA

Yes, and--

ZINC

And, we suck.

LUCAS

It's true. Come over and see.

(LUCAS goes to the large monitor. The team follows. LUCAS points to the computer screen data chart.)

LUCAS

If you look at the data, the tournament of '89 was the last time the Literary Lizards even made it on the scoreboard. After our fifth consecutive loss at the Bi-annual Lincoln Literacy Council Scrabble Tournament in '95 we haven't been invited back. It's all in the numbers.

(HANK shakes his head and walks back to the couch. ZINC and RAT follow. LUCAS looks up at LYDIA. LYDIA shrugs and goes back to the couch area. LUCAS follows.)

RAT

We won the Valentine City Tournament this fall. We can't be that bad if we beat the team from Turkey Run Retirement Home--they basically invented Scrabble!

HANK

Those city slickers from Lincoln don't know the first thing about playing Scrabble the traditional way: play as you, win as a team. They're all out there trying to out-do one another. I'd like to teach 'em a thing or two!

LYDIA

We might get our chance, Hank. We've finally been invited back to the Bi-annual Lincoln Literacy Council Scrabble Tournament, January 2000. Apparently the Lincoln Literacy Council invites an "underdog" team from each county. Preparation for this tournament will take everything we've got.

HANK

I've wanted to go back to that tournament since '95. Let me at 'em! I'll have to brush the dust of my rule book. I wonder if I left in the attic--

LYDIA

The council has made changes to the rules since '95, Hank. We have to send in our registration packet by tomorrow with every team member's name next to the rule changes.

ZINC

Why do we have to do that?

RAT

Most likely to indicate that each team member has read, endorses, and agrees to the changes made by the council.

ZINC

Rad.

LUCAS

Scrabble is Scrabble. How much could the rules possibly change?

HANK

Watch your mouth, boy. Just because Scrabble ain't a program on your computer don't mean it ain't just as complex.

LYDIA

He's right, Lucas. Scrabble is always evolving. Every so often the Official Scrabble Committee holds a conference and they screen words that should be added to the official dictionary.

RAT

Like the inclusion of swear words in 1945 like "butthead" and "dumbo."

ZINC

LOL.

RAT

No, Zinc. L.O.L. is an acronym for "laughing out loud"--hardly dictionary worthy.

(ZINC stinks out his tongue at RAT. RAT rolls her eyes.)

LYDIA

(clears her throat)

Ahem!

(reading from the invitation)

Beginning January 2000, the Lincoln Literacy Council Bi-annual Scrabble Tournament will use the 2000 dictionary. The 2000 dictionary has 400 new words: foreign words, technological terms, and jargon.

HANK

I've memorized the 1971 Scrabble Dictionary from "aah" to "zo." Now you're telling me all that's for nothing!

LYDIA

There's more. The rules clearly state that teams must include five members; those with fewer than five members will be ineligible to compete in the tournament.

(LYDIA pauses while the rest of the team says "So...", "And...", "What about it...", etc.)

LYDIA

(winces)

Members must be over the age of thirteen.

HANK

That's bullshit!

RAT

"Bullshit"--thirteen points. I wish points were years...

ZINC

Whoa, Lydia. Let's be honest, Rat is our key player. We can't win--

LUCAS

Or compete--

ZINC

--without Rat.

LYDIA

Rat, you are the star but rules are rules. If we want to be eligible to compete in this tournament we'll need another player--and fast. There's no time to lose. That's why I've invited Sylvia Drake from Ainsworth to be a member of

the Literary Lizards.

HANK

You're telling me that you went ahead and invited some outsider to join our team without even asking the rest of us?

LYDIA

Listen, I went to her Scrabble workshop in Ainsworth this summer. She is an inspiration. She doesn't usually play as a guest for tournaments. We're lucky she even agreed to come.

ZINC

My mom lived in Ainsworth. They have a great Scrabble team--won the Midwest Regional Tournament and went to Nationals.

RAT

Mom also said Ainsworth people should never be trusted. They'll do anything to get ahead.

LYDIA

Sylvia Drake is the most respected woman in the game. Her methods are progressive and sometimes border-line crazy but going to her workshop made my score jump from 186 to an average of 219 points per game.

HANK

I still don't like the sound of this Sylvia Drake. She doesn't know the history of the Literary Lizards or what we're about. When Elsie died two years back I promised her I'd maintain the integrity and tradition of our way of playing Scrabble.

LUCAS

Wasn't Elsie that old spinster librarian at Tucker?

ZINC

Oh boy, here we go.

RAT

Is "spinster" a term you use to describe a woman whose greatness and dedication laid the foundation for the Literary Lizards?

LUCAS

No, I guess--

RAT

Frieda, Ida, and Elsie Hilgenkamp were sisters dedicated to the integrity and power of words. Originally from Germany, the Hilgenkamps came to America in the early 1900s and settled right here in Valentine. The sisters lived in Valentine their entire lives. Together they founded the Literary Lizards in 1938. It was the first Scrabble club in the Midwest.

HANK

It wasn't even called Scrabble back then, it was Criss-Crosswords. Try to find that in that scrap-heap of wires you think is so great!

RAT

Elsie was not only a librarian. She was a pioneer. The Hilgenkamp sisters dedicated their lives to the Literary Lizards. None of them ever married.

ZINC

That's the fate of most librarians.

RAT

Zinc!

LUCAS

Librarians could marry if they wanted to. I bet there were tons of guys after Elsie.

LYDIA

Do you think marriage is the measure of a woman?

LUCAS

No, no. Of course not, I'm just saying that librarians are hot.

LYDIA

What?

LUCAS

What?

HANK

There was a time Elsie and I were under the bleachers of Valentine High--

LYDIA

On that note, I'd like to point out that we have limited time to waste and since there are no Valentine options we're forced to look for outside players.

HANK

Whoa there, Lydia. I've got a viable option right here in Valentine. Morraine Duncan!

LUCAS

"Viable" could be contested.

HANK

What d'you mean, kid?

LYDIA

What he means, Hank, is that Morraine is over a hundred years old. Her

cataract leaves her almost completely blind--she can't see the letters on the tiles.

HANK

That's why they have special prescription glasses.

LUCAS

I heard she's connected to a bunch of tubes. She can't walk around her own living room let alone travel five hours to a tournament in Lincoln.

HANK

Bah!

RAT

She smells sour.

HANK

She smells like roses! Morraine knows the meaning of integrity and tradition. Something I doubt Ms. Drake knows anything about.

LYDIA

She agreed to come for today but nothing is set in stone. We will restore the glory to the Literary Lizards' name. We need you on this one, Hank.

(The entire team stares at HANK as he mulls it over in his head. HANK keeps his head down and puts an index finger in the air as he says his first sentence.)

HANK

One day. She can practice for one day; I'm not signing my name to anything unless she's a sure fit.

(SYLVIA bursts through the door.)

SYLVIA

It is steaming in here.

LYDIA

Hello, Slyvi--

(SYLVIA strips off her large fur coat and tosses it on LYDIA.)

SYLVIA

I am here because of someone named Lye-dia.

HANK

Who?

LYDIA

(underneath the coat)

Me! I'm Lydia.

(LUCAS takes the coat off LYDIA.)

SYLVIA

Lye-dia, your e-mail seemed desperately urgent.

(to everyone)

Lye-dia attended my workshop and is therefore aware of my methods. I may be eighty-two but I know every tip and trick, twist and turn of American Scrabble. When we're done, the Literary Lizards of Valentine, Nebraska will be known throughout the Midwest Scrabble Tournament circuit--and not because of their pathetic losing record.

(LYDIA laughs...too hard. Everyone stares at LYDIA. LYDIA stops laughing abruptly and SYLVIA continues.)

SYLVIA

Motivation is the key to success. Knowing your motivation will keep you going in times of weakness. Your weakness is the other team's fuel; once they catch a whiff of the weakness that seeps from your pores they'll pounce on it and the game is over. A competitive spirit is the other key to success in Scrabble. You must nurture, cultivate, and train it in order to achieve your potential for Scrabble glory.

(Everyone looks around at each other. This is more aggressive than they are used to.)

SYLVIA

So, Motivation. Before we begin I want to know who you are, what you do outside the tiles, and why you choose to be a member of the Literary Lizards. Lye-dia, you begin.

LYDIA

I am Lydia Foster. I am the head librarian--

ZINC

Aren't you the only librarian?

RAT

Zinc!

ZINC

What? It's true.

(RAT puts her hands on her forehead and shakes her head.)

LYDIA

Well, Zinc, I am the only librarian here at St. Mary's Elementary. When Elsie died, however, I was appointed head librarian. So, I am the head librarian. I spent hours with my grandmother playing Scrabble in her parlor room. She said Scrabble was the common man's language exalted. Grandma Tootsie was a member of the Literary Lizards during their reign of the Midwest Scrabble circuit fame.

HANK

I didn't know Tootsie was your grandmother.

ZINC

Did you know her?

HANK

Oh, boy. Did I know Tootsie Foster!

LYDIA

(wincing)

I don't want to know! Can I finish?

HANK

(still remembering Tootsie)

Surely...

LYDIA

Okay. I joined the Literary Lizards after getting my master's in library sciences from University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Moving back home was...not exactly what I had in mind for myself but I had to come back. I didn't become a librarian to shelve books and make holiday bulletin board displays. I am a librarian and Scrabble competitor because I want to share my love of the American vernacular. What better way to do that than to come back home, where my love for words began?

SYLVIA

Charming. Next.

(No one looks like they're going next. LYDIA nudges LUCAS.)

SYLVIA

Come on now. It's your time you're wasting. I didn't come here to lead a team of ghosts!

(LUCAS points to himself, "Me?" LYDIA nods her head, "Yeah, you.")

LUCAS

(almost inaudibly quiet)

Lucas. Computer programmer. I--

HANK

What was that, kid? I couldn't hear ya!

(ZINC and RAT laugh. LUCAS glares and speaks louder.)

LUCAS

My name is Lucas Spinelli. I'm a computer programmer for--

ZINC

Too bad he's not a "pro" at "grammar."

(HANK and ZINC high five.)

LYDIA

Cut it out, you two!

(to SYLVIA)

Lucas is from Lincoln. He is converting our old system of filing to a new electronic version. It's the latest in library science technology--

SYLVIA

Thank you, Lydia, but I think Lucas can speak for himself.

(to LUCAS)

I know your vocation. This, however, does not explain why you are a Literary Lizard.

HANK

We know why lover boy is on the team. He's here for the only reason a twenty-four-year-old man is on any Scrabble team.

RAT

Lucas has a crush on--

LUCAS

Words! Words. I have a crush on words. You know, because I am a...um...

(LUCAS looks to the sky for support.)

LUCAS

...a man of the Bible.

LYDIA

I thought you were an atheist.

LUCAS

I am an atheist. But you know...the language in the Bible is just so...descriptive?



