

*write your
own path...*



42nd AGNES SCOTT
Annual
Writers' Festival

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42nd Annual
Writers' Festival



March 2013

Design and Production

Illustration and Design - Megan Cieri '13, Meghan Joyce '13, Gaby Loisel '12

Layout and Design - Katy Metcalfe '15

Writing - Clare McBride '13

Marketing and Public Relations Consultants - Julia Lutgendorf '04, Erin Zellmer

Editor - James May

Writing Contest in Four Genres - Nicole Stamant, Steve Guthrie

Selection Committee

Roger Reeves - poetry

William Boyle - fiction

Kerry Bakken - nonfiction

Jacqueline Pardue Goldfinger - one-act play

With the success of last year's fairy tale theme, the creative team behind the Writers' Festival knew we wanted to do something similarly nostalgic, but we also wanted to put our unique spin on things. We knew we wanted the look of old maps, but the maps, on their own, were a design, not a theme. When one of the artists proposed marrying it to the journey a writer takes, we knew we had something, and the work began. We singled out four significant steps in the writing process—writer's block, inspiration, fear and success—and fleshed them out into environments of their own to populate a map of the writer's journey. My contribution to the theme was just the words "write your own path," but I think that small phrase exemplifies what the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival urges writers to do every year. If there's not a path for you, then write it yourself.

Enjoy the magazine.

Clare McBride '13



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

All works printed in this magazine remain the property of their authors and may be submitted for publication elsewhere. The Writers' Festival Magazine is printed by Trinity Press.

Send any correspondence or inquiry regarding the Writers' Festival Magazine to Christine Cozzens at ccozzens@agnesscott.edu.

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to a 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 Gish Jen, Cristina Garcia and Anjail Ahmad '92.

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, Vice President of Academic Affairs Carolyn Stefanco, Eleanor Hutchens '40 and the estate of Margret Trotter for their support. We also thank Nicole Stamant and Steve Guthrie for organizing and overseeing the Writers' Festival Contest; the Office of Marketing and Public Relations for their help with design, social media and marketing; Christine Cozzens and James May for their guidance; Demetrice Williams for her event planning and management; and Roger Reeves, William Boyle, Kerry Bakken and Jacqueline Pardue Goldfinger for their time and careful reading as our outside selection committee.

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Poetry



The Dangers of Instant Space/Time Travel

MacKenzie Regier
University of West Georgia

Imagine I dismantle you to atoms, fling you through the black drapes of space and time. Could you come back from that? Wait, better. Picture yourself as a bowl of rice I drop. Now you see why we can never teleport. Notwithstanding how *The Fly* launched fears of cross-dimensional head-swaps, the danger is in the rice, between the wrinkles built into your brain like mountain ranges we hiked in Tennessee, valleys overrun with purple phlox, between the folds of your plaid shirt crumpled on my floor.

In your head, electric memory resides, but when you're down to nuclei scattering, all of you will go. You'd still look right, even smell like that perfect hour of the morning—coffee, a wisp of milk, toothpaste, the last shavings of a dream of you and me. Which is to say, if Scotty beamed us up, the sea of memory would be flat-ironed to a dull, cold mirror. Here you've got me mixing metaphors. Because alone, with only threads of you in the sheets, I would love to slip through space, shed you like a comet until I had just your hand down my hip, your voice purple in the evening, the threat of rain swollen in the clouds hanging above Nashville, above our skulls trapping the lightning of us.

Belly Dance Lessons

MacKenzie Regier
University of West Georgia

Ameerah sometimes played a tape with ten men layered like a chorus of jackals ushering my half-hour onward, then unsnapped my legs and showed me how to paint diamonds into King Tut's stone beard, how to clear my mind like chalk vanishing from a blackboard. Between us was a desert history, an oasis, like the one a figure-eight of hips makes for the man's eye, our arms snaking into the dunes with their zils.

Once, in the studio, below the photo of her lover killed by a Mack truck, she gave me a second name, *Shalimar Mahal, Jewel of the Garden*, which I could use whenever I wished. I never did. My throat turned cream in the fluorescence. Night dragged the moon over the sky. My hands lingered on a hip scarf of yellow coins. When I walked, I sounded like money.

Ars Poetica

MacKenzie Regier
University of West Georgia

Once, life seemed like rowing a boat in a bathtub—the smallness of it all, the loveliness, oars clumsy, sympathetic on the stained porcelain. No sound save for the faucet's metronome. Then, life became the pod of air between two ships before they tangle, a breath stuck in the lung, and down they go. And if I straddle prow and gaze into the open drain, or tuck a coin neatly beneath each sailor's tongue, I only taste the metal edge, a sudden knowing in the lamps of their eyes, or mine, some horizon to snug the final Earth. Truth is, I work for those who see the stopper pulled.

Glenville

Melissa Sullivan
University of West Georgia

No one comes here, except to play football. Friday nights, the town empties itself into the little stadium built of cinderblock, ringed with chain-link and barbed wire. Otherwise the only pastimes are loitering in the Tasty Dip parking lot, to watch Sally tongue the cold wet of her soft serve, or sex, which are really the same thing. You drive her through the one red light in town, that blinks yellow this late at night, too tired to care whether you stop or go, past the cotton and tobacco fields you both work as summer jobs, past the perfect, parallel lines of long-leaf pines, down to the fishing pond of Billy Currington's daddy who is too drunk every Friday night to notice the headlights in his driveway, and even if he wasn't, he'd just tell you that you picked a pretty one and wonder aloud if she'd be as good as her mother was twenty years ago.

Stained-Glass Jesus

Melissa Sullivan

University of West Georgia

Tied too tightly to the wooden bones of a pew
meant for longer legs, the toes of my patent leather
Mary Janes snub the commercial carpet.
A purple splash of sun filters through the stain
of Jesus and his glass loin cloth, spills down my leg,
pools at my feet. Suffer the little children to come unto me,
my pastor says, who suffers us each week—the bald cries,
the pew climbing. Or maybe the children suffer in that way
the Sunday school teacher taught: longsuffering, like patience
but feeling like pain, which is, he said, a beatitude,
or a spiritual fruit around which the hornets carve their halos.
But what do insects, with their drones and queens, have to do
with the cross, I wonder, as I cringe from my mother's anger?
We all must turn and be washed white like children, the pastor says,
in the blood of Christ, the name echoes across the vaulted ceiling
pocked by can-lights trained on the pulpit. I look across the veneer
of faces, stop on the drop of red light flung across the shoulder
of a girl in haltered sundress. Her father's graying hair tinged
with spikes of brown, the face betraying no grimace, no crystal
on the cheek. In this way, Jesus is bigger, projected prostrate
across the crowd. His arms stretch five rows wide, half way across
the sanctuary, elliptical dust above his head meeting the white wings
of a dove from the window across the way. And the pool at my feet?
Testing its depth with my toe, I swear I could fall into its flood.

March

Melissa Sullivan

University of West Georgia

Becky pulls the sparse denim of her skirt
down her leg, while Dillon tugs at the frays
of the cutoff, traces their length down
her goose-prickled thigh, which bounces
in the dull glow of the radio dials lighting
the cab of the '86 Chevy Dillon's daddy
gave him last year to drive from school
to the back twenty acres of their south Georgia
tobacco farm where Becky works each summer,
letting the boys lift the long bulks to the rafters
of the barn to cure, but now they slip past
the ranked files of long-leaf pines flanking
the sides of the road, a kind of Morse code of sight
made of being and non-being, tree, no tree, tree,
no tree, parallel lines marching away
into the middle of nowhere and anywhere but here.

Cosmology

Tim Payne

University of West Georgia

My mother shakes a menthol from the box,
nebulae of ash, fiberglass. I was seven, lost
in astronomy's distances, observed

the planet's slow circuit as smoke rings
pulling from the sun. My mother floats
around the room in her only spring dress

greeting guests, gravitates toward talk
of urgent refills and absent uncles.
Balloons fade like black holes must shrug

off their girth, like conversation dwindles
at party's end. Relatives, meanwhile, coalesce
around the cake. My mother stretches streamers

above doorframes that launch into years
spent apart, memory's gravity as it threads
latex and crêpe across missed calls, like a void

meant to swallow in its easy apathy, its adulthood.
Sucked in, how could we escape?
In my mind, my mother always whispers

happy birthday; she's flicking a match out
into the yard—over the flowers she never kept—
opening her mouth to a thin rope of smoke.

Small Fires

Tim Payne

University of West Georgia

As we pulled into Reid's Jeweler, sodden
with assumptions from a recent flood
of in-laws, I heard pillage
in your throat, a horde of Vikings gearing
for one last raid on my single life.
You told me about survival
while Frank led us past the disembodied
wrists arrayed in Tag Heuer and blindness
near the register. In these, the end times
of his lease, we came hunting
a deal. I watched Frank calculate loss,
his stores' ebbing a tribute as you led me
through bank after bank of small fires
under glass, asking what I thought
of their burning. We were like gods
appraising catastrophe's remnants—
just camps on a fluorescent tide
that would edge them into nothing
sure as closeout sales will save
for a limited time. Every one alone
in their hunger but the pair we kept
for ourselves, sleeping in plastic
hulls while the rest dimmed to silence.

The Tourism of Mass Graves

Tim Payne
University of West Georgia

We admired the smooth grays and whites
of the envelope, a single word:
Pompeii, scratched into a corner.

The brochure promised it all:
picnic area, bilingual guides, and bodies.
You pushed the deluxe package,

a stroll through the Temple of Venus, its promise
of as much as we could take in.
I consulted a list of neighborhood bars.

The pictures, really, are what sold us.
I felt you quake at A Quiet Street,
as if mall traffic had been unusually light,

the photographer too familiar with exposure
for an indie vibe, to keep from focusing
on what seemed an ancient La-Z-Boy

left out after a party, which didn't tell us anything.
We paused at a still of the Forum, that mountain
brooding over columns that refused to touch or fall.

But nothing could stand up to Garden of the Fugitives:
thirteen husks against the walls of a triclinium
reborn as plaster effigy—the paste of Italian masters

pumped into ashen voids, limbs welded, in situ.
The truth is, there are no bodies,
only space enough for nonchalance, for gravity,

their mouths not choking on debris,
but stretching over their heads like a familiar shirt
that, once worn, will never come off.

Advice

Mac Gay
Georgia State University

Since you've asked me I must tell you
that this seems not such a good idea;
seems, in fact, much like the botched
euthanasia of the wild puppies
you could not catch or scare away;
ergo, those poorly-placed gut shots
with that vintage British .303 you'd
mail-ordered from Kleins, Chicago,
that came with armor-piercing ammo,
which, since puppies aren't composed
of steel, simply whisked their bowels
out the other side to hang, as they,
who'd barely just arrived, commenced
their other-worldly arias and tornadic
whirls, and gnawed intestines till
their fires burned mercifully out.
Orchestrating that chaos in the backyard
while Aunt Em rested after surgery
was to me idiocy heaped on madness.
But still I love you, Brother, adjacent
fruit on our gnarled and withered tree.
And since you've asked, I'll say again,
this also seems no great idea to me.

The Way It Is

Mac Gay
Georgia State University

My big rule is don't
pee on each other,
I tell the dogs as they
check out the pole.
I'd be my main sermon
for everyone if I was
a preacher. Then
just as quick I say
"that's a loud-mouthed
goddamn mockingbird--
where's my shotgun!"
Clearly you see
the downside of the cursed
manic-depression--
a life of making
inappropriate remarks
followed by hours
of brooding followed
by exhausting and
frenzied sex. And yet
the poetry's fun: breath-
takingly mounted
and galloping out
all at once from
behind those giant boulders
like bushwhackers from heaven

Frank Stanford

Mac Gay
Georgia State University

1948-1978

Though I never met him, we arrived
same summer, same year, both our daddies
old engineers, both of us privileged
white boys spoiled by our mamas
into a kind of Fauntleroyesque corner
escaped only by stark hyperbole--
blood, say, or death,
those pedestrian loudmouths.
Unbeknownst to us, we had entered
this world where our inappropriate remarks
become appropriate. Yet such stews
make for odd tastes, confused
dichotomies: A succotash of black and white,
up and down, pink and blue,
life and death. Almost
a junction of conjunctions.
But Frank was an altogether different
kettle of fight, of write, of do-
and so he did, writing best words in best
order, so frictionless they shot all
the way into the twenty first century;
yet he overlooked a major importance:
himself, stuck back there in the ditch
of the seventies,
one ditch beyond Elvis,
stranded eternal beside the way through.

Mother Mary

Elizabeth Bonhorst
Georgia College & State University

Let's say the tree is God. Easily
God is the man beneath, peeling
an apple in shade, or the chicken
perched on a low branch, cocking
and angling its little head. Or
it's the diamonds of light pushed
through branches, trembling
against shadows, or the sound
of those diamonds trembling.

But here: the magnolia tree, a genus
95 million years old. Its many leaves
shiny and thick as a roach's back—
the same snap, too, beneath the feet.
Hard to believe a tree so tough
admits a blossom bigger and whiter
than a woman's palms cupped
for water. His petals are not
petals but tepals, meaning
"undifferentiated," meaning
"one." The blossoming is
the sacrifice. The tepals could have lived
forever as one green husk, dark but
warm, embraced. But no.
The Carpel must emerge, strange
as it is beautiful.

The prophets and violence
are fiction. Truth: the Carpel was just
too heavy for the tepals' open embrace—
fell like the rest with an unsexy
plop. It, too, browned and withered.
Simple compost we call "Mother."

Developing Film for the Police Department

Elizabeth Bonhorst
Georgia College & State University

In the negative where her cheekbone shattered—
a lake of yellow. Her right eye swollen shut—
hard-boiled egg—peeled and halved. God
created man in his image and man creates image
in his. Isn't this the story? The violence
of creation? Replay it in prayer

over canned-corn and fish-sticks,
or watch her from the doorway
powder the purpled chin, purpled breast.
He wanted her body to blossom
from his touch. You'll understand
when you're married, you are told
and believe. Believe first in 8th grade
when the boy pulls off your skirt, so
eager. Let mankind rule over all
the creatures that move along the ground.
Pleasure dissolves into pain
just as grape becomes wine.
Kneel, swallow. Wilt over
your white-knuckled prayer.

When the cops come to pick up the prints
still warm, one asks, "Another domestic?"
And you say, "Just another domestic."
He runs a finger lightly down the gun
at his hip, says, "Shame," and out they go
with the enveloped woman luckier
than most, for she has palpable fear, burns
literal and guilt so heavy on the chest
she sleeps on her stomach, afraid otherwise
it would smother the heart.

An Invocation

Elizabeth Bonhorst
Georgia College & State University

Mid-afternoon and window-filtered sun
gridding the bed with light.
My body curled at bed's center
tender and small as furled fern.
Enter you, in a body that is both every man
and no man, and it takes both no time
and eternity: the spine unzips, hands jam
to wall, toes point and hook—magnolia buds
just beginning to fuzz. Call it sex
but it's more complex than that. Or call
me a woman for saying so. Regardless,
can't you see me bundling and knotting?

It does not matter who you are.
The streets of my mind are always wet
and it is always night. Come closer,
stranger. I have an umbrella made of sunlight
that will not open unless you are near.
Pockets lined with satin, too deep
for my hands that have become fists.

CURRY

Sydney Bolding
University of West Georgia

Crowded musk, sweat rolled in summer
dust, damp earth and the harsh seeds
of the Silk Road—cardamom, coriander,
star of anise. This is your smell, home
again from school and a room shared
with an Indian girl whose cooking oil
I can almost taste, whose sari flows
deep-desert red and cloying. The wild
Night Queen blossoms between each thread
of your evasions, the pungent onion
on your breath, on my neck. I picture her now,
across the tracks at 113, preparing curried
lamb in a wooden mehmas just for you.
Rich and yellow mouths of the frangipani
open as you appear in the kitchen door, spices
greeting you, soft nap fleece sliding between
her stained fingers. Even Tupperware
carries the smell of her intent. At the edge
of your lips, turmeric's unforgivable gloss.
What can I say? I'm twenty-one and covetous,
and she's an undiscovered country, a stopover
on a trade route, the curse of a subcontinent.

ENCOMIUM, WEIRD WASHINGTON

Sydney Bolding
University of West Georgia

It's good to be the Kring

Daughter of Seattle, Goddess
of a low-tech, no-budget, one-
woman affair, praise be to you,
the Kring, who almost fully captured
her muse in a small apartment.
Ode to public access television,
the '90s and an old camcorder—
to the cult of viewers and your
self-expression, experiments
of dance, video diary, and freeform
poetry. Sister of the world, with a naked
aura you paint the screen with syn-
Kring-nicity, a coined cosmic force
of sex in verse, monologues inspired
by a hemp activist you've also archived
as past boyfriend. Praise be to you, a devout
artist, a bare soul, that romps her Rubenesque
body around to a transcendental beat, reciting
abstract poetry abstractly. Chubby, free-spirit, you,
Warrior of the West, rebel against convention
and picket a bohemian lifestyle like
your parents. Ode to Weird Washington
and its Empress of refurbished footwear—
see how she flaunts personal philosophy, untamed
as King Midas' touch. Do you, Shannon
Kringen, encourage the other goddesses
of our galaxies? Do the ancients adore
your name?—Is Athena at work in the sky
clearing out a wooded forest of stars beside
Artemis for your spot of fame? Praise to the Kring.

PROTHALAMION

Sydney Bolding
University of West Georgia

The Town Dump, Cave Creek, AZ

Horded salts of the earth—Its thick walls
made of coquina kept Frieda Kahlo trapped
in a mural. Wrought iron bars severed her
frame and a smirking cross towered above.
Ella no está a la venta, the store-keeper chanted,
waving a coiled cane. My ear handicapped
against litany and I tried to fold into the stucco
of Kahlo's amaretto-red robe. But at the nape of
my neck, with a bristled tongue, you whispered,
¿Ha visto la Kokopelli hombre? Do you know
of a man's skin like bottled gold and blood—his voice
like Otis Redding, all guttural-jazz?

There, lying in the gutters of summer, with a fluted
tune, you skirted myth and a taste of turrón into
climate; beat-boxed the welded tar of Arizona. Then,
in a street-baritone, thick as the sax, you sang me
a Spanish lullaby beneath an eight-armed Cholla.
Two tumbleweeds. We wrestled in mid-morning heat,
like double r's—phonetic-fresh sounds flicking in the roof
of a mouth. You are folklore, guiding me outside of sight, out
of the flat spaces in rhythm and inside your palms, where
past worlds strum the blues; words like spit-shine. Stippling
my collarbone with clay, burnt as desert sands, you say
we and call it *Trabalenguas*—things tying the tongue. Us.
And there you called me your little javelina.

Haircut

Megan Bell
University of West Georgia

Someone with surer hands might quicken
the scissors but you take the time to grip
taut my hair around your fingers, tug till my neck
tenses. I've had this braid since my first time
witnessing the swelling muscadines
in August heat, some bursting as they fell
My father, not one to waste, led me there
for the cutting. Outside, a worm-eaten moon,
thin as the first cored apple. Its face
just white paint, gesso, it's called,
the thick erasure, same blankness as the page
where the monks carefully scribed Delilah
in the act of cutting Samson's curls.
Was there anyone who dared to claim
Samson didn't sleep at all, his eyes drifting
away in pleasure, his hair falling
to the carpet? How he must have loved her,
for lifting the burden of God. Like him I offer it,
this weakness. You kiss me, throat to nape of neck.
Go on. We know what love is. Take me like that.
Pull my hair back with one fist, and cut.

Poetry

Anti-Ghost

Megan Bell
University of West Georgia

Some ghosts don't realize they are ghosts,
don't feel their bellies full of wind, drifting
like boneless kites over the telephone lines.
Or they step through slits in their curtained bodies,
eyes rheumy with all they have forgotten:
the fog of their last year, a window latch
clamped tight, night and Mark Knopfler
singing So far away from me...

If they had buried you, I would have refused
to hand over my fistfuls of dirt and root,
but I watched you sink into a cavity of wind
below the Walnut Street Bridge, down
the Tennessee in rain soft as the day I was born,
the first touch of your lips on my damp head.

Some ghosts don't know they're ghosts,
but you do—you, who with lacy hands
try to braid my hair, turning everything to silk.

At your funeral, I told my father not to read
the kitsch of dissolving footprints, celestial shores.
I read the one you were named for, the one
about the way a kiss can bruise the hairline.
"Jenny kissed me..." I recited carefully
while you greeted coworkers in your flowing gown,
surrounded by lush, celibate flowers,
encased in a sky of blown blue glass.

Later, you might peel the skins
of clementines, let the orange wilt
on the countertop, neglect to water
your tiny, perfect bonsai, its thin roots
clenching the rough bottom of the planter.
Some mornings, I leave the faucet
dripping for the cat. I scribble my name
in library books before I return them.
I sing "Tunnel of Love" and lose
the words, something for you to fill in.
I understand. We never forget, do we?
You should always leave something behind.

Demeter

Megan Bell

University of West Georgia

Today in the mail, a postcard from a dead man,
the devil himself, the late, great. On it, a meadow
of sweet pear trees with demure white flowers.

My daughter, did the bellies of prosperous pines shake
when he dragged you down the cliffside, drew your flower-
beheading dress above your breast, bare as a stripped fir?

I imagine you in that lazy city of piña colodas,
sewers like gold buckled shoes,
the obligatory shock of ghost tours.

At the gate, did you smell the scattered red bricks,
bolted locks, the metal on metal burn,
fall yellowing at the fringes?

For you, I spoiled the earth,
unfurrowed the furrows, popping seeds
out of the pockets of the low and hungry.

I took my time, blowing through the heather,
withering wheat with my fingertips, while you dipped
your sweet toes—I counted and kissed—

into the warm salt of that lazy river Styx,
ghostly hands palmed the small of your back,
lyres throbbed the latest hits.

I press my nose to the ink, bleach, paper.
The etches of clouds seem fantasy,
you might even miss them, just there, in the back.

Even this postcard is boring.
This dirt I've known from century to century—
blistered and windblown, strange at last.

I don't know what possessed me,
as if I might smell the nape of your neck,
the sea salt and warm honey of it,

roots shaken out of the earth.
No crushed pomegranate seeds,
Instead, only the loose scrawl:

Good mother, I took your lovely daughter
to see the sun die in our renowned volcanic beds,
a weekend vacation from my unsleeping city.
She had red roses strung from ear to ear,
ravishing and ravished.

Wish you were here.



The Olympics

Lauren Williams
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The bus left me discarded on a curb. Wind throwing hair at my face and no energy leftover from lunch to fight back so I let it be. Every day I got on a bus with strangers and when it was my turn, the opening of a door invited me to leave. Dusty double doors split open. Get out. My brother's two years older, sometimes one, so the walk's not alone too often. We were born a year and a third apart, because my mother was in a rush (and/or my father just wouldn't leave her alone.) She was thirty-two when she started. They had their two boys before me, so she had to keep trying. My father told my brothers, "If you want a boy, drink whiskey."

They divorced sometime after my little sister, but stayed together years after. They called it being "cordial for us"; and, after my mother exhausted her manners we, the new "we," moved into a house with stucco sides, and an off centered front door.

The walk waited for me every weekday after school. I would lift my legs one after the other pacing the trail from where the bus left me to my new address and it was like transporting tree trunks. I lay in bed, in the dark a.m., with the television illuminating my bedroom, and stare at them. Feel the volume. And, wonder why these legs don't belong to anyone else. I didn't see television people with legs like mine; nonetheless, they were Greek columns as far as my best friend's mother was concerned.

Whenever she overheard me complain, she'd stare through me with surly lust then say, "men love big legs. I'll trade you for these things." Then she'd walk away mildly. I'd look down at her calf less limbs and I'd feel how

you're supposed to feel when you complain about burnt toast to a starving child. As I lay on my back with my legs dangling, I examine my product: thigh to ankle. Suspending them in air flattered them; it's when I'd set them down to hold my weight the thighs dimple and my calves dense and stump.

When I finally make it the few yards home, the house is different again. Afternoons without my brother's company or his friends' make it like this. Foreign. And, I'll never get used to it. It's without the noise that allures the hallways. There's always someone's outside voice inside the walls; or, someone placing their weight down too hard for the floors.

Back in my room, on my lint riddled carpet in front of the TV, school didn't cross my mind until I cursed it in the mornings like Sisyphus and his rock. I'd use whatever curse words I'd heard from anywhere arranging them like a beginner: "what the shit," "damn that." Screaming "I'm up!" so my mother would "leave me the shit alone" and let me feel sleep again on my bathroom rug for ten more minutes.

On my tawdry, retro, yellow-green carpet, I sat there not looking at the screen with the volume turned all the way down. It was the afternoon after I volunteered to race in the annual school Olympics, and I sat Indian-style, like the Land-o-Lakes girl, while the television occupied my sight. I thought long about running down the street. I sat waiting on the feeling—everyone says there's supposed to be some feeling that takes you. I took my feet out of my socks and started filing my toenails round. Stretched my legs until I felt my hamstrings—I figured if I think about it for a while, take out the necessary parts, my body would catch on and join in. I just couldn't get my legs to go outside again. My calves had a routine, now. I had to understand that.

The clock said an hour had passed since I sat there, blankly staring at a screen, swimming through a wakened dream. Eventually, with gruff ambition, I got up and out the front doors. The April colors that were once on the trees and the neighbor's front porch flowers were now in the sky. Behind the lined dogwood trees in the yard ahead, salmon pink thrashed across the horizon like a fierce brush stroke; then merged into a color the same as the middle of fire: between blue and red.

I was twelve and technically overweight for a child, but I didn't consider myself either. I could touch my toes. That's the test. And, I had a waist—It didn't just run right into my hips like real fat people. I didn't change shoes to go out; didn't want anyone thinking any new thoughts other than their usual Thursday ones. It was about 6, so the neighborhood boys were still playing basketball in the other neighborhood. It was actually a street right beside ours with another name sign in someone's yard—it just felt like somewhere else over there. The only separation was a fire station, but it wasn't an important one. The firefighters sold candy to us after school. Me and Rita, she was just like me except skinny with big tits, would go buy egg rolls and heat them up in the firemen's microwave after school. The firefighters decided to clear out an entire room in the station that had shelves for the candy and snacks. We never had more than two dollars between us, she had the majority; but, when I had one dollar I would walk to buy two egg rolls instead of one. I didn't go with her on those days, because anything more than one was something fat people did.

My neighborhood was perfect for practice. What was left of my neighborhood in the evenings was: Rita, children too small to know what I'm doing out here, and adult too mid-life to be concerned with children not their own. I came out pretending like I was checking the

mail—sorted through it, giving me time to scan the street. Eventually, I began walking a normal walk down the hill in my skort: shorts pretending to be a skirt. You can see the shorts in the back, but it has a skirt flap in the front. My mother found this mullet-wear a happy medium for me to transition from tomboy to teenager. After a few moments of mundane silence it seemed safe enough, so I picked up a jog—pumping my arms back and forth, legs beginning to sting. They haven't had a strenuous task since I was late for the school bus one morning; and, there was no such thing as missing the bus as far as my mother was concerned—I was forced to make my legs runners that morning. My mother once smacked my brother in the dead center of the back of his head for mouthing her. She simply reached into the backseat and connected. All while driving and staying in one lane on the freeway. Of course, she instructed him to lean his head forward to be slapped, but nonetheless: impressive.

I needed to master the distance of the track before the race. Learn it. Make a routine for my calves. I couldn't afford to be caught off guard, the stakes were too high. After jogging a few seconds, I began my version of a sprint. I probably topped at two, no more than three, miles per hour. My heart racing like a Maserati on the Autobahn; but, I didn't feel the wind on my face like runners advertise. However slow I was my mind refused to relate. But, my body was not in sync. After a minute or so it exhausted and stalled. I proposed to myself that I had an abnormal deficiency. Concluded, my body wasn't able to take me as far as my mind was prepared. That had to be written somewhere. Some science book on anatomy and psychology must have covered this condition in the beginnings of science. I'd finally found "the zone" I'd heard about, and I was there; in it feeling the feeling; then cut off like grass reaching out over the

curb of the first house with the neighborhood sign. My mother told me that the first house sets the tone of the neighborhood, "and you better be damn sure you know how to look." A blade of grass reaching out from the perfect order of the first house's lawn is rejected before it reaches potential.

The instant my legs stopped, I regretted raising my hand in class a few weeks back when my homeroom teacher called out the positions our class needed to fill for the Olympics. The Olympics are an annual event teachers probably made up to have an excuse for a bonus. Students each grade level: sixth, seventh, and eighth, divide into five teams each representing a different country with an associated color. Black was Zambia, Yellow-India, Red-Canada, Blue-Australia, and Green for Brazil. No America. Naturally, no one wanted to be yellow or green for fashionable reasons. Each grade level was sectioned off on three separate hallways: the A-team for advanced students, and B and C for the leftovers. Our school had the luxury of being sectioned off comfortably because my junior-high took the hand-me-downs of a high school. The building was vast. The halls remained undecorated and plain as the day they were built. I was on the B-team. It was neither A or C, a fair middle ground.