I'm bored. SYLVIA  
(to RAT)

What about you, munchkin child? RAT

My name is Rat. SYLVIA

Your name is... "Rat?" Your mother named you for a rodent? RAT

No, my dad is a truck driver for SAS international. He was on the road the night I was born. ZINC

Oh, yeah! It was so funny. Mom called him and he nearly swerved off the road! RAT

He really wanted a girl. ZINC

And over the radio all he heard was "Rat, rat, rat"! RAT

Rat means "careful" or "watch it" in trucker slang. That's what all the other truckers were saying over the radio-transmission. SYLVIA

Scandalous. Continue. RAT

I don't have many friends at school. But that's alright--I've got Hank and my pen-pal, Miguel. I spend most of my time reading the Oxford English Dictionary, talking Scrabble with Hank, and reading seventeenth century romance novels. My mom let me join the team to help Zinc with his vocabulary. (whispers to SYLVIA)

He spells vacuum with two "c"s. SYLVIA

Ah, I see. RAT

I'm a fourth grader in Ms. Virginia's class--

Fourth grade you say? How old are you? SYLVIA

Nine. RAT

You are wasting my time. SYLVIA  
(to LYDIA)

Pardon me? LYDIA

This girl is not even eligible for tournament play! How will it make me look if I take a team to the Bi-annual Lincoln Literacy Council Tournament with a team member who isn't even tall enough to sit in a regulation folding chair? SYLVIA

Uh, I have finals tomorrow. Lydia, can I go home? ZINC

No, that's ridiculous. LYDIA  
(to SYLVIA)

Look, even though Rat isn't eligible to be part of our tournament team she's still part of the Literary Lizards. HANK

Damn right she is! (SYLVIA raises her eyebrows at HANK.) SYLVIA

So...Zinc? ZINC

It's a family name. SYLVIA

I see. So, you're a high school boy? ZINC

Yeah, I'm a junior at Valentine High. SYLVIA

What's a teenage boy like you doing spending all his free time with a bunch of Scrabble freaks? LYDIA

Who you callin' a freak, Pal? HANK

It's okay, Hank. "Freak" in this context is complimentary. It means to be wildly obsessive about something. RAT  
(to herself)

"Freak"--twelve points. Nearly thirteen... LYDIA

Zinc, answer Sylvia. ZINC

My mom signed me up for this to prep for the SAT. RAT

She sent me along to make sure he actually came and didn't go behind Mr. Swanson's Deli to make out with Jan Anderson. SYLVIA

Okay, enough side chatter. I hardly have time to listen to this extraneous information. Lydia, who's left? You only have four eligible team members. HANK

What am I, chopped liver? For your information, Ms. Scrabble Queen-- SYLVIA  
(flattered)

Thank you. HANK

I am Henry Eugene Farnam, born and raised in Valentine, Nebraska, home of the pig-in-a-blanket and the Heart of the Midwest. I own Farnum Mechanics down on Vine and Harrison. My friends call me Hank. SYLVIA

Ah, a man of tradition and hometown pride. What is it that draws you to Scrabble? HANK

I've been a member of the Literary Lizards longer than any of these kids have been alive. I was the only kid in shop class that could build a carburetor and spell it too! I've always had a knack for words. Elsie Hilgenkamp invited me to their practice after Sister Clare's first grade spelling bee. She won, of course, but I was runner-up. I know the Scrabble dictionary-- LYDIA

The 1971 version.

--like the dirt roads and corn fields of Valentine. HANK  
(lends LYDIA a dirty look)

And how well is that, Hank? ZINC

Pretty damn well, smart-ass! HANK

I'm sensing some anger, Hank. That's good. Anger is a motivation for some just as fame and glory are for others. Now that I am clear on the motivations we're dealing with it's time to begin our training. SYLVIA

Training? But we already know how to play Scrabble. ZINC

Elementary, Zinc, elementary. SYLVIA

Sylvia, why don't we do that game you had us do the first day of the workshop. Oh, it was such a brain-teaser! I love a good challenge. What was it called? Something to do with "scrimble" or "scrimmage"-- LYDIA

Please, Lydia, do try to keep your eagerness in check. Making up such words as "scrimble" to fill the empty space in the room is hugely unattractive. SYLVIA

(LYDIA is obviously embarrassed and a little taken aback by SYLVIA's comment. The other team members are made visibly uncomfortable by SYLVIA singling LYDIA out.) SYLVIA

At any rate, the exercise Lydia is referring to is one of my favorites-- "Scrabble Scramble." It is a game of speed and visual analysis designed to cut a player's tile-response time to under that of the average player. This exercise will test your quickness as well as emotional control. ZINC

"Emotional control"? Where am I, the psychiatrist's office? RAT

No, Zinc. Sylvia is obviously referring to the emotional reaction a person has when either embarrassed, challenged, or otherwise made to feel lesser than by their opponent.



SYLVIA  
Precisely, my dear--this exercise will definitely test your motivation and competitive spirit which are the keys to success in Scrabble.

HANK  
What about having fun?

SYLVIA  
"Scrabble Scramble" is simple: every player lines up, shoulder to shoulder.

(There are general murmurs of confusion.)

SYLVIA  
Shoulder to shoulder, in a row.

(exasperated)

So you get off the couch and get in a line!

(more to herself)

I swear, I will never take another fixer-upper.

HANK  
(under his breath)

If this game makes me any better at Scrabble I'll be a monkey's uncle.

RAT  
(under her breath but a little louder)

Pigs will fly.

ZINC  
(outloud)

And the fat lady will sing!

Excuse me?

SYLVIA

Nothing, Sylvia!

LYDIA

(to the team under her breath)

What is wrong with you guys?

(HANK stands, arms crossed. RAT and ZINC stand half way between SYLVIA and HANK.)

LYDIA  
You promised you'd give her a chance. Be good to your word.

SYLVIA  
What are you all doing over there? We are wasting valuable tile-time!

(HANK looks to RAT and ZINC.)

HANK  
Just having a team chat, Ms. Drake. We'll be over in a jiff.

(LYDIA walks over to LUCAS in line. HANK shrugs his shoulders and joins the line. He motions for RAT and ZINC to follow. They do.)

SYLVIA  
Come along, in a line!

(Once they are in a line--the order of which does not matter--SYLVIA continues with her instructions.)

SYLVIA  
The rules of "Scrabble Scramble" are really quite simple: I will start with a letter and from that letter the person I point to will say the first word that comes to their mind that begins with that letter. I will demonstrate.

"A." (points to LYDIA)

LYDIA  
Apple!

SYLVIA  
(purses her lips and points to LYDIA again)

"Z." (LYDIA points to herself and mouths, "Me?")

SYLVIA  
Don't be difficult, just go.

LUCAS  
Hey, I think you've picked on Lydia enough already! She invited you to help, not berate us.

(LYDIA looks over to LUCAS who is looking forward to avoid eye-contact with both LYDIA and SYLVIA. SYLVIA scoffs. LYDIA rolls her eyes.)

LYDIA  
(to LUCAS)

I got it, Lucas.

HANK  
The boy's right. Ms. Drake, we'd appreciate it if you'd get on with it.

SYLVIA  
I was invited here to whip you all into tournament shape not to coddle you into complacency. I know the tournament circuit and I know the kind of competition you are up against. All this side chatter and questioning me is getting you nowhere. It's my way or the highway. If you want to show any bit of pride in the legacy of the Literary Lizards I suggest you zip it!

(clears her throat and smiles a tight smile)  
As I said, this exercise will test your intellect as well as E.Q.

ZINC  
(to RAT)

What's E.Q.?

RAT  
(whispers to ZINC)  
Like I.Q. but instead of intellect it tests for emotional intelligence.

ZINC  
Sweet.

SYLVIA  
The rest of the exercise is more... "involved".

(smug smile)

After the initial letter suggestion the next person I point to must have a word that begins with the last letter of the previous word. If someone should fail to say a word that is consistent with the 2000 version of the Scrabble Dictionary, a word with eight or less letters, or "hm" and "haw" for more than five seconds that person is out.

ZINC  
What do we get if we're the last standing?

SYLVIA  
If you are the player who has what it takes to beat your opponents you will win. Whoever is left standing is first place.

ZINC  
I thought we were warming up?

SYLVIA  
This isn't cheer camp, Zinco.

(SYLVIA points to LYDIA. LYDIA is prepared and raring to go.)

"W." SYLVIA

Water! LYDIA

(SYLVIA points to HANK.)

Ray. HANK

(SYLVIA points to ZINC.)

Yuck! ZINC

Ah, you're out, kid! "Yuck" is an onomatopoeia, ain't a Scrabble worthy word. HANK

SYLVIA  
You would be right, Hank...if this were 1971. According to the 2000 version onomatopoeias are allowed. The merit of "ain't," however, is heartily contested.

So Hank is out? ZINC

SYLVIA  
(thinks on this and smiles)  
Not yet. I am a reasonable woman.

(completely changes to a sinister tone)

Again! (pointing to LUCAS)

"N." LUCAS

Noodle. (SYLVIA points to RAT.)

Er...ch...egg! RAT



SYLVIA  
Hesitation! You are out, little one.

HANK  
Hey now, that couldn't have been more than three seconds!

ZINC  
Yeah, there's no way she's out.

SYLVIA  
Rules are rules. If you want to run your practice like a free-for-all, have at it. If you want Sylvia Powell Drake as a member of your team, this team has got to shape up!

LYDIA  
(to SYLVIA)  
Let's call that a practice round. Now that everyone is clear on the rules we can start for real.

(The team gets back into a straight line ready to prove themselves.)

SYLVIA  
I'll let the child's hesitation slide this time. No more second chances, though. I've got a timer in this old ticker.

(points to her heart)

It's got unbelievable accuracy.

(SYLVIA stares ZINC and HANK down. ZINC draws back but HANK meets her stare with equal intensity. SYLVIA smiles.)

SYLVIA  
We begin...now!  
(pointing to HANK)

"L."

HANK  
Loot.  
(SYLVIA points to LYDIA.)

LYDIA  
Tack.  
(SYLVIA points to ZINC.)

ZINC  
Cake!

SYLVIA  
"Cake"? Out--you are out! "Tack" ends with a "K" not a "C," you imbecile. Get out of my game! Second round--close ranks!

ZINC  
(shrugs his shoulders)  
Whatever.

(ZINC goes to the couch and gets a comic book out of his SAT prep book. The remaining players step in so they are standing shoulder to shoulder.)

HANK  
(whispers to RAT in a mocking tone)  
She sure is a pistol, ain't she?

RAT  
(to HANK)  
A pistol without the safety-lock on.

(HANK giggles. SYLVIA hears HANK, glares and points at him.)

SYLVIA  
"H."

HANK  
Helical.  
(SYLVIA points to RAT.)

RAT  
Lake!  
(SYLVIA points to LUCAS.)

LUCAS  
Electron!  
(SYLVIA points to LUCAS again.)

LUCAS  
(confused)  
Nexus?  
(SYLVIA points to LUCAS and smiles a sick smile.)

LUCAS

(with wide-eyed terror)

Spindle!  
(SYLVIA holds her pointed finger at LUCAS for seven more turns.)

LUCAS  
(gulps)  
Extra. Actuator. Rampart. Tool. Lap. Platters. Sack!  
(LUCAS clutches his chest and gasps for air. LYDIA nudges LUCAS and mouths, "Good job." LUCAS blushes with wide eyes and smiles at LYDIA. SYLVIA points to HANK.)

HANK

Kink!  
(SYLVIA points to LUCAS. LUCAS continues to smile and stare blankly at LYDIA.)

SYLVIA  
While your technology vocabulary is adequate your attention span is that of a gnat. Out! Close ranks.  
(LUCAS walks dejectedly back to the couch and sits next to ZINC.)

SYLVIA  
We're down to three players. Motivation is the key to personal development but a competitive spirit and strategy are invaluable in tournament play. Keep that in mind, Lizards. Go!  
(pointing to RAT)

"M."

RAT  
Mug.  
(SYLVIA points to HANK.)

HANK  
Gauge!  
(SYLVIA points to RAT.)

RAT  
Eat!  
(SYLVIA points to LYDIA.)

LYDIA  
To!

(SYLVIA points to HANK.)

(SYLVIA points to RAT.)

(pointing to RAT)

RAT

(SYLVIA points to LYDIA.)

HANK

(SYLVIA points to HANK.)

LYDIA

(SYLVIA points to RAT.)

RAT

Xylophone.

Xylophone--

On.

Next.

You're playing it safe, Lizards. Go for the jugular!  
(pointing to RAT)

The last word was "next."

Troll.

Lamp.

Polon.

Nark.

Kylix!

(SYLVIA points to HANK.)

(SYLVIA points to LYDIA.)

(SYLVIA points to RAT.)

RAT

SYLVIA

RAT  
(beaming)  
Twenty-four points.

SYLVIA  
(unimpressed)  
Nine letters. What is so difficult about following directions for you people?  
(RAT is on the verge of tears.)

RAT  
That's the only word I know that starts with an "X."

SYLVIA  
Well maybe you aren't such a prized possession, hm? You are out. Leave!  
(RAT falls to her knees and crumbles into tears. ZINC runs to her side.)

HANK  
Where's the glory in makin' a little girl cry?

LYDIA  
She knew the rules. Come on, guys. It's just a game.

SYLVIA  
Save it! Close ranks. It's time for the fourth and final round. Whoo!  
(ZINC puts his arms around RAT. They walk together back to the couch. RAT sits on the couch with her two middle fingers in her mouth.)

SYLVIA  
(rubs her hands together)  
Let's find us a winner!  
(pointing to HANK)

"D."

HANK  
Dunce!

(SYLVIA points to LYDIA.)

LYDIA  
Exist.  
(SYLVIA points to HANK.)

HANK  
Tranq.  
(SYLVIA points to LYDIA.)

LYDIA  
(smirks as if to show HANK she cannot be deterred)

Qi.

HANK  
"Key" starts with a "K" not a "Q." She's out!

SYLVIA  
On the contrary, Hank. It is you who is out.

HANK  
Are you kiddin' me? I ain't never heard of any other "key" than one with a "K." Are you tellin' me there's another way to spell "key"?

SYLVIA  
If you don't believe me look in the tournament sanctioned dictionary--the 2000 version.

LYDIA  
It's "qi," Hank--with a "Q" and an "I." Just admit it, Hank. I beat you fair and square! A-boo-yah!  
(LYDIA does a victory dance, not unlike that of professional football players after a touchdown. RAT sifts through the 2000 Scrabble dictionary to find the word. She finds it, raises her hand, and waves it excitedly.)

RAT  
I found it! "Qi"--it's from the Chinese word for "Ch'i," one of two dynasties that ruled in China a.d. 479-502.

ZINC  
Sounds "nasty"! Get it? "Die" and "nasty"! I crack myself up.  
(notices no one else is laughing)

Jan Anderson laughs at all my jokes.  
(RAT shakes her head.)

HANK  
That's some communist propaganda if I ever heard it!

LUCAS  
Can she use a word from another language?

RAT  
There's no rule against using foreign words per se. If it's in the dictionary then it counts.

HANK  
Okay, okay, we get the point. Can we get to a real game of Scrabble now? I don't want to have missed a meetin' with Beverly Yoder at the Night Before Lounge for nothin'.

SYLVIA  
So right, Hank. We can't allow Lydia to steep in her victory for too long. Let's have scrimmages.

LYDIA  
(excited and proud)  
Sylvia, we have this great exercise called "Duos". Two team members play a round until one person gets one hundred points.

SYLVIA  
Only one hundred points? That's hardly a decent hand.

LYDIA  
It's an exercise. After one person reaches one hundred points then they move to the next table to play the person who stayed at the table.

SYLVIA  
Oh! Like a tournament--

HANK  
(sits on a chair and crosses his arms)  
No, like an exercise.

SYLVIA  
(rolls her eyes)  
Yes, I know this but how do you find a winner over-all?

ZINC  
You don't.

LYDIA  
The winner of that round moves to the next table and so on.

HANK  
(stands up)  
Let's get to it! Lydia, you go and get the card tables. Zinc, you and geek squad help me move the furniture to the side so we'll have room for the tables.  
(LYDIA goes offstage to get the three card tables. ZINC and

LUCAS pick up and move both chairs to the other side of the room.)

Sylvia... HANK  
(HANK looks SYLVIA up and down. He decides any job would be better done by anyone other than SYLVIA.)

HANK  
(to SYLVIA)  
Why don't you just...make yourself comfortable.  
(HANK motions for SYLVIA to go and sit on the chair ZINC and LUCAS just moved to the side. SYLVIA sits quite content.)

RAT  
I'll get the Scrabble sets!

HANK  
Great idea, kid.  
(RAT runs offstage. LYDIA comes into the room lugging three large card tables. She rests them against a bookshelf. LUCAS and ZINC are each holding one side of the heavy couch.)

LYDIA  
(calling after RAT)  
We need three. Be careful!

(to LUCAS)  
Lucas, can you go with her and get the timers on the top shelf?

LUCAS  
Yes, sure, definitely!  
(LUCAS stops helping ZINC carry the couch and runs off stage.)

ZINC  
Great. I guess I'll just carry this couch myself.  
(mocking)

Anything for the Queen of Scribble Scramble.  
(HANK laughs heartily and picks up the other side of the couch. They carry it to the side.)

LYDIA  
Get off it, you two.



(LYDIA huffs as she moves to pick up one of the three card tables.  
LUCAS runs in holding three timers.)

LUCAS  
(out of breath)

Where do you want these?

LYDIA  
(distracted)

Um, over on the coffee table for now. Say, can you help me move these card tables?

LUCAS

Yeah, sure, definitely.

LYDIA  
(sighs)

Thanks, Lucas. You're the only one who doesn't give me grief.

LUCAS

Hank and Zinc just like to mess with people. Don't let them get your goat, Lyd.

LYDIA

I know but they really get to me. Sometimes I get so competitive. It's like nothing else matters.

(looks to LUCAS)

Being invited back to the Bi-annual Lincoln Literacy Council Scrabble Tournament means so much to the Literary Lizards' reputation. Winning this tournament would mean living up to the standards my grandmother and the generations before us upheld. I need to win this tournament, Lucas.

LUCAS

You need to win this tournament or we need to win this tournament?

(LYDIA continues trying to open the table legs  
without answering his question.)

LYDIA

Can you get the legs out?

(LUCAS rolls his eyes but unfolds the card tables. RAT comes from offstage with three mis-matched and tattered Scrabble sets. She places them on the coffee table. ZINC and fetch chairs for the three tables. HANK gets the sets out and starts setting up the pieces. SYLVIA spies over his shoulder. When HANK turns around she jumps back, purses her lips and looks down her nose at the Scrabble sets with disdain.)

SYLVIA

Never in my thirty year experience have I seen such tattered and maimed Scrabble sets. You can tell what sort of Scrabble club you're running when not even the local elementary school will fund you.

HANK

Hey, Ms. Hoity-Toity, we may be poor but the people of Valentine take pride in our Scrabble team.

SYLVIA

(lifting up one of the box lids with her index finger)  
These sets have to be from the Roosevelt Administration. Do they even have adequate tiles?

HANK  
(defensive)

Of course, they have adequate tiles. Rat checks to see that the sets are complete every week. We may not be Scrabble royalty but we know how to set up a goddamn Scrabble board.

LYDIA

Cool it, Hank. We only have fifteen minutes left of practice. Let's make the most of it. Lucas and I will take the table by the fiction.

(LUCAS looks at LYDIA with thrilled surprise. They go to the table stage right. RAT and HANK look to each other and roll their eyes.)

HANK

O'er here, Rat.

(RAT joins HANK at the stage left table. ZINC is left with SYLVIA.  
ZINC folds his arms as if resigning to his fate.)

SYLVIA

Boo!

ZINC

What?

SYLVIA

Keeping you on your toes.

(SYLVIA and ZINC take their seats at the middle table.  
Each duo deals out the seven tiles for each player.)

LYDIA

Everybody ready? First person to a hundred points wins the bout. Time starts...now!

(to LUCAS)

You did really well today at "Scrabble Scramble." All of the technological terms really trip me up--

(notices she is babbling and places her first word on the board)

I'm impressed.

LUCAS

Well, you know, I--I have to be honest, Lydia. I'm--

(LUCAS looks into LYDIA's eyes and loses his nerve. He quickly places his word on the board.)

LUCAS

"Lame."

LYDIA

What?

(LUCAS smiles weakly and shrugs.)

SYLVIA

Sit up straight.

(ZINC sits up straight, begrudgingly.)

SYLVIA

Precisely, now at least the blood can make it up to your brain. By George, I know it needs it.

(puts on reading glasses and places her word on the board)  
"Lark."

HANK

(mocking SYLVIA to RAT)

Precisely, m'dear.

RAT

(playing along)

Exceedingly great Scrabble players must wear--  
(places her word on the board)

--"minks"!

HANK

(chuckles)

You--

(places his word on the board)

--"slay" me, kid!

(HANK and RAT laugh uproariously. SYLVIA pivots and glares at them briefly before whipping back around. HANK and RAT glare at each other and snarl--mocking SYLVIA.)

RAT

I think "kyme" is a word, but I'm not sure. I only had a few moments to look over the new dictionary.

HANK

Why don't you just look it up.

RAT

What if she sees?

HANK

We always look up words, darlin'. No need to sweat the small stuff.

(RAT smiles. She goes to the coffee table, grabs the 2000 Dictionary, and returns to her seat.)

SYLVIA

(to HANK)

Oh, I see your protégé is getting in the competitive spirit!

(to RAT)

You were right to question him, m'dear.

RAT

I didn't question Hank.

HANK

We use the dictionary as a learning tool. It's only an exercise.

SYLVIA

I've never heard of such debauchery.

RAT

We use the dictionary to learn. Since we don't know the new dictionary we should be able to use it in practice.

HANK

It's more fun that way.



SYLVIA

You want to know what is fun? Winning is fun. Beating your opponent so bad they can't show their face in church for a month is fun. Cheating, however, is not fun. Now you ingrates have gone too far. Rules are rules. If you can't use it in tournament, you can't use it here.

(to LYDIA)

Tell them that if they want to be on this team they've got to follow our rules or they must leave. They are wasting my time.

HANK

We're wasting your time, Lydia, you're going to get rid of us to win some tournament?

LYDIA

Sylvia, I really don't think there's anything to be upset about. I think we can all--

SYLVIA

Really? You send for my talent and don't accept it? Let it be known that I gave up the opportunity to be a guest player on numerous teams with much greater appreciation for me and my methods than here. I could have chosen any one of them but I chose Valentine. I chose the Literary Lizards of Valentine, Nebraska because they used to be the hallmark of Midwest Scrabble. The Hilgenkamps were my idols. I imagined another group of people just as eager to immerse themselves in the competition. Be honest with yourselves. The Literary Lizards are nothing but a troupe of has-beens. You need me.

LYDIA

(gathering the courage)

No.

SYLVIA

Excuse me?

LYDIA

We don't need you, Sylvia. I apologize for any inconveni--

SYLVIA

Any inconvenience? Oh you will rue the day!

LYDIA

When I came back to Valentine I thought the same thing, Sylvia. I thought that the old days of winning and championships were because they were more competitive, they had more drills, or maybe they just read more. But what I know to be true is that the reason they won more than we do is because they were all on the same page. I invited you because I thought you could whip us

into shape. Now I see that was all in my head. I didn't think about anyone but myself when I invited you to be part of the team. You couldn't be a Literary Lizard if you wanted to. You are a condescending, cold-hearted and...  
(shakes her head and looks SYLVIA down and up as if to conjure the best insult)  
...and you smell sour!