We were India that year. I was stuck wearing yellow for the entire week of the Olympics, and chained to promise I made to my country. Backing out of a commitment now became treason. Besides it wasn't until high school I learned I was allowed to not show up places. Call in "I don't feel like it" to work. Ms. Simmons not Jones. A point she made every other day. She was divorced and proud.

She said to us, "The Olympics are coming up and we have to choose who's who for the positions. Everyone has to do something so let me know what you want."

Her words caused my body to flush with spare blood from somewhere. Blotched patches of red appeared on my neck and chest, and I didn't know until then that skin was translucent; I heard the word enduring a science class a while back, but I didn't think I was involved. I didn't know science covered emotions. Before I knew it, I was left with shot-putt, baton race, and the long jump. Johanna quickly claimed the fat-girl category: shot-putt. She was popular and I couldn't figure out how. A male voice grabbed the long-jump. Alice B., Victoria S., and Charlotte T. volunteered over a span of five minutes of silence and eye shifts looking to see who would volunteer for the baton race. There were four slots to fill, and in the far left corner I was the only one left without a position sitting with the people I was forced to call my friends.

Sharon Wilson was fair-skinned and freckled, and the only Jehovah's Witness I knew. She didn't speak much or often. I thought it was because of her religion, but she was just fat and knew it. Janice Washington was the same size as me, but she didn't act like me. She didn't act like Sharon, either. She acted how she was supposed to act—whatever that is. She had the face of a seven year old with the matching laugh—cute for a minute then you're overwhelmed with the urge to strangle her. The three of us sat there subconsciously pretending to be statues—decoration for the classroom, not real people. We wouldn't dare exchange a word on these occasions. Our athletic handicaps would stand out. We knew our place. We were not a part of the selection, and Ms. Simmons acted accordingly and considered us statues. We had an unspoken understanding. Her eyes would graze across the room without a connection with any parts of us. We were "N/A: Not Applicable."

After a few moments I felt my body break pose. I felt my hand rise. I saw it as it went, and watched Ms. Simmons lips part flashing her

tea stained teeth, waiting for her to acknowledge my hand. It was better to volunteer than be assigned. Janice and Sharon couldn't help but come out of character to try and stop my sudden insanity. Their heads didn't jolt, just the eyes. I looked at them both. Janice's face read, "what the fuck?" Sharon's just had spices of worry, terror, and compassion sitting on her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth.

I replied, "what" almost in defense. Loud enough so anyone besides them could hear me. "It's just a race." I said it like it was as simple as tying shoelaces. Ms. Simmons briefly paused with shock, but then caught herself. She repeated the position for me—an act far worse than her expression.

She said, "it's the baton race," then held her stale expression.

"Yeah, I'll do it I guess. If nobody else wants to," looking about the room.

"Sure. That's great, Lauren." Her latter statement turned my normalcy into pity, just that quick. She may as well have said, "Good for you. You have to start somewhere, right?"

"Which positions would you girls like to run?" Ms. Simmons said, shifting to each of our faces.

Victoria raised her hand to withdraw herself.

"I'll do the third leg, I guess. I'm not as fast as Alyce," Charlotte said. "Alright, I'll run last," Alyce replied. I followed suit. "I'll run second." I figured it to be the least important leg of the race.

"I still need a fourth," she said, exhaling as if she released her last iota of passion for teaching. "I'll hold you in here. We have to fill these positions. Don't make me start calling out names," she said. Then "Fine," echoes the room and we found Farrah F's arm limped in the air like there were puppet strings attached. Simmons then says we can leave, and I find myself

winded at the bottom of my street, searching for strength to make it back to my carpet in front of my static ridden TV.

The hallway, living room, den, and each of the 3 bedrooms, plus my sister's chambers had a different colored carpet. My oldest brother's red carpet would rub off. The bottoms of his socks were a faded crimson. My other brother got blue. My mother's bedroom carpet couldn't be seen because clothes and household debris from the old house with dad carpeted the floor. And, my little sister's room was a storage room made into a bedroom. Her space was desolate, and unfair with a small hole in the ceiling where we quickly learned bats like to come through in their leisure. She was ten and naturally frightened so her room became my father's old brown recliner that sat in the living room surrounded by more of the guts of the house with dad. It was as if the walls and years were jammed into thin plastic. Hangers, book corners, pot handles, picture frames pierced through the thin plastic. The afternoons pass me sitting on my carpet, until tomorrow is the day.

Tuesday afternoon comes; everyone is energized by the sun a smell of cut grass; the stench of puberty hot in my nostrils standing in a crowd of runners, Zambia leaves to position on the track. Australia, India, Brazil. I position in the center lane, focused on Farrah and the yards between us. A gun fires sending Farrah F. into motion. My eyes locked on her legs, studying the pace and grip of her sneakers on the track; and, running out of time the closer she jolts towards me demanding I match her momentum. Her eyes locked on mine. Zambia, Brazil, and Australia inch off into a slow jog. I begin to sprint. My acceleration equals their jogging effort. My head remains turned behind me, locked with Farrah's eyes. The cold aluminum of the baton shocks my arm as Farrah lobs it at me. I grab the baton. The crunch of

the beaded track rocks sound under my feet. Legs and hair. Girls trying to make it to their mark. In my peripheral, Brazil steadies at my side the other colors well ahead. The weight of gravity pushing on my body. She locks eyes with my body then my face, wearing her confusion around her mouth and brow. Her speed increases. Around the curve of the track I stay in my lane with no one at my side. Ahead Charlotte T. waits alone with her arms outstretched bouncing her head back and forth between me to Alyce B. Charlotte trying to throw encouraging words at me, but they are blocked by the sound of the voice in my head counting down the steps until I reach her. As Black, Red, and Blue begin the final leg Charlotte slumps her shoulders—her arms now dangling about her sides like accessories. And just shy of my mark, I reach out to hand her the baton walking the last inch of my duty—forcing her to backtrack then proceed ahead to finish out a race that's already won.

In the far corner of the bleachers, a boy stood motionless in the front amongst the unruly crowd. With my head bowed and my arms on my waist (like runners do after races) he calls out for me without my name. He held his gaze on me until I felt it. And, in an effort to notice all things other than the laughter of my peers in the stands, I caught his eyes waiting on mine. Wanting a moment. Longing to pass a message without words.

I caught his gaze and kept it with me as I stepped off the track onto sun tinted grass almost the color of my lint riddled carpet in front of the TV.

Inspired by An "Iris:" How a Goo-Goo Doll Brought Me to Tears

Na'Aisha Austin
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A few months after he became all 'dirty' my mind begun to form encapsulated scar tissue around certain parts of my cerebrum and hearts atrium, or so I envisioned graphically daily in my jaded teary eyes. The white cloth neatly and tightly wrapped around him lost a bit of it's stiffness once it became soiled with the georgia red clay-mud-dirt-crap. I can never visualize him the same way, never, ever, again. The horrific images stained in my memory haunted me, bringing random bouts of trauma and grief to my third eye and the visibly bloodshot hazel ones too.

Once again I found myself in public, searching with and without a purpose. I didn't have on any sunglasses, despite the sunny weather and the darkened circles under my eyes. I'm not sure if I looked more hurt than I felt, or if I felt more hurt than I looked. Either way, when I left the house I was impulsively, fleeing, without a lick of concealer or a twinge of blush. An impulse that would serve as a replacement for everything emotional. Parking was meaningless and sharp as my black japanese sedan came to a screeching halt. I would realize that I still paid no attention to coloring my car in between the lines as I glanced at my horrible parking job on the way back later. He hated when I parked sloppily. He had taught me too well to be a sloppy parker.

Fabric quality, hue, and texture are things that I've always been drawn to. His latest permanent stint away from us didn't stifle that passion luckily. Being enraptured in my

husband's morbid needs stole vital chunks of my soul that may never be refilled again. I probably shivered at the mere thought of losing all of myself to his once strong but eventually traumatic skeletal looking hands again; the air conditioning in the middle of November or the personal record breaking 15 pounds that I had lost recently didn't help either. (And I'm already petite.) Whenever I looked in the mirror I saw the permanent scars that only caring could imprint, the despair, the pain, the loss of control, and a perplexing fate that only God himself could answer. But in "the stores," I saw none of that, thank the lord. Being there helped to blind and shade my vision, even though I had no shades on that day to save the public from myself.

The fabric he wore before he disappeared was simple, cotton, as is customary of Islamic tradition. I used to be his personal stylist, the white oxford fabric wasn't supposed to look like this as he laid down. It wasn't.

My closet would never be the same had I still seen the man in the mirror (and just between you and I, sadly I love every single item in it.) Somewhere in between nervously and surreptitiously picking up Alice+Olivia, Rock&Republic, and Catherine Malandrino, a voice calls out to me. No, not in a, "hey, don't I know you?" type of way, but in a haunting, eerie, humbling-back-to-reality-type-of-way. The frontman of the band Goo-Goo dolls doesn't really know my name, but I swore, on that day, he did, and that he sung through the radio sound system with the pure intent to make me remember "my husband" despite my burdened, thrashing cerebrum and atrium. The song "Iris" was one of our favorite alternative rock songs. We both loved it in middle and high school, separately, only to later belt it out later in college in off-beat, pitchy unison in our

underwear while jumping and frolicking on the bed together. Our descents were always slow and precisely guided, partly due to remembering our mothers scolding us about jumping on the bed. Even as adults we had chips on our shoulders, mine now, just so happened to be covered in studded jeweled embellishments.

My pale hands were quivering, the hangers of couture began to make a slight chattering plasticky noise, which just so happened to be loud enough to muffle my uncontrollable sniffling. Too bad a nosy gray haired lady saw my growing crimson rudolph nose being drenched in saline and snot. If only I had my sunglasses on, perhaps I would've been able to at least maintain the aura of cool during a uncalculated catharsis. The grey-haired lady's menacing eyes honed in on me. At least that's how it felt. Like the scene in *The Lion King*, when Scar leaves the canyons and the stampede of wildebeest come racing towards Simba. The look of utter fear, and wide eyed intensity was there. Our eyes met and suddenly I felt 2 feet tall. Between us, no words were spoken aloud, but I heard it all. Her wrinkled crows feet and frightened, confused eyes saw me as the pitiful, borderline anorexic-looking, and most likely abused from an emotional or physical substance. She could've asked me if I was okay before she walked away, but my sullen, downcast eyes wouldn't allow that type of connection.

Shopaholics tend to suffer from guilt, grief and guise issues. I walked in robotic, laborious, ceremonial circles around the dress racks, as the song dragged out, blaring on the cheap intercom system. Under my breath and in between stifled sobs, I did something I would never do, I sang in public: "And I don't want the world to see me, 'cause I don't think that they'd understand, and while everything's meant to be broken. I just want you to know who I am..." Who I am, is a woman, who's seen a ghost,

heard a ghost and is still madly love with a man who can do absolutely nothing for her or to her anymore. Human touch has been replaced with silks and leather hand-bags. He left despite everything I did to save him, everything. Not a prayer, yoga pose, flight to a treatment center, radiated invisibility or toxic kryptonite could reverse the metastasis. It was deadly and my husband hurt me more and more as he began to need me as his everything. Death can make you lose your soul, even if it's not your own fate, we all lose a part of us when something or someone dies. Grief is a helluva drug addiction.

If anyone remembers the movie with Nicholas Cage and Meg Ryan, *City of Angels*, then perhaps you'd have an inkling of how I felt,

to be in the middle of TJ Maxx on my fourth major impulse shopping trip in two weeks inspired by my overwhelming grief and need to control something in my life. And suddenly the song that my dead husband, and love of my life sang with me so often, comes on. Damn you Goo-Goo Dolls. Damn! I think we can become addicted to people, emotions, things, substances and the withdrawal is purposefully meant to be painful. I call it a lesson from God on placing this world on too high of a pedestal.

Learning how to let go of the imbalances, dependences and toxicities is a treacherous and daunting feat. Many of us don't make it, but the few that do, should be applauded. I only bought one dress that day, it's probably somewhere



in my closet now, or in an outdoor clothing market in Cameroon because I gave it away to one of those green metal bins around the city. Letting go is cathartic, I suppose. Everyone has their own beliefs on a specific timeframe and emotional weight loss when it comes to grief and progress. It's calculated, but only on their terms. Not mine. Walk a few miles in my shameful stilettos and see how easy it is to just let go then get back to me. Cold turkey, couture, closet, closure, calling. All words reminding me of how the struggle waxes and wanes, gone but not forgotten, like a favorite doll in a toybox. It's memory stays there to haunt or happily remind you. Hopefully that facet of me won't be back anytime soon.

The Honor Motel

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We all dine on this rhetoric from time to time: If I could be somewhere—anywhere—else, everything would be okay. In fact, better than okay—perfect, crystalline, *easy*. I sit down to a meal of it five times a day, growing fat from it. But of all people, I should know better.

I grew up in a dumpy motel in Honor, Michigan—which is to say Nowhere, Michigan: Hick capital of the Yankee North. My parents managed and maintained The Honor Motel (THM) entirely on their own, which meant our family lived in a very small “apartment” attached to the lobby; travel, in its purest, physical sense, was virtually impossible: we were anchored, awaiting the sporadic customer—that *ding* we could hear from the den, kitchen, our shared bedroom. But I never thought of it as entrapment—this was our kingdom: glorious, strange, melancholic.

I have a hard time recalling how daily life went back then. I was two, three, four, five, six. Mom was teaching sixth grade in a crappy school system and doing the housekeeping when she got home. Dad tended bar a town over at the Crystal Lake Golf Club and drank. My older brother spent most of his afternoons pretending to be a horse while I rode on his back yelling shit about being a princess. And at night, in our shared bedroom, my brother and I were foxes: we had our dens—were protected. Everything was a game, make-believe. It had to be.

The most thrilling occasion was when Mom carted me around to help her clean rooms. She let me peel the soiled sheets from the bed and toss the bottles and cans into

the trash. I never understood why she was so disgruntled doing this work. For me, it was an investigation into another person's private, gritty, lonely night. THM housed the strangest travelers: usually single men with little luggage and calloused, cracked hands. Tourists stayed in cottages or B&Bs; THM was sub-Motel 6—probably Motel 2.75. My running narrative was that people rented these rooms to kill people (or possibly cats) in, so I'd scour the carpet, reach under the bed, search the white sheets for evidence of blood, burnt hair—looked beneath the sink for weapons (this is where my brother said they'd hide them), pinched lint and receipts off the floor and brought them to Mom: “What do you think *this* means?!”

Winters in Northern Michigan are long, brutal. Sometimes it took hours to shovel Dad's Trooper out just to drive ten miles south to Farmer John's for a carton of eggs. And there was no escape to Starbucks, the mall, a movie theatre. Because my brother and I spent long hours in the dark apartment and knew little of the world outside Honor and the motel, we developed tumor-sized imaginations that sprouted legs and walked us all over the planet—sometimes beyond. We each had our own brigade of imaginary friends, marching out of the recesses of our mind and into the physical world whenever shit got tough or cold or just plain boring.

My favored imaginary friend was named Harry. Harry was a world traveler, looked like Cousin It, and donned a khaki safari vest and hat. He'd touch down at THM every two weeks or so, stay for a few days to regale with stories of his travels, then hit the dusty trail again to some made up island where My Little Ponies sunbathed on white shores like sea lions. And when I got a little older, weirder, arguably slightly disturbed, Harry developed the ability to travel through strangers' dreams and imaginations. This, too, was when my fascination

with the dirtied motel rooms began in earnest, perhaps obsessively so: it seemed I, too, had been imbued with the power to inspect others' interiors—bottles and cans and ash covering the carpet like the first snow—evidence of the sadness I suspected made up the whole human genome.

The best thing about having Harry around wasn't that he got me through a weird youth. It was that my whole family had an odd respect and reverence for Harry when he visited. For example, on more than one occasion Harry rudely burst in right when we were sitting down to our dinner of spaghetti or Hamburger Helper, and I'd yell to Mom or Dad, “No! Don't sit! Harry's sitting there!” And they'd politely give up their seat to my imagination, eat leaned over the kitchen counter or on the couch, all through dinner asking me to relay Harry's adventures across the world and into others' minds.

In retrospect, the paradox of living in THM is a real beauty: We (the family) were in close proximity, but often far apart—lost, staggering in different directions, but all stuck to the same Band-aid, protecting a wound none of us had any memory of, like when you fall on your face in a blackout, no knowledge of when or where or how it happened. But still the dull pain persists for weeks, a scar visible not to yourself but others. See: Dad, anxious and angsty by default, quelling his fears with drugs, alcohol. See: Mom, overworked and underpaid, afraid of motherhood, poverty, spending long hours in the backyard chain smoking, her intermittent sighs audible through the screen door. See: Older Brother just arrived at the knowledge of his adoption, writing his first shaky letter to his biological mother. See: Me, sitting Indian style on my twin bed, sharing animal crackers with Harry, asking him about sadness.

Yes, if you could just be somewhere—anywhere—else, all the soiled selves will flag out

the open car window—laundry too small and constricting for the big, confident You that's going to arrive with chest puffed and mighty, eyes wide with wonder, all the cynicism and alcoholism that clouded them now clear as the sky you're there to envy. All you really need is an ocean, or a mountain, or a city large enough for anonymity. Because you can't stand your own mind, body. There must be somewhere to quiet their demands—the persistent memories that live in your gut, throat, aching head.

Years later, after Dad did the rehab thing and we moved into a two-story house and got a collie and spent whole afternoons at the mall in Traverse City, we took a few trips: DC, Alabama, Colorado—White House, ocean,

mountains. These were nice trips. But the real adventure, fun, and voyaging happened in the backseat of our minivan, en route, between me and my brother—always the games, the make-believe—conspiracies about what the ocean was hiding or how the mountains really got there.

This sounds nuts, but to this day, I don't fully segregate the experiences I have in dreams from those I have in waking life—often the distinction seems irrelevant. I'm with Freud on the import of dreams and imagination to the overarching journey of life. What the mind creates is just as cool and often far more satisfying than a big hole in the ground or a bunch of water spewing over a ledge. If God or Whatever made the whole wide world for man to cultivate and



gawk at, so the individual constructs imaginary worlds that give us the strength and empathy to endure said physical world. And no, this is not simply escapism: my childhood imagination did not remove me from my family. It brought me closer to them.

It seems the blandest of revelations to recall the vastness within oneself. But, oh, I forget—it's just what grownups do—and when I remember the multitudes of my youth, the many worlds and feelings I could inhabit all at once, the restlessness settles and clears, and I am left again with the childlike giddiness that anything can happen, and will.

Skin

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This is the Creation myth of the Philippines as I first read it: Kabunian made us out of mud. First, He took earth, shaped a man and woman, and put them into an oven. He pulled them out too late. Overbaked. These were the black people. Then He took another handful of mud. This time, Kabunian pulled them out too early. These were the white people. Underbaked. Then, He shaped more clay. When they were baked, they were yellow. Yellow people. Once more, He molded mud and baked them. They were red. Red people.

Frustrated, he tried one more time. After molding the couple, He watched the baking figures carefully, and when He pulled them out, they were perfectly cooked. Brown. These were the Filipinos.

I was proud to have my own Creation story. Even my child-mind at the time comprehended that the Biblical Adam and Eve were not meant to look like me, be me. They were for others in my elementary school. After all, didn't Adam and Eve look like them in pictures, pale-skinned and light-haired?

One day, for show and tell, I brought my yellow Filipino legends book to class. I was going to tell them about Creation.

So I did, beaming, proud to share my heritage with the class.

One boy, skinny, white, shot up his hand, bullet-like, after I finished.

"That's racist!" he shouted before rushing to the teacher to whisper furiously into her ear about how offended he was.

It was like I had been pushed to the ground, until I shattered.

When I was a little girl, I had wanted blonde, curly hair, like my frozen-faced dolls'.

My hair was black and straight. Boring.

Everyone in the books I read hated having straight dark hair. Laura Ingalls in *Little House in the Big Woods* envied her sister Mary's golden curls. Sarah Crewe in *The Little Princess* had straight dark hair and green-gray eyes described as "queer," the epitome of unconventionally pretty. Heidi was not the cherubic blonde Shirley Temple but undersized and dark-haired.

I took comfort that my favorite heroines looked almost like me, even if they, like I, wished that they looked like someone else.

If I had been baked out of mud, something had gone wrong during the process. My brown skin, darker than that of my sister and one brother, was lined with fissures. I was like parched earth after a drought.

Or a serpent.

I never put on the creams, Vaseline, and lotion my family demanded I use, to combat my eczema. My legs were two long serpents, fish, scaly, reptilian. An ugly two-legged mermaid.

"I could skin you and make your skin into leather," my little sister said, when my skin was particularly dry and flaky, due to my stubborn refusal to tend to it. I hated the gloppy coldness of the creams, the sliminess of the oily Vaseline. Worse, my sister was the "pretty one," angelic and soft-skinned. Pale enough that she has been mistaken for being Korean and even white. Her feet, unlike my gnarled claws, are as delicate as a baby's.

"You'll grow out of it," my high school librarian who had had eczema assured me, as she had shed her dried-out skin with age, like a snake.

I clung to that hope. My mother had the same skin as mine growing up, and now, it was

soft and scaleless. Like she had been skinned to her true self, her true skin, the scales broken off after years of hardening.

I went to the dermatologist when I graduated from high school, and she said that if the scales on my legs hadn't disappeared by then, they never would.

Jesus was not the Caucasian he is often depicted as. He did not have the flowing brown locks, pale skin, light eyes, and aquiline features of the aristocratic European, as depicted in Western art.

He was a Galilean Semite. In 2002, Richard Neave, a medical artist, drawing on evidence from the Bible, the skeletal remains of Jewish Galilean men from the period, and the latest in forensic technology, reconstructed and unveiled the "real Jesus."

Swarthy skin, dark eyes, thick-set features, black close-cropped curling hair and beard. In some places, this appearance equals terrorist.

"You're so dark," grandmother told me. It was summer, at Lake Michigan. Days at the beach baked my skin into a rich earthy brown.

"You're so dark," said my mother, when we tramping around Disney World in Florida. I could see the pale powder caked thickly on the sweaty faces of the Disney princesses who smiledsmiledsmiled under the hot sun. The sun baked a darker crust on my skin, free of cosmetics save for a layer of sunblock.

"You're so dark," said my aunt(s) whenever I visited the Philippines. My Tita Gigi, dark as I am, is darker than her sisters. My mother, with my laughing aunt and grandmother, called Ma, present, told me some family apocrypha one day:

"Your Ma drank a lot of Coca-Cola when she was pregnant with your Tita Gigi. Maybe that's why she's so dark."

When I read *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison at the age of thirteen, I wrote in ecstatic, baroque verse in my notebook, that I felt as if "molten gold was poured into my brain." At the time, if you had asked me why, I would have named the wildly postmodern narrative (not that I would have used that vocabulary), the daring subject (never had I been exposed to the sexual abuse of a child), the wondrous language.

But only recently could I identify with Pecola Breedlove, the one who wishes for the "bluest eye" of the title.

Pecola desires eyes as blue as Shirley Temple's, whose image is on her favorite blue teacup. After all, she is poor, black, "ugly." Unloved by society. Unloved by her parents. Unloved by herself.

Perhaps if she is blue-eyed, she will be beautiful, she will be loved, but for that she needs to shed her black skin, her black hair, her black eyes, her sanity, her self.

I would not have admitted this, at my strident age of thirteen, when my youthful fury at the world's injustices was brewing, but I identified with Pecola, her internalized oppression making her hatefully pathetic and love-starved. I cringed in knowing horror when she kept returning to the "friends" who made themselves feel better about their "ugly" darkness by mocking her even blacker "ugliness." Too often, I had stared at my dark, arid scales and wished to savagely rip them off to something light, soft, and normal.

Even if this act would be madness.

In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, light is beautiful. Creams, pills, ointments, and soaps flood the market promising beauty as fair as Kristine Hermosa, as Aishwarya Rai, as Angelina Jolie.

The United States is different: the tanner

the better. On the news, the "tanning mom," Patricia Krentcil, wrinkled and dark as a raisin, was accused of causing her child second-degree burns by letting her use a tanning bed. Her daughter was five at the time. Krentcil has been banned, reportedly, from over sixty salons.

The girls in my high school looked at my skin with envy. "You're lucky to be naturally tan. I'm too pale," a girl said, pointing at my arm.

"I'm a ghost," said another.

"I glow in the dark," said one more.

They talked about going to the beach and tanning, about going to salons and tanning, about lying in their backyards and tanning.

I, accustomed to shame about my scales, my darkness, could only respond with puzzlement.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at a gleaming contraption.

I was sitting in a posh salon in the Philippines. In the next room were dresses and shoes that were fancier, more womanly, than I had ever worn. I was eighteen, and in the coming weeks was my debut, my Filipino initiation into womanhood. We were about to have a photography shoot for my guestbook, my photo album, my banners, my party favors.

I had never had my face on so many things before.

My stylist smiled. "It's for your foundation. We're going to airbrush it on you."

Airbrush?

"Like a magazine cover?" I thought of *Cosmopolitan*, which mostly consisted of ads starring tall, light-skinned models whose beauty I could never aspire to. Didn't even know if I wanted to aspire to.

"Yes, but it's not on the computer."

I nodded timidly. Before this debut, the nuances of painting a more perfect version of yourself on your face had been beyond me. My

aunts and my styling team were so sure in their handling of me, their wayward, awkward niece, that I felt it better not to get in their way.

When the machine whirred to life, I could feel only the lightest puffs of air on my face and neck. It was unlike the threading, waxing, curling, pulling, brushing, and massaging that had gone on before.

"We're done," he said, swiveling me around so I could look in the mirror.

All my pores were gone. All my freckles, scars, moles — my skin was as smooth and plasticine as that of a Barbie doll.

My ethnicity is malleable.

"Are you Chinese, Korean?" a man asked me while I was standing on the escalator at a MARTA station.

"Ni hao!" a man at a party said to me.

When I rebuffed him, he followed me around, asking, "Do you know Lucy Liu?"

"Ni hao?" asked a pair of men on the street in Glasgow. When I refused to answer, they said to each other "Maybe she's Jamaican," like I couldn't understand them, before I gave them the finger and walked on. They hooted.

My black hair, my brown eyes, my brown skin, read "exotic," which allows men to draw their desires on me, paint the exotic Oriental sex doll of their imagination onto my body.

I become who they want me to be until I open my mouth and ruin the illusion, breaking the clay baked around me, proving that this doll thinks, feels, speaks.

My face transforms under my hands. I smooth tinted moisturizer over my cheeks, nose, forehead, and chin. I line my eyes with eyeliner, brush eyeshadow on the crease of my eyelids, comb mascara through my eyelashes. I rub blush on my cheeks and pat powder to reduce shine. Lastly, I cover my mouth in lipgloss

and clamp tissue between my lips, staining the white fluffy sheet pink.

This is my routine for "going out," a nebulous term which can be anything from a girls' night out to a date to a formal. Beforehand, I either went without make-up or submitted myself to the whims of my aunts and mother or a stylist.

But when I turned eighteen and when my aunts discovered, to their horror, I knew nothing about make-up besides haphazardly applying gloppy lipgloss to my lips, they gave me mascara, lipgloss, blush, and a compact and ordered me to watch them.

After my aunts took me under their wings, the mystery disappeared. With a mirror and Q-tips and tissues to blot out my mistakes, I learned what went where and how. After comments of "too much" from my sister when I went too heavy on the glitter, I finally walked out one day and was complimented by my roommate on my eye make-up.

Perhaps make-up can be dangerous—lead to materialism, to ungodly vanity, to a crumbled sense of self-worth dependent on beauty, perfection, and the admiration of others. To sexual objectification.

But, when I hold those brushes, I can at least control how I look, how I feel, and in a limited way, how others react to me. I can cover what I find displeasing, the acne scars, the blemishes, the uneven tan. I can emphasize what I love most, my eyes, my lips.

I can reduce but not disappear my freckles, moles, and pores, the little imperfections that make me feel safely human, safely myself.

"You're beautiful," a boyfriend whispers. Perhaps his hand brushes my cheek, or his fingers tangle in my hair. Perhaps he comments on the silkiness of my dark locks. It usually trails off after that, because I tend to date medical

students.

He does not, however, ever mention how exotic I am, how he loves Asian women. It's usually because I date Asian men, and there's no mystery to unwrap for a mind filled with visions of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Miss Saigon*, *South Pacific*. There are no heightened expectations for these men, who have grown up with their Asian mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, cousins in all their unglamorous, scolding, just-woke-up-with-bleary-eyes-and-morning-breath glory.

I am not against dating men of other races, as long as I see that they know they're holding a real person in their arms, not a flickering image on screen.

While Jesus has often been portrayed as white, especially in the West and by imperialists who bring their white male God to the countries they colonize through their guns, their illnesses, their money, their culture, their language, and their religion, many who adopt Christianity have depicted Jesus as one of their own.