(SYLVIA grabs her mink coat and purse.  
She stomps to the door and just before exiting she turns.)

SYLVIA

(with a snarl)

You'll never play tournament Scrabble this side of the Mississippi as long as Sylvia Powell Drake has anything to do with it!

LYDIA

We'll take our chances.

HANK

(taking the door and gesturing outside)

Don't let the door hit you on the way out!

(SYLVIA leaves in a huff with the door slamming behind her.)

SYLVIA

(yelling offstage)

Where is the goddamn exit?

(The team is both stunned and impressed with LYDIA's sudden courage.  
HANK, ZINC, and RAT start putting the chairs and tables back.  
LYDIA is busily cleaning up the Scrabble sets and tiles.  
It is not immediately apparent that she is crying.)

ZINC

(stops to belly laugh)

"and...you smell sour!"--the look on Sylvia's face was priceless!

HANK

(mocking SYLVIA)

"Where's the goddamn exit?"

(ZINC and RAT howl at HANK's spot on impression of SYLVIA.)

LUCAS

(goes over to LYDIA and places a hand on her shoulder)

You okay, Lydia?

LYDIA

(stand abruptly wiping tears away)

No, I'm not okay. The tournament is less than a month away and we don't have another player. The registration packet is due tomorrow.

(sniffle)

I let Valentine down.

HANK

Now wait just a triffin' second there, Lydia. You didn't know she was going to be so cracked.

RAT

"Cracked"--that's sixteen points. You're so good, Hank.

LYDIA

So much for Valentine tradition.

HANK

What d'you mean? If anything you are an exemplar of Valentine tradition. Yes, you may have been a little aggressive with Scrabble Scramble and overlooked the obvious witch that is Ms. Drake--

(RAT shakes her head and mouths "no.")

HANK

--but when time came to make a decision you went with your team rather than the glory. You have the true Valentine spirit, Lydia.

LYDIA

Ah, thanks, Hank. But I'm afraid no one will be able see our Valentine spirit if we don't find another player by tomorrow.

HANK

I'm tellin' you--Morraine Duncan.

RAT/ZINC/LUCAS

No!

ZINC

So...are we going to the tournament or can I tell Jan we can go to the 9:00 showing of She's All That?

RAT

Is that all you can think about in a time like this?

Yes.

ZINC

Hank?

LYDIA

Yeah, Lydia?

HANK

How well do you know Morraine Duncan?

LYDIA

Oh, I know her if you know what I mean--

HANK

Hank, Do you know her number?

LYDIA  
(cringes)

HANK

No, but you can try her at Turkey Run Retirement Home.

LYDIA

Lucas, give me your cell phone.

HANK

His what?

(LUCAS hands a large, early model of the cellular phone to LYDIA.)

LUCAS

Watch out for the antenna. It's finicky.

(LYDIA dials a number on his cell phone. She hands the phone to HANK.)

HANK

Howdy, there. Can I speak with Morraine Duncan?

(winks at LYDIA)

Morraine--it's Henry Farnum.  
(pauses and speaks louder)

Henry Farnum, from the Literary Lizards.  
(pause)

Yes--The Literary Lizards.  
(pause)

Uh huh.  
(pause)  
Yes, you were very good at Scrabble. Say what would you say about joining back up again?  
(pause)  
Uh huh.  
(pause)  
Hello? Morraine? Are you there?  
(HANK hangs up the phone.)  
LYDIA  
What'd she say?  
HANK  
I think she fell asleep.  
LYDIA  
Well, then we'll have to go wake her up! Put on your coats everybody. We have a mission.  
RAT  
To wake up a hundred-year-old woman--  
LUCAS  
With cataracts--  
ZINC  
Connected to a bunch of tubes--  
RAT  
And sour smelling.  
LYDIA  
Yes.  
ZINC  
Awesome.  
LYDIA  
(smiles proudly)  
I know.  
HANK  
That was quick thinkin' there, Lydia. I remember when I was quick--

Hank-- LYDIA  
I know, I know. HANK  
LYDIA  
(turns to HANK)  
You're the quickest.  
RAT  
Twenty-three points!  
HANK  
Atta girl.  
(CURTAIN.)

# WITHIN THE SHADOWS

Mark Willard  
University of Georgia

## INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

The sound of walking footsteps begin on a black screen. Fade from black to a shot of a clown's feet, walking down a hallway. He reaches a door. The camera shows the back of a figure wearing a suit, and the back of a red wig. He closes the door. The door has a name plate saying 'Joey Balloons'.

## CUT TO BLACK TITLE SCREEN

## INT. JOEY BALLOON'S OFFICE - NIGHT

JOEY BALLOONS (MALE, 30s, HEAD OF CLOWN MAFIA) is sitting at a desk in his dimly lit office. He is smoking a cigar and drinking a glass of whiskey. His head is resting on the table. His gang of clowns standing in front of him.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Boys, gather around. Let me ask you's a question. What's the meaning of life?

Clowns are speechless, looking afraid to say anything.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Stilts! How bout you? meaning of life?

STILTS  
Uhh...I dunno, boss.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Of course ya don't. Socks! What's the meaning of life?

SOCKS  
(wearing a sock puppet on his arm)  
Uh, um I dunno, Joey B. Uhhh, what about you, Stefan?

(puppeterring his sock puppet)  
Hmm? Oh let's see. Oh God, anything Louie Vuitton. Umm...Oh! Those tiny rasberry chocolates from Antonio's. OH! They're to die for...that little chubby man can bake. Hmm oh! And let's not forget...a strong set of hands. I mean

for Goodness sakes--

JOEY BALLOONS  
No! Are you kiddin' me? This is what I'm dealin' with? Chuckles! Meaning of life. Go.

CHUCKLES  
(Has a painted-on frown)  
...Love?!

JOEY BALLOONS  
Love? Love? Are you serious? I'm tryin' to run a successful clown mafia here, and you tell me 'love'?

Chuckles looks away out of embarrassment.

(laughing)  
Love?! Bozo's pie, no! I'll tell you the meaning of life.

Joey Balloons motions to the group to come closer.

The group of clowns step closer.

Closer.

The clowns exchange of few cautious glances at each other, and take a few more tentative steps closer to Joey Balloons.

Smart car. (whispering)

SOCKS  
(to Stefan)  
What'd he say?

JOEY BALLOONS  
Smart car!!

JOEY BALLOONS throws a rubber chicken at SOCKS. He gets up from his

chair and walks to a poster board display.

We're living in tough times, boys. There's no denying it. We're definitely in the red.

Shot of the poster board of a decreasing line graph.

We've had to make cuts across the board. Wardrobe's been cut.

Shot of an extremely tall clown's (STILTS) feet, wearing a pair of flip flops instead of over-sized clown shoes, as well as pants that are too short.

...Talent's been cut.

Shot of SOCKS attempting to juggle, but drops the juggling balls.

Like I said. Things have been rough. But, I've found a solution...

Joey Balloons throws the poster board of the graph onto the floor, now revealing a picture of the Jupiter Domesphere logo.

The Jupiter Domesphere!

BLINKY  
(blinking uncontrollably)  
But, Boss? How is a Jupiter Domesphere going to fix our money problems?

JOEY BALLOONS  
Ah! Glad you asked, Blinky! You see, this is no ordinary smart car. The Jupiter Domesphere comfortably seats twelve or more, has 4-wheel drive capability, and has a gas mileage of 55-highway and 38-city!

SOCKS  
(impressed)  
Sounds roomy.

STILTS  
And eco-friendly.

JOEY BALLOONS  
I've had Patches already crunch the numbers...

Shot of PATCHES, dressed as a 1920s stockbroker/accountant, furiously working with a calculator and writing down numbers.

...and it's going to save us a ton of dough when we steal one!

CHUCKLES  
(worried)

Steal one?!

JOEY BALLOONS  
Yes, Chuckles, steal one! I'm Joey Balloons! The toughest clown mobster there ever was! Stealing things is what I do! Now are you going to join me, or are you going to go read one of your sappy, love novels?

CLOWNS  
*Laughter.*

Shot of Chuckles looking away in embarrassment again.

BLINKY  
But, Boss. Where do we get one of these Jupiter Domesphere's?

Joey Balloons sits down with a pondering smile on his face.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY CUT TO

CODY (Male, early 20s) and BEN (MALE, early 20s) are sitting on the couch, watching TV. A commercial is playing.

BEN  
(excitedly)  
Oh man! Look, look, look! It's your dad!

Ben is pointing feverishly at the TV and patting Cody, trying to get his attention.

CODY  
(slightly annoyed and clearly aware of the TV)  
Oh, wonderful.

EXT. USED CAR LOT - DAY CUT TO TV COMMERCIAL

BOB BERKOWITZ (Male, 40s/50s) and Timmy (Male, 10) are acting in a cliche', under budgeted local used car dealership commercial.

BOB BERKOWITZ  
So come on down to 'Big Bob Berkowitz's Used Car Emporium'! Where we have the best deals in town! We've got 'em all! Big ones, little ones, fast ones, blue ones! Hey, look even a red one!

TIMMY

Wow!

BOB BERKOWITZ  
Haha, that's right, Timmy...even red ones. And now featuring the one and only Jupiter Domesphere! Which comfortably seats twelve or more, has 4-wheel drive capability, and has a gas mileage of 55-highway and 38-city!

TIMMY  
Sounds roomy and eco-friendly!

BOB BERKOWITZ  
Haha! You know it, Timmy! So come on down to Big Bob Berkowitz's Used Car Emporium! And tell 'em Bob sent ya!

CUT BACK TO BEN AND CODY  
INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

BEN  
You're dad has the best mustache. I wish I could grow that kind of lip foliage.

The TV begins to play another commercial.

BEN  
(excitedly)  
Oh!! This is what I was telling you about! Watch this, watch this, watch this!

Ben is pointing feverishly at the TV and patting Cody, trying to get his attention again. Cody is slightly annoyed and clearly aware of the TV.

CODY  
I'm watching!

INT. DOJO - DAY CUT TO TV COMMERCIAL

SENSEI PAT, (MALE, 30s) is a blind and rather eccentric ninja master acting in a TV commercial, advertising his ninja class. He is holding a swordstick, performing an array of 'moves' while he talks. TIMMY, is acting alongside Sensei Pat.

SENSEI PAT  
Hello! Do you enjoy things like espionage? Infiltration? Nunchucks?

Nunchucks? Yeah! TIMMY

Huh? Who said that?! SENSEI PAT

A startled Sensei Pat abruptly flails his arms, nearly smacking Timmy in the face with his swordstick.

SENSEI PAT  
For the small fee of fifty dollars, you can learn the way of the ninja, from me, Sensei Pat.

TIMMY  
Fifty dollars?! No way!

SENSEI PAT  
Holy Sh-t! (Bleeped out)

An even more startled Sensei Pat, flails his arms again, this time knocking Timmy out cold with his swordstick.

SENSEI PAT  
So sign up today for 'Insight and Instruction on Living Within the Shadows: A Ninja's Way of Life'.

Sensei Pat points at what he thinks is the camera, only to be pointing off into the distance.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY CUT BACK TO BEN AND CODY

BEN  
We have to go.

CODY  
No.

BEN  
Cody!?

CODY  
No. Absolutely not. You know I can never be seen again acting like a ninja. Remember back in elementary school? I made a fool of myself in front of Emma Brinkley!

Cody dramatically stares off into space, having a flashback.

## EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY

## FADE TO FLASHBACK

A young Cody is alone on the playground with his classmates. He is wearing a ninja outfit, pretending to be fighting an invisible opponent, while swinging around a plastic sword. A group of girls, including YOUNG EMMA approaches.

YOUNG CODY  
(grunting/swinging sword)  
Hi-ya! Gotcha!

GIRL  
(to YOUNG EMMA)  
Hey look, Emma. It's Cody.

GROUP OF GIRLS  
Oooooo, Cody! Giggles.

YOUNG EMMA  
Hi, Cody.

YOUNG CODY  
H-hey, Emma.

GIRL  
What are you even doing?

YOUNG CODY  
I'm a ninja. I'm fighting an opponent.

GIRL  
...But no ones there.

YOUNG CODY  
Just because your opponent isn't fighting back, does not mean he isn't there.

GIRL  
Your weird.

GROUP OF GIRLS  
Giggling.

YOUNG EMMA  
Bye, Cody!

A game of kickball is going on near by. A boy kicks the ball and it knocks over an unsuspecting Cody, who is still practicing/swinging his sword. Every-

one on the playground, students, teachers, and even Timmy, point and laugh at Cody.

NOOO!!!!  
YOUNG CODY

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY  
FADE BACK TO BEN AND CODY

NOOO!!!!  
CODY

BEN  
(mockingly)  
Ok! Ok! Ok! Stop! Geez, it wasn't that bad.

CODY  
Hey, that was a very traumatizing moment for my life.

BEN  
No one even remembers that. C'mon. Let's check out Sensei Pat's.

CODY  
No, absolutely not. Besides, don't you think we're a bit old to be going to a ninja class?

BEN  
Old?

Ben gets up from the couch and stands in front of Cody.

BEN  
*Old?! Do you think Chuck Norris was too old when he fought Bruce Lee?*

CODY  
...Didn't he lose?

BEN  
Do you think Batman ever thought he was too old?

CODY  
Batman's not a ninja.

BEN  
We've been over this. Half bat. Half ninja.

CODY  
...Okay?

BEN

Do you think Michelangelo and the gang were too old when they were kicking Shredder's butt?!

CODY  
Valid point. Look, I don't know. I just think we've outgrown this stuff.

BEN  
What if I told you Emma Brinkley was going to the class?

CODY  
Emma Brinkley? What? Yeah, in my dreams. There's no way she'd ever go to---

Ben's phone dings.

She's in.

Ben is holding his phone, just receiving a text from Emma.

CODY  
What? How?

Ben's phone dings.

BEN  
She's coming.

Ben's phone dings.

BEN  
She says she can't wait.

CODY  
Really? Wow. Okay. I'm in, I guess.

BEN  
Good man.

CUT TO

INT. DOJO - DAY

Sensei Pat is standing in the front of the rec room. Ben, Cody, EMMA (FEMALE, 20s), and the rest of the class are sitting down on the floor. Emma smiles and waves at Cody, who awkwardly smiles and waves back. Sensei Pat begins the class.

SENSEI PAT

Ohhhhkay. Welcome to Insight and Instruction on Living Within the Shadows: A Ninja's Way of Life. I am your sensei, Sensei Pat. Well let's get started. I need a volunteer. Hmm...how about you.

Sensei Pat points at a closet. The class exchange confused looks at each other. Ben decides to go up to the front of the class.

SENSEI PAT  
Ohhhhkay. Here's your weapon.

Sensei Pat attempts to hand Ben a pair of nunchucks. He unknowingly drops them on the floor. Ben picks them up.

SENSEI PAT  
Ohhhhkay. First rule of combat. Never look your opponent in the eye. Second rule. Kick, then swing.

Sensei Pat covers his eyes with his arms and demonstrates a less than impressive 'kick then swing' move.

SENSEI PAT  
Ohhhhkay. Got that? Alright, my son. Commence attack!

Ben shrugs his shoulders, then performs a 'kick, then swing' move at Sensei Pat, hitting him in the face with the nunchucks, knocking Sensei Pat to the ground.

SENSEI PAT  
(struggling to get up)  
Ohhhhkay. You learn quick.

Sensei Pat gets up, and aimlessly turns around, hitting Ben with his sword-stick.

SENSEI PAT  
Ohhhhkay. Everybody pair up! We've got a lot to get through!

The class stands to their feet. Emma approaches Cody.

EMMA  
Hey, Cody!

CODY  
(startled)  
Ah! Emma! Hey! Hi! I, uh, like your, uh...eyebrows? Very nice. Newly waxed?

BEN  
Yeah, that's not creepy or weird at all.

EMMA  
No, not waxed. Just well trimmed. But thanks! Hey, do you want to be partners?

CODY  
(awkwardly)  
Partners?! Y-Yeah. Sure! Ok! We can do that. Partners. Why not?

BEN  
Oh dear God.

EMMA  
Great!

Montage of Sensei Pat teaching the class an array of drills. Sensei Pat teaches the class how to walk on bubble wrap. Sensei Pat and Ben are sparring. Sensei Pat points at something behind Ben, Ben looks at where Sensei Pat pointed, only to turn around with Sensei Pat hiding underneath a cardboard box. Following this example, Emma points behind Cody. He turns around, then turns back to an empty cardboard box. He peaks underneath the box, thinking Emma is under it, only to find that she is missing. Confused, he looks around and Emma is standing right behind him, and startles Cody enough to make him fall backwards onto the box. Emma laughs, and helps Cody up.

FADE OUT

EXT. DOWNTOWN - DAY

Ben, Cody and Emma are taking a walk downtown.

BEN  
(mocking Sensei Pat)  
Ohhhhkay. I am Sensei Pat!!

EMMA  
*Laughing.* Oh look. A clown juggling!

Emma points toward a clown, JUGGLES, who is juggling. She runs toward the clown.

BEN  
*Shivering.* Blegh.

CODY  
(grabbing Ben)  
Come on.

BEN  
(reluctantly)  
No, no, no. Clowns are way freaky. With their white, plastered faces and disgusting nappy, red afros. Reminds me of my mee-maw...

CODY  
(grabbing Ben)  
Come on.

The group approaches the juggling clown (Juggles). Emma is thoroughly enjoying herself and clapping.

EMMA  
Wow! He's amazing, isn't he Cody?

Emma touches Cody. Cody reacts awkwardly.

I wish I could do that with balls.

BEN  
Haha! I bet she does!

Ben nudges Cody.

CODY  
(to Ben; quietly)  
Will you shut up!

Juggles begins making a balloon animal. He offers it to Ben. Ben disgustingly refuses and looks uncomfortable. Juggles gives it to Emma, instead, who happily accepts it. All of a sudden, three hooded figures grab Ben, Cody and Emma and take them into a nearby alleyway. The three hooded figures throw the group down on the ground.

CODY  
WHAT ARE YOU DOING! WHO ARE YOU!?

EMMA  
HELP!!

The three hooded figures (EXTRAS) pull out handguns and point them at the group. Joey Balloons approaches them.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Now, now. We don't want to make a commotion, now do we?

BEN  
A clown?!

The three hooded figures take off their hoods, revealing that they are clowns as well.

BEN  
Clowns!?

CODY  
What are you doing? What do you want from us?!

JOEY BALLOONS  
I have a little proposition for you. Cody Berkowitz, I presume your father is Bob Berkowitz, of Big Bob Berkowitz's Used Car Emporium?

CODY  
Yeah.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Well, he's got something I've had my eye on!

CODY  
What?

JOEY BALLOONS  
(quietly)  
Smart car.

EMMA  
What'd he say?

JOEY BALLOONS  
Smart car!! The new Jupiter Domesphere. Capable of seating twelve or more, with a miles per gallon gas mileage of at least 38-city and 55-highway!

BEN  
(convinced)  
Sounds roomy.

EMMA  
(convinced)  
And eco-friendly.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Roomy and eco-friendly indeed!  
(snaps fingers)

The three clowns approach Emma, who starts screaming. One of the clowns pulls out an over-sized, rubber mallet, and strikes her on top of her head,

knocking her unconscious. And take her away into a nearby parked van.

CODY  
Hey! No! Let her go!

JOEY BALLOONS  
If you ever want to see your little puff pastry again, you'll bring me a Jupiter Domesphere by Sunday at sunset!

BEN  
Puff pastry?

JOEY BALLOONS  
The creepy, old warehouse on Boulevard Street. Be there!

CODY  
EMMA! No!

Joey Balloons runs off, and jumps into the van. The van drives away.

Cody and Ben stand up. Cody begins pacing back and forth.

CODY  
Great! What do we do now?

BEN  
I think it's pretty obvious...you get him a Jupiter Domesphere.

CODY  
How?

BEN  
Call your dad.

CODY  
My dad? Why?

BEN  
...Because he's your dad. He'll give you a Jupiter Domesphere...cause he's your dad.

CODY  
Yeah, I don't know. He's pretty busy with work. I can never get in touch with him. Plus--

BEN  
(on his phone, interrupting Cody)  
Hold on, hold on. Hey, Mr. Berkowitz? Heyyy there! It's Cody's friend, Ben...

CODY  
How do you have my dad's number?

BEN (CONT'D)  
...Cody, yeah. Your son, Cody. He's good.

CODY  
...I don't even have my dad's number.

BEN (CONT'D)  
Haha, well listen. Here's Cody, he needs to ask you something.

Ben hands Cody his phone.

CODY  
Dad?

BOB BERKOWITZ  
Codester, what's up son?

CODY  
(pleading)  
Ok. Dad, listen. This mafia of clowns just kidnapped my friend, Emma, and they're holding her hostage. They're demanding a Jupiter Domesphere and if they don't get it--

BOB BERKOWITZ  
Haha!! Good one, son!

CODY  
No, dad. Please, I'm serious, these guys mean business--

BOB BERKOWITZ  
Oh that imagination of yours! Well, I gotta run, son! Stay in school!  
(hangs up)

CODY  
No! Dad!?

BEN  
So...?

CODY  
Yeah, that didn't work.

BEN  
...Well, we could always steal one?

CODY  
Steal one? I can't steal from my dad!

BEN  
Yes you can.

CODY  
No I can't, Ben.

BEN  
Yes you can...cause he's your dad.

CODY  
Ehh. I dunno...

BEN  
Well what's more important right now? Getting Emma back? Or worrying about what big Bob Berkowitz will do if you steal a car?

CODY  
Yeah. You're right. But how do we get Emma?

BEN  
As much as it pains me to say this. I think I know someone who can help.

CODY  
Who?

EXT. OUTSIDE OF WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Ben, Cody and Sensei Pat are laying on the grass wearing all black ninja outfits. They are looking at the warehouse trying to figure out their plan of attack. Ben is holding a pair of binoculars.

SENSEI PAT  
Ohhhkay. First rule of infiltration. Stay within the shadows. Second rule let your senses guide you.

BEN  
Yeah, you would say that. Here, take a look at this.

Ben gives Cody the binoculars.

CODY  
Oh look there she is!

Emma is tied up and sitting in a chair. Two clowns (GUARD #1 & GUARD #2) are keeping guard.

SENSEI PAT  
Nice work! Way to use your senses.

BEN  
But it looks like she's being heavily guarded.

CODY  
Yeah, you're right. Crap, how are we going to get in?

SENSEI PAT  
Get in? No problem. Follow me.

Sensei Pat rolls away into a crouching position. He scouts the area, and begins walking towards the warehouse

BEN  
Yes. Let's follow Mr. Magoo. That's a great idea.

CODY  
(grabbing Ben)  
Come on.

Cody and Ben get up and join Sensei Pat. They make their way towards the warehouse.