When I was a child, I read about Juan de Pareja, a morisco in service to the great Spanish artist Diego Velasquez, and a painter in his own right. When Juan tentatively began painting, he was drawn to the Virgin Mary and much to his shock, depicted her as black as he was, as black as his own mother was.

Nowadays, you see Jesus reclaimed by Christians who are not white, who wish to see Jesus, the great speaker to and for the marginalized, as not merely their leader, their Savior, their Messiah, but one of them.

"Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return," said Father Daniels, as he brushed a cross of ashes on my forehead. Getting up, I remind myself to refrain from rubbing my face. By the end of the day, many students at my Catholic

high school had illegible gray smudges on their foreheads.

Perhaps this is why some Filipinos were able to accept the religion of their imperial oppressors: they had the same Creation story. In one version of Creation in Genesis, Adam is made out of dust. And, at least with Catholics, the Orthodox, and some Protestant denominations, every Ash Wednesday, we have our foreheads touched with dust to remind ourselves we are ultimately the same, that we came from and share the same ultimate fate: the ground.

I smoothed on my lipstick and grabbed a Kleenex, deftly blotting my lips. Fluffing up my hair, I walked out the door and into the elevator to meet my family downstairs.

It was the Sophomore Ring Ceremony, the feted midpoint of an Agnes Scott College student's life. I was to receive my college ring, a distinct square onyx set in gold which would mark me as an Agnes Scott woman every time I wore it.

For the ceremony, I wore a little black dress, a slinky number with a v-neck, a drape down the middle, and a fitted waist. My loose, short hair was blow-dried and combed to smoothness. My mother had promised to bring a necklace.

When I got to the porch of my dorm, I hugged my parents, my brothers and sister, whom I hadn't seen in months. We started our usual nagging, eye-rolling, joking, and how-are-you-doing. My mother handed over the promised necklace, a tiered string of crystals.

Eventually, I noticed my sister watching me intently. "What?" I asked.

"You're pretty."

This innocuous compliment stopped time, as I blinked, disbelieving. I was the smart one, and my sister was the pretty one. This was how

this worked.

"You're so skinny. And tan. You look like Rachel Berry," she continued, referring to a major character in the show *Glee*, a diva with a penchant for preppy clothes.

"Thank... you?"

In the grand scheme of things, this only lasted a moment, but it was enough to make me finally, finally reconsider myself.

"I'm a pretty girl, Mama," is a famous line from *Gypsy*, as the titular character looks in a mirror and realizes she's all grown up.

I had grown up, too. For the first time, I felt comfortable in my skin, with the way I was molded. No longer did I look at myself in the mirror and think that my appearance

was something I had to endure, as opposed to something I could reshape.

The question must be asked, though: Would I be as content if I hadn't been lucky enough to have a conventionally attractive body? Straight hair, tan skin, thinness. Mainstream America reads me as exotic—a double-edged sword, but if nothing else, I get attention.

I'm not head over heels, butterflies-in-my-stomach in love with my body. At best, our relationship is tentative. Whenever drought lines criss-cross my legs during winter, whenever catcalls remark on my "Oriental" face, whenever a relative comments on how dark I've become, I wonder if I could go back to the

beginning, to the mud.

If I could be reshaped into someone taller, fairer with scaleless skin and more lustrous hair. If I could not be anxious about my faithless skin. If I could be free of the paralyzing fear that men's eyes see an Oriental doll when they look at me.

What if those rushing thoughts could disappear? *What if what if what if...*

But now, only now, can I look at myself in the mirror and know that, despite the cracks that line my hands, the scales that cover my legs, and the darkness that envelops my body, I have remained, miraculously, whole.

Taste and See That It is Good

Keely Lewis
Ages Scott College

Christians are unscrupulous eaters. We've got rules about money (shun it), music (screen it), and sex (don't even think about it), but when it comes to food, we are anarchists. Unlike the pious of every other major religion, our diets are savage. Followers of Jainism—an Indian religion, one of the oldest in the world—won't eat root vegetables, let alone meat or eggs, because they refuse to hurt any living creature, including the microbes in the dirt. Orthodox Jews and Muslims are a bit more permissive, but even they will only eat animals that have been prayed over and slaughtered as painlessly as possible. Meanwhile, the only concern most Christians have about food is whether to bring Jell-O salad or deviled eggs to the after-worship potluck.

For me, the child of two ministers, food is more about symbolism than it is about taste. It demonstrates the community pecking order, our priorities and occasionally our love. Unlike those Rockwellian dinners my grandmothers made in the fifties, my supper is an afterthought on Sundays. The family is too tired from worship and meetings and solving other people's problems to be interested in anything more labor-intensive than bringing cereal spoon to mouth. But sometimes there are perks. Twice a month or more we inherit cast-off food from some picnic or other celebration. Mrs. Webster brings us a cookie platter every Christmas, and Dad's otherwise dour pianist hands him a smoked sausage and cheese sampler for Easter. Then there are the foods that only we are denied which, to me, are the most delicious of all.

The Blood of Christ, Brought to You By Welch's The first thing I learned as a young and hungry preachers' kid was that all grape juice is God's blood in a bottle, even when it's camouflaged and hiding in my refrigerator. The communion juice in my house is for the invalids—the frail faithful who are too sick or old to leave their homes, even for a taste of salvation. Every month, my mother packs it up in a wicker basket with twelve clear plastic thimbles and a baggie full of Christ's cubed flesh, baked the night before according to a thirties-era shortbread recipe. I know the juice is not for me, which makes me covet it even more. It is the forbidden fruit, the drink of the gods. A whole mouthful is such a luxury that guilt often prevents me from taking more than a singular gulp. When I decide to sneak a glass of it after school to go with my snack of fishers-of-men Goldfish crackers, my upper lip is stained with the purple mustache of iniquity.

As I get older, I shoot grape juice like it's vodka in the church kitchen with some other sullen teens, trying hard to look worldly in my patent leather shoes. Many of us have never even been in the same room as a bottle of alcohol, so Welch's is as close as we can get to liquid rebellion. After a few minutes, though, half of us wander off to sulk in the choir loft and the others return to the nursery, where they are supposed to be watching their baby cousins. Church, I decide, can make even underage drinking stodgy.

Ham: the Food of the Dead

I get to know the ins and outs of death pretty quickly, listening in to my father's phone conversations about bypasses and blood poisoning and fluid in the lungs. Mom prays over women with brain tumors the size of limes and men with no jaws from thirty years of dipping as

I squeeze their bloodless hands. Every other year a high school senior flips his car off of Gas Valley Road, which winds like a snake with a broken back through the hills.

My mother goes weekly to visit the maimed and diseased; daily as they take a turn for the worse. When the time comes to bury them, though, she isn't the only woman on the job. As she performs the funeral and consoles the relatives, the church ladies carve up the ham. It's always ham, with green beans and rolls and cheese potato casserole when the family is lucky. Funeral dinners are gifts from the church, freely given to the bereaved but with economy in mind. Ham can be sawed off in slabs or sliced as thin as the organist's patience, depending on the size of the crowd.

Once in a while I'm struck with a charitable impulse, and I line up with the ladies in the kitchen to plop casserole onto plates. Sometimes, when the departed one is popular, we run out of rolls. The potatoes and beans are the next to go, and finally the fruit punch runs dry. Never has the ham run out. If anything, the meat increases like Jesus' loaves and fishes. Afterward, everyone divvies up Bundt cake and fruit salad and little pats of butter. The funereal family gets first pick, but they usually decline. No one wants the leftovers of grief.

Finally, only the ham remains, and before I can slip out the door, a woman with a cotton ball perm and trembling hands invariably foists the accursed meat upon me, smiling as if she has done me a favor. The preachers always get stuck with the ham. "It will save your mother a week's worth of cooking," she says, winking like it's a funny little secret that the church demands my family to be vultures as well as doves. It's a foil-wrapped power play. A subtle reminder, like the trash bags they drop on our porch that are filled with their outgrown clothes, of who



is serving whom. I sigh and grab the meat, knowing that it will be shoved to the farthest corner of the refrigerator when I go home. It will be taken out only once: after serving its month-and-a-half sentence in food purgatory, I will carry it to the dumpster and put it out of its misery.

This is My Body, Broken for You.

In college, I reread French folktales and am struck by Delarue's Little Red Riding Hood, who unknowingly tears into her grandmother's newly-butchered body as a snack. "A slut is she who eats the flesh and drinks the blood of her grandmother!" the cat says as the girl munches on, oblivious. The old woman's corporal feast nourishes her, infusing her veins with sacrificial truths and a survivor's cunning. Grandmother died so her girl-child might live. The taste of grape juice wells up on my tongue, remembering the day I realized how cheerfully my faith sanctifies cannibalism. The Jains worry about hurting the bacteria in wine, and my family and I are willing to pretend to drink the blood of God. We have become vampires by seeking the path of righteousness.

Sometimes, while stirring a congregation-sized vat of sloppy joe or scrubbing the plastic tablecloths in the fellowship hall, I contemplate the meaning of meat. How the beef I am absentmindedly singeing is the muscle of a creature that was born to be killed. Eventually, my ruminations lead me to the relationship between Christ's willingness to suffer for his people and his people's willingness to let others suffer. Maybe we eat animals because we know we are worth dying for.

There's a Euphemism for Everything

"You visited Rick in the hospital today, right, Trina? Did they figure out what was wrong with him?" Dad asks, patting his mashed potatoes into a pile. It's eight in the evening and we've just sat down to eat at the kitchen table—forty percent of which has been commandeered by Vacation Bible School supplies and hymnals.

"Oh yeah, turns out it's gangrene of the colon. Doctors are pretty sure they're going to have to remove it and give him a colostomy bag to carry around—you know, one of those poop holders? It's terrible. Could you pass the beans?"

I stop chewing and stare. "Seriously? Is it really necessary for you to go into detail about Rick's colon right this minute?"

"I was just answering your father's question. What are you upset about all of a sudden?" When calling on congregants, my parents are compassionate, hopeful, reassuring. But humans can witness only so much pain before blocking it out.

"She's just picking on you for not being sensitive about the ailments of the world." Dad pauses. "Should we start calling leprosy 'parts falling off challenged' like they did in that Christopher Moore book? Would we be PC enough for you then?" My mouth betrays me by smiling, and before long I'm laughing along with my parents at the dreadful diseases we've encountered recently. Mom brings out the ice cream and our talk shifts to martyrdom.

Call it callous or call it a coping mechanism. Gallows humor runs rampant in the House of the Lord. We must find nourishment where we can.

Metamorphosis

Kirsty Rutland

Georgia College & State University

On the day that I murdered my mother's butterfly, I did not know that the expected life span of a butterfly is only four to twelve days after they emerge from their cocoons. I did not know that they are preyed on by birds and predatory insects. I did not know that it is likely that my mother's butterfly, minutes after I had set it free, would have been trapped and eaten by the spiders spinning webs in the space beneath the slanted roof of my grandmother's house.

When Mama had pulled into the long dirt driveway, the only thing I knew was that I didn't want her to see me. I had my feet buried in the dirt, and my new shoes were slung over in the grass, most likely being infested with fire ants. The dirt was cool and I wiggled my toes. I ducked my head and hoped that my brother and my cousins would block her view of me. I stopped holding my breath when I heard the screen door slam and scrambled out of the sand to retrieve my shoes. I brushed myself off as best I could and headed toward the house. I began to run once I hit the grass, arms flailing. I swung open the front door and my grandmother stopped me with a hand on my chest and a reverent "Shush."

"Kristy," my mother said. "Come and look at this." Her voice was different, soft but high-pitched, not her usual tone.

"What is it?" I asked, peeking around my grandmother. Now the boys were coming in, and Granny moved to scold them for tracking dirt into the house. My mother was standing strangely, her shoulders rounded and her arms sticking stiffly out from her sides. An impos-

sibly large butterfly was sitting on my mother's shoulder. Its bright orange wings flapped once, lazily, as if to say hello.

"I brought him from work," she said. "He landed right on my shoulder. He was still the whole way home. He must be sick from all those chemicals."

My mother worked in a factory. They manufactured skiff boats. When talking about her day, she would use words like "acetone" and "resin." I didn't know what any of that meant as a child, and I can't say I know much more now. Knowing the meaning of those words doesn't make me understand why my mother's hands were bright red when she came home or why she said her feet throbbed with every heartbeat. Even if I were to read up on the subject, I don't think I ever would understand why she went back, day after day.

The chemicals used in the factory were strong, and all employees were forced to wear goggles and something my mother called a respirator, although I always pictured it looking somewhat like a gas mask. So when she said the butterfly was sick, I believed her. I didn't think they made gas masks for butterflies.

The butterfly, as if to prove her wrong, lifted its wings and flew off. My mother made a sound in her throat and cupped her hands, reaching out to catch him. He fluttered around the room before lighting again on my mother's shoulder.

I don't remember exactly what I was thinking. I'm sure that this situation would have thrilled any six-year-old, but I don't remember being thrilled. I remember watching my mother's face and feeling a slow burn in the pit of my stomach. I remember feeling that this was not my mother. My mother's face didn't glow like that. My mother's mouth didn't turn up at the corners, but down, always down. I think that it was the first day I noticed that my mother's eyes

were a surprising shade of green, like the ferns that grew outside my grandmother's house. She seemed taller, as if in her excitement she had forgotten to point her strong chin toward the ground.

"Isn't he pretty?" My mother asked.

Before I could answer her, my older cousin Brad, who was by my grandmother's definition sweet as pie and by my mother's estimation all kinds of mean, shoved me out of the way. "Is he going to die?" he asked, without preamble.

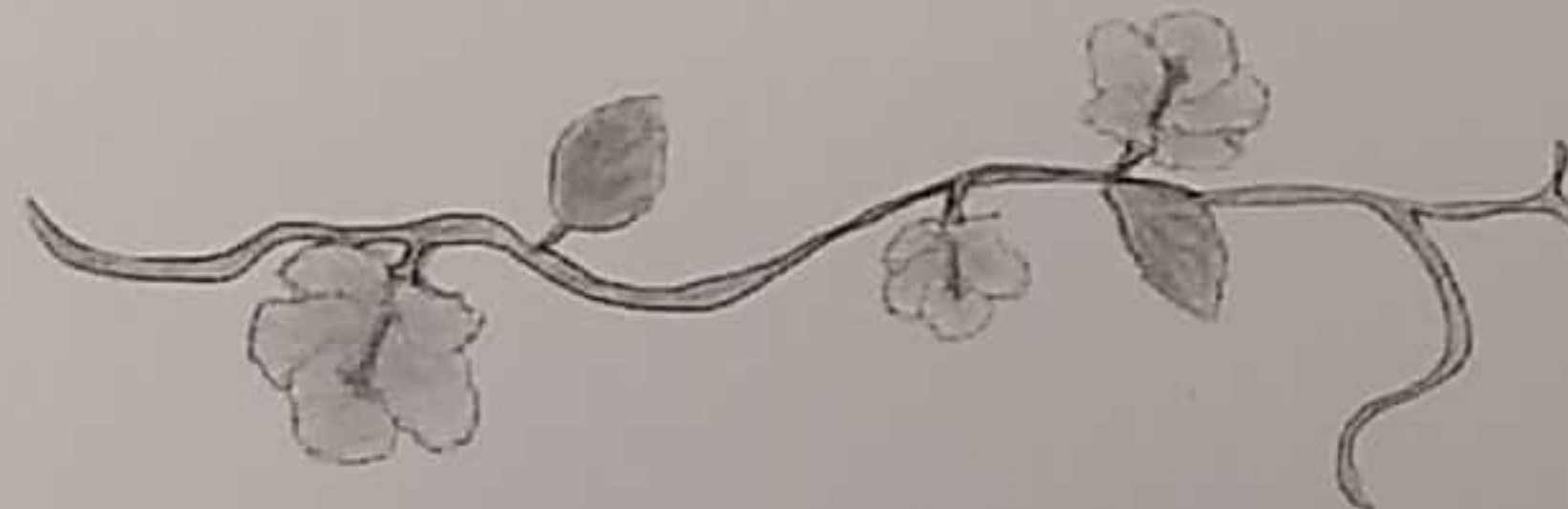
"Probably," my mother said, and her chin dropped a little.

"Can we bury it?" I asked, and the words burned in my throat. They were the first words I said to my mother after she introduced her butterfly.

"Not now." Her voice was softer. She didn't look at me, but at her shoulder and the butterfly, who was still and silent, watching me. "I'll call you when it's time. Go back out and play."

Brad and I went back outside, and I wiggled my toes in the dirt. It was cool outside, almost winter. While I sat there, I imagined the butterfly's funeral. I pictured the butterfly in a tiny coffin. I pictured myself standing near a tiny mound of dirt, wearing a black veil and carrying a bouquet of dandelion puffs to blow into the breeze at the right moment. I would stand there and be strong. I wouldn't cry if I could help it, but if I did, it would be a single, sparkling tear. It was how I had imagined my grandfather's funeral. I hadn't attended. I had been afraid, but after watching a funeral on television, I regretted my decision. It seemed dreadfully romantic, and the more I thought about it the more impatient I became to bury my mother's butterfly.

Some time before I murdered my mother's butterfly, my grandmother had given me an expensive baby doll with blinking blue eyes for



my birthday. She did all the things that babies did, like wet her diaper and drink from a bottle. When my mother came home from work and saw the doll, she took me aside.

"It's hard to be a mother," she had told me, giving me her half-smile that didn't quite turn up at the corner. It wasn't really a smile at all, but like when someone loses an arm or a leg and whatever is missing still hurts. Up until the day of the butterfly, my mother had a phantom smile. I often wondered the same thing about the man sitting behind the counter at Cal's Grocer... how he had lost his arm, and how much it must hurt to know he'd never get it back.

"It's hard to be a mother," my mother had repeated, "a lot of responsibility. You have to take care of her, just like I take care of you. She should be important to you. You shouldn't leave her outside or hurt her."

I had hugged my baby to my chest and nodded, thinking that I would be the best mother in the world because I would never, never hurt her. I named her Jenny and carried her around with me for two days, feeding and changing her often.

On the second night, when I was sitting in the middle of my bed listening to my father's screaming and my mother's sobs, I looked down into Jenny's chubby face. She didn't look like anyone I knew. Her mouth turned always up at the corners. She didn't look like she belonged to me. I poked my finger in the dimple of her left cheek. I had seen a photo once of a man with curly hair and deep dimples. It took my grandmother two weeks to convince me that the man in the photograph was my father. I decided to cut off all of Jenny's hair and drag a magic marker across her face, smearing bright red streaks on her dimpled cheeks.

The day I murdered my mother's butterfly, I waited for only a few minutes before she called

me from the house. Brad sprinted ahead of me and got there first, but my mother waited until I walked up. She reached out her cupped hands and presented me with the butterfly.

"It won't be long now," she said, and I tried to take the butterfly in my own small hands.

My grandmother was standing behind her, looking out at the sky. "There's a cold front coming," she said, and when she spoke, the butterfly's wings fluttered once. My mother hesitated, curving her hands inward, toward her belly.

I want to say now that she was like the goddess Demeter, who was so reluctant to sacrifice her daughter to the underworld, even if only for a season, that she made the whole earth mourn. Of course, my mother was not a goddess, and I wouldn't have thought of her as such. But I think I recognized even then that she was something different than my mother that day, something bigger, but that made her like Jenny. That made her not my mother, and that made me afraid.

Then, after a few seconds, my mother gave me the butterfly. As soon as it left her hands, she began to look like herself again. My grandmother handed me a shoebox, which wasn't at all like the coffin I had imagined. It wasn't small enough to fit me, so she gave me a small recipe box instead. Brad went to get the spade from Granny's garden, and while he was gone I placed the butterfly in the box.

My cousin and I watched it for several minutes. The butterfly seemed to watch us, too, flapping his wings but not flying away.

"How long do you think it'll be?" Brad asked.

"A little while."

"I hope it doesn't take a long time." He scraped dirt up from the ground with the hoe.

"Maybe we should put him out of his misery," I said.

I used the phrase I had heard from my uncle when his horse had broken a leg a couple of months ago. Later, I had asked my father about it.

"Daddy, what does 'out of his misery' mean?"

He had been lying on the couch, his head resting on the arm of the couch and his eyes closed. It was dark in the living room. Daddy was there often, alone in the dark, hands folded, like I imagined Papa in his coffin.

"Out of the world," he had answered, not changing position or opening his eyes. "Out of your misery means out of the world."

I picked up a small, flat stone and held it in the palm of my hand. Before Brad could stop me, I placed it on the butterfly's back. He began flapping his wings wildly and sprinkled my hands with orange dust from his wings. I reached to pull the stone off, but Brad stopped me.

"Wait," he said. He began to dig the butterfly's grave.

I didn't know what I was waiting for. The butterfly's wings began to flap more slowly, and my stomach began to hurt. The death of the butterfly couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, but all the sound faded out of the world as I watched. I didn't know then, but I must have had some idea, because I remember imagining that my mother could feel his life rushing out of her.

When the butterfly stopped moving, Brad placed the recipe box down into the hole he had dug. He handled it gently. He kept the butterfly intact. I removed the stone from the butterfly's back and put it into his box as if to weigh him down.

A few hours after the butterfly's funeral, my mother and I drove home. I pretended to be asleep, folding my arms and closing my eyes

tight to shut out the light.

Several months after I murdered my mother's butterfly, I told her what I had done. She didn't say much, although I cried and said I was sorry.

"How did you do it?" She asked.

"With a rock," I said between sobs.

She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. "Hush up. Your daddy is sleeping."

My best friend in elementary school was named Alisha. On the playground one day, she wanted to play angels. I didn't want to play that game, so I just sat down and watched her, sulking. She began running around me in circles, flapping her arms.

"I can fly, see?"

She wouldn't listen to my opinion about the game because she was angry at me from last week, when I had told her that Barney the dinosaur wasn't real.

"He is so real!" She had shrieked, slamming her fist down on the coloring table.

"He's a dinosaur, stupid." I had told her, coloring in the sun with an orange crayon. "Dinosaurs are all dead. Besides, t-rexes don't smile and sing 'Skip to My Lou.' They eat people."

She had run screaming to our teacher, who had reprimanded me.

"Barney is real if you want him to be," our teacher had said.

Even then, I knew that wasn't true.

Barney talked a lot about imagination, about pretending. Alisha could pretend all she wanted, but daydreaming couldn't make a prehistoric animal flesh and blood. If it could, my father would drive me to school every morning and wave to my friends as I hopped out of the car. My mother would work in an office and take her vacation days during the summer so that we could drive down to the beach, singing all the way there.

Pretending that Barney is real is a lie, but a happy lie. The kind of pretending my father did was a little different. When we walked together on the street and he'd meet up with an old friend, they would ask him how he was doing since his father died.

"Fine," he would say, "good," and I would look up at him. I would watch his mouth as he lied to them. I would watch his arm pump as he shook hands. I wonder now if they could feel the lie in his touch, because they always looked at me before they walked away. They looked down and sort of shook their heads, as if they were the skeptical parents of a child who believed in Barney.

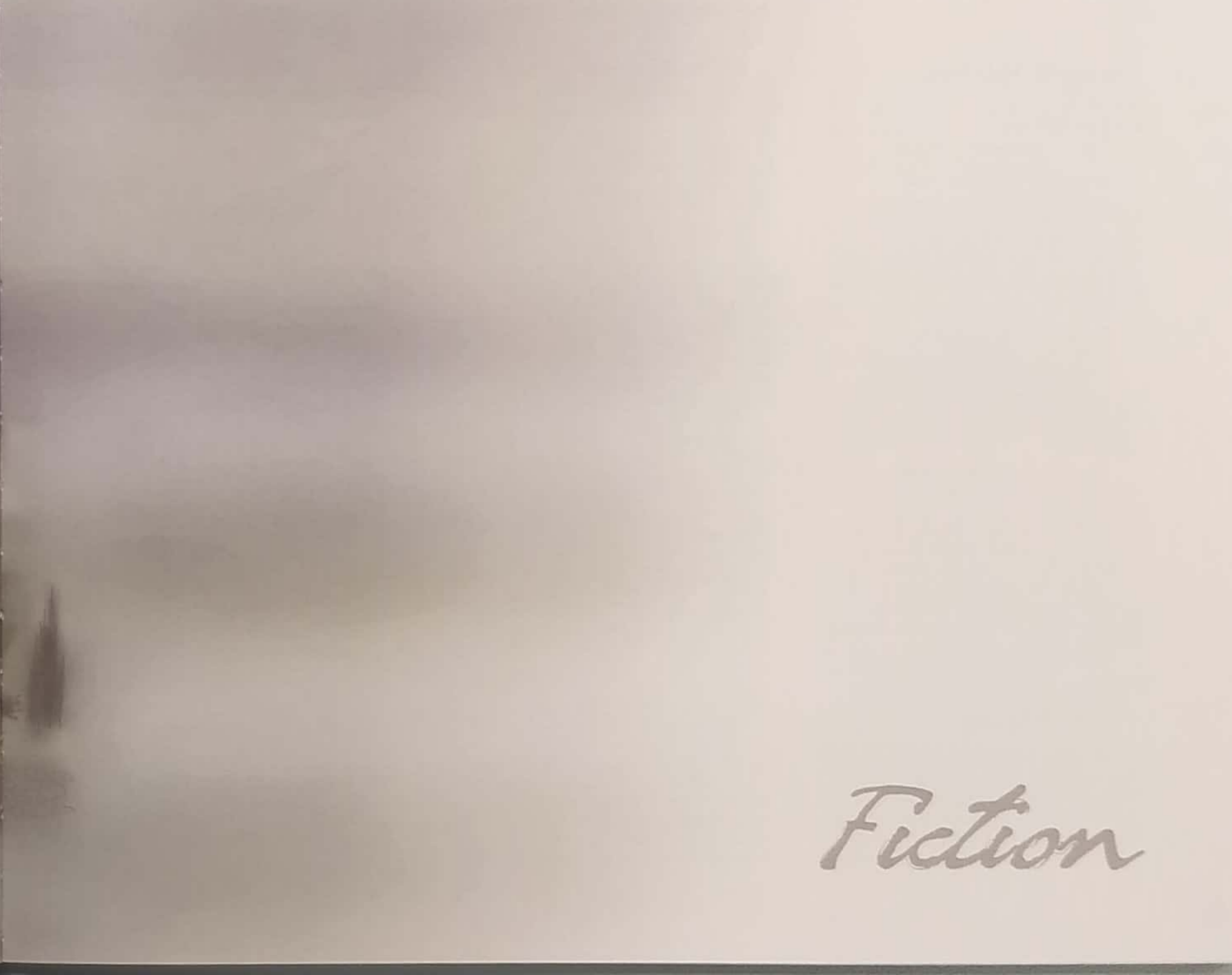
So when Alisha wanted to play angels again, for the thousandth time, and I watched her flail her arms as if she were about to take flight any second, I thought about her frilly dresses and the pink canopy bed I had spent the night in. I thought about her mother standing in the doorway with a tray of cookies. I thought about her father kissing her mother when he came home from work and the way their

months always started up at the corner. Like my old doll Jenny, Alisha didn't belong to me. I thought I might get caught if I tried to draw on her face, so when she came close again, I stuck out my foot to trip her. She scraped her knee and began to cry. I never saw her pink canopy bed again.

When they taught us about metamorphosis in school, I thought about how much it must hurt to sprout wings with intricate veins and tiny scales. It must be hard to break through the tough skin of the cocoon. Sometimes a metamorphosis is interrupted. Sometimes the butterflies can't break free. They remain in their cocoons until they starve or asphyxiate. It must be awful to die there in the dark after all that time spent waiting and waiting, newborn wings aching to fly.

Now I think that's where we all were on the day I murdered my mother's butterfly. All of us were trapped inside the chrysalis, where it was dark and close and still. When the butterfly landed on my mother's shoulder I saw what she might have been if she had been able to break free and inflate her wings. Back then, I thought I liked it in the dark. I thought I liked being in the cocoon wrapped tight with my arms folded and my eyes closed, like my baby brother in the womb or my grandfather, buried deep beneath the dirt.





Fiction

The Lady Vanishes

Anna Cobe

Agnes Scott College

For a minute, I thought I saw her.

I didn't care that I was in a bookstore and had to be "respectful of other patrons" or whatever those signs said. Shoving my way through suburban moms lugging Nora Roberts and their sticky kids, I ran up to her and tapped her shoulder.

"Ina."

She turned around. It wasn't her.

"Excuse me?" not-Ina asked.

I backed away. Not-Ina was frowning.

Not-Ina had, I realized, shorter hair. Not-Ina had freckles. Not-Ina had glasses.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you were someone else."

She smiled that *freaky-boy-go-away* smile I had seen on too many girls when I approached, including Ina.

No, she said, the one time I asked her out. No.

Maybe I was stupid for thinking that our shared love of useless trivia (i.e., we were both nerds/geeks of the highest caste, good grades *plus* esoteric tastes) would be enough to knock her over with swooping romantic love. But, hey, better to try, right?

I was still trying when she vanished into thin air.

This is what happened:

We call it the Catastrophe, those of us left from the St. John Baptist de la Salle trivia team. Me (lovesick loser), Peter Dirk (captain, perpetually red-faced), Harold Lin (stoic object of Ina's affections), Dilep Shah (type-A bore), Aaron Goldberg (not-so-funny motormouth).

It was the citywide annual televised Knowledge Bowl tournament, when we, the geekiest kids in town, duked it out for a cool ten grand apiece.

The money was for college, but the moderator, a middle-aged television anchor with a lush head of graying hair, liked to pretend otherwise. *Hey, whaddya want to spend it on? A Mercedes-Benz? A trip to Hawaii?*

The team and our advisor, Mr. Frank, had decided on our main four — Peter for economics, math, and everything else, me for philosophy and science, Harold for history and politics, and Ina for literature, film, art, and what we guys secretly referred to as "girl stuff." She knew who was the first American female doctor, Elizabeth Blackwell, and who was the first woman to run for president, Victoria Woodhull.

Stuff like that.

Dilep and Aaron, as sophomores, would remain alternates and watch and "learn," which Mr. Frank sternly emphasized. Dilep, or "Peter's future replacement," nodded and took out a notebook and pen, jostling a leg. Aaron ran a hand through his Jewfro and asked, "Learn what? How to make 'em cry for their mamas?" He looked hopefully towards Peter, begging for approval. Like a puppy. Unfortunately, the only thing puppy-like about Aaron was his hair, and even if he had rolled on the ground, belly exposed and tender, Peter wouldn't have scratched him.

Mr. Frank may have rolled his eyes; I couldn't tell. "I guess. But pay attention, Goldberg."

Blinking at eye-melting lights, we four were soon standing at our podiums. Across from us were the Belleville High team (that was the school's name, as unfortunate as it was—Peter hummed *Beauty and Beast* songs whenever we saw them, our archenemies). Like us, there were three bespectacled guys in odd-fitting suits and a girl (but she wasn't nearly as pretty as Ina, if I

remember).

Our fingers were tensed over the buttons; sweat poured down our necks. We were running facts, current events, through our heads.

"First category, British literature—"

Ina sighed.

"Name the author. Elinor Dashwood—"

Buzz.

"Ina?"

"Austen."

"Correct."

From there, it was a blur, like watching a ping-pong match, but with buzzes instead of a ball. Belleville got one; we got another. Back and forth, back and forth.

Battle of the Wilderness. 0. Lithium. The panda. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Then, we were in the final round, the lightning round. Current events.

John McCain. Ai Weiwei. Ralph M. Steinman was dead. Godfather's Pizza.

A few seconds left. A question:

"What is the name of the popular Japanese author of the recently released *IQ84*?"

Buzz.

"Ina."

We all smiled. Harold even showed a crack of teeth. I was going to joke about it later with him—Harold, Mr. Supreme Court Justice, you smiled.

Then, Ina wasn't answering.

"Ina? We need an answer."

Silence echoing through the room, like a wave, shivering with algae.

Silence, in immovable Harold, like granite.

Silence, volcanic, in Peter, about to erupt.

Silence, in Aaron and Dilep, impotent, with tense knuckles and tightened jaws.

Silence.

Silence.

Buzz.

"I'm sorry—Ina? Ina?"

None of us realized what had happened at first. Too much piss in us. I could see that the sole-girl-on-the-Belleville-team, Ellie, knew the answer, was about to hammer her hand down. Damn it, Ina, no time to freeze.

But she hadn't frozen.

I looked next to me. There was an empty space where Ina should be. Emptyemptyempty.

The silence broke. Something was beside me, but too big to be Ina. No—two. A man and a woman, her parents.

"Where the hell is she?" her dad said.

Aaron, I was startled to discover, was grabbing my shoulder. "She *disappeared*, Matt."

"What?" I asked, stupidly.

"She *vanished*. Like those magician's tricks—you know? But without a curtain or box or *anything*."

I had never heard Aaron use so many emphases. "What?"

"She's gone."

Let me give you some background on Ina at the time:

Full name: Marina Grace Garcia Apan

Age: 16

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Black

Height: 5'5"

Weight: Won't speculate.

Favorite authors: Jane Austen, Kurt Vonnegut, Ernest Hemingway, Terry Pratchett

Least favorite authors: The Romantics (Keats, the Shelleys—she said once that *Frankenstein* was overwrought pulp—, Wordsworth, et al), the Brontë Sisters, Stephanie Meyer

Favorite filmmakers: Wes Anderson, Terrence Malick, Julie Taymor

Favorite artists: Jan Vermeer, Frida Kahlo,

Fiction

El Greco, Jeff Koons, Georgia O'Keefe

Favorite TV shows: Didn't watch TV.

Favorite musicians: The Decemberists, Gustav Holst (the only thing she would ever really talk to me about), KC and the Sunshine Band (her one shame)

Favorite food: Sweet corn in milk and crushed ice

Crush: Harold Lin

Before you decide I, Matthew O'Shaughnessy, am a stalker, I didn't find out half of this information until after she vanished.

I did use to sigh longingly in her direction when she was still—visible—but I didn't know that sweet corn could be eaten that way or that despite her fervent feminism, she liked Hemingway or that she couldn't get into poetry or that she was drawn to feverish images in film and art or that she danced to disco.

None of that, until the flesh-and-blood person disappeared and let's face it, any hope of an actual relationship.

Funny how life works out.

The police were called in. They swarmed gingerly, like bees on flowers, over the scene, dusting for fingerprints, peeking into corners, asking questions.

Was Marina having any problems at home?

She was always so quiet. Hiding in her room all the time. But she never caused any trouble.

What about trouble in school?

Not really. She kept to herself. Read lots of books. Not real social, you know? But a pro with that buzzer, fingers as quick as bare feet across hot pavement—

Did she say or do anything strange before she, uh, disappeared?

Not that I noticed, Officer—

What about you, Mr. O'Shaughnessy? Did you notice anything?

No, sir.

Later on, I realized I had been wrong. I had noticed something. I chalk it up to simple forgetfulness, but now I wonder if it was willful forgetfulness. If it is possible to willfully forget, to say, "I will erase you from the gray folds of my brain," and that would be done.

St. John was, as you could probably guess, Catholic. No glaring nuns in penguin suits except doddering old Sr. Angela Catherine, who manned the desk in the library and smiled at everyone, even the people who threw wadded paper at each other during break, but Catholic all the same.

As someone who perpetually makes a feeble effort to embrace atheism and then falls back into tepid agnosticism, I wasn't exactly happy to be taking religion classes, not hardcore catechism or anything on Thomas Aquinas, but reiterations of "Jesus loves you. And listen to the Vatican!"

But I did like the chapel, the dim, musty room where dust motes swirled in the colored beams of light through the stained glass windows. It's one of the few places on campus guaranteed to be empty, unless Father Stephen decided to stay in, as opposed to marching off somewhere, protesting war, poverty, and the healthcare system. I wasn't surprised when, after I graduated, he was moved "elsewhere," to keep his pinko liberation theology radicalism away from impressionable young minds.

I would sit in a front row staring at the stained glass depictions of Apostles, Saints, and the Holy Family, contemplating. Not often did I think about anything deep, sadly. Mostly life: Where would I go to college? Why was I, number four in the senior class, a fucking screw-up in my own family (wait for it—no social skills)? Would I ever get laid?

One day, though, I walked in and realized I was not alone.

I was annoyed. Even though the chapel was open to everyone, I had become territorial. If I could have marked it, but not like a dog, I would have done it.

Then, I saw it was her.

Now this is coming to the weird part: For once in my life, I walked in quietly, not tripping over my feet. Because of that, I saw...

Ina was sitting in a chair, next to the stained glass window of St. Paul. I could feel my heart roll in my chest, and my breath stop because then, Ina occupied too many thoughts, too many fantasies, sexual and otherwise. She still does, but not like then.

This only was a moment.

Despite my reverie, I noticed her hands. She was holding them up to her face. I could only see a bit of her cheek, her ear.

The hands were see-through.

But I tripped. Whatever had caused me to enter quietly left me, causing my ankles to shake. She started and turned around.

"Who's there?" she asked.

I picked myself up and dusted my glasses on my tie. Then, I walked towards her, so I could see her face. "It's me. Matt."

She breathed out irritation. "What are you doing in here?"

"I was about to ask the same thing."

"This chapel is for everyone."

"True. That's why I'm in here, too." I stood next to her, trying to understand what I had seen. *Thought* I had seen. That I saw her arms were up, but the solid masses of brown flesh attached to her wrists were not there. Just a thin tannish mist through which I could see red, green, and blue light streaming through. But her hands were clearly there now, wringing together in her lap.

It was a trick of light, I decided, and then forgot.

"Why are you in here?" she asked again.

I shrugged. "Can I sit?"

"I guess."

I sat down in the seat across the aisle and looked at the altar covered green for Ordinary Time. "I like to think in here. It's quiet."

"I thought you were agnostic."

"Yeah, I am. But it's quiet." We sat in silence, and I carefully looked at Ina out of the corner of my eye. She was not hot, like Megan Fox hot. But I thought she was beautiful. Always will. Like Mount Everest—serene and unconquerable. Unknowable. "What about you?" I asked.

"I pray," she said.

I blinked. "Really? I didn't think you were the type."

"Why, because I'm feminist?" she said.

"I...guess."

"Just like a boy. Think all feminists are God-hating harpies," she said, but notably, there was no malice. No feelings like that took in this space. The light. The tranquility. No wrath or despair stayed there.

Without prompting, she said, "I need to pray. Catholicism is hard, believing is hard. And God's distant..." She was playing with a strand of long black hair. Usually, it was in a ponytail, but it was free that day. If I was braver (or creepier), I would have run my fingers through it. "I pray to the saints."

Before I could stop myself, I asked, in a snide tone, "Aren't you supposed to ask the saints to pray for you?"

But snideness couldn't take root there, not even of the splitting-hairs-over-Church-doctrine-variety. "I know. But I like asking them for help."

Silence. Then—"Saints are more approachable than God. That's why I've always talked to them. Not to God. They're human."

"But they can't help you. Remember? God gives them all their powers."

"I know. But they understand."

"But God is omniscient or supposed to be,"

I said, unable to stop even though I was cursing myself. You dumb bastard. You dumb bastard who can't let go of a fight. "Wouldn't He know?"

She finally looked at me, and I could see her dark eyes. Drownable eyes. "Matt," she whispered, as tenderly as she would ever whisper to me. Too bad it wasn't for me. *Because of me.* "Matt."

I barely let out a "Yes."

"Knowing isn't the same as understanding."

We played the video again and again, the team. The five of us: Peter the Captain, Dilep and Aaron the Alternates, Harold whom she adored, and I who adored her.

There's the three of us waiting. Peter fuming under his breath. Harold, his face motionless save for a tiny muscle pulsing in his forehead. Me, panic forming in my eyes.

The camera cuts to the moderator, looking agreeably sad. *I'm so sorry for your screw-up*, his face said.

It cuts back to Ina. And that's the part we can't understand. She's smiling. She's fucking smiling.

1. 2. 3.

Buzz.

She vanishes.

In the time it takes to snap a finger, to blink, she disappears from view.

"I'm sorry—Ina? Ina?"

I always knew that she was in love with Harold Lin, but like all people in love, I conveniently forgot that fact.

Understand it, though—it made sense logically. Mr. Frank handpicked all six members of the team, through school-wide testing and buzzer try-outs. Thus, the six of us were the smartest in the school. Or at least, the ones who best embodied the perfect combination of intelligence, rote memorization, quick reflexes,

logical thinking, and a certain arrogance and aggression.

Why wouldn't Ina want to choose the mate with roughly the same desirable skills to pass onto the next generation?

From there, it was a matter of eliminating the candidates with undesirable traits:

Peter Dirk

Positives: Arguably, the most physically attractive member of the team (all that wrestling). Received a full ride to Ole Miss and is planning to become an investment banker.

Negatives: Cursed with the worst temper ever, i.e., liked to throw his textbooks at the blackboard during practice when he gave the wrong answer. Also, had a girlfriend at the time.

Dilep Shah

Positives: Possessed the highest GPA of the six of us. Mr. Frank was eyeing him to become captain after Peter graduated. Reliable to a fault, as he had spreadsheets and lists for every facet of his life. Wants to become a mathematician and will be attending the University of Chicago in the fall.

Negatives: Sophomore. Way too much nervous energy. Obsessed with grades. Somewhat boring and likely to spend his Friday nights with his calculator.

Aaron Goldberg

Positives: The not-so-funny class clown of the group. Knows every single word of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Tropic Thunder*. Got into Davidson easily.

Negatives: Sophomore. Never takes anything seriously. Insecure and attention-seeking. Prone to stupid puns and gross-out gags. Never worked for his grades or anything, really.

Matthew O'Shaughnessy

Positives: Completely in love with her. Great taste in music. Actually likes to read. Was accepted by Cornell.

Negatives: Socially awkward. Prone to

idealization. Bad at reading social cues. No taste in fashion. Did I mention socially awkward?

After this series of unfortunate flaws, this left Harold for her to latch her attentions onto.

I would like to say that I don't get what Ina saw in Harold, who sat in the corner reading *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and *The New York Times* before practice. That, save for a dry sense of humor, a fondness for Star Wars, his frequent hiking trips, and and baking pies for senior citizens, he was as dull as a butter knife. That, he was your everyday Chinese-American overachiever except that he was better at history than calculus. That, he wanted to go to law school to advocate for immigrants and refugees.

But I would be lying.

Harold Lin, for all his stolidity and Romantic Comedy False Lead vibes, was fundamentally a decent, intelligent guy with good manners you could take home to mama. A rare commodity in high school.

Ina saw that, and I can't blame her for it. Even though I did then, I can't now.

"I need a prom date," said Aaron.

"You're a sophomore," said Harold from behind his copy of *1776*.

"That's why I need a prom date."

It was late March. A few weeks before the big event(s). Prom and the Championship.

We knew how the Championship would go down. If we lost, burgers afterwards. If we won, burgers afterwards plus 10,000 dollars apiece and bragging rights.

Prom, though, was different territory for us nerds. Well, not for Peter, who often came into practice with lipstick on his collar, but the rest of us were venturing into untested waters. If we dug up the courage to even consider going.

"Why do you even want to go to prom?" asked Dilep. He had a college physics textbook open. He wasn't even in AP Physics yet.

"And do what Saturday night? Curl up with *University Physics*?"

"It's good to prepare early."

"For what?"

I drifted away from the conversation.

Ina-time, it was, in the five minutes or so before Peter stomped in, steam coming out of his ears for some reason, and Mr. Frank returned from traffic duty, complaining loudly about "mad teenagers and their predilection for seeing people as speed bumps to be sped over."

She was in the corner, reading. Today was *The Great Gatsby*. Classic. Americana.

Perhaps it was time to make my move.

I sidled up. "Ina," I said.

She shifted in her seat and squinted. She had taken off the green standard-issue sweater and had it draped on the back of the desk. Her shirt sleeves were rolled up. Her ponytail bobbed as she turned the pages.

She looked lovely.

She had looked lovely the last and only time I had asked her out, on impulse after a close match against the local all-boys school, 150-145, in which she stole the final question from the other team (and me), about the composer of *Madame Butterfly* (Puccini), thereby stealing us the tournament.

No, she had said. No.

"Ina..."

"Hmmm?"

Maybe she would have been generous that day. Maybe the prospect of going to prom alone would have compelled her to say yes. Maybe she would have gone on a pity-date with me (pity was better than nothing). Or maybe if my timing had been better, she would have wanted to make a point and gone with me and maybe instead of regretting it, she would have had a good time and wouldn't have disappeared a week before prom.

But Harold happened.

"Hey, Ina? Do you remember the name of

that woman during the American Revolution? With the water?" he asked.

"Molly Pitcher, you mean," she answered. She looked away (she never liked eye contact—more likely to stare at your collar or forehead), but I saw her eyes flickering towards him, back and forth, back and forth.

"Yeah. Her," he said. And suddenly, he smiled.

Then her face turned on like a bare light bulb in a dark room, which was so rare, and it lasted just a moment, but then, I knew it wasn't going to happen. Never was going to happen. Not after Harold smiled, innocuously, surprisingly, for her.

"I'm going to fuck someone up." There was Peter, blowing a fringe of hair out of his reddening face. "Goddamn AT&T and dropped calls. I need a buzzer, man."

"Language," said Mr. Frank, walking in, even though he commenced muttering under his breath about "fucking kids."

In my head, the rest of practice, all I could see was Ina's face. Bright as a bare bulb, alive with light. A rare, rare occurrence, and it never was for me.

The questions you are all probably asking:

- 1.) Did Harold love her?
- 2.) Why didn't she make a move?

The answers:

1.) Yes. No. Maybe. I never asked him, afraid of the answer. Certainly, it was *thought* to be true by several people. Even Mr. Frank joined in the action.

Mr. Frank: "You know who you should ask to prom, Lin?"

Harold (from behind *The Washington Post*): "Hmmm?"

Mr. Frank: "Apan, there."

Ina (blushing furiously): "Mr. Frank!"

Harold: ...

Even during class, people—when they bothered to notice us nerds—chimed in, perhaps in a bid to make our lives less sad (even though we were going to be the movers and shakers of the planet, but apparently, our future successful lives were empty without someone to cuddle with—which I agree with but I digress).

Girl #1: "You should go out with that cute Japanese guy, Ina."

Girl #2: "Yeah! Harold!"

Ina: "He's Chinese."

Girl #1: "Sorry! I'm not racist, but I mean, you'd be cute and smart and Asian together."

Ina (blushing furiously): "Um... okay."

The gap there is Harold himself. Stoic—even more unknowable than Ina.

2.) I don't know. Shyness? Pride? Fear? All of the above?

Imagine this: A mirrored hall of watchers. A person watching another person watching another person.

In the practice room, I would be watching Ina longingly across the room, not even bothering to hide it. Ina was more subtle and would be reading a book determinedly, but her eyes betrayed her, flickering quietly, quickly, softly at Harold, who too was reading a book but looking at no one.

Looking was all Ina ever did. If anything else had ever happened, neither side gave any indication of it. Not even Harold, during our endless rewatches of the video, gave a flicker of more than concern. Not any more than the rest of us. Certainly not more than me.

At any rate, Harold is at Rice now. So far, his Facebook relationship status has never been made public.

"We need to stop," said Peter.

"What?" I said. We were sitting in the local library's quiet room, the one with the TV. The video was playing endlessly. Ina disappeared and reappeared, disappeared and reappeared.

Again and again.

"I mean, what else can we see? Nothing, man. She buzzes, she stays silent, she smiles, then she vanishes."

"Peter's right," said Dilep, from behind his AP Stats textbook. "We've been looking at this video all summer. If we haven't caught it already, we probably won't in the future, even if we watch it another hundred times."

"But," I said, fumbling. "You don't know that. I mean, what if we see something the hundredth time?"

"Dude," Aaron interjected. "Peter and Bollywood Nerd here are right. We've been staring at the fucking thing all summer. Besides, what if we saw something? What would we do with it? She disappeared on-camera in front of everyone. Abracadabra, the lady vanishes into thin air. Besides, if she was fucking *smiling* before that happened, she probably *wanted* to disappear. She did it herself. Ever thought about that?"

"I'm just saying—"

"Matt, you fruit," said Peter, shifting and dropping his legs on the table with a loud thump. "You're in love with her. Have been since she joined the team. We've been nice to you, but dude, fucking let it go. It was a Catastrophe, but that's what a catastrophe is. Some fucking avalanche of chaos and despair you have no control over."

My face burned. "I'm just trying—"

"Matt."

We all turned around. Harold, for once, was without his newspaper and book. Instead, he was sitting cross-legged, arms crossed. Looking straight at us, he adjusted his glasses.

"Peter and all of them are being dicks," he said in a low, even voice. "But they're right, Matt, they're right. If she wants to come back, she will, but in the meantime... she's gone."

I have another memory of Ina. Just me and her.

It was before a match at Cairo High School, a crumbling public school that was ostensibly suburban but thanks to budget cuts and the recession was being shunted to the bottom of the list in the local government's agenda.

It was early for me. I was usually one of the later ones, because I never could get up until ten minutes before a match, but I made it forty minutes early. Daylight Savings, you see.

I parked in the spookily quiet parking lot and got out. Stretching my arms, I ambled towards the school. Suddenly I saw a movement in one of the cars.

It was a spiffy Camry. But inside, I saw a head lying on its side against the wheel.

I began to inch closer and realized, with horror growing in the pit of my stomach, that it was Ina.

She was gritting her teeth, the rest of her face contorted with a wild helpless pain. As I moved closer, I saw the screwed-shut eyes, the lines in her forehead.

"Ina?" I pounded on her door, my knuckles aching, but Ina didn't react, just continued to sit there.

"Ina?"

But she didn't hear—wouldn't hear me.

While I stood there, pounding the glass until my knuckles were scraped, she didn't hear me.

"Ina?"

That morning, Ina only reacted a few minutes after I stopped, exhausted. She opened the door and saw me sitting on the ground. Like she never noticed me before then, she smiled sleepily and murmured "Good morning" and "Are you ready?" She mentioned she had stomach pains but that it would be all right.

We won that day, with Peter and Harold grabbing the last two questions (*All the Kings'*

Men and sled) but Ina's wild eyes, the lines in her forehead, stayed with me. Especially after the transparent hands. Especially after she vanished.

Now, though, I am returning to St. John after my second year at college. I can't say I'm happy to be back, but I promised Mr. Frank to stop by "whenever."

I amble through musty hallways lined with rusty lockers. I slip into the library and whisper "Hello" to Sr. Angela Catherine who smiles at me and asks "How are you, Matthew?"

When I go upstairs to Mr. Frank's history class, he guffaws when he sees my straggly hair and stubble ("Class, never let yourself turn into cavemen like this guy here") and when the senioritis-stricken seniors leave the room, we talk about my major change (I was physics until I switched to philosophy), college quiz bowl (I decided not to try out), and what the new team is like (solid, but not as solid as we were).

We do not talk about my depression, diagnosed long after I graduated, for which I am now on medication and talk-therapy.

We do not talk about Aaron getting caught with a cheat sheet during the AP economics exam.

We do not talk about Dilep's treatment for generalized anxiety.

We do not talk about Peter's anger management counseling.

We do not talk about Harold, who seems to have fallen off the face of the earth, save for the occasional Facebook post.

We do not talk about the Apans leaving town after the confused search of the police, stymied by the lack of evidence and the strange smile of the vanishing girl.

We do not talk about Ina.

After I say goodbye to Mr. Frank, I walk to the chapel. By this point, Father Stephen is gone, and they're waiting for the new guy. So I'm the only one here.

The chapel is changed, much to my disappointment. They replaced the chairs with new blond-wooded ones, with padded kneelers under each. Probably better for the knees but still.

At least the stained glass windows are there, and I stare at St. Anthony, with his beatific face. Not one of my favorites—he lacks the sinning, the redemptive power of a St. Ignatius of Loyola or a St. Augustine—but now, his sweetly smiling visage is comforting.

I pray...

I stare at St. Anthony. Miracles. The patron saint of miracles. I had forgotten.

I pray...

Dropping to my knees, I ignore the rattling in my kneecaps and clap my palms together.

"Please," I whispered. Please.

The air changes. A breeze ruffles my hair. I wait.

Minutes pass. My knees ache with the strain.

Please.

Nothing.

After what seems like an eternity, I get up, cheeks burning. What did I expect? That her voice would reverberate throughout the chapel, apologizing for hurting my feelings by disappearing, by not loving me? That her ghost would appear before me, absolving me of my stupidity? That, better yet, she'd drop, fleshly and alive, into my arms from the heavens, my love for her convincing her that it was worth returning?

Not that it mattered anyway, feeling suddenly tired. She was gone. In many ways, she had been vanishing long before I blinked during a televised Knowledge Bowl match.

"Goodbye," I murmured. "Goodbye."

I walked through the chapel door, dipping my fingers into the grimy water bowl, crossing myself. I did not look back.

Roadside Memorial

Stephanie Devine
Georgia State University

You fall in love with the house on the corner. You put it first on your list of places and put an asterisk next to the address. You weigh the pros—curb appeal, street, remodeled kitchen and bath—against the cons—smallish yard, old wiring, low square footage. But the cons don't matter because this is it. Two stories, blue siding with white shutters and a red door. The front yard has a tall oak tree that you guess is at least fifty years old. 728 Ideal Way. This is the place. Your very first home.

You make lists of things to do in your robin's egg notebook: home inspection, paperwork, closing, and then of things you will buy to decorate each room. Sage and butternut throw-pillows, burgundy paint for the living room to complement the sand-colored sofa sectional you saw at the store, ivory lace curtains for the bedroom just like your mother's.

Your stomach turns when you write the check and you think of the years working as a paralegal that it took you to save up the down payment. You think of all the times you moved in the past ten years and briefly panic at the thought of not being able to move now that you own. Now that you own. You pick up the keys and drive down your new street noting the old craftsman homes, the fixer-uppers, the mini mansions where fixer-uppers used to be. And your place, right in the middle. You walk in the front door, stepping lightly on to the antique hardwoods. Leaving it open behind you, you let your purse fall and smile.

Of course, you have a housewarming and fill up three pages in your notebook with names of people to invite. Parents, girlfriends, cowork-

ers, bosses. They all come dutifully with plates of brownies and bottles of wine and congratulate you on moving up in the world. They make the obligatory jokes saying "My, this place sure is ideal," and "What an ideal first home." Smiles and polite laughs are exchanged. You glow.

And it is because of the house that you meet Jacob. He literally bumps into you at the bank while you are doing your preapproval. He is so charming and apologetic that when he invites you out for coffee you think at first that he is still trying to make it up to you. After two dinners your friends start referring to him as your new boyfriend, and you laugh but don't correct them.

You can hardly ignore how perfect it all seems. Jacob is a great guy. He has everything on your list, the one you insist is hypothetical and never write down. The one you keep only in your head. Jacob has a degree. *Check.* A job at the bank. *Check.* A non-embarrassing car. *Check.* He is good-looking, he has lots of friends, like you. You both tend to vote conservative. *Check, check check.* And an added bonus, he is ex-military, Air Force, though not so into it as the guys who never stop wearing crew cuts or yelling "hoo-rah" when they drink.

"I just kind of did my time so I could get the GI bill," he confesses one night in bed, as you eye the damp spot on your new lavender comforter where you just made love.

"So?" you say. "You're smart. I mean, you've got no student loans. Everyone should have to do that." But you admire the military in him for more than just the lack of debt, which is, admittedly, a big plus. He's just so respectful. And so polite with people who find out about his service and thank him.

You can't help but love how gracious and humble he is when he bows his head and says "Well, it was my pleasure" or "Please, that's not necessary" when they try to buy him a drink.

Even your girlfriends notice, in the way he walks, the way he stands so straight. You think he acts more like he spent his time in the Middle East instead of two years in Japan, and you don't mind when other people think so too.

And if meeting all your prerequisites wasn't enough, he is always somehow doing the right thing. You like to watch his lips curl ever-so-slightly downward during the eleven o'clock news. For the kind of stuff that stopped moving you a long time ago. And of course he is entirely chivalrous. Opening the door, ushering you inside first, bringing over white tulips on the afternoon of your housewarming. You proudly displayed them on your new cherry wood coffee table. How tastefully, you noticed, they went with the décor.

It is in this blissfully happy stage of your new relationship, in your new house, that things feel like they are finally coming together in the way that lives are supposed to come together. So you do the practical thing and begin to compile the addresses of friends and family members. And when your mother asks why you need the address for your great Aunt Jean in Sarasota, you say it's because your New Year's resolution is to send more cards. But you suspect she knows that you are compiling just in case. Just in case you might soon need to send announcements.

So you shouldn't be surprised, even though you are, when he suggests that he move in. They are downsizing at the bank. He hopes he won't be targeted and he doesn't feel threatened, but he wants to play it safe, start cutting some expenses. He says, too, that he thinks things are going well between you, and he really cares about you, and thinks you should give it a go. And ever being the gentlemen, he insists on paying rent. He says you should sleep on it, but you immediately accept, all smiles. Only later

do you wish that he hadn't included that part about work. You wish it was just because of you. But then again, he is so practical, and you can't fault him for it. And it is nice to be able to buy the lace curtains, the last thing on your shopping list, after he gives you his first month's rent.

With each day that passes you feel more and more like this might be it, this might be your story, one worth telling. The kind of story that needs to be shared, a story that delights with its repetition. A story that is either so crazy or weird or perfect or chilling that it somehow changes the person it belongs to. And you owe it to the story to pass it on as many times as you can. Like your friend Angie who found a body in the woods while she was jogging on campus. Or Jessica's dad, who had a brain aneurism and lived. And the cousin of a coworker who ran away from home and resurfaced years later when he published a bestselling memoir. All these stories are so unbelievable but true that even you retell them whenever you get a chance.