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Cody, Ben and Sensei Pat are crouching/hiding behind a stack of cardboard boxes in the corner of the warehouse. They see Emma tied to a chair, being guarded by two members of Joey Balloon's gang. They begin whispering to each other their plan of attack.

BEN  
Man, she's guarded pretty tight. How are we going to get past those goons?

CODY  
I've got an idea.  
(turns to Sensei Pat)  
Sensei Pat..

SENSEI PAT  
(looking the opposite direction)  
Aye!?

CODY  
Ok. See those two guys over there?

SENSEI PAT  
(pulling out a pair of binoculars)  
Hmm. Ah! Yes, I see. Two guys. Twelve o'clock.

BEN  
I'm sure ya do, Sensei Pat..

SENSEI PAT  
(still peering through the binoculars, quickly turns toward Ben)  
Huh!?

Ben annoyingly slaps Sensei Pat on the top of his head. Sensei Pat reacts by karate chopping into the air, swinging and missing. Cody grabs Sensei Pat and gets him to refocus on the task at hand.

CODY  
Come on. Pay attention. Ok, those two guys...

SENSEI PAT  
Aye!

CODY  
I need you to 'kick, then swing'.

SENSEI PAT  
King, then swing. Got it. Commence attack!

BEN  
(to Cody)  
What are you doing?! That's never going to work! He can't even freaking see!

CODY  
I've got a good feeling about it.

Sensei Pat sideway rolls away from the cardboard boxes. He gets up in a crouching position, and begins a series of 'swing, then kick' moves toward the two clowns guarding Emma. As he gets closer to the clowns, they cease their pacing/guarding of Emma, and face the oncoming Sensei Pat, exchanging looks of confusion and fear with each other. They point their guns at Sensei Pat, ready to fire, when Sensei Pat veers off track as he begins fighting a support beam/pole. The two clowns are caught off-guard by this unexpected event. They leave their watch on Emma, and cautiously approach Sensei Pat.

CODY  
(grabbing Ben)  
C'mon.

Ben and Cody quietly make their way to Emma. The "fight" amongst Sensei

Pat, the support beam, and the two clowns is in full force. They make it to Emma, and untie her from the chair.

EMMA  
(whispering)  
Thank God! Thank you so much!

CODY  
(whispering)  
Are you okay?!

EMMA  
Yeah, I'm ok. God, these clowns are awful. They're not even funny!

CUT TO FLASHBACK

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

The two clowns who are guarding Emma, are telling jokes to Emma.

GUARD #1  
Ok, ok. What's purple and 5000 miles long?

GUARD #2  
...The Grape Wall of China!

GUARD #1 & GUARD #2  
*Laughter.*

Emma reacts by rolling her eyes.

CUT BACK TO WAREHOUSE

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

BEN  
Bummer.

They finish untying Emma. She gets up and hastily hugs Cody.

CODY  
Alright well let's get out of here!

BEN  
Deal.

EMMA  
What about...

She points at Sensei Pat who is still 'fighting' the pole. GUARD #1 &

GUARD #2 are now sitting on lawn chairs, sipping on beverages, while watching Sensei Pat wear himself out.

BEN  
...I think he'll be ok.

CODY  
Yeah, let's just get out of here. Come on. Before anyone--

BLINKY  
Where do you think you're going?!

Blinky and two other clowns (CLOWN #3 & CLOWN #4) suddenly appear, quickly surrounding Ben, Cody and Emma.

BEN  
Are you serious?! More clowns!?

Blinky, Clown #3, and Clown #4 begin fighting Ben, Cody and Emma. Blinky is fighting Cody. Clown #3 is fighting Emma. Clown #4 is fighting Ben.

Clown #4 comes toward Ben engaging him in a fight.

BEN  
*Screams.*

Ben immediately turns, and runs away. While Cody and Emma are fighting their respected 'enemies', Clown #4 chases Ben around the warehouse. Ben dives behind a stack of boxes in a dark corner of the warehouse.

While Cody and Emma are still fighting their respected 'enemies', Cody notices Ben is hiding.

CODY  
Ben, what are you doing?!

BEN  
Hiding!

CODY  
Hiding?!

BEN  
Yeah...within the shadows!

EMMA  
What?!

Cody and Emma get distracted with Ben's comment, and their fighting 'partners' grab a hold of them, tie up Cody and Emma with hankchiefs, proceeding to throw them on the ground. Clown #4 is still searching aimlessly around the warehouse for Ben.

In walks Joey Balloons, joined by his gang, including Juggles and Patches, and also his girlfriend, BABS (FEMALE 20s).

JOEY BALLOONS  
Well, well--Hey, what the?!  
(notices Sensei Pat)  
Can someone stop this guy before he knocks the place down?

GUARD #1 and GUARD #2 hastily get up from their chairs and grab and subdue Sensei Pat. They tie him up, and bring him over next to Cody and Emma.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Well, well, well. Look what we have here. A couple of little lovebirds.

STILTS  
(laughter; imitates a bird)  
Chirp, chirp, chirp.

JOEY BALLOONS  
And, what's this? Oh, you have yourself a little ninja man?

STILTS  
(imitates a ninja)

JOEY BALLOONS  
(mockingly)  
Oh, excuse me! I can come back later...you look a little tied up at the moment!

CLOWNS  
*Laughter.*

Joey Balloons shoots his balloon gun into the air, to demand silence. He circles around Cody and Emma.

JOEY BALLOONS  
Now, I believe the last time we met, we had a little agreement? About a car if I'm not mistaken?

Cody remains silent.

JOEY BALLOONS  
(moves in closer)  
What's the matter? Clown got your tongue?

CLOWNS  
*Laughter.*

CODY  
You don't deserve it!

JOEY BALLOONS  
(angrily)  
What did you say!?

BABS  
He said, "You don't deserve it." Jeez, Joey. You know, you never do listen.

JOEY BALLOONS  
I heard what he said, Babs!

BABS  
(blabbering)  
Well, then why didja ask what he said? I mean for Cripe's sake, he's right in front of you, Joey!

JOEY BALLOONS  
Babs! Shut ya pie hole!  
(turning his attention back to Cody)  
Now here's how it's gonna go down, Berkowitz. Either you give me keys to a Jupiter Domesphere, or your little puff pastry here gets it!

BEN  
(to himself, still hiding)  
Again, with the 'puff pastry'?

Joey Balloons points his gun toward Emma.

EMMA  
(urgently)  
Cody. Now would be a good time to give him the keys. Please.

CODY  
(eyeing Joey Balloons)  
No. I think he's bluffing.

JOEY BALLOONS  
What did you say?!

BABS

*Sighs.* He said "he thinks your bluff"--

Joey Balloons shoots his gun off into the air to interrupt Babs. He smacks his forehead in annoyance.

JOEY BALLOONS

Babs. Please. Can you just...

Joey Balloons does the 'zipping of the mouth' motion.

BABS

Fine.  
(folds her arms)

JOEY BALLOONS

(turning back to Cody)  
So you think I'm bluffing, eh? Stilts! Pie me.

Joey Balloons sticks his hand out for a pie. Stilts reaches inside his pants, and hands Joey Balloons a pie.

CODY

I'm supposed to be scared of a pie?

CLOWNS

*Laughter.*

Joey Balloons throws the pie across the warehouse. It creates a huge bomb-like explosion.

Everyone is now silent.

Joey Balloons snaps his fingers at Stilts. He reaches in his pants for another pie, and hands it to Joey Balloons. He cradles the pie in his hands, and begins to circle around Cody and Emma, while pretending to drop it to inflict fear.

BEN

Nooooo!

Ben, who has been watching from his hiding spot the entire time, emerges from behind the boxes and begins sprinting toward Joey Balloons. He desperately leaps in front of Cody, Emma and Sensei Pat to 'protect' them from the explosive pie, only to anticlimactically land in front of them, with Joey Balloons still holding the pie.

BEN

Bad timing.

GUARDS #1 & #2 tie up Ben.

JOEY BALLOONS

So, back to my Jupiter Domesphere. Where are the keys, Berkowitz?

CODY

I'll only give them to you if you let us go!

JOEY BALLOONS

Yes, ok! Fine.

BEN

Promise?

JOEY BALLOONS

Yes, yes, yes. Bozo's pie. I promise. I'll let you go. Just give me my keys, boy!

CODY

They're in my pocket.

JOEY BALLOONS

Stilts!

Stilts goes and gets the keys from Cody's pocket, and tosses them to Joey Balloons

EMMA

Alright, now let us go!

JOEY BALLOONS

*Laughs.* Let you go? You silly little girl, don't you ever watch movies? The bad guy never lets them go! Stilts!

Stilts pulls out a single black pie from his pants, setting it in front of Cody, Ben, Emma and Sensei Pat. He attaches a long wick to it. Joey Balloons and his gang start making their way toward the door. Stilts lights the wick.

JOEY BALLOONS

Hope you enjoy dessert!

Joey Balloons closes the door. The wick burns closer toward the pie.

BEN

Great. What do we do now?

SENSEI PAT

I smell fire.

EMMA

Cody!? What are we going to do?

CODY

(panicking)  
Uh. I dont know! Sensei Pat! What do we do?

SENSEI PAT

When trying to escape. Always keep calm. Think like an eel, swimming away from big shark.

BEN

Is this guy serious right now!?

Sensei Pat begins squirming his body, trying to free himself from the rope. He remains stuck.

SENSEI PAT

When you can't escape. Scream for help.

EMMA, BEN, CODY, & SENSEI PAT

Help!!

Just before the burning wick reaches the pie, a giant clown shoe puts out the flame. It's Chuckles.

CODY

Who, who are you?!

CHUCKLES

I'm Chuckles.

Chuckles begins to untie everyone.

BEN

Ya don't say.

CODY

Why did you do that? Aren't you a member of Joey Balloons' gang?

CHUCKLES

I used to be a member of his gang, but not anymore. I quit! I couldn't take it anymore! The stealing, smuggling illegal pie-bombs, just everything! Plus, Joey was always so mean to me.

EMMA

Aww...

Cody, Ben, and Emma all stand up.

CHUCKLES

So anything I can do to get back at Joey is just fine and dandy with me!

CODY

Well, I really don't know what to say. I mean you just saved our lives. How can we ever repay you?

CHUCKLES

No, trust me. It's ok. And besides, I'm more worried about you. You just lost a Jupiter Domesphere!

CODY

(slyly)

Yeah I'm not too worried about that...

CUT TO

INT. JUPITER DOMESPHERE

Joey Balloons and his gang are comfortably seating in the Jupiter Domesphere. Joey Balloons is in the driver's seat.

JOEY BALLOONS

Yes! Finally! The Jupiter Domesphere!

Joey Balloons starts kissing the steering wheel.

JOEY BALLOONS

I love you. I love you. I love you.

BABS

Jeez, Joey. How bout doin' that to me every once in awhile.

PATCHES

Oh what fine automobile! Think of the dough we'll save! Ohhh man, I get so riled up just thinkin aboutit!

BLINKY

Start her up, boss!

Joey Balloons starts the car. The dash starts making an array of noises and flashes. The Domesphere's navigation voice comes on.

JUPITER DOMESPHERE V.O.

Hey Baby! Welcome to the Jupiter Domesphere. Capable of comfortably seating twelve or more, with a gas mileage of



38-city, and 55-highway.

Joey Balloons claps with excitement.

STILTS

Ooh. Fancy.

JUPITER DOMESPHERE V.O.

Please enter your security verification code before choosing your destination.

BABS

Verification code?!