You want a story so much for yourself, a story to tell at brunches and dinner parties and late at night over cocktails. The thought that this fairytale could belong to you makes your mouth water. And, you know, so what if it is a little perfect? You can almost hear your friends saying, *I have a friend who met the ideal guy while buying her first house on, get this, Ideal Way. They still live there and are married and have two kids: one boy, one girl.* You like the way it sounds. And with each romantic meal for two, each painting hung and leveled, each rose left on the kitchen counter, it sounds even better.

Then one Thursday afternoon you come home from work to find Jacob wearing jeans, putting two plates of spaghetti on the table. He says he has something to tell you, and that something is he lied. When he told you about the potential layoff, it wasn't really potential, he had been let go. And he wanted to tell you, he

swears, but he was embarrassed. You wrinkle your forehead thinking of how to approach the rent topic, your mortgage, the vase you had been planning to buy for the dining room.

"I understand if you're mad," he says. "Insecurity, I guess. I was afraid you wouldn't want me without the paycheck."

You think carefully before saying, "I won't stop loving you because you got laid off. But I can't keep doing this if you lie to me."

"I'm sorry," he says. Then a few minutes later, "So, you still love me, right?"

"Come on," you say, rolling your eyes.

The next evening you come home to find he hung the lace curtains in the bedroom, and you figure it might not be so bad to have Jacob at home to fix things around the house. A lot could get done. And that night while he is checking job postings, you cuddle under a blanket on the couch with your laptop and allow yourself to research diamond rings, just for fun, minimizing the window whenever he asks you a question. You would never get married while he was unemployed, for obvious reasons, but you have no doubt he will find a job again soon. No doubt.

Before the news, he walks over and whispers in your ear, "Come to bed." So you follow him, and turn your head as he presses inside you. After he finishes, you lay with your back to him and listen to the rain outside, watching lightning flash through the lace curtains, creating dots on the bedspread like so many sequins. He says to the wall across from him, "I hope you know I'm trying my best to give you everything you want."

Before you can answer, Stacey Williams dies.

It happens quickly. Tires squealing, trying to grip, glass folding into itself, metal splintering. Jacob shoots up and runs into the living

room. "What the fuck?" You come out and look through the spot he parted in the blinds. Touching your nose to the glass then pulling back, stung. A red jeep is hugging your oak tree.

"Jesus." He grabs your hand.

You don't really know how much time passes before the ambulance arrives. You watch Jacob pacing in the yard, peering into the windows of the car. She is slumped over. "Should I get her out? Should I move her? I don't think I should move her." You don't respond. The paramedics come and get in the vehicle. Without doing much of anything they pronounce her dead. They try and ease Jacob by saying it wouldn't have mattered. It's a rainy Friday night and she'd probably been drinking, speeding. She lost control, hit it head-on. Instantaneous.

You go back inside during the extraction but you can't help but peek again through the blinds as they carefully lift the sixteen-year-old with blood-matted blonde hair from the wreckage, her right arm shaking like Jell-O, and zip a black bag around her the way you might zip a garment bag over a wedding gown. The police have a couple questions, the neighbors gawk. Late in the afternoon a tow truck comes and pulls the jeep out of the yard. You run your hands over the red paint chips, the knick in the tree trunk. You frown. Jacob kisses your forehead and says, "If it wasn't for that tree, she'd be in our living room."

In the days following the accident you read and watch every news clip you can find. Most of the photos include your house, the red jeep, the red door, some of them with Jacob in the background holding his hand over his mouth. *A tragedy occurred last night on this quiet Dilworth road....* You learn that Stacey Williams was a junior who ran track and was on the honor roll. You keep repeating "Can you believe this?" to no one at all.

You go to the funeral, because that's what

you should do. Jacob suggests you send flowers and you do that, too. You listen intently as Stacey's family and friends speak about her. Her cousin talks about how Stacey taught her how to do handstands in the swimming pool when they were twelve. Her English teacher on how bright and talented she was. Her friend Merissa on how she loved hip-hop dancing and wearing black and pink. Then another friend Katelyn cries that they will always be sisters at heart, in life and death, forever, even though they weren't related. The church is standing room only.

Two weeks later Merissa and Katelyn and another girl you don't recognize stop by asking for money for a scholarship fund they are starting in Stacey's name. They say they knew that you would want to contribute. You pause, looking past the girls in the doorway to the flowerbeds the landscaper had just refinished. "Of course we would," Jacob says from inside the house, heading for his wallet. You don't bother telling him that you seriously wonder if a girl who drank and drove herself into a tree deserves to have a scholarship in her name.

You start having trouble sleeping. You lie awake at night wondering who would care if you suddenly and tragically died at age twenty-eight. If there would be any Merissas or Katelyns that showed up for you. If you would have a crowded funeral. If your coworkers, your high school friends, your college girlfriends, your family members would all be there. Who would write their name in the guestbook, who would regret not getting a chance to say goodbye, who would buy a park bench in your memory. You get out of bed and write down the names.

You also list what ways you could die that would get the biggest and most emotional response. Cancer, obviously, but that usually has a little bit of a warning. Things that are unexpected are best. Medical reasons: heart failure,

stroke, aneurism. Then there are car wrecks or plane crashes, the latter being more desirable. But these are topped of course by suicide, homicide, and freak accidents, in that order.

One night Jacob comes out to check on you and peeks over your shoulder to see a hangman scrawled on your notepad. "You know," he says the next morning while making coffee, "this not sleeping stuff, it's starting to scare me. I lot of buddies of mine from the service went through it. You know, after something happens."

"What would you know," you snap. "You weren't even in a war."

He stares until you apologize, blaming lack of sleep. He doesn't understand that people who work as paralegals and have mortgages, people like you, die at eighty-one, and the only people who show up are their remaining family members. The children remember you, the grandchildren, barely.

Stacey's classmates also start another kind of memorial, but this one is in your front yard. You tolerate it at first, because that's what you should do, and because it is all luminaries and flowers. But after three weeks it shows no signs of slowing, and the flowers are being replaced by neon green and blue teddy bears that look like they were won in a claw machine. And each day when you come home there are more and more of them until it seems like the amount of bears is directly equivalent to the amount of sleep you've been losing. Then one day you come home from work to find a white cross edged with pink tissue paper taped to the tree, the dates of Stacey's birth and death drawn across the front in paint.

"Have you seen our yard?" you say, slamming the door.

"What?"

"It looks like the side of a highway out there."

"Come on, give it a rest. They lost their

friend."

"Well, I lost my yard."

You wait until Jacob leaves that night to meet some old coworkers, and then you go back outside with an empty file box and pick it all up. You stuff in the bears, the tacky cross, and a note signed "Kyle" that says "Stacey, when will it get easier?" You know that for the rest of his life, Stacey will be his story. Forever the friend, or maybe, the crush, that died in high school. It would be that way for all of them. Katelyn will tell it to her husband the first time he loses someone his age. I lost my best friend in high school... In college, Merissa will take the keys from her drunk sorority sister. My friend Stacey died in a car accident...

Jacob comes home a few hours later and asks, hesitating, "So, what happened to the memorial?"

"I boxed it up," you say, swallowing, "and gave it to Stacey's mom. I thought she should have it more than us."

He forces a smile and walks out of the room.

You shut the door and drop your purse and see Jacob waiting in the kitchen, his hands folded on the table like he does when he's mad. Only this time, his fingers are white.

"Guess who stopped by today?"

"Who?"

"Stacey William's mom."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She wanted to know why we took down the memorial."

"What did you say?"

"I said you told me you gave it to her."

"And what did she say?"

"Jesus Christ, what do you think she said?"

You look down at your hands balling into fists, pushing the car keys you're still holding into the flesh of your palm.

"She said she never got it!"

"You don't have to yell!"

"Yes, God damn it, yes. Yes, I do, I do have to yell. Why did you tell me you gave it to her? Why didn't she get it? What did you do with it?"

You bite your lip.

"What did you do with it?"

You look at your feet.

"What did you do with it?"

"I threw it away."

After he picks up the last of his things, you pull out your box of lists and draw two black lines through Jacob's name on the list of people you think will speak at your funeral. You come back to it two nights later, after polishing off a bottle of wine, and move his name this time to the top of the page. You know that if you were found broken at the bottom of a tall building he would be there, at your funeral. He'd be full of regret. Crying that he hadn't helped you, that he gave up on you, that he always loved you. And the room would be full of people weeping, people audibly sobbing. Not that quiet invisible crying that takes place when a grandparent dies.

When you are feeling better you place the list back into its box and your eyes roam across the words "does it ever get any easier?" and something occurs to you. It occurs to you that Stacey Williams is your story too. That you cannot be the girl who lives on Ideal Way, in an ideal neighborhood, in an ideal house, with an

ideal man. No, you can't, because instead you are the girl who had someone die in her yard not six months after she bought her first home. It's funny, really. You pick up a sad looking teddy bear, fur all matted from being left in the rain, and look into its glassy eyes. You can see your mother telling it to her best friend over coffee. Oh, she's been having such a tough time. Well, you know a girl died on her property right? Yeah. Car wreck, can you believe it? You can even see yourself when you move into a bigger place, shoving it off to your friends. I love this place, so much more spacious. And I was glad to get out of my old house, of course. Oh, I loved it too. But, you know, unpleasant memories.

And you can see Jacob, sitting at a kitchen table. Maybe with his Air Force buddy Mike, who you never got to meet. Drinking beers. And in the living room a blonde with a full round belly and a toddler on her knee is befriending Mike's new girlfriend. The TV is on and a news anchor appears in a blue pea coat saying, Fatal accident in a local neighborhood. Details at 11:00. The camera pans to the street sign, oak trees out of focus in the background. Jacob's wife smirks.

Mmph.

What?

Oh, it's nothing, she edges closer on the couch to her new friend. It's just that Jake used to live on that street.

Really? Mike's girlfriend breaks her ribs.

Yeah. With a girl he was dating at the time. Been they both are whispering. Anyway there was a car wreck, and a teenage girl hit the tree in the front yard and died.

Wow.

Yeah. But that's not all. This girl, the one he was with, was a real piece of work. Jake thought she was depressed. But anyway, the kids from the high school were leaving teddy bears and crosses in the yard as a memorial and she got all weird about it, said they were tacky, and she took them down.

Huh. Well, maybe, I don't know. It was her yard.

Yeah, but that's not the best of it. So she takes them down and tells Jake that she gave them to the girl's mom. But later the mom shows up for them.

What?

I know. And get this, she tells Jake that she threw them out.

Seriously? That's terrible.

Yes but that's the thing, though, Jacob's wife says, glancing into the kitchen. I don't think she threw them out at all. I think she still has them.



Everything Foreign

Monie Duotan

Georgia College & State University

The first boy I ever kissed was an out-of-towner. I was in eighth grade, and I had always lived in South Carolina, never even ventured out of the state. He was from Boston and had an accent that was completely foreign to me. When he stood to introduce himself to our English class, and that voice came out, I was drawn to it, as if lured by a Siren's song. His name was Mark, and I expected him to introduce me to new things, explain his corner of the world to me. I was disappointed to learn that Mark did not have much to teach me in the way of culture since we were both American and raised in the same culture. The first thing I learned from him was when to open and close my mouth during a kiss.

I was raised Southern Baptist, but Mark was Catholic. He took me to confession with him and explained how it worked. I liked the idea of confession, the idea that I could say anything. The priest would not tell anyone and God would forgive me. I began to make weekly walks down East Broad Street all the way to the railroad crossing and the overpass, and then I would slip into the only Catholic church in our town. The windows were stained and the altar was wide and long, much grander than anything in my clapboard Baptist church. At Catholic mass, the choir stood tall and formed their mouths into perfect Os. At my Baptist church, there was much more ostentation. The choir swayed from side to side, clapped their hands, and even moved their hips a little too much, so that they looked more like dancers than worshippers. Our Baptist church was a tiny space with ceiling fans. The old ladies smelled

like denture cream and peppermint, and they would hug you so tight you half smothered.

My conversion to Catholicism was the first phase of a lifetime spent sampling new religions and cultures. In college, I made friends with my Jewish roommate. Her name was Leah and she was from Brooklyn. When she asked me home with her for Thanksgiving, she mentioned we could go to synagogue together. I asked if there would be other black people there.

"No," Leah said. "There won't be. Why does it matter, Annie?"

I rolled my eyes and didn't say anything, but I wanted to ask if she had ever been some place where she was the only white person. I knew that the answer was no, she hadn't. And so how could she understand what I was really asking?

Leah and I saved the change we earned from our waitressing jobs and went on weekend escapades in her old Volvo. Our school was in New York State, but sometimes we'd drive over to Penn or up to Canada for the weekend. We once drove all the way to North Carolina because Leah had read a book about the Outer Banks and wanted to see what they looked like. She claimed the salt water turned her curly hair to frizz. She straightened her hair as often as I straightened mine. We complained about our curly hair, even used one another's wide toothed combs and straightening chemicals. Even now, when I remember Leah Berg, I see her tearing barefoot across Nag's Head beach with her wild hair flying out and her sarong slipping down just enough to reveal the curly brown hair beneath her navel.

Leah declared herself a feminist, but not the man-bashing type. She loved men as much as I did. She preferred the ones that came home with her from bars and sweated all night and then left early and never called.

"It's simpler this way," Leah said. "All I need

is a good fuck every now and then."

"You talk like a man," I said.

I wanted the type of guy who would hold doors open for me and recite poetry, and though I'd dated only ones who did the former, I had yet to find any who did the latter.

"You're such a sap," Leah said. "Lower your standards."

I couldn't lower my standards. From the first moment I began to notice boys, I knew I wanted one that was different from me.

In college I dated men from every part of the world. Haiti. West Africa. Ethiopia. Puerto Rico. India. The Netherlands. Italy. The man I remember most from my college days is Leah's brother.

As it turned out, I did go home with Leah at Thanksgiving during our sophomore year. Brooklyn was another world to me. The city blocks and the men in yarmulkes with those darks strands of hair down the sides of their faces were so different from anything I ever saw growing up in the Deep South.

As Leah drove us through the city, I asked about her family.

"Does your dad wear a yarmulke?"

"Nope," Leah said. "Does yours?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Only on weekends," I said, keeping my face neutral.

She grinned as we pulled up in front of a brownstone. I didn't know if the smile was in response to my question or if it was just in anticipation of being home after months of living away at school. In contrast, I had not gone home since I first left for college the year before. Though I did sometimes miss my mother and even dreamed about our little shotgun house, I still could not bring myself to go back there. I felt that I had matured, and so it was hard to go home. I wanted to shake the red clay of the Piedmont from beneath my feet and become

someone new.

On that Thanksgiving Eve, Leah and I decided to bake pies. Halfway through mixing the ingredients together, she realized we needed more flour and left to buy it. I was beating yams and sugar into a thick, orange glaze when I heard the kitchen door open and felt the cold New York wind on the nape of my neck. The man who stood in the doorway was not much taller than me, and he had Leah's face—straight dark eyebrows hung low over brown eyes that were too close together. His chin, like Leah's, was broad and slightly pointy. I knew that he must be her brother Seth.

Seth stepped forward. "You must be the beauty queen from Alabama," he said, and Leah's dimple winked in his cheek.

"South Carolina," I said. I noticed that he offered his hand to me with his palm facing down, and I had to reach up to accept his handshake.

He was a charmer. By the time Leah came back from the corner market, he had regaled me with stories about crazy co-workers at his accounting firm and talked me into having dinner at his apartment on Friday evening.

Fiction

Seth lived in Manhattan. Though I wanted the dinner to include only the two of us, we shared the evening with Leah and two of her friends from NYU. They all talked about which boarding schools they had attended, their summers abroad, and myriad other things I knew nothing about.

I did wind up in bed with Seth. It happened that weekend after Thanksgiving. Leah had driven back to school on Sunday morning, but Seth offered to take me back the next day if I would spend the night with him.

Before Leah left, she whispered to me, "So if you marry my brother, will you convert?" She giggled. "You could be a Baptist Catholic Jew."

In bed with Seth, I tried to get his take on religion. He was a non-practicing Jew, and he didn't want to talk much about himself. Instead, Seth wanted to know about South Carolina and how I grew up and what I did there.

He traced my face with his fingertip. "I really like your nose and lips and hair," he said. "You look so different from me."

Something burned in my belly. At the time I thought it was the wine, but now I realize that I was to him what so many other men had been

to me: an experiment. I was his chance to taste something foreign to him: a blue collar black girl. But I didn't realize any of this at the time. And so I said, "I would really like to spend Christmas with you."

He didn't answer. I lifted my head and propped it on my hand. "Do you have plans for Christmas?" I asked.

His brown curls brushed across the pillowcase as he shook his head.

"Christmas is another month away, Annie. I guess we could get together, I mean, if we're still friends then..."

Realization dawned on me. This man wanted nothing to do with me outside of his experiment. We would not spend Christmas together or even speak again beyond that night.

"Take me home, please," I said, knowing that he would take me back to the dorm, but what I really wanted was to go back to South Carolina. This man did not want me and would not have me, but I knew that if I were to show up on the porch steps of our little shotgun house, no matter the circumstances, my mother would welcome me home.



to be touched

Keely Lewis
Agnes Scott College

Riley had never been good at kickball. She had attempted to learn to play the clarinet in fourth grade, but after three years as last chair, her band director finally decided that it was more merciful to ask her to stop playing than to let her continue to be ridiculed by the band parents. She had faithfully tried out to be a cheerleader every fall from seventh to twelfth grade, but had never even made Junior Varsity. Her eyes were mud-puddle brown and she wore overalls every day to school.

When she was younger, Riley had been bothered by how unimportant she seemed to be. No matter how much she studied, she got C's in history. No matter how much conditioner she put in her hair, it surrounded her head like smog by lunchtime. She had a nice group of friends, average young women like herself who had made it through the crucible of high school together and were now studying at various local community colleges and technical schools to become dental hygienists, cosmetologists, and data entry specialists. A few had husbands and one girl, Kate, had had a baby in the spring. His name was Garrett Thomas Abrams, after his daddy and his pap.

Riley had been over to the double-wide once to visit Garrett, had brought a cardboard copy of *Goodnight Moon* as a gift for him and a turquoise necklace for Kate. She and Kate chatted about motherhood over a couple of sodas and then a Bud. It was much harder to raise a child than she'd ever thought from watching her own mother, Kate had said. Especially when trying to go to school at the same time. She was lucky that Garrett Senior had been able to hang

on to his ticket-taker job at the race track, or else they'd never be able to afford diapers and textbooks at the same time. Riley had stared down at the child, asleep on carpet by her feet, as she listened.

Babies were fascinating when she really thought about it. When they were born, they seemed no more human than the monkeys at the zoo. They couldn't feed themselves, clean themselves, speak—they couldn't even hold their heads upright or focus their eyes. In many regards, alligator and elephant babies were far more advanced than any human child. And yet, even after a week or two, human babies had personality. They might be completely helpless, but it was obvious that they were individuals. All you had to do was watch them for a few minutes and you could figure out that much.

Garrett Junior was in love with colors. Kate said. He was her little artist. When he woke up after his morning naps, he talked to the patches on the crazy quilt his Ma-Maw had made him. He'd just burble and laugh and carry on, she said. It was quite a sight. She had taken to drawing pictures for him in crayon, hung two feet from the baseboards all around the living room, in an attempt to get him to crawl faster. Kate liked coloring the pictures so much that she kept drawing airplanes and ice cream cones and basketballs and clowns until the whole trailer was wallpapered with doodles. She claimed that Garrett Junior fussed less than he used to and could sometimes be persuaded to give a slobbery smile.

Riley wondered if she'd ever get to have a child of her own. She hadn't had a boyfriend in a while. Not since Derek had died. Frankly, she doubted that she would ever be able to date again. Even by small town standards she wasn't a catch. But Derek had loved her, frizzy hair and all. They would have had a good life together. He had just gotten a job as a motorcycle me-

chanic down at Murphy's Auto Repair, and she had overheard his boss tell him that he was the best worker the shop had had in years. They'd been together for four years but he had respected Riley's wishes to live in separate apartments until they married. Her mom had begun to buy bridal magazines and was collaborating with Derek's mother, Patty, to make the Lion's Club dance hall glamorous—an Appalachian royal wedding, Patty had said. Patty was obsessed with Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding, even though it had happened months ago. Pictures from celebrity-watch magazines were still taped all over her refrigerator door. But now Derek's obituary was wedged between the white horse-drawn carriage and the official royal family portrait.

Derek had died just off Route 8. He'd taken a too-sharp turn and crashed through the guardrail into the creek below. The sheriff saw his green pickup wrong-way-down and knew he was dead before he looked in the cracked window. The funeral had been closed casket. Cousins and neighbors and kids from his votech graduating class had all come with potted plants, eaten too-salty ham and scalloped potatoes, said he was a better place. Riley had hated it when they said that, and knew everyone knew she hated it. It was a useless consolation, really, seeing as everyone who heard it felt worse afterward. Disney World was a better place than Swiss Ferry. Six feet below a ton of packed dirt was not. Even now, five months later, she couldn't bring herself to smile at those neighbors when they passed each other in the grocery store. Mostly, though, she had moved on. She had taped a picture of Derek to her mirror and kissed it every day, but continued her coursework and training at the hospital. The bills had to be paid, whether she felt like working or not.

He had thought about being a preschool

teacher when she was in high school but had heard it was harder than ever to find a full-time position in child care. Instead, she was going to school to be a physical therapist's assistant. Her cousin Howie worked at the hospital and said physical therapy was a great job if you liked old people. Riley did. Though she had never been popular in school, she had always loved people, regardless of their age. Toddlers and Pre-K's were easy to love, but seniors were storytellers. There was so much to learn from them—all you had to do was take the time to listen. Riley purposely scheduled her haircuts on Thursdays because she knew that was when the ladies from the Oak Street Methodist Women's Society came in together to get their weekly fluff-ups. Each had a particular way in which she wanted her hair to curl under or fan out, but after two hours of gossiping, fussing, and drinking instant coffee, they all looked the same to Riley. Sometimes she got a manicure after her trim, just so she could keep listening to the ladies reminisce about what the town had been like when they were girls, an infamous band who had worn their skirts a tad higher than their parents allowed and had made wisecracks about the minister just loud enough for him to hear.

Those facts made it even funnier when they acted scandalized at the "young people these days" who had eyebrow piercings and dyed their hair fuchsia. Sometimes she wished her hair grew faster so she would need it cut more often.

A few months ago Riley had finished her second year of physical therapy training, surprising herself by graduating with a B+ average. School had never been easy for her, but understanding the way the body worked came naturally to her. The way the muscles and tendons and joints all came together—it made sense somehow. And the people she worked with knew she could heal. Six-year-olds with leg braces, teenage volleyball players with torn rotator cuffs, and crotchety old men with arthritis all trusted her touch. Even the meanest hairy-eared grump relaxed when she laid her hands on his knees. Something else happened, too, as she kneaded shoulders and ankles and calves and spines. Her patients told her about winning the regional championship and losing the family golden retriever. They showed her pictures of their grandkids at Christmas. One girl, Molly, always pulled a linty cookie out of her jumper pocket by way of thank-you after Riley

stretched her calves and heels each Wednesday. The child had handlebar pigtails, perpetually dirty hands, and Barbie pink orthotics. "So everyone knows I'm a princess." Cletus, a seventy-three-year-old fry cook with chronic back pain, clipped the crossword puzzles from the Sunday paper to hand her on Mondays and gave her hints to the remaining blanks during the following week. "Little Miss Sing-Song," he called her, after he walked in on her during her break once, humming along with the radio. These days he just called her Missy.

Sometimes, when she wasn't tired enough for bed at night, Riley pulled out her old high school yearbooks and found her gray face lined up alongside the other alphabetized students. It was cautious and just a bit beaten down. That half-inch teenaged smile said it knew it wasn't attached to a prom queen or brainiac. It knew it would never end up in the newspaper. But that smile wasn't the same as the one Riley wore now. Even on nights when her ankles were swollen and she missed her could-have-been husband, she was content with her life. She could touch people. And that was enough.



What They Say

Kirsty Rutland
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I.

While sitting in the car with your first lover, you're thinking about how strange it feels to have had him inside of you and to have felt nothing at all but movement, but friction. He's driving and singing and holding your hand and you think of all the things you shouldn't be thinking. You're wondering what it would be like to burn from the inside out, for fire to bloom out from your stomach, just reaching the tips of your fingers and toes to thaw them.

You wonder if you lost something. Your grandmother called promiscuous girls "rips." You never understood why, but now that you might be a rip, you understand how they felt. You are no different, anymore. You are no better.

You have been a virgin for twenty years and it means nothing to you now. All girls begin that way, intact, perfect. Your mother told you this, your grandmother. When you were a child, you asked them if men were born perfect too, and they laughed and shook their heads, as if it were impossible to explain. The word *virgin*, the word that used to stick in your throat when you told someone, doesn't apply to men, or at least not in the same way. You took pride in that word when you used it around your family. It seemed to make them happy, to make you something important.

You became ashamed of it in high school, when it made you something different, something strange and foreign. In college, it only got worse, and people looked at you differently after you told them, as if there were something wrong with you, something that didn't show on

the outside.

You fell in love in college with a man you swore you'd never care about. He was dumb and beautiful, or so you thought. You wanted experience, you said; you were tired of being labeled that word *virgin*. He let you explore him with your hands and mouth, but when he tried to touch you, you froze.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"I'm a virgin," you stammered, choking on it as if you were admitting something huge, something awful.

You will never forget the way he looked at you after that. He never tried to touch you again, even when you begged. He didn't need to know who you were, and taking your virginity (because it was something that could be taken, something that could be given) would have given him knowledge he didn't want. He needed you to know who he was, and you did. He talked to you for hours about his abusive father and his ex-wife and you took his pain, let it flow over you. You carried it in your bone marrow and it weighed you down. You dragged your feet for months after he left you. Even now, every time you think about him it's like a bolt of lightning, and you took this new lover as a distraction more than anything else.

Your lover stops at a red light now. He leans over to kiss you and you don't turn your head, because you always want to be distracted. You met him at a bar. You went home with him because you were trying to forget who you were and he drew the pain out of you with his hands on your breasts, his mouth on your neck. You think he loves you because he isn't used to healing.

He became a street fighter at fifteen. He made men bleed, tells you about his brass knuckles and how he used the money he made to invest in a business. He says that his street name was Wolf, and you believe it because he

is a feral sort of man, growling when you rake your nails down his back or bite his neck. But you call him puppy for the way he whimpers when you hurt him, the way he follows you close, his hand hovering near the small of your back. He doesn't touch you, just gives you the suggestion of a touch, a guide, and it's one of the things that makes you want to love him.

He's driving you home, and he sings to you. His beautiful voice doesn't match his lean, hard body or the tattoos etched into his skin. He's looking at you and you feel a surge in your stomach that isn't love but might be pity, which might be close enough.

"I'm going to miss you, puppy," you say, and it's a sickeningly sweet lie. You will not miss him, but the glow he sees around you, the beauty he projects upon your face, the power you have to hurt him. He has fallen in love with you, or at least in obsession, and part of you wonders if there is any difference.

Even though you've kissed the knife scars on his back, you still can't picture him fighting shirtless behind his high school. Once, you found his brass knuckles discarded on the mantle. You picked them up and he took them from you quickly, hid them, as if he were ashamed.

He doesn't scare you, even when he tries, even when he grasps your foreign hipbones hard enough to bruise. He doesn't feel dangerous, and even if he did, it wouldn't turn you on. It wouldn't turn you off, either. It wouldn't turn you anywhere.

He stops the car at a gas station. You aren't on the road home. You aren't sure where you are and this doesn't seem unusual. You watch him walk in. He's walking fast. He's afraid that you will forget him, and maybe you will.

The last time you had sex, he kissed your bare shoulder and told you he was in love with you. You were afraid it was real and afraid it wasn't and all that fear got you thinking about

death. Not your own death, because that never led anywhere. You need to lead somewhere.

At fifteen, he pounced from the bushes and beat a man nearly to death for fifty dollars. He tells you this late at night, while you listen to the way his heart thuds against his chest, and he tells you that he still isn't sure if he killed the man or not. He says that he doesn't feel remorse, but you hear his heart thud harder, heavier. You wonder how many sins would cause his breastbone to crack.

He starts snoring, soon enough, and you scoot closer to him, put your mouth near his, as if he can breathe you into his lungs, as if you can hide inside of him, curl up between his ribs and hug his thudding heart.

This is where you go. This is where you are.

II.

You're ten days late and you're sitting on the bathroom floor trying not to vomit. You're not sure why it matters if the baby that might be growing inside of you like a tumor belongs to a man you don't love, but it does. You're thinking that up until this point the fear has been far away, muffled. You've chosen this moment to bring it close to you, after you wipe and there's still no blood.

You've got all these secrets, now, and you're looking down at the floor as if you're expecting it to crack beneath you. It's coming up now, all the secrets you've allowed to churn in your guts and all you can do is stick your head between your legs and try to be quiet. If you can stop thinking maybe you could breathe but now everything is flashing through your head.

You're thinking about how he got drunk and cursed you for not loving him, slammed his fist over and over into the wall, cracking the sheetrock, until you told him you loved him. You've been lying ever since and you're hoping the baby is his because at least he loves you.

Your mother says she doesn't recognize you anymore because you've lost so much weight.

"You're too skinny. Your legs don't touch," she said on the phone a week after you visited for her birthday.

"I'm fine."

"It's not natural for a woman's thighs not to touch."

You want to tell her it isn't natural for women to be as big as her, to have legs and arms swinging like hamhocks, but you don't. You tell her you're losing weight because you're happy but really you're fucking too much and not eating enough and you're trying to hold on to something you're losing.

Sex fills you up, somehow, in a way that tells you you've never been whole before and it has nothing to do with wanting love. At least you think it doesn't. You're a feminist and you know that there's no biological link between love and sex. It's all society, it's all repression and oppression, it's all bullshit. So you sleep around. You don't tell him about the other men but he knows. He checks your cell phone and reads your emails and now whenever he drinks he gets a little violent, bruises you a little more and makes you keep your eyes open when he kisses you. You don't think you're in love. You don't think it matters if you are.

Now you're wondering. You're wondering why the possibility of a baby makes you wish you did love him, makes you want to become those women you hate that can't make their own decisions but allow fate to take them and shape them into housewives. You are surprised to realize that you don't want to fight at all. You're not even kicking and screaming.

The next time you're with him you'll notice fingerprint bruises on your hips and wonder if they're his fingers or someone else's. You'll think that if you are pregnant, it must be the fingertips of the father, because surely no one else

could mark you.

III.

He gets back into the car and this time he turns off the radio. He holds your hand tight and takes you down a road you've never been. You open your mouth to ask where he's taking you but then you realize it doesn't matter.

"I've got a surprise for you," he says when he sees you looking at him.

His eyes are bloodshot. He hasn't slept. They're greener than usual, wilder, and you can see more of the wolf in him.

"We'll drop by the bar. See a few friends."

He isn't talking enough, but it doesn't bother you. You're riding the waves. You wonder if it's the after effects of the pot brownies you ate the night before, but you don't think so. Ever since that night in the bathroom you've been thinking that life gets easier if you let it control you.

At the bar, he buys four shots and the bartender lines them up on the counter. You take them all, one after the other. They go down like water, flow through you like blood.

There are a lot of men at the bar and when he goes to the bathroom they gather around you like vultures.

One of them has bright blue eyes and he asks if you want a drink.

"Anything that doesn't taste like alcohol," you say, and the man smiles and gives you something that's heavy and sweet like honey.

Your lover comes back to the bar and asks you where you got the drink.

"I don't remember," you say, because you don't, and even if you did you wouldn't tell him. He broke a man's nose once for asking for your number. He tells you he has to stop taking you out in public. He says that you're too beautiful, but you know he's wrong. It's that you aren't beautiful enough. Men wonder what you're

doing there. They wonder why a homely girl would wear frilly clothes. They wonder how you got so skinny. You look naked even in clothes, your bones showing, poking out from beneath your skin as if they're trying to escape.

You're drunk and you don't protest when he takes you to the car. You don't care where you're going and it's probably because of the pot and the booze but it might also be because you don't know who you are. You don't recognize yourself anymore than your mother does.

"What happened to you?" Your brother was leaning against your doorjamb when he asked you this. You were curled up on your twin bed, hungover, trying not to move. You didn't answer him and he kept asking questions.

"Where did you go?" he asked you.

You went away. You crawled inside yourself and disappeared. You've just realized it, now, and you're trying to claw your way out but you keep making the same wounds with your fingernails over and over, never getting any closer.

Now your head is lolling against the seat. He puts your legs in, bending your knees, and you grab your foreign hipbones and squeeze hard. The pain brings you back in to focus, a little, and you think that something awful must have happened to you. You don't know what it was.

You think you're losing yourself along with every ounce of fat on your body because of no reason at all and that sobers you up a little. You look over at your lover.

"Where are we going?"

He smiles, baring his teeth, and for the first time you notice they are crooked and yellowing. "You'll see."

IV.

It isn't true, what they say about love. The first time your heart breaks straight through, you were nineteen years old. You were

asleep in his bed and he woke you up by curling his arm around you as hard as he could, digging into your ribs with his fingers until it hurt. You could feel it, then, how you weren't big enough, weren't the right shape. When you turned over to face him, he let go of you and sat up on the edge of the bed.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he took a hitching breath, put his head in his hands. You had known this man for two months and it felt like twenty years because every piece of you ached when he smiled at you. He met you two days after his live-in girlfriend had broken his heart, and you spent the rest of the year trying to mend it, trying to be the right fit.

"Oh, God," he said. "She's gone."

You looked at him for a moment, watched him, and you could see the holes she punched in him and you felt sorry because you had never been enough. He wanted an empty kind of love, and yours was too full, too heavy. It hung over you like a rain cloud, clung to you like smoke.

You thought if you can heal him with your body, fill up the holes inside of him with your love, he might stay. You sat up and touched him, ran your fingertips along his spine. He stiffened.

You were thinking about the places that life takes you, and then you were thinking that life had never taken you anywhere.

In the movies, the plain girl gets prettier, and the bad boy falls in love with you. Love is grandiose, wide and encompassing. It takes over the lives of the characters; leads them somewhere they've never been and it's glorious.

Here, where the plain girl stays plain and the bad boy always hurts you, love actually exists. Love takes you somewhere, makes you something. Love isn't something you feel or something you do but somewhere you go. It's wrapped up with fate and it's a path you choose to take. The place you go isn't always pretty, but it's a place. It's somewhere to be. It's a home.

You can get there for a few minutes with sex, you think, although at this point in your life you are still a virgin and part of you thinks you always will be. You fear that you will die intact.

You are wrong about that. You are wrong about love. You are listening to what they say about it, the lies they choose to tell you.

You beg him to stay with you, to spend the night, and for hours, he places his head on your breast and cries. You hold him and you think if you can just hold him tight enough, you can make him yours.

In the end, he leaves anyway, and it takes six months before you open the door at two a.m. to see him leaning against the doorjamb, staring at you, his eyes with the constant beer haze like foam on seawater and a sheepish half grin that makes you let him in.

He talks and talks, and you can hear the rain thudding down on the roof and every word he says, every breath he takes, is breaking your heart. You listen to the rain and think about time and how it doesn't heal a goddamn thing. All that time does is make him want you after you've given up. You're like an amputated limb, only itching and burning after you are gone.

When you make him leave you think you might die because when the door shuts behind him you can't breathe, feeling like he had gutted you, reached in and twisted, winding you tight like the dial on a music box. He kept turning and turning until the dial wound too tight.

The music won't play.

V.

Here is where you are. Here is where you've gone. He takes you to the park and puts you on the swing. You slump over because your head is spinning and he looks at you as if you're above him. You are above him, physically, because he kneels beneath you, between your knees.

You think that this is the moment. This moment, right now, you find everything out about love.

You realize that you were right about love being somewhere you go. You're there, now, and you know it because you don't care why he has taken you here. You think he will either kill you or propose and either way, you feel prepared. You don't know which one you want more.

You look down at him and the moonlight glints off the sand and it's romantic, just like the movies.

He opens his mouth and out comes everything you've ever wanted to know about love. It isn't what they said. It isn't what they said at all, but something smaller, something tangible, like a grain of sand or a chip of diamond, something

you can hold in your hand. Something that you might injure yourself with, stick inside of you and cut deep. You want to ask him how he knows but now you're blacking out, falling out of the swing and into his arms and before you close your eyes you wonder if you've died.

VI.

You wake up and look at the ceiling. Your first thought is that there's something lonely about love. Something lovely. And that's all you ever remember about the previous night, even when he reminds you.

You're surprised that he didn't kill you. You had begun to think that maybe he was dangerous after all, that maybe you should worry.

"I love you," he says, when you glance his way.

You don't know exactly what they say about love, but you're pretty sure it isn't true. You've heard love compared to barbed wire, to roses, to chocolate. You think it's more like cancer, abnormal cells dividing and multiplying and spreading through your body, inching its way to your heart.

"I love you, too," you say, and for the first time, you aren't sure that it's a lie. You curve your arms around your stomach. You think that maybe losing yourself is taking a different path. You also think that maybe you're lying to yourself. It isn't true, what they say about love, because they say that it's true. Love is the biggest lie of all.



Granddaddy Ocean

Ally Wright
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The house was hung with pictures of Granddaddy Ocean. That was what August knew.

It had been Granddaddy Ocean as long as he could remember. He'd never questioned the name, had never seen anything more than pictures of the ocean, over his mother's bed, over the dining room table, above the wooden mantle on the brick wall of the living room, and so he figured it was natural. Those pictures and what they pictured were called Granddaddy Ocean. He was called August. The woman who walked through the house singing slowly to herself, she was called Mother.

Granddaddy Ocean was big and blue and crunchy. August was quiet. Mother was beautiful. His child-self had everything figured out.

The name Granddaddy Ocean flowed from Mother's mouth with the ease of waves rocking towards soft sand. She described waves. She described sand. Again, August had never seen them. They lived in the middle of the continent. Mother pointed on the map in the room that was her office and his schoolroom. They lived in the middle, and Granddaddy Ocean lived on the edges. Someday, maybe, they would visit.

As he grew older, as he finally started school with the other children, being sectioned off into a third grade classroom because he was nine and that was where the other nine-year-olds went, he realized that the children there didn't know Granddaddy Ocean. They knew Sea, Ocean, Beach. They had seen it. They knew Granddaddy, too, but did not put it with Ocean. He knew what Granddaddy was to them; he called his Pop. He was Nana's second husband, Mother's stepfather. Pop and Nana came to visit

once a year, for his birthday in June. They gave him money now, after giving him a toy plane for his sixth birthday, when he liked trains. When they visited, his mother did not walk through the house singing.

Nana and Pop didn't know Granddaddy Ocean and neither did the children at school. Granddaddy Ocean, as his mother said, was all-knowing, gentle, loving, lapping at the edges of their continent always, though his voice muffled before it reached land.

He thought about asking his mother: Why do these others not know Granddaddy's name? But he didn't. He thought it was a special thing, his mother's and his secret, like the way the woman in the moon would open her ears to him every night before he went to sleep, his mother singing as he squeezed his eyes shut and sent the woman in the moon messages about his day—the snail in the backyard, the book from the library that was missing a page. He did not talk to Granddaddy Ocean, but August knew his presence was steady, and he did not want to lose that.

He was twelve and had been in classroom-school three years, when he found the letter. He was snooping in Mother's dresser. She was asleep on the light blue couch in the living room, a book open on her chest. A child at school had talked of snooping, of the secrets he might learn. That child had found money and his mother's diary. He had kept the money; he brought it to school and showed it to August. Two years in the world of children and things gave him a new perspective when he found the letter.

*I'll write you a poem.
The ocean swells with promise.
It falls back, unsure.*

He could call this Haiku, because his

mother had taught him that,
*I'll write you a poem.
The tide comes in, out again;
I never did leave.*

*The moon on the breast
Of the tide-driven ocean,
We are water-made.*

He could call this Symbolic, because his sixth-grade teacher taught him that.

*I'll write you a poem.
Is that an answer to the
Question that you seek?*

He did not know what to call this. No one had taught him that, yet. He kept reading.

*I never did leave.
As the ocean is constant
I am on the edge.*

He called this True; the ocean was constant. He remembered, as he sat on the white-carpeted floor in front of Mother's dresser, that Mother had said that. The letter was pages of this, addressed to a name: Victoria. That was the name Nana and Pop called Mother. The letter was signed:

With my forever love and regret,

But the name was scratched out.

*Water follows light;
Moons pull, and bodies follow.
Forced, they are, to move.*

August read all of the letter—16 ruled pages torn from a notebook, the edges crinkled—of these Haiku-like poems. The penmanship (his

fourth-grade teacher taught him that word, showing him how to make slow, loopy letters with his pen) was small, wiry, but the ink was thick. The author with the scratched out name had pressed his pen hard into the paper.

When he finished reading, August looked up at Granddaddy Ocean above Mother's bed. He stood up to put the letters back in her wooden drawer, lifting the stacks of old t-shirts, under which he had found the folded letter. He then saw what he had missed earlier, in his excitement over finding the letter. A photo of a man, tall, with blonde hair and large, thick-rimmed glasses. The colors of the photograph were distorted: a brown tint across the middle, a splash of blue seeping in from one bottom edge. The man stood next to a little girl much smaller than August but who was blonde, like him. He was smiling; the little girl was looking off to the side of the picture, but she was holding his hand.

August turned it over. On the back, he read:

*The tide moves out, in.
Time moves forward, forgive me.
We move like oceans.*

*I will wait for you,
Love,*

But the name was scratched out.





Drama

The Owl's Nest

Cheryl Wollner
Agnes Scott College

SETTING: OWL's kitchen. It is barely furnished, dirty, and overall ill-kept. A sink is stacked with dirty dishes. There is a breakfast nook in one corner of the stage with one decrepit chair. On the counter-top is a fork, a whole melon, and a knife.

AT RISE: Lights up on OWL in the chair talking to AQUAMARINE who's asleep in the breakfast nook. Rain can be heard from outside. OWL strokes AQUAMARINE's hair. A door offstage is opened and rain can be heard more distinctly. The door is closed as HELIX enters wearing a wet raincoat. He throws the coat onto the counter before noticing OWL.

HELIX

(hesitantly and from across the stage)

Good morning, Owl.

OWL

(OWL looks up at HELIX. She is awake and excited.)

G'morning. Come here and look at our newest player. I saved her. Isn't she perfect for my game?

HELIX

(HELIX moves to the breakfast nook)

I've seen her already, Owl. Can I talk to you for a—

OWL

You haven't seen her when she's asleep. Look, look! People seem so young when they sleep.

HELIX

But she is young. She's younger than me.

OWL

Not by much. Not at all really, you're not so much older than her.

HELIX

How old is this girl anyways?

OWL

Her name is Aquamarine and she's going to be your sister. I think she said she was seven. Maybe eight. I don't remember asking but she may have said at one point or another.

HELIX

Well, I'm almost twelve and a half. That's practically a teenager and, Owl, you were a teenager once so you'll understand. I wanted to ask you—

OWL

(laughing)

You're not that old. You don't wanna be a teenager. You don't wanna be old.

HELIX

But I do!

(OWL stands up and takes a long look at HELIX. AQUAMARINE wakes up suddenly and looks around, forgetting where she is. Her eyes settle on OWL and she calms down.)

OWL

Aquamarine, there's nothing to be afraid of.

(OWL sits next to AQUAMARINE and strokes her hair.)

AQUAMARINE

Morning, Owl.

OWL

Helix was just being too loud. That's what woke you. I'm sure of it.

HELIX

Owl, you're not listening—

OWL

Now that we're all awake who's ready to play a game?

AQUAMARINE

I wanna play. What are we playing today, Owl? Pirate ship? Could we play Pirate Ship? I really liked that from yesterday.

OWL

No. Today needs to be different, more exciting too.

(OWL hears the rain)

OWL

Damn this rain! It ruins everything.

HELIX

The game can wait, Owl. I have something I need to ask you about—

AQUAMARINE

So we can't play outside? All the best things are outside. Helix, what's more exciting than Pirate Ship? You must know all Owl's games. Helix? Helix? You know all Owl's games right? Right?

HELIX

(to AQUAMARINE)

Can you shut up for one moment? I need to talk to Owl. Owl?

OWL

What? I was in the middle of picking today's game!

HELIX

Listen to me! I want to go to public school.

OWL

You want what?

HELIX

Public school. I know it would be difficult with us living so far away, but I met this girl, this girl named Penny, and I can walk to her bus stop in a little under an hour if it's good weather. That's where I was this morning and the past few weeks. I went to see Penny off to school. She's the prettiest, nicest girl I've ever met and I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think we could do it. But now that you have Aquamarine I know you won't be lonely. Can I go?

(OWL stares at HELIX and shakes her head no.)

OWL

You're mine. Why would you want to leave me when I can teach you fine here. Haven't I taught you fine here? Haven't I?

HELIX

Well, yes, but not everything. What about math and science? I don't know any of that.

OWL

You don't need it! All you need is me—

HELIX

But what about when I get older? I can't stay here forever.

OWL

Who says you can't?

HELIX

All normal kids go to school. They go to school and they learn things and then they get married. Normal kids don't stay at home playing games.

OWL

You're not a normal kid! What's wrong with your life with me? What could be better than playing with me?

HELIX

Owl, why can't you let me go? I'd just be gone during the day. I'm old enough that I need to grow up.

OWL

You need to stay with me! If you cared about me at all you'd know you need to stay, but you've never cared about me. You're selfish and ungrateful.

HELIX

But I'd still be here to play with you—

OWL

Stop lying! I need... I need to pick today's game and I can't do that listening to your lies!

(OWL runs offstage.)

AQUAMARINE

Owl's right, you shouldn't lie.

HELIX

But I wasn't lying.

AQUAMARINE

I've been to public school and you don't have time for things like games if you go there. At public school all you have time for is homework. You shouldn't lie to your mom, not when there are poor kids like me without moms to lie to.

HELIX

Owl's not my mom. And I didn't ask to hear your life story either, so stop being so tragic.

AQUAMARINE

But Owl told me I could be the tragic hero of one of her stories. You're so lucky to be raised by Owl. Owl would be a great mom, she's always there when you wake up and she always wants to play.

HELIX

Listen, little girl—

AQUAMARINE

Aquamarine. That's what Owl decided my name should be. She didn't like my old name.

HELIX

What was your old name?

AQUAMARINE

It doesn't matter. Owl calls me Aquamarine and I like that better. Owl picked the best name for me.

HELIX

You don't know Owl. You don't know anything about her and you can't play in one or two of Owl's games and expect to understand her. You don't know Owl like I do. And if you did you'd want to run back to wherever you came from.

AQUAMARINE

You're just being mean to Owl and that's not fair. I do know about her and I know that if you really meant those mean things, you wouldn't be wearing her handkerchief.

(HELIX grabs onto the handkerchief around his neck.)

HELIX

So? What does it matter what I wear?

AQUAMARINE

Owl gave it to you. She told me so herself. You wouldn't wear her present if you didn't love her.

HELIX

Well, I could take it off right now if I wanted to and never wear it again.

(HELIX reaches for his handkerchief, but stops before he pulls it off.)

HELIX

But I won't 'cause you're just jealous that I have a present from Owl and you don't. You want my handkerchief and I won't give it to you.

AQUAMARINE

I don't want some funny old handkerchief. If you go to public school wearing that all the kids are gonna laugh at you. You'll be weird and stupid.

HELIX

You don't know anything about anything.

AQUAMARINE

I know lots of things and I'm just trying to help. Maybe that's what Owl's doing too. Maybe she knows you're just not good enough for public school. Maybe I'm the one who deserves a present from Owl. I know if Owl was my mom I wouldn't deny it or lie to her.

HELIX

Owl's not my mom! I wasn't lying about that either. You're the one who's the liar.

AQUAMARINE

How am I the liar?

HELIX

You think you know so much because you've been to public school? That doesn't mean anything. You just want my handkerchief. You think it'll bring you closer to Owl but it won't.

(pause)

You can only get so close to her. I'm sorry about whatever happened to your real mom, but Owl won't be a replacement. I love her but—

AQUAMARINE

So do I.

HELIX

You don't know her! How can you love someone you barely know?

AQUAMARINE

Like how you know that girl Penny?

HELIX

Leave her out of this! She's perfect and you're just an idiot.

AQUAMARINE

I bet I'm smarter than she is.

HELIX

You're Owl's new toy and that's all you'll ever be. You'll never get a present because Owl doesn't love you.

AQUAMARINE

Owl does so love me. You're just mad she won't let you go to public school. That's why you're being mean to me.

HELIX

Fine, I'm mad. That's not something I've been trying to hide. But you've been just as mean to me.

AQUAMARINE

Kids are mean! Kids at public school will be mean. Why would you want to go there? I wouldn't go back for anything. Penny can't be that great.

HELIX

Penny is more than great. She's funny and smart and she loves math. I've never known anyone who loves math before! And when I let her on at her

bus stop she always sits by a window so she can wave at me and she's always smiling while she waves. You know what else? The only games she knows are games like chess or checkers. I'd rather play checkers with Penny than play Pirate Ship with Owl.

AQUAMARINE

Really?

HELIX

Of course. Haven't you ever known someone you'd do anything to spend time with?

AQUAMARINE

My real mom. But she's dead.

HELIX

(pause)
I wasn't trying to hurt Owl.

AQUAMARINE

But you did.

HELIX

Yeah, but I didn't mean to. I just wanted—
(pause)

It doesn't even matter now. I did hurt Owl and when she comes back she's gonna be mad. She may be mad at you too—

AQUAMARINE

But I didn't do anything! That's not fair!

HELIX

Why can't you be quiet and let me talk? I'm trying to help you. Can we stop fighting during today's game? I don't know what the game will be, but we should stick together. Owl won't want to hurt either of us that way.

(OWL enters.)

AQUAMARINE

Are you alright, Owl?

OWL
We're going to play The Jungle.

HELIX
But you promised we'd never play that again.

OWL
The same way you promised to be here for me? I guess we're both liars.

HELIX
Owl, that's not fair. Last time we played I got hurt.

OWL
(to AQUAMARINE)
Only because he didn't play by the rules.

HELIX
I fell out of a tree and broke my wrist!

OWL
It's not hard to follow the rules. You just do what I say. Besides, we're inside this time. You can thank the rain for that. Now get up and play!

(OWL drags HELIX into the center of the kitchen. AQUAMARINE follows.)

AQUAMARINE
(whispering to HELIX)
Did you really break your wrist?

HELIX
Yeah, I have a scar and everything. My wrist bone pushed through my skin and we had to go to the hospital. Wanna see?

(HELIX attempts to show AQUAMARINE his wrist, but OWL grabs his arm.)

OWL
Yes, I'm sure it was horrible. Aquamarine, why would you want to see some nasty old scar? He broke his wrist, but it's not as bad as he says.

HELIX
It was bad. It really was.

OWL
Why trust a liar? You heard him lie to me before. If he can't tell me the truth why should he be able to tell you?

HELIX
Because I'm not lying.

OWL
Now come close, Aquamarine.
(whispered)
Once the game begins know that you can't trust anyone but me, okay?
(louder)
I love you.

(AQUAMARINE nods. OWL gives AQUAMARINE a hug.)

OWL
Ready to play?

HELIX
I'm ready.

AQUAMARINE
What are the rules?

HELIX
It's simple—

OWL
Just do what I say and follow the story.

(OWL begins a narration. Her narrating voice should be different from her normal speaking voice.)

OWL
It is mid afternoon when you wake up on the earthy floor of a jungle.

(HELIX lies down on the floor pretending to sleep.)

HELIX
Get down and do what Owl says. We can't wake up unless we were asleep.

(AQUAMARINE looks to OWL to make sure what HELIX says is true. OWL nods and AQUAMARINE lies down on the floor as if asleep.)

OWL
You wake up to the feeling of moss against your cheek and the dampness of the ground.

(HELIX and AQUAMARINE wake up.)

OWL
You don't know how you got here or where you are. All that you see are trees shooting up into the sky. There are more trees than you've ever seen before, thick all around, and so close to each other the canopy above seems to be a large mass of branches and leaves. On the earthy floor, raised roots wait to reach up and grab your foot. There's a life to this jungle, rumbling and stirring with energy, and yet everything is still and quiet. Everything waits for your move.

(OWL pauses while HELIX and AQUAMARINE look around at the setting she has created.)

HELIX
We should start moving. It'll get dark soon and I don't like this.

AQUAMARINE
You're not scared though, right? A jungle's just a big forest. I know a girl whose brother was a Boy Scout and they earned badges for finding their way out of forests.

HELIX
You don't get it, do you? This isn't some forest, this is a jungle. Like Africa. With lions and snakes and a million things just waiting to kill you. Do you hear anything?

OWL
The silence grows deeper and settles itself around you. If you reach out your hand you could touch it.

AQUAMARINE
(listening)
Nothing. Why?

HELIX
That's always a bad sign is why. Lions hunt silently until they're right behind you.

(OWL roars like a lion. HELIX climbs on top of the chair.)

AQUAMARINE
What are you doing? You're not afraid are you? 'Cause I kinda am and if you're afraid then—

HELIX
(HELIX climbs down, embarrassed.)
There's nothing to be afraid of. So long as you stick by me, there's nothing to be afraid of. Aquamarine, we have to start moving.

AQUAMARINE
You said that already and we haven't moved.

HELIX
Well now we're gonna move and we're gonna move fast.

(OWL roars again.)

HELIX
Now!

(AQUAMARINE follows HELIX. They run around the kitchen and then slow to a cautious walk. HELIX constantly checks around them, never looking at OWL.)

OWL
You run and you run. Whatever was out there seems to have lost interest in

following you but this doesn't make your journey any easier. You have traveled deeper into the jungle and the shadows fall thick and heavy around you. Every tree looks exactly the same and due to bad leadership you are utterly lost.

(HELIX turns one way then another but has no idea which way to go.)

OWL

You keep walking and eventually two distinct paths become clear. The path to the right has fewer trees and a bit more light. The path on the left is as dark as the rest of the forest.

(HELIX points left.)

HELIX

This way.

AQUAMARINE

But how do you know?

HELIX

(going left)

It's this way. It's always the way that looks the scariest. It was made to fool us but I won't be fooled.

(AQUAMARINE follows HELIX. They go a few steps when OWL comes up behind HELIX and cuffs him in the back of the head. OWL retreats.)

HELIX

Ow!

AQUAMARINE

What happened?

OWL

Something hits you in the back of the head. It came from up in the trees like a warning that you are heading the wrong way.

HELIX

It was nothing. Prolly just a monkey throwing nuts around. Let's go.

(HELIX and AQUAMARINE keep moving. OWL screeches like a monkey.)

OWL

Up in the trees above you sits a monkey thrashing its arms as if to tell you to turn back.

AQUAMARINE

You are going the wrong way. It's my turn to lead and I say nothing's following us. Let's find some food. I'm hungry.

OWL

The afternoon wears down to a close. The bits of sunlight that found their way through the trees are fading into even greater shadow. You can't remember the last time you've eaten. You can't remember anything from before you woke up.

HELIX

I guess we can stop, I'm getting pretty hungry myself.

(HELIX climbs onto the chair by the breakfast nook.)

HELIX

Are you coming? It's not safe to be eating on the ground.

(AQUAMARINE looks toward OWL.)

AQUAMARINE

I-I think I'll look for some berry bushes.

(HELIX sees the exchange with OWL.)

HELIX

Fine, go find your berries. They're probably poisonous anyway.

(AQUAMARINE looks around the kitchen for bushes.)

OWL

There are no bushes in the area. There are only trees.

HELIX

I told you you wouldn't find anything.

OWL

But while you search hopelessly, you hear a tinkling of bells and there is a sudden blinding white light.

(HELIX and AQUAMARINE cover their eyes.)

OWL

It takes you a few moments to see again, but once you recover you find before you a basket of fresh picked berries.

AQUAMARINE

I told you I could find food.

(AQUAMARINE starts to eat the imaginary berries.)

AQUAMARINE

I don't need to be up in some tree.

HELIX

But you didn't do anything. It just happened. How do you know it's not some trap?

AQUAMARINE

'Cause it tastes good. Why make a trap that tastes good?

HELIX

That's the point of a trap!

(AQUAMARINE continues eating.)

HELIX

Jeez you're stubborn! You don't listen to anyone, do you? If that's how it is, just go ahead and die down there.

AQUAMARINE

That's a mean thing to say. I won't die. This is a magical jungle and I have an angel who'll protect me.

HELIX

(laughing)

And how'd you come up with this?

AQUAMARINE

It has to be an angel who brought me this food and warned us to turn back. Who else could be so nice? All orphans have guardian angels.

(OWL goes behind HELIX and removes the chair he's standing on.)

OWL

The tree shoves you from its branches.

(HELIX falls forward onto the floor.)

HELIX

Hey! What was that for? That hurt.

AQUAMARINE

That's 'cause you don't believe in my angel. Angels don't like it when you're mean to girls they protect.

HELIX

Forget your stupid angel for a moment. Let's focus on getting out of here. It's almost night, I'm still starving, and I don't want that lion to come after us in the dark.

(OWL roars like a lion again. HELIX grabs AQUAMARINE's hand and drags her toward the opposite side of the kitchen.)

HELIX

You're welcome. Now, let's keep moving.

AQUAMARINE

Where? You don't know where you're going.

HELIX

I have a better idea than you so we're going this way. We'll stay in the trees.