Joey Balloons hastily pulls out a slip of paper.

JOEY BALLOONS

Love that internet!

Joey Balloons enters in the code onto a keypad.

JUPITER DOMESPHERE V.O.

I'm sorry. That is incorrect. Please re-enter your verification code.

JOEY BALLOONS

What?!

BABS

Great! This always happens, Joey! You know if you would just do a little research first, before you go out on a limb and start stealing cars, maybe we could actually--

JOEY BALLOONS

(cutting Babs off)

Shut up, shut up, shut up, you giraffe! I think I've got it.

Joey Balloons re-enters in the code onto a keypad.

JUPITER DOMESPHERE V.O.

What the hell is wrong with you?! That is still incorrect. For your own security, your Jupiter Domesphere will self-lock, and the po-po have been notified.

JOEY BALLOONS

Police?! What?!

He tries to unlock the doors, but they won't budge.

JUPITER DOMESPHERE V.O.

Please wait patiently for the police to arrive. Thank you for choosing the Jupiter Domesphere. Have a nice day, sugar!

A police siren begins to near and flashing blue lights begin to reflect into the Jupiter Domesphere.

JOEY BALLOONS

Berkowitz!!!

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

CUT TO

BEN

So, Sensei Pat. I think it's time for us to *leave*.

Ben nods his head towards Cody and Emma, who are now holding hands.

SENSEI PAT

A ninja never leaves when he is told. He leaves unexpectedly when he--

Ben smacks Sensei Pat in the head to stop him from speaking. Sensei Pat reacts to Ben's punch and swings and misses in retaliation. Ben grabs Sensei Pat's head and points it at Cody and Emma's hand holding.

SENSEI PAT

Ohhhhh. Uh, yes! Time to go. I have to buy...new...sunglasses.

Ben and Sensei Pat walk toward the door. Cody and Emma follow behind them while holding hands.

END.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Kevin Adler is a Ph.D. candidate in creative writing at Georgia State University. His stories have been published in *The Brooklyn Review*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Open Face Sandwich*, *Confrontation*, and others. He is from Auburn, Maine.

Hank Backer is pursuing his Ph.D. in Creative Writing, Poetry at Georgia State University. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rectangle*, *Sixty Six: A Journal of Sonnet Studies*, and *Prime*.

Sydney Bolding, 22, plans to graduate from the University of West Georgia with a major in English and a minor in Creative Writing. After graduation, Sydney plans to further her studies in English—obtain both her M.A. and M.F.A.—all in the hopes of one day being able to teach English and Creative Writing at the college level, while also publishing her own original poetry. Sydney owes praise and thanks to her mother for being both superwoman and best friend. She would also like to thank: Amy Ellison, Lisa Crafton, and Chad Davidson for being such wonderful professors, mentors, inspirations, and counselors; for without the help and motivation each of you provided, hope would have been surely lost along the way.

Alicia Brandewie grew up in Wyoming, Ohio and is currently a senior creative writing major, anthropology minor at Emory University. "Circulation" is part of her senior honors thesis collection. She plans to earn her MFA and share her love of words through her books and as a professor.

Jennifer Mary Brown is a Ph.D. candidate in English for Creative Writing - Poetry at Georgia State University. She received her MA in Creative Writing from University College in Dublin, Ireland in 2009 and her BA in English and Studio Art from University of Vermont in 2005. Her work has been previously published in the Anthology *A Curious Impulse* by University College Dublin press.

Anna Cabe, a 2011 fiction finalist for the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival, is grateful and ecstatic to be selected for the creative nonfiction category. A junior English literature and creative writing major who is studying in Scotland for the spring 2012 semester, she would like to send her congratulations from Glasgow to the other finalists and to say thank you to her family, friends, and fellow Scottie writers for their continued support.

Will Carter is currently a graduating senior at Oglethorpe University, study-

ing an individually planned major in Dramatic Writing, and he has been writing plays since his junior year in high-school. He has had the privilege of having many readings and performances of his plays at Oglethorpe, as well as being selected as a finalist in the 2010 Strike 38! Short Play Festival in New York City. He is currently applying to graduate school for playwriting with hopes of teaching it some day soon.

Trista Edwards has an M.A. in English with a concentration in poetry from the University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA. Her work has appeared previously in *32 Poems* and *The Journal*. She is also a past participant in the Sarah Lawrence Summer Seminar for Writers and a forthcoming participant in the Juniper Summer Writing Institute at Amherst. In her non-writing time, Trista enjoys crochet, hula-hooping, crafting, and hanging out with her pup, Buster.

Briana Gerdeman is a senior at the University of Georgia studying journalism and Spanish. She works for The Red & Black, UGA's independent student newspaper. In her free time, she enjoys parkour, cooking, and writing.

M.M. Kaufman is a writer of short fiction and poetry. She has studied fiction and poetry under Dr. Amber Dermont and Dr. Rachel Trousdale at Agnes Scott College, from where she plans to graduate in the spring. Kaufman is a co-editor in chief of Agnes Scott's literary magazine, *Aurora* and Co-founder and President of the film viewing society, The Cinephiles. Her work has appeared in the literary magazine *Used Furniture Review* and the upcoming anthology of constraint based poetry, *Oulipolooza*, published by the Kelly Writers House. Kaufman is currently a finalist for a Fulbright Scholarship.

Laura Nelray Lilly is from Thomasville, Georgia. She will graduate from UGA in May with a major in English. On Sunday evenings, she listens to Car Talk. This is her first piece to be published.

Emily Lake Hansen is a second year MFA student at Georgia College & State University and a 2008 graduate of Agnes Scott College. She lives in Atlanta with her husband, son, and chihuahua named Sammy.

Rori Leigh Hoatlin is a first year MFA student at Georgia College & State University (GCSU) concentrating in Creative Nonfiction. In 2010 she received her B.A. in Creative Writing from Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. Her work has been published *The Lanthorn Lit*, *InWriting*, and is forthcoming in Volume 9 of *Young Scholars in Writing*. She

is currently the Assistant Editor of the East Central Writing Center Association Newsletter and Assistant to the Supervisor at the GCSU Writing Center.

Leah Kuenzi is a senior English Literature-Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College. She enjoys her work as a tutor at Agnes Scott College's writing center and her work as an intern at Georgia Women's Action for New Directions. "The Architecture of Forgetting" is part of her senior seminar portfolio, which explores her relationship with her father through public history, personal memory, and interviews with family.

Keely Lewis is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College who is considering majoring in English literature-creative writing or, much to her chagrin, psychology. She is originally from Chester, West Virginia—home to 2,300 people and the World's Largest Teapot—but thinks Atlanta is fantastic. Her interests include writing, climbing trees, theology, hats, and Boston cream pie.

Calli Long is 22 years old and has lived in Dalton, Georgia most of her life. She recently graduated from Berry College in December 2011 with a Bachelor's degree in English and a minor in journalism. While at Berry, she was a member of the Omicron Delta Kappa honor society, and served as Editor in Chief of the college's literary magazine. She loves to travel (a study abroad summer at Cambridge University has turned her into quite the Anglophile), read, and especially write. She is hoping to attend graduate school so that she may dedicate even more time to the study of creative writing, with poetry in particular.

Merrill Montgomery is a Biology major at Agnes Scott. She lives in Decatur with her husband and her tortoise. If both graduate school and pharmacy school don't work out for her, she's considering starting a world religion or a sport that involves underwater cage fights.

Robert Mynatt is a senior at Oglethorpe University.

Andrea O'Rourke is from Rijeka, Croatia. She attends the MFA program at Georgia State University. Among other publications, her work has appeared in *Anderbo*, *PANK*, *Bigger Than They Appear: Anthology of Very Short Poems* and is forthcoming in *The Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Poet Lore*.

Phoebe Perry is studying creative writing and English literature at Agnes Scott College. Phoebe plays Scrabble with her grandma, Noanie, in Nebraska. They always use a dictionary.

T.J. Sandella is originally from Ashtabula, Ohio, but currently resides in Milledgeville, Georgia, where he shares a happy home with his puppy, Rufio. He is a second year poetry student in Georgia College and State's MFA program. The winner of the Academy of American Poets' University Prize, T.J. has had poems published in *Plainsongs*, *The Common Ground Review*, and *The Montucky Review*, among others.

A former Spanish instructor, Christine Swint now studies in the M.F.A. program in poetry and creative writing at Georgia State University, where she also teaches first-year composition. She studied English and Spanish literature at UGA, and later received an M.A. in Spanish language and literature from Middlebury College. Her poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in the *Red Clay Review*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *The Naugatuk River Review*, *Ekphrasis*, and *Tampa Review*.

Christen Thompson is a senior at Agnes Scott College majoring in English Literature and Creative Writing. Originally from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, she has grown to love Atlanta as a second home and a place that has provided unimaginable inspiration in the lasting friends she has made, places, and history it holds within it. She spent last summer working with TBS and TNT and is currently working at *Creative Loafing* Atlanta, as well as the editor of the website for the Agnes Scott student newspaper, *The Profile* and layout editor of *Aurora Literary Magazine*.

A junior at Agnes Scott College, Caitlin Thomas White enjoys experimenting with different genres, but her passion is finding the epic in the everyday through creative nonfiction. Her writing is strongly influenced by her involvement in theatre and music, as well as the storytelling tradition of her family, rooted mainly in North and South Carolina. She is interested in faith and its power to inspire both conflict and unity, which she continues to explore through her writing while studying abroad in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Mark Willard is a writer and filmmaker.





## A CREATIVE TRADITION

Agnes Scott College is known for fostering the creative spirit through the written word. The Writers' Festival has brought renowned novelists, poets, playwrights and essayists to campus including:

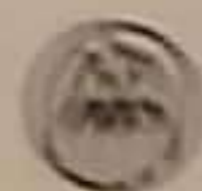
Julia Alvarez  
Margaret Atwood  
Eavan Boland  
Peter Carey  
Junot Diaz  
James Dickey  
Chitra Divakaruni  
Rita Dove  
Percival Everett  
Carolyn Forché  
Paul Gaster  
Quiana Alegria Hobbs  
Jamaica Kincaid  
Yusef Komunyakaa  
Li-Yang Lee  
Paul Muldoon

Gloria Naylor  
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Dana Sene  
Bapsi Sidhwa  
Jane Smiley  
Megan Curtis Tucker  
John Updike  
Robert Penn Warren  
Richard Wilbur  
Joy Williams  
and many others

This annual festival is made possible by the following funds:

The Emma May Larey Endowment Fund for Writing  
The Margaret Guthrie Trotter Fund  
The Ellen White and William Wyeth Newman Writers' Festival Prize

*Agnes Scott College educates women to think deeply,  
live honorably and engage the intellectual and  
social challenges of their times.*