(HELIX climbs atop the counter. AQUAMARINE follows.)

OWL

All is silent, but you can feel the presence of something creeping close behind. It follows you, coming closer and closer with each step. You don't know if it's human. You don't know if it's an animal, but it's dangerous and it's after you. You feel death is upon you with each second.

(OWL stalks HELIX and AQUAMARINE like a lion. HELIX attempts to turn around and look.)

OWL

If you turn around it'll kill you now! Don't turn to look.

AQUAMARINE

Helix? I'd share my guardian angel with you, but it doesn't seem to be watching me right now.

(AQUAMARINE and HELIX stop crawling along the countertop.)

HELIX

Don't be scared. If you're scared then whatever is after us has won. We don't want that. Now I'm not scared, but I need to know that you're not scared either.

AQUAMARINE

You're lying again.

HELIX

So?

AQUAMARINE

You're just as scared as me. Admit it.

OWL

The thing gets closer. You can now hear it breathing, its breath coming through an open mouth with sharp teeth. This thing wants you dead.

HELIX

I'm not scared, Aquamarine.

OWL

It's coming to eat you alive. It'll tear you to shreds. You know you should run.

HELIX

I'm not gonna run either.

AQUAMARINE

We're not running?

HELIX

No. We're not.

(OWL moves closer to HELIX and AQUAMARINE)

OWL

It'll tear off your arms and dig its bloody mouth into your guts! Run!

AQUAMARINE

Helix?!

OWL

This thing will rip into your heart, squirt you with your own blood, chew through your skull to get to your brain!

(OWL is close enough and ready to pounce, but she remains crouched, waiting.)

OWL

Why won't you run?

HELIX

Because that's exactly what you want.

AQUAMARINE

I wish my angel were here!

(OWL pauses.)

OWL

Your wish has been granted. The creature is struck down by a magical light coming from within its belly.

(As the lion, OWL roars in pain.)

OWL

You hear its tortured screams, but as the creature dies a little girl's voice is heard. The animal is dead and you are now free to turn and look.

(HELIX and AQUAMARINE turn around. OWL rises from the kitchen floor.)

OWL

Where there had previously been the deadly creature, an angel now stands before you. She has risen from within the animal and appears lovely and beautiful before you.

AQUAMARINE

Are you my angel?

HELIX

Aquamarine, stay back. This girl could be dangerous.

(OWL speaks as the angel. Her voice for the angel should be different from both her own voice and her voice for narration.)

OWL

Thank you for saving me. You have been brave beyond measure.

AQUAMARINE

But you saved us. We didn't save you.

OWL

Yes, you did. I am your guardian angel, but I have been locked away inside that hideous beast of prey and I could rarely use my magic to help you. By wishing for me in your last moments of life I was able to break free from the curse that had trapped me.

AQUAMARINE

You were the one who sent me those berries. You were the one who sent that monkey too.

(OWL nods.)

AQUAMARINE

See, Helix, I told you I have an angel.

(to OWL)

He didn't believe me, but I was right all along.

OWL

Of course you were right. I am your guardian angel, and not just because you are a poor orphan but also because you have hidden magic. I must be the one to tell you what that magic is.

AQUAMARINE

I'm magic! Helix, I'm magic.

HELIX

Okay, so you're magic, let's go. We need to escape, not stay put for some girl who says you're magic. I bet she's lying anyway. She might be that creature in disguise. Come on, we're going.

(HELIX starts to walk away but stops when OWL speaks.)

OWL

Stupid boy. First you nearly lead her to death with your poor direction and now your friend has the chance to learn about magic and you choose to be selfish.

HELIX

How am I selfish? I helped save you more than she did. If I hadn't stayed in that tree, she would have run and then you'd still be trapped.

OWL

And you'd both be dead.

AQUAMARINE

What's my power, Angel? Can I fly? Can I spit fire?

OWL

Come down from that tree, child, and I shall divine for you what I know.

(AQUAMARINE climbs down from the counter and stands before OWL. OWL circles AQUAMARINE studying her closely.)

AQUAMARINE

Well? What is it?

OWL

My powers are being blocked. Your companion, this boy, won't believe in me and so I can do nothing for you.

AQUAMARINE

Helix, how could you do this to me? Why can't you let me have this one thing?

OWL

Bring him before me.

(AQUAMARINE grabs HELIX's hand and attempts to pull him toward OWL. OWL steps forward to meet him instead.)

OWL

Tell me, boy why must you be so ignorant? Why do you doubt my powers and stop me from helping your friend?

HELIX

I'm not ignorant. Your powers aren't real so I don't believe in them. You're just out to hurt us.

(OWL grabs HELIX by the hair. HELIX struggles to get away.)

AQUAMARINE

You're not hurting him are you?

OWL

Of course not. This is how I detect evil and your companion is full of evil thoughts and ideas.

(OWL releases HELIX)

OWL

Get away. I no longer need you to divine her powers. I have found a better way.

(HELIX backs away from OWL and AQUAMARINE.)

OWL

I might be able to tell you your power if our bond was stronger. Kneel before me, child.

(AQUAMARINE kneels.)

HELIX

You don't need to do this, Aquamarine. Get up.

(AQUAMARINE stays kneeling.)

OWL

Now swear to me that we'll be together forever.

AQUAMARINE

I swear to be with you forever, Angel.

OWL

Swear that you are loyal to me and no one else for all eternity.

AQUAMARINE

I do, Angel. I swear I'm loyal to you.

OWL

Now close your eyes.

(AQUAMARINE closes her eyes. OWL grabs the kitchen knife and goes to stand behind AQUAMARINE.)

HELIX

What are you doing? Don't hurt her! Aquamarine, open your eyes and run!

(OWL grabs HELIX's arm and keeps him from getting to AQUAMARINE. AQUAMARINE opens her eyes and starts to turn around.)

OWL

Don't listen to him, Aquamarine. He's evil, remember? The only thing you'll feel is the touch of my magic artifact. Don't be scared. If you open your eyes now I'll wither away and die because you don't believe in me.

(AQUAMARINE keeps her eyes closed. Standing behind AQUAMARINE, OWL gently brings the handle of the knife to AQUAMARINE's forehead and closes her eyes as if in meditation and prayer.)

OWL

You may open your eyes now, child.

(OWL removes the knife from AQUAMARINE's forehead and places it back on the countertop. AQUAMARINE opens her eyes.)

OWL

I have divined your power. You have been gifted with eternal youth.

AQUAMARINE

Will I still have birthdays?

OWL

Every day can be your birthday because now we have forever.

HELIX

How can you think about things like birthdays when you've just been cursed? Don't you wanna grow up?

AQUAMARINE

My angel wouldn't curse me.

OWL

No she would not. But this worthless boy would tell you lies that I mean to do you harm. I do not hurt the ones I love.

HELIX

No, just the ones that love you. Aquamarine, I'm getting out of this jungle and you're coming with me.

OWL

(laughing)

You think you can lead her out? You think you can play the hero? What makes you think she'll go with you?

HELIX

She'll come because I'm right.

(HELIX grabs AQUAMARINE's hand and begins to drag her away from OWL.)

AQUAMARINE

Lemme' go! I don't wanna go with you. I'd rather stay in this jungle with my angel. You haven't been very nice.

HELIX

I can lead you out. Come with me and we'll get out together.

AQUAMARINE

I don't believe you.

(AQUAMARINE wrests her hand free and stands by OWL.)

OWL

That's 'cause no one believes a liar. Lying, awful, boys are always punished somehow, but you're 'specially awful so we'll just leave you here to die.

(OWL leads AQUAMARINE in one direction and HELIX goes off the opposite way. HELIX turns to follow OWL and AQUAMARINE when he hears OWL talking about him.)

OWL

How dare he lie to you and put you in danger! All the idiot knows how to do is hurt you. If you went with him you'd be dead by now. He was a terrible leader and an awful person. We'd be better off if he was dead already.

AQUAMARINE

But angels can't kill, right? You just wanted to teach him a lesson? He was mean to me but—

OWL

No, darling. Angels can't kill. They can just come really close.

(OWL stops suddenly and looks over at HELIX who has turned away, pretending to be lost in his

own world and not eavesdropping.)

OWL
I have to go for a moment, Aquamarine. After divining your power my magic is weak. I need to go replenish my strength.

AQUAMARINE
I don't know how to get out of the jungle without you. Can't you lead me out then leave?

OWL
No. Now close your eyes. This magic will work best if I'm not here anyways. I can only do this though if you let me leave. Do not watch me leave or you'll never find a way out. Understand?

(AQUAMARINE closes her eyes. OWL goes back to narrating.)

OWL
You close your eyes and sense your angel vanishing.

(OWL walks quietly away and stands behind HELIX.)

OWL
You open your eyes and your angel has disappeared. Slowly the jungle around you starts to fade. The trees become blurry and the sky reaches down to pick you up. For a moment you are suspended in the sky, carried by the wind and the voice of your angel. Then gently the sky releases you, and you are placed on your feet, safely out of the jungle. You have made it out of the game alive. Congratulations. You may now sit and rest.

(AQUAMARINE goes over to the breakfast nook to sit. She tries to readjust to seeing the kitchen. She is visibly disoriented and confused. OWL continues her narration.)

OWL
Your companion is not so lucky.
(to HELIX)

Your body is weighted with exhaustion and your hunger is unbearable. You are cursed to never be able to rest. The jungle knows of this curse and hides

its food from you. You can do nothing but keep moving. This is, after all, what you wanted, right? You always wanted to just keep moving?

(AQUAMARINE laughs. HELIX has not moved.)

OWL
I said, you keep moving!

(HELIX remains motionless. OWL pushes him from behind, knocking him to the floor. HELIX tries to get up, but OWL pins him to the ground. HELIX cries out.)

OWL
Moving only involves one little first step, but you can't do that can you? A nearby tree hits you in the back with one of its branches. You fall and break your wrist. The roots of the tree rise up and pin you to the ground.

(OWL grabs HELIX's wrist. AQUAMARINE rises and goes toward HELIX but stops halfway across the room.)

HELIX
Get off! Get off'a me!

OWL
You think a tree will listen to you? You're a non-believer. The tree increases its grip.

(OWL bends HELIX's wrist. HELIX screams.)

AQUAMARINE
Owl?

HELIX
Stop! Stop it, Owl! I don't want to play anymore!
(OWL releases HELIX's wrist. HELIX begins to sit up but OWL pushes him back to the ground.)

AQUAMARINE
What does it mean if he doesn't play?

OWL
(as herself)
It doesn't matter what it means because I choose the game. I choose the game!

HELIX
Well I won't play anymore.

(HELIX tries to get up once more, but OWL pushes him back down.)

OWL
You don't have a choice. The game isn't over. You're still in the jungle. You won't be free until you promise to be with me forever and never leave.

(HELIX does not respond.)

AQUAMARINE
Owl, I'll be with you forever. You don't need to—

OWL
What happens to him is not your concern! Besides, you must be hungry. You get breakfast for being so brave and making your way out of the jungle. Go sit down and I'll get you some food.

(AQUAMARINE looks over at HELIX who stands up glaring at OWL.)

OWL
Go. Now.

(AQUAMARINE sits at the breakfast nook.)

OWL
Perfect little girls don't need to worry about freaks like that. Our world is perfect.

(OWL leaves HELIX abruptly and goes to AQUAMARINE to smooth her hair and give her a hug.)

AQUAMARINE
As perfect as the fairy tales?

OWL
Except better because I make the rules. We can make new fairy tales together. We'll be the new heroes. We already have a villain.

(OWL looks to HELIX.)

HELIX
I told you I'm not playing.

OWL
(goes to the countertop and cuts the melon into slices)
As if it matters what you say!

AQUAMARINE
But you gotta play, Helix. Maybe you'll be a great villain. Every story needs a villain.

OWL
Don't bother with him, Aquamarine. If he won't be our villain we'll just have to take him captive instead. It'll be a really fun game.

(OWL brings a plate of melon to the breakfast nook table and sits down.)

OWL
Have you ever taken someone captive before?

(AQUAMARINE shakes her head no.)

OWL
That's okay, just follow my instructions and we'll have ourselves an incredible story. You like playing Pirate Ship? Well we can be pirates, and our captive is a captain of an enemy ship. We're gonna bring him to justice. You and me, 'kay?

(HELIX goes to the countertop to see if there's any melon left lying there. There isn't. He stands near the breakfast nook.)

OWL

You did great in today's game. We're gonna have tons of adventures every day now 'cause I trust that you'll keep your promise and never leave me. You'll give that to me. Right?

AQUAMARINE

I wouldn't leave you. I have nowhere else to go.

OWL

Of course you have nowhere else to go. You belong here with me. You know what you need? You need a present.

AQUAMARINE

I get a present? Did I really do that great?

OWL

You were a shining example as to how everyone should behave. You deserve to be in my family for real. That means—

AQUAMARINE

I get a special gift?

OWL

You get the most special thing I own.

(OWL points to HELIX.)

HELIX

Since when do you care about me?

OWL

I don't.

HELIX

Well, you can't give me away 'cause you don't own me.

OWL

You are mine and always will be. But don't give yourself that much credit. You're not even close to being special to me. Aquamarine, I was pointing to the handkerchief around his neck.

AQUAMARINE

It's mine?

OWL

It's yours. If you're gonna be my pirate first mate you'll need a badge of honor. Besides, he won't need it as our prisoner. It's only fair that you take it. You're the one who completed today's game.

AQUAMARINE

I did complete the game. You're right, Owl. It's only fair that as the better player—

OWL

And the better person.

HELIX

Aquamarine, did you learn what's fair at school? When I go to school, I'll make sure I go far away from wherever you went. Your school didn't teach much, did it? Or were you just so stupid that you didn't learn?

AQUAMARINE

I'm the one who's been there. I know what it's like. Besides, you won't get to go to public school. Owl said so. You're just jealous that Owl likes me more than you.

HELIX

I'm gonna learn lots when I go to school. Penny will help me—

OWL

Penny! This girl will hate you soon enough. What can she possibly see in someone as worthless and pathetic as you? You weren't even brave enough to finish my game. How will you ever survive in public school? When she hates you—

HELIX

Penny will help me find my way around to all my classes.

OWL

When she hates you what will you do then? You don't know how to make friends.

HELIX

Penny said she'll introduce me to all her friends. And I'm gonna grow up and go to high school and then college. And my world's gonna be real!

OWL

My world is more real than anything you'll ever find. The world you want won't accept you. You grew up with me. No matter where you go that'll always be who you are. My games are your life.

HELIX

My life's about to change!

AQUAMARINE

You don't wanna go, Helix. Owl's right, no one will like you 'cause you won't be like them.

HELIX

I don't take advice from children.

OWL

So now you're an adult?

HELIX

I'm more mature than you could ever be.

AQUAMARINE

We're trying to help you. Why do you have to be such a jerk?

HELIX

I'm trying to help myself. You'll understand when you get older but I understand now. You just want Owl to love you, and Owl just wants to be cruel. I would stay to see Owl tear you apart but—

OWL

You are staying. Even if I have to lock you up, you are never leaving this house.

HELIX

Let's test out that threat.

(OWL stands up and rips the handkerchief off HELIX's neck. HELIX grabs it back and for a moment they hold onto it before HELIX wrenches it free.)

HELIX

You know what? I figured it out. You want me here because losing me would be too real to explain away in a game.

AQUAMARINE

Owl loves you. I know she does.

HELIX

Owl doesn't know how to love.

OWL

Get out of my sight! Go to your room!

(crying)

I hate you. I hate you. You ruined our lives!

(OWL makes to chase HELIX to his room, but HELIX runs off stage before OWL can get to him. HELIX's footsteps are heard running upstairs. OWL sits crying on the floor. AQUAMARINE goes to comfort OWL.)

AQUAMARINE

Owl? Don't cry. You don't need to cry.

OWL

(still crying)

I deserve to cry! Helix was my best friend. He's betrayed me. I deserve to cry.

AQUAMARINE

But you're too old to cry.

OWL

I'm not too old! I'm just like you. We don't grow up. That's why we're the perfect family. My world is the only one that matters and Helix's gonna die out in the outside world. There are worse things than lions and jungles out there.

AQUAMARINE

(frightened)

I don't understand.

(OWL stops crying and begins to pace.)

OWL

What do you mean you don't understand? Why would Helix choose to leave me? No one understands us out there so why should he be any different? You've been there. You know. Of course you understand, you even said we were trying to protect him, but he's a selfish, worthless—

(OWL begins to cry again. AQUAMARINE goes over to OWL and tries to calm her down.)

AQUAMARINE

But don't you love him?

(OWL grabs AQUAMARINE by the shoulders.)

OWL

I love you! And we need to stick together. Helix is a traitor and our prisoner now. There is no love for him, understand? This is the new rule of my world.

(AQUAMARINE nods. OWL wipes away her tears.)

OWL

Don't you see? He needs me. Without living here he has nothing. He needs me.

AQUAMARINE

But Owl, I need you too. No matter what happens to Helix, will you still tell me stories?

OWL

I'll tell the best stories. I always do. Think about the game in the jungle. Wasn't that a wonderful story?

AQUAMARINE

It was...great. I was really scared.

OWL

That's the point. Now you know I'll protect you. Now you know to follow the rules.

AQUAMARINE

I know to follow the—

OWL

Wait a minute. In today's game you got out, but Helix didn't. He's still in the jungle.

AQUAMARINE

But he said he didn't wanna play anymore. He can't be in the jungle if he was just here in the kitchen.

OWL

I never said he was free and so he's still in the jungle. You can't leave a game until all the players get out. Our games'll be ruined. We need him back. Otherwise the three of us will never be able to play again.

AQUAMARINE

I don't want our games to end. That's not fair.

OWL

Since when has Helix been fair? The only way to play tomorrow is to get him back here so he can finish the game. Will you help me? As soon as we get him back we can start playing Pirate Ship.

AQUAMARINE

What do I have to do? Captain.

OWL

I need you to go upstairs and tell Helix that I'm not mad at him anymore.

AQUAMARINE

But are you? Are you still mad?

OWL

That doesn't matter. Go upstairs and tell Helix to come back down. Go!

(AQUAMARINE runs offstage. Her footsteps are heard running upstairs. OWL goes over to the breakfast nook and chops at pieces of melon.)

OWL

He won't ruin my games. The three of us will be together forever now. I'm the guardian angel of this family.

(Footsteps are heard coming back downstairs but stop before anyone enters on stage. OWL turns around but does not move toward the stairs.)

OWL

Helix, you come over here and finish the game. So long as you do as you're told there's nothing to be afraid of.

(no response)

Helix? Don't be a coward. Come over here!

(OWL grips the knife tighter as if to attack HELIX. AQUAMARINE enters cautiously.)

AQUAMARINE

Owl it's me.

(AQUAMARINE holds out HELIX's handkerchief.)

AQUAMARINE

He ran away. This was left on his pillow.

(OWL drops the knife on the floor.)

OWL

No. No. You're lying!

(OWL grabs the handkerchief then hits AQUAMARINE. OWL hits her again and again.)

OWL

He didn't run away! Liar. Liar. You don't want him to be found! You didn't look hard enough. Look again. Damn it, look again!

(OWL starts to cry. She leaves AQUAMARINE curled on the floor and runs upstairs calling for HELIX.)

OWL

(offstage)

Helix? Helix?! Wherever you're hiding I'll find you. Come back. Helix? Helix! I hate you. Come back.

(AQUAMARINE slinks off to the breakfast nook. She hugs her knees to her chest and tries to sink into the bench. The sound of the door opening and the rainstorm can be heard as OWL runs outside.)

OWL

(offstage)

Helix? Helix?!

(OWL comes back inside, soaking wet from the rain.)

AQUAMARINE

He ran away, Owl. Don't be mad though. It's not my fault. You don't have to look for him. I'm still here to play—

OWL

Of course you're still here. You know you have nowhere to go.

AQUAMARINE

I thought you loved me and not him. Owl, I'm better than him. I'm staying with you. I didn't mean to do something wrong when I looked for Helix. Whatever I did I won't do it again.

(OWL draws AQUAMARINE close.)

OWL

We don't need him. Let him rot in the rain for all I care. We need to stick together, you and me. How about a story?

AQUAMARINE

I'd love a story.

OWL

No. You tell it. I need sleep.

(OWL lays down on the floor.)

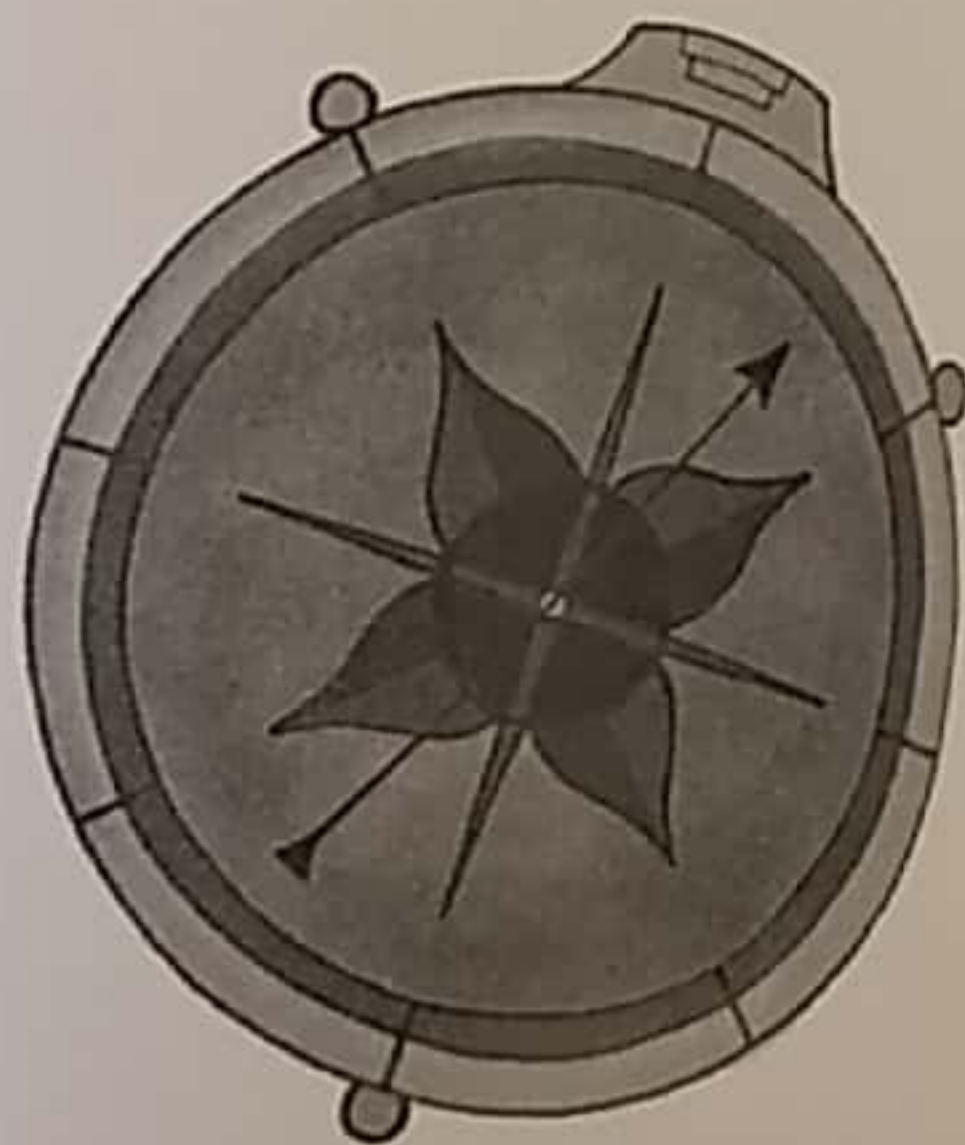
OWL

Tell me the pirate story. Tell me what our adventures will be tomorrow.

AQUAMARINE

I'll try to do it right. A pirate captain and her first mate are sailing on the ocean. The sky is clear and pretty and the water is pretty too. The water's a pretty blue. The captain and her first mate do great things together—

(Lights fade as AQUAMARINE continues the story and OWL falls asleep.)



Come To My Funeral

Ruth Johnson
Agnes Scott College

List of Characters

Robin Walker: The head speechwriter for the president-elect of the United States. She is in her mid-thirties and entirely too self-reliant, stubborn, and presumptuous. She is coming from an environment that values sarcasm and mean-spiritedness and acts accordingly to her family.

Martha Walker-Presser: A loyal mother and wife in her early thirties, she is incredibly resentful of her sister Robin.

James Walker: A young autistic man in his twenties, he is not fully emotionally mature, and thus has many difficulties adapting to life in general.

Jack Walker: The uncle of the three siblings, he is weary, hit hard by the recent losses.

Daniel Presser: Martha's beleaguered husband, he just wants the best for his family. He is highly sarcastic, but it is a world-weary sarcasm, as opposed to a mean or whiny sarcasm.

Scene A family living room in Lansing, Michigan.

Time The present, around Christmas time.

SETTING: A living room decorated for the Christmas holidays in Lansing, Michigan. There is a couch, three chairs, a coffee table, and a small artificial Christmas tree. There are also several Puzz3D-like scale model sets of famous buildings such as the Empire State Building, by the tree. They are in various states of construction.

AT RISE: Sitting on the couch holding a photo album is JACK. He is a man in his sixties, and it shows. He is hunched over, possibly

taking a bit of a nap, with a cane sitting at his side. A doorbell is heard ringing, which stirs JACK from his bout of nostalgia.

JACK
It's not locked!
(ROBIN, a normally fairly put together career woman enters stage right, bundled up in a heavy winter coat and struggling with several packages. JACK leaps up to assist.)

JACK
(surprised)
Hello, Robin! This is... well, it's...

ROBIN
Surprise! Merry Christmas, Uncle Jack!

JACK
Why'd you come?

ROBIN
Daniel didn't tell any of you I was coming?

JACK
No...

ROBIN
That's odd.

JACK
(pondering)
Yes. Your sister will be happy to see you.

ROBIN
(laughing)
You are a terrible liar, Uncle Jack.

(For a moment, an awkward pause falls. It is quickly broken when MARTHA and DANIEL enter. She is a typical tired mother and housewife, increasingly so because of the holidays. He is a beleaguered, but sharp-eyed husband who looks more at home in

front of a computer than mediating disagreements between his wife and his sister-in-law.)

MARTHA
My, my, my. The prodigal daughter returns.

DANIEL
And not a moment too soon.

MARTHA
Punctuality was never one of her finest traits. Did you invite her, Jack?

JACK
Ah, no, but—

ROBIN
(covering)
I came of my own accord, Martha. I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner. My work often gets in the way of family, and for that I apologize.

MARTHA
Apology not accepted. Our parents' funeral isn't something you miss.

ROBIN
Well, maybe if they hadn't have died just as the president-elect was forming her administration—

MARTHA
I'm sure she still needs you. Get. Out.

JACK
Martha, she came all this way—

ROBIN
No, Jack, I'd do the same if I were in her place.

MARTHA
And what do you mean by that? My place?

ROBIN
Well, you know. Left behind to take care of everyone. Forced to stay here.

MARTHA
What's wrong with here, Robin?

ROBIN
You know exactly what's wrong with here.

MARTHA
Oh, but I so enjoy the way you put it.

ROBIN
Boring, humdrum Michigan?

MARTHA
Well, at least you're being honest now.

JACK
(trying to change the subject)
Where's James? I'm sure he'd love to see his sister—

MARTHA
He's indisposed.

DANIEL
But nice try, Jack.

ROBIN
(quietly)
That's not the most bullshit excuse I've ever heard.

DANIEL
I know, right? I'll go get him.

MARTHA
No, you won't.
(DANIEL rolls his eyes at her and leaves, while MARTHA scowls after him, before turning her anger back upon her sister.)

MARTHA
It's not like you'll be able to talk to him much. He only ever pays attention when he wants something. He's deteriorated a lot since you left. Actually, everything's pretty much fallen apart since you left. Not that you care much.

ROBIN
(sarcastically)
Yeah, that's why I left in the middle of preparations for the Inaugural Address. Because I don't give a shit. How could I be so stupid?

JACK
(laughing)
Did you really?

ROBIN
Yes.

MARTHA
Oh, for god's sake, Daniel! There's e-mail. This isn't the Middle Ages. She can write that speech from anywhere.

ROBIN
It's hard to get inspiration in Michigan.

MARTHA
I seem to be doing just fine.

ROBIN
(muttered)
I'm not sure how much inspiration it takes to be a mother. I just thought it was a gift.

MARTHA
(hissed)
Jealous?

ROBIN
Not really.

JACK
(stepping in between the two)
Well, then. End of Round One! That went well.

(A stony silence falls, as ROBIN and MARTHA glare at each other, and JACK awkwardly stands in the middle. Their attention is broken by the entrance of JAMES and DANIEL. JAMES is a

man in his mid-twenties physically, but very much a boy in every other respect.)