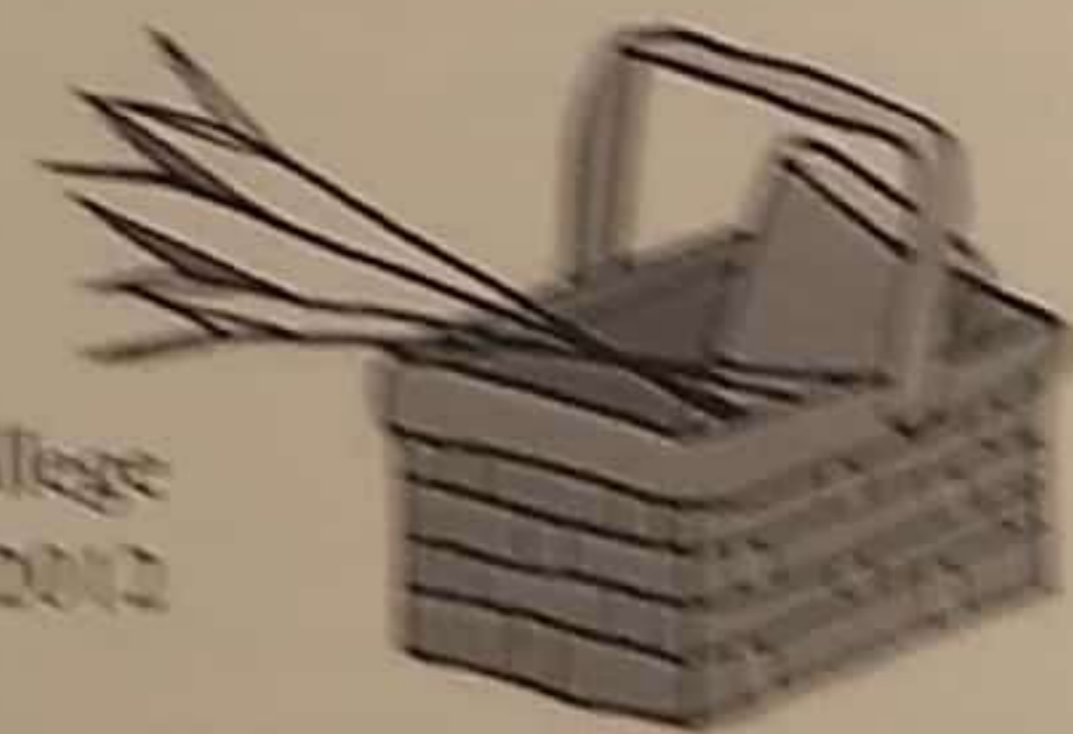
AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE  
THE ROAD FOR WOMEN

# the 41<sup>st</sup> annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival



Benjamin Percy  
Joy Harjo  
Jacqueline Farber Goldfinger '00

Agnes Scott College  
March 29-30, 2012



## GUEST AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Benjamin Percy is the author of the short story collections *The Language of Elk* and *Refresh, Refresh* and the novels *Red Moon* and *The Wilding*. He is a recipient of the Whiting Writers' Award, a Pushcart Prize and a Literature Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. His fiction and nonfiction have been read on National Public Radio, performed at Symphony Space and recently appeared in *Esquire*, *Paris Review*, *Glimmer Train* and *The Wall Street Journal*. He teaches in the MFA program at Iowa State University and at the Low-Residency MFA program at Pacific University.

Joy Harjo was born in Tulsa, Okla. and is a member of the Mvskoke Nation. Her seven books of poetry include *How We Became Human—New and Selected Poems*, *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* and *She Had Some Horses*. She is the recipient of the New Mexico Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas and the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. She has released four award-winning CDs of original music and in 2009 won a Native American Music Award (NAMMY) for Best Female Artist of the Year for "Winding Through the Milky Way."

Jacqueline Pardue Goldfinger '00 returns to Winter Theatre, one of her favorite haunts as a student and president of the Blackfriars of Agnes Scott College, to offer insights on playwriting and discuss her work. The session will feature current students performing monologues personally selected by the author for the Writers' Festival. Goldfinger is a Barrymore-nominated playwright and dramaturg. She teaches playwriting at University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Her original full-length plays include *the terrible girls* (Azuka Theatre, NYFringe), *The Oath* (Theatre Exile, Off-Off Broadway Maieutic Theatre Works) and *The Burning Season* (winner of the National Plays for the 21st Century Competition). She has been a finalist for the Haas Award for Emerging Philadelphia Theatre Artist, New Dramatists, O'Neill Theater Center Playwrights Conference and the Next Generation Playwrights Award. Her new play *Slip/Shot* will world premiere at Flashpoint Theatre this spring.

*Copies of the authors' work will be available for purchase.*

*For more information, please visit [www.agnesscott.edu/writersfestival](http://www.agnesscott.edu/writersfestival).*

## EVENT SCHEDULE

### TUESDAY, MARCH 27

4 p.m.

Agnes Scott College Finalists Read Their Works

*Sponsored by the Center for Writing and Speaking*

Wallace McPherson Alston Campus Center, Amelia Davis Luchsinger Lounge

Each year, student writers from Georgia colleges and universities submit their fiction, poetry, personal essays and one-act plays to the Writers' Festival Creative Writing Competition. Finalists from Agnes Scott will read from their winning entries.

*Nonfiction:* Anna Cabe '13, "Two Fountains"

Emily Lake Hansen '08, "Mother/Mother"

Leah Kuenzi '12, "The Architecture of Forgetting"

Keely Lewis '14, "On the Ward"

Caitlin Thomas White '13, "On Pleasing a Male God"

*Fiction:* M.M. Kaufman '12, "Real Ladies"

Merrill Montgomery '12, "Daycare"

Christen Thompson '12, "The Birds of Bessemer City"

*Drama:* Phoebe Perry '14, "The Qi to Success"

### THURSDAY, MARCH 29

1-2 p.m.

Q&A with Benjamin Percy, Joy Harjo and Jacqueline Pardue Goldfinger '00

Wallace McPherson Alston Campus Center, Amelia Davis Luchsinger Lounge

4 p.m.

Reading by Benjamin Percy

Charles A. Dana Fine Arts Building, Winter Theatre

5 p.m.

Benjamin Percy Reception and Book Signing

Charles A. Dana Fine Arts Building, The Dalton Gallery

8 p.m.

Reading by Joy Harjo (free, ticket required for entrance)

Presser Hall, Gaines Chapel

9:30 p.m.

Joy Harjo Reception and Book Signing

Rebekah Scott Hall, Katharine Woltz Reception Room

### FRIDAY, MARCH 30

1-2 p.m.

Reading by Jacqueline Pardue Goldfinger '00

Charles A. Dana Fine Arts Building, Winter Theatre

2 p.m.

Jacqueline Goldfinger Reception and Book Signing

Charles A. Dana Fine Arts Building, The Dalton Gallery

The Agnes Scott College

*Writers' Festival Finalist Reading*

*Nonfiction*

*Leah Kuenzi, "The Architecture of Forgetting," ASC*

*Keely Lewis, "On the Ward," ASC*

*Emily Lake Hansen, "Mother/Mother," GCSU*

*Anna Cabe, "Two Fountains," ASC (In Absentia, Read by Isobel Robinson-Ortiz)*

*Caitlin Thomas White, "On Pleasing a Male God" ASC (In Absentia, Read by Molly Saunders)*

*Fiction:*

*M.M. Kaufman, "Real Ladies," ASC*

*Merrill Montgomery, "Daycare," ASC*

*Christen Thompson, "The Birds of Bessemer City," ASC*

*Drama:*

*Phoebe Perry, "The Qi to Success," ASC*

# Once upon a time...

**Thursday, March 29**

*Reading by Benjamin Percy*  
Winter Theatre  
Charles A. Dana Fine Arts Building  
4 p.m.

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8 p.m.

*Joy Harjo Reception and Book Signing*  
Katharine Woltz Reception Room  
Rebekah Scott Hall  
9:30 p.m.

**Friday, March 30**

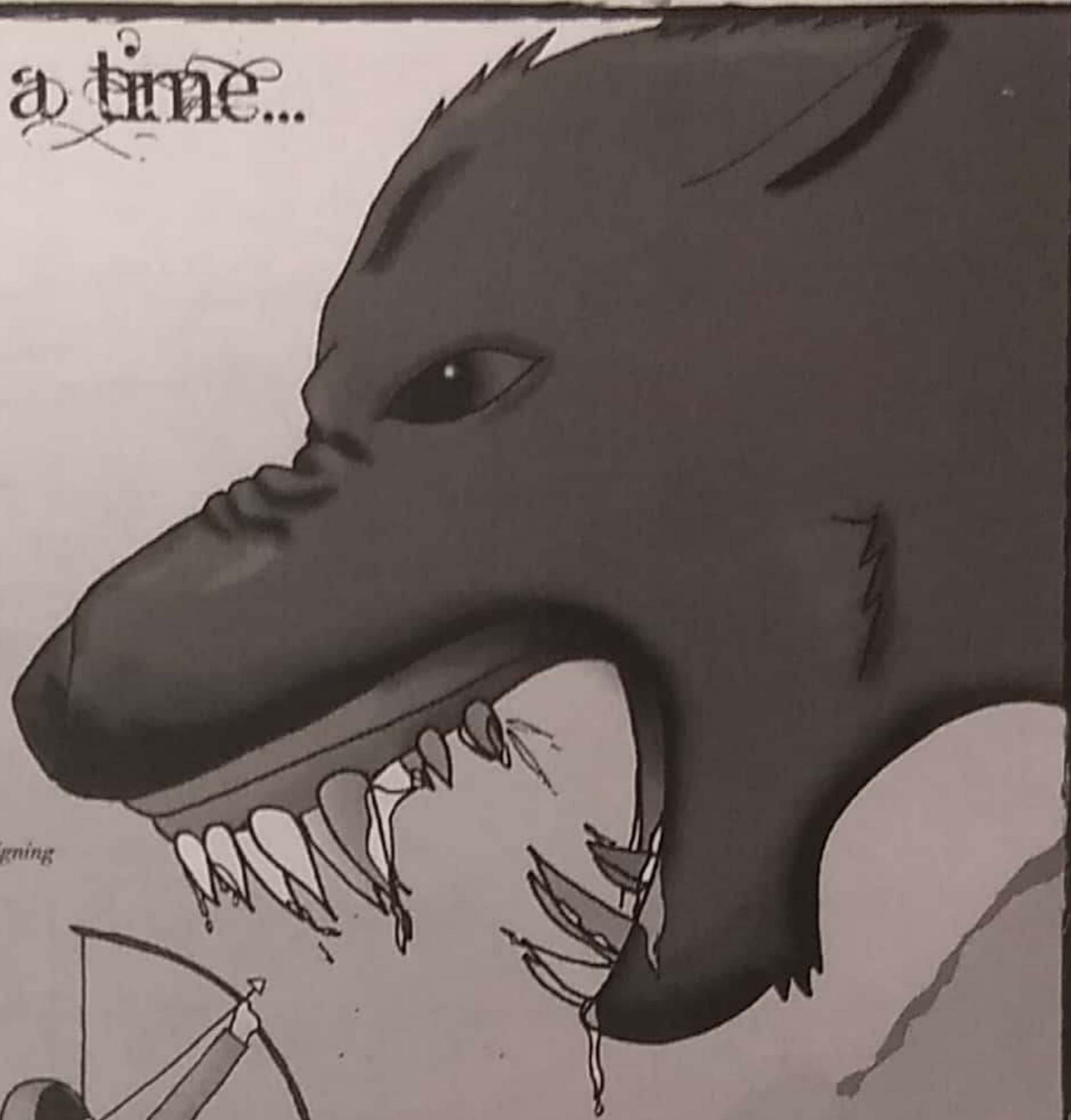
*Reading by Jacqueline Goldfinger*  
Winter Theatre  
Charles A. Dana Fine Arts Building  
1 p.m.

*Jacqueline Goldfinger Reception and Book Signing*  
The Dalton Gallery  
Charles A. Dana Fine Arts Building  
2 p.m.

All events are free and open to the public.

\*For tickets, call 404-471-6430.

For additional information, please contact  
Special Events at 404-471-6430 or  
specialevents@agnesscott.edu.



## 41st annual writers festival

featuring: Benjamin Percy  
Jacqueline Goldfinger  
and Joy Harjo