DANIEL
(faking cheer)
Hello, everyone! Say hello, James.

JAMES
(timidly)
Hello.

ROBIN
(moved)
Hello, James.

(JAMES is confused.)
ROBIN
(suddenly scared)
R-remember me, James? I'm your sister, Robin.

(He shakes his head.)
MARTHA
What did I tell you? You've been gone for too long, Robin.

JACK
Martha—

MARTHA
What?!

JACK
Stop. Just... stop for a moment.

ROBIN
(moving closer to JAMES)
I'm your sister. We played together, all the time. I read you stories about... about—
(she can't remember)
—about something. We had fun. I left a long time ago. Maybe I shouldn't have.
(shaking away her momentary moment of

confliction)
The point is, I'm here now. We can all be together again, for a while. James?

(JAMES looks at her warily. She smiles slyly. MARTHA rolls her eyes and scoffs. She is about to make another snarky comment, when JAMES runs toward ROBIN and wraps her in a big bear hug.)

Robin!
Robin!

Hi! Hi again, James.

I'm going to be sick.

(to MARTHA)
Maybe we should let them be for a minute. Or I could just grab a bucket—

(He is cut off by an intense glare from MARTHA.)

Let's go.

Lead on.

(MARTHA exits.)

(wearily)
My wife, the drama queen.

She really hates me, doesn't she?

I'm not sure hate is the right word, but, well. Can you blame her?

ROBIN
Just because grudges run in the family, it doesn't mean she has to continue the tradition.

DANIEL
This is going to be a fun Christmas, I can tell.

ROBIN
You only have yourself to blame, you know.

DANIEL
(playful groan)
Yes, I know.

ROBIN
I have a list of places that might be good for him.

DANIEL
(glancing at James cautiously)
That's good. But not now. Spend some time with him. I need to go check on Martha.

(He exits. JACK stays behind, watching the two of them.)

ROBIN
So... how have you been? James?

JAMES
Where were you at?

ROBIN
Washington. Uh, D.C., not state.

JAMES
Have I ever been there?

ROBIN
Not yet. Martha has though. We went when we were kids, before you were born. Did you ever hear about the time she ate too much ice cream?

JAMES
Ice cream? Ice cream is cold.

ROBIN
Yes, it is. She ate too much, and she, well...
(She mimes throwing up.)

JAMES
I've done that!

ROBIN
Have you now?

JAMES
Yes. When it was hot I did that.

ROBIN
(concerned)
Does Martha know?

JAMES
Uncle... uh...
(to JACK)
What's your name again?

JACK
Jack, James, Jack.

JAMES
Right, Jack. Uncle Jack. He took me to the park.

ROBIN
Oh. And you got sick?

JAMES
Uh-huh, but we cleaned it up, didn't we?

JACK
We sure did.

JAMES
I wish Mom had come with us. Do you know where she is?

ROBIN
(taken aback)
She's... she's gone. Didn't you know—

JAMES
Where did she go?

ROBIN
She, well, she died, James.

JAMES
She's in heaven now.

ROBIN
I... I suppose so. Why don't you know all this?

JACK
(to ROBIN, quietly)
He does. He forgets. And Martha didn't tell him everything, of course.

JAMES
I'll never see her again, will I?

ROBIN
I... I don't know.

(This does not placate JAMES, who starts becoming angry.)

JAMES
Was it good for you?

ROBIN
Was what good for me?

(JAMES grows in confusion, grasping for the right response.)

Washington!

Uh... yes.

Why?

Well, that's where's my job is.

(suddenly curious)
What do you do?

I... I write speeches for people. You know on the news, when those serious faced people talk for a really long time?

Uh-huh.

Well, I'm one of the reasons it takes such a long time.

Oh.

(The conversation ends for him, and he begins to play with his model sets by the tree.)

James? James?
(poking at one of his models)
These are really nice, James.

(loudly)
Don't touch!

JAMES

ROBIN

JAMES

ROBIN

JAMES

ROBIN

JAMES

ROBIN

JAMES

ROBIN

JAMES

Okay. Sorry. James?

(There is no response.)

Best to just let him be when he gets like this.

But I wanted to talk more.

You're lucky he talked to you at all.

He doesn't seem that bad. I mean, he's still distant, but he's answering questions. With full sentences, no less. Wasn't doing that when I left.

What little therapy your parents were able to get for him had some good effects.

So, why am I here? He seems fine, Jack.

(DANIEL enters.)

Why did you call me, Daniel? He seems fine here. I don't think we need to move him.

Didn't you see?

He's fine.

Then you haven't seen yet.

Seen what?!

ROBIN

JACK

ROBIN

JACK

ROBIN

JACK

ROBIN

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

You'll see.

God, just spit it out!

Fine. But it would be best if he didn't hear about this. Jack, could you...

Sure. James, let's go see what Martha's cooking, okay?

I'm not hungry.

I know, but let's just go see, okay?

Okay.

(They exit.)

Spill. Please.

He's being oddly well-behaved right now. But recently, he's been acting like a monster. Ever since your mom and dad died. He was the one who found your dad, you know. And Martha didn't let him see your mom when she was in the hospital.

Why?

She thought he would make a scene. Your mom was in a pretty bad state, you know. The stroke really—

I've seen a stroke patient before. I can imagine it, no need to describe. Did he get to go to the funerals?

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

JACK

JAMES

JACK

JAMES

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

Yes. And he was okay, there, but the second he got home, well—

Yes?

He's gotten very rough around the kids, so much so that Martha's been isolating him from them. Which doesn't help, because he loves playing games with them. And they both love their Uncle James.

And?

He doesn't like wearing clothes.

(laughing)
He never has.

Yes, but it's gotten especially egregious. The only grown man I need to see naked is myself. No, scratch that. I could go without ever seeing a grown man naked. He thinks he's a kid, he doesn't understand.

Have the kids seen him—

No, thank God! The sitter, however—

Oh, dear.

She called the police. Needless to say, Martha and I haven't gone out since.

Poor girl.

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL

ROBIN

DANIEL
Yes. He also... yells a lot. And sometimes Martha forgets herself and yells right back.

ROBIN
Just like when they were kids.

DANIEL
Except they are both very much adults. Legally, at least.

ROBIN
Oh, they never got along. They never were going to get along, regardless of whether or not James improved or Martha managed to get away from all of this.

DANIEL
Hmm. I shouldn't be telling you this, especially not now, but...

ROBIN
What?

DANIEL
Martha is expecting.

ROBIN
(taken aback)
Oh, wow! Congratulations!

DANIEL
No one else knows. Sometimes she gets so tense and so angry, and she's always so nervous and fretful... I'm afraid she might not be able to carry it to term. She's miscarried before.

ROBIN
Mom had problems like that.

DANIEL
I know. And what if the baby is like him? We can't take care of two of them. We can't even take care of one!

ROBIN
We're in luck then, I guess. I found several nice facilities.

DANIEL
We can't pay for it.

ROBIN
I know. But I can. Believe it or not, but communications director for the president-elect of the United States pays pretty well.

DANIEL
She didn't fire you when you left?

ROBIN
She couldn't. She'd be dooming herself to a one-term presidency. And like Martha says, we have e-mail.

DANIEL
Oh, if only I had the famous Walker bluster and confidence. You should bottle that stuff. Sell it on Amazon—

ROBIN
Anyway. There's one in California.

DANIEL
That's so far away. And we can't move. Martha wouldn't leave.

ROBIN
There is another one. In Pennsylvania.

DANIEL
That's better. Closer to you, at least.

ROBIN
Yes. And you guys could visit more often, certainly. My only worry is, well, Martha.

DANIEL
I've tried talking to her about it. About the idea, at least.

ROBIN
And?

DANIEL
Your trip may be wasted.

ROBIN
She won't budge, will she?

DANIEL
It's up to you. I've tried my best.

ROBIN
If she won't listen to you, then why would she listen to me?

DANIEL
She did when you were children.

ROBIN
It was a simpler time.

DANIEL
Do you miss it?

ROBIN
Always. Do you?

(Suddenly, MARTHA enters, as agitated with her sister as she was earlier.)

DANIEL
(quietly)
Doesn't everybody?

MARTHA
You're still here?

ROBIN
My plane doesn't leave for a week, so, well, yeah!

MARTHA
Were you and Daniel catching up on old times?

ROBIN
Maybe.

MARTHA
Always the avoidance.

DANIEL
What else would we be doing? Having an affair?

ROBIN
(jesting)
Oh god, the very idea. Do you have any brain bleach, sis?

MARTHA
Ha. Ha.

DANIEL
I believe we got her to emit a chuckle, Robin. Well, how about that?

MARTHA
Daniel, shut up.

DANIEL
Of course, dear. Shall I glue my lips together as well?

MARTHA
Robin and I need to speak in private if you don't mind. Sisterly affairs and all that.

DANIEL
Oh, so you're the one having the affair!
(silenced by a glare that could come from the very pit of hell)
Going now, going.

(He leaves.)

ROBIN
Well, I don't know about you, but I certainly missed all of this.

MARTHA
Is that sarcasm?

ROBIN
Surprisingly, no. I forgot how funny everything was here.

MARTHA
Keep laughing at us. Maybe we'll join in.

ROBIN
There's always hope.

MARTHA
Why are you here? And I don't need any spin, Miss Press Secretary.

ROBIN
I'm not a press secretary. And it's Ms., not Miss. I'm here because of James.

MARTHA
He's fine.

ROBIN
He has never been fine. Remember the time he ran naked through your sweet sixteen?

MARTHA
He wouldn't have if you had just kept an eye on him.

ROBIN
I was studying for the SATs. Little more important.

MARTHA
Always focused on yourself, never on helping anyone else.

ROBIN
I'll admit it, I'm such a bitch.

MARTHA
I didn't say that.

ROBIN
That's why I said it for you, ye good old Christian housewife.

MARTHA
That was Mom you're thinking of.

ROBIN
(getting carried away with petty spite)
You're the spitting image of her, you know.

MARTHA
No, I'm not.

ROBIN
Yes, you are.

MARTHA
(exasperated)
What do you want with James?

ROBIN
I want to get him the care he needs.

MARTHA
Oh, no. No. You are not taking him to some care facility with bars on the windows—

ROBIN
That's absurd.

MARTHA
—and a Nurse Ratched who torments him!

ROBIN
You've been watching too many late-night movies.

MARTHA
Mom would never have allowed it.

ROBIN
Mom's dead!

MARTHA
No shit! Doesn't mean I'm going to disrespect her last wishes.

ROBIN
What about Dad? What did he think?

MARTHA
He didn't care. Didn't care about any of us. Just Mom. He gave me James right after the funeral ended.

ROBIN
I heard that James found him.

MARTHA
He did. But only because he got to Dad's room first. Truly creative of him, the way he went. Kind of out of character for him, actually.

ROBIN
Suicide is creative?

MARTHA
No, the means by which he did it. Freezing himself to death. Like I said, creative.

ROBIN
I... I didn't know that. How do you know?

MARTHA
Our father was a walking cliché after our mother's death, dear. He left a melodramatic note, of course.

ROBIN
He was in pain!

MARTHA
So was I, but I didn't turn off the heat, open the windows, and wait out my death while clutching Mom's Bible.

ROBIN
He just waited?

MARTHA
He was drunk. That probably helped.

ROBIN
No one told me about any of that.

MARTHA
You never answered your phone.

ROBIN
You could have left a message!

MARTHA
Yes, I can just see it now.
(feigning leaving a message)
You have reached the answering machine of Robin Walker. She is not available at this time. Please leave your name, number, and message after the beep. Thank you.

(making beeping sound)

Um... hi. Robin? This is Martha. Yeah, Dad's kinda... frozen. Like a popsicle. A Bible clutching popsicle. Oh, and our autistic brother found him and is currently acting like a nut. Just thought you should know, but I know how "busy" you are. Well, look forward to not talking to you later.

ROBIN
My answering machine was probably full anyway.

MARTHA
There are so many words I could use for you right now—

ROBIN
Go ahead. Let loose.

MARTHA
Just. Go away.

ROBIN
No. Not without getting James the care he needs.

MARTHA
(through gritted teeth)
He. Is. Fine.

ROBIN
You said it yourself! He found Dad, and he's been acting even worse ever since they both died! He's grieving and he doesn't understand most of the world around him. You have two small kids in the house! You've got another on the way!

MARTHA
How do you know that?!

ROBIN
(realizing she's said too much)
A little birdie told me.

MARTHA
Did he now?

ROBIN
Did who now?

MARTHA
He should learn to keep his damn mouth shut. I'm fine, you hear me? Fine!

ROBIN
All this stress can't be good for you. In your condition.

MARTHA
Oh, that's not sexist at all. After all the arguments I had to hear between you and Dad... just shut up.

ROBIN
Apologies, it must be in the blood. We're all assholes in the end.

MARTHA
Way to win me over, sis.

ROBIN
Oh, it's not as if you relish in it. It's our heritage. When some people point to their ancestors, they say, "Look kids, your great great great infinity grandpa sailed over on the Mayflower!" When we point to our ancestors, we can say, "Hey, kids! All of us are huge assholes! Look forward to it!"

(MARTHA stares at her in amazement. Then, she begins to laugh.)

MARTHA
You are not locking him up. And I know that's your only option.

ROBIN
It won't be locking him up! For god's sake, they have horses!

MARTHA
He's scared of horses!

ROBIN
He doesn't have to ride the damn horse! He'll have his own little house. Three square meals a day—

MARTHA
I can feed him, you know.

ROBIN
He'll have his own life. He'll have professionals to help him, and you won't have to worry about your kids anymore.

MARTHA
A mother always worries. But you wouldn't know that.

ROBIN
You're right, I wouldn't. I decided to leave and make a life for myself instead of becoming someone else.

MARTHA
What is that supposed to mean?

ROBIN
You're Mom! You're Mom all over again!

MARTHA
Better than nothing. Better than you.

ROBIN
I work for the President!

MARTHA
President-~~elect~~. Oh, don't think we don't watch the news here in the lowly Midwest.

ROBIN
Did you vote for her?

MARTHA
No.

ROBIN
Some things never change.

MARTHA
He's not going with you.

ROBIN
Why? Why are you so afraid of this?

MARTHA
I am not afraid.

ROBIN
Whatever you say.

MARTHA
He's my brother. I'm not sending him away to god knows where.

ROBIN
(like she's in a tourism ad)
Pennsylvania: it's not god knows where!

MARTHA
It's miles and miles from here, you dumb bitch!

ROBIN
I'm not... no. You're right. Maybe I am.

MARTHA
Oh, god, don't play meek and mild with me. I know you too well.

ROBIN
What do you want me to do? Say that I'm better than you? Say that I won?

MARTHA
No.

ROBIN
Then what do you want me to do?

MARTHA
Leave. Just leave, please.

ROBIN
I'm afraid I won't be doing that.

MARTHA
Well, you aren't staying here.

ROBIN
I anticipated that. I'm staying at a hotel in town. I'm not stupid, Martha. And I know you aren't.

MARTHA
Well then, go back to your hotel room and talk on your cell phone endlessly about politics and other nonsense. We don't want you here.

(As if talk of a cell phone could summon it, ROBIN's cell phone rings.)

ROBIN
I have to get this.

MARTHA
Take your time. I don't care.

ROBIN
(into phone)
Hello? Hi, Martin. No, I'm kind of busy right now. She needs what? A speech for the Congressional Black Caucus, huh? By when? Tomorrow? God, Martin, why don't you just write it yourself? No, no. I'll write it. Talk to you later. I'm sure the tree's beautiful. Bye, Martin.

MARTHA
Not fired?

ROBIN
Of course not.

MARTHA
Who was that?

ROBIN
Martin? Oh, he's my deputy. He's in charge while I'm gone. We went to Berkeley together. He was a few years behind me.

MARTHA
(with contempt)
Berkeley.

ROBIN
Yes.

MARTHA
So far away.

ROBIN
That's a given.

MARTHA
Do you know, that when you left, Mom cried that whole day?

ROBIN
I'm sorry to hear it.

MARTHA
She just... wouldn't stop. Dad shut himself up his office. James wouldn't stop asking questions. I had to care for all of them for a week. Mom was never the same.

ROBIN
I came back.

MARTHA
The first year. The mandatory Christmas visit. But you weren't there the next summer. Or the next Christmas. Or the next. Mom and Dad went to your graduation, but you were off to England almost immediately after.

ROBIN
I know.

MARTHA
And we never saw you again. Mom would spot you on the news talking to a reporter every now and then, do you know that? You made a liberal out of her. Dad, too, I think, towards the end. Every time you came on, she'd shriek and call us all and tell us that you were on the TV. She voted for your candidate. I don't know why, but she did. She loved you until the end. She asked for you on her deathbed.

ROBIN
She had a stroke, how could she—

MARTHA
She pointed to a picture of you. You were her darling girl. You were always her darling girl.

ROBIN
She loved you too.

MARTHA
She loved you more.

ROBIN
Did Dad ever—

MARTHA
Our father shut everything up. I didn't even know he was going to do it. Of course he missed you. They all missed you.

ROBIN
Did you?

MARTHA
I have a pot roast to put in the oven.

ROBIN
Let's talk! Please, Martha.

MARTHA
Do you want Christmas dinner or not?

(Before MARTHA can leave, JAMES rushes in, struggling with his clothes. DANIEL enters right after him, hot on his heels.)

DANIEL
You need to wear clothes, James.

JAMES
It's hot. And they're uncomfortable.

DANIEL
James. C'mon now.

JAMES
No!
(beginning to take off shirt)
Too hot. Too hot.

DANIEL
(rushing to stop him)
James! You've already done enough. Come on, now!
(JAMES refuses to listen.)

MARTHA
James Marshall Walker! Put your shirt back on!

JAMES
Shut up!

MARTHA
Fine. Be that way. Your models are going into the garage until you behave.

(She begins to pick up one of the models, and JAMES rushes to stop her.)

JAMES
No!
(They struggle for a moment. ROBIN stares, horrified, but DANIEL comes in between the two. JAMES swings and hits the both of them.)

JAMES
(continuing to swing blows)
Hah!

ROBIN
James! Oh, James!

JAMES
I got the both of you. You both can't tell me what to do.

ROBIN
James. It's Robin. Stop it, please.

JAMES
No.

ROBIN
(with a loud cry of desperation)
James!

(Hearing the clatter, JACK enters, looking bewildered. When he realizes what's going on, he rushes to help MARTHA and DANIEL up. MARTHA is clutching her back, while DANIEL is suffering from a bloody nose. JAMES continues his tantrum, going near his toys as if to protect them.)

MARTHA
James Walker, you stop that right now.

JAMES
No.

MARTHA
Now.

JAMES
Moron!

MARTHA
I'm not the one standing half-naked punching two perfectly innocent people!

JAMES
Whatever!

MARTHA
(continuing to hold her back)
Just... augh. Sit down!

(He does not. She however does, sitting on the floor, clearly in pain. ROBIN tries to placate JAMES.)

ROBIN
(desperate)
 James? Please... calm down!

JAMES
 They're going to hurt my models!

ROBIN
(like a terrified, unconfident mother)
 No, sweetheart, they just want you to wear some clothes!

JAMES
 I don't want to!

ROBIN
 Why?

JAMES
 They're scratchy!

ROBIN
 Do you have anything else that isn't scratchy?
(JAMES has not thought about this. He ponders her question and nods slowly.)

ROBIN
 Well... then how about you and Uncle Jack go and find you something to change into. Would that be better?

(He nods. JACK takes his hand and begins to lead him upstairs.)

JAMES
(suddenly worried)
 I'm in trouble.

MARTHA
(weakly)
 You have no idea, you little—

ROBIN
(taking command with more confidence)

Martha. Shut up. James, just go with Uncle Jack. We'll talk about it later.

(JAMES and JACK exit. ROBIN turns on MARTHA, angry at MARTHA's inability to take control.)

ROBIN
 You know, I almost believed you. I thought I was in the wrong. I was being presumptuous. But I was right. You can't take care of him.

MARTHA
 He's putting on a show.

ROBIN
 He is not putting on a show! He hates it here! We all hate it here! You just don't want to leave!

MARTHA
(starting to breathe heavily)
 He loves it here. Everything is fine, Robin. What just happened won't happen again.

ROBIN
 No, it won't. Because he won't be here.

MARTHA
 You can't take him!

ROBIN
 Just say it, Martha. Say that you can't take care of him. I haven't been here for years, and I was able to make him do what you weren't. It'll all be over. Just give it up. You can live your life, and he can live his.

MARTHA
(grimacing in pain)
 No... I won't... augh!

DANIEL
 Sweetheart?

MARTHA
 I'm fine.

DANIEL
 Is it happening again?

MARTHA
 Daniel, shut up! Everything will be fine.

DANIEL
 I'm not going to let you miscarry again. We're going to the hospital.

MARTHA
 I'm fine. I'm fine.

ROBIN
 No, you're not.

MARTHA
 I will be. Just... all of you shut up. Let me rest.

ROBIN
 Martha... doesn't this make you think? You don't want to lose this baby. James caused this. You have to let him go.

MARTHA
 I promised Mom—

ROBIN
 Mom wouldn't want this. She cared too much, but she wasn't stubborn like the rest of us. She was willing to change. She became a liberal at the end, didn't she?

MARTHA
(starting to cry)
 Go then. Just go, please.

(to ROBIN)
 You win.

ROBIN
 This isn't a competition, Martha.

MARTHA
 It's always a competition with you! Between us. And you win, ultimately.

ROBIN
 Why? How?

MARTHA
 You're a success. You went off to college and became a professional competitor... that's all you do now, try to win. I just stay here. Changing diapers, making snacks. This is the third try we've had for a baby in as many years, and I am not losing this one again because of all of this. I'm a failure. You can take care of him without him crippling you. Hell, he listens to you! He never listens to me.

ROBIN
(quietly)
 I wouldn't be taking care of him—

MARTHA
(not hearing ROBIN)
 Mom always wanted grandkids. So I gave her grandkids. Because you wouldn't contribute, and James couldn't. I thought it would make her happy. But it didn't. You did, though. I don't know why I keep trying. She's dead, after all. What does she care? She didn't care. She wanted me to be like you. Instead, I'm sitting on the floor, as I just try to hold on to my life for at least one more day. Go off to your world. Take him with you. We can live out our lives.

ROBIN
 If you say so.

MARTHA
 I do! I want the children I have to have a happy, normal life, without dealing with him. I want this one to have a chance!

(She is sobbing now. DANIEL tries to take her hand, but she ignores it.)

DANIEL
 Dear—

MARTHA
(ignoring him)
 I told you I'd take care of the family. When I called you after Mom died, I ended up slamming the phone down in a rush. But here's the blunt and honest truth. I can't even take care of myself.

MARtha— DANIEL
 What do you care? You were the one who called!

How did you— DANIEL

You're no James Bond, sweetheart. I figured it out. For all that I fail at, I am at least smart. All Walkers are smart. You should know that. MARTHA

Oh, sweetheart. DANIEL

(An awkward silence falls.)

I'll start the application process, then. ROBIN
 (quietly and cautiously)

Will they take him? MARTHA

Yes. Of course. He'll be in a good place. ROBIN

I know. I know. MARTHA

I'm sorry. For all of this. It shouldn't have been this way. ROBIN

You didn't force Mom and Dad to have him. MARTHA

No, but I begged for him. ROBIN

You begged for a lot of things. And you got all of them. Go and write your speech, Robin. Go and write your speech. Fill out the application. MARTHA

ROBIN
 I'm so sorry.

MARtha
 Don't be. You won. From what I recall, you love to win.

ROBIN
 (embarrassed)
 I do. I almost... If I hadn't had come...

MARtha
 If you hadn't have come, things would've gotten worse. There's still a chance that everything will be okay. I just want to feel the kick. I haven't gotten to feel one, well, my one, in a long time.
 (Beat.)

ROBIN
 I should go.

MARtha
 Please.

ROBIN
 Will we ever...

MARtha
 Who knows. But sis?

ROBIN
 Yes?

MARtha
 Come to my funeral, will you?

ROBIN
 Only if you'll come to mine.

MARtha
 I wouldn't miss it for the world.

(They stare at each other in the way only sisters can. Lights down.)

Biscuits: A Tragedy
 Najah Yasin
 Wesleyan College

ACT I
 Scene One

SPOTLIGHT UP on NINA

(NINA is stirring up a mouthwatering batch of fresh biscuits ever so delicately. She is a beautiful woman; a little too beautiful for the shabby apron and gingham dress she is wearing. Her hair is up, but slightly off. There is a slightly noticeable dark circle over her left eye. She has a nervous tick.)

NINA
 (stirring her biscuits)

I don't usually make biscuits. I rarely get the time. When I first married Antone I'd make him biscuits every morning. Nice, fluffy, thick buttery biscuits with fresh jam. Oh how he can't resist them. They're his favorite and I never made them wrong. Sometimes people make things wrong, even when they are right. My biscuits—Never wrong. I could burn the chicken, drop the peas, get eggshell in the cornbread or simply forget to cook at all. Sometimes I don't want to cook. But, not only is it my job I wonder often if it isn't the only reason why my husband married me. We haven't been getting along so well lately, Antone and me. Sometimes I don't get in on time to make him his supper, so sometimes he doesn't make it home, but today is an important day, it's our son's birthday, so he has to come home. Today I have the time to make him his favorite biscuits and he'll be so happy he won't even notice that I made them all wrong. That I made them all wrong on purpose.

(LIGHTS DOWN and NINA walks off stage. LIGHTS UP and she is in the kitchen area checking on her biscuits. ANTONE comes through the front door tired.)

NINA
 Hello, sweetheart. How was your day?

ANTONE
 (grunts)

NINA
 Guess what I'm making, dear.

ANTONE
 I'm tired, Nina.

NINA
 Oh, pooh, Antone! Come on, guess.

ANTONE
 I don't have time for this... well alright
 (Sniffs)
 ... is it... naw, it can't be... is it really... your biscuits?

NINA
 Today is someone special's birthday.

ANTONE
 What's today's date?

NINA
 December the 5th, year 1937.

ANTONE
 Your birthday ain't in December.

NINA
 Silly man, it's not my birthday.

ANTONE
 It ain't mine. Nina, who's birthday is it?

NINA
 You're such a silly man. It's our son's birthday, don't you remember? Antone, don't tell me you forgot.

ANTONE
 Nina, we don't have a son.

NINA
Don't start with that again.

ANTONE
Nina-

SOUND TIMER

NINA
Oh! That's them now. Oh, Antone. Smell them biscuits. Don't be cross. I already made the rest of your supper, I just wanted the biscuits to come out fresh. I knew you'd be home on time, you couldn't be late on such a special day.

ANTONE
Now, Nina-

NINA
(Grabs for his lunch box and coat)
Oh, honey, let me take that. Did you like your lunch? You came in so late last night, I didn't have the time to ask you what you wanted when I woke up this morning.

ANTONE
Nina, you ain't celebrating any birthdays today. Not in this house, you ain't-

NINA
Be quiet, Antone. He'll hear you!

ANTONE
I don't care who hears me!

NINA
You been drinking?

ANTONE
What?

NINA
You been down to Charlie's again?

ANTONE
No.
NINA
Do you remember what you promised me two years ago this day?

ANTONE
Every now and then a man deserves a drink.

NINA
You told me that you wouldn't touch the bottle any more.

ANTONE
I don't, not that much. Not like I used to.

NINA
Why don't you sit down, dear.

ANTONE
I will sit down when I damn well please! Now Nina, we are going to put an end to this foolishness right now. Sit down and listen to me-

NINA
Oh, Antone. I can't now, I'm not done-

ANTONE
I SAID SIT DOWN BEFORE I SAT YOU DOWN, WOMAN.

NINA
You been drinking, I know you have.

ANTONE
You've always been such a selfish little snatch. Couldn't let me have my peace. If I drink it's cause you drove me to it. I should have known that you were going to go acting all loose in the head today, you always do this, every year. I shoulda known when I walked in the door that you were going to be at it.

(goes to cabinet and pours liquor)

(LIGHTS DOWN on NINA. LIGHTS UP on ANTONE as he walks forward into a spotlight with his glass in his hand.)

Every now and then I enjoy a little whiskey when I come in at night. I don't drink the way she thinks I do, really, I don't. Every day she thinks I'm at work, maybe she thinks I head over to Big Charlie's for a drink with the fellas when I get off my shift. Maybe she thinks I am in the room above big Charlie's with that common woman who hangs around the door to the outhouse. I ain't doin' none of that, let me tell you now. I go out there every day searching for a job, sometimes two or three towns over, but ain't no one hiring. So I go to Big Charlie's, a man has to make a living some how and I happen to make mine off of lady luck. I ain't manage to lose once. As for my wife, I've never loved anyone cept her. Always have an always will, though sometimes I don't know how to show it. She'd never understand why I did it, but I knew that she was pregnant even though she didn't tell me, but I had to do it. She wasn't thinking right, she wasn't thinking about the boy. I always wanted a son, but I couldn't put him through that. I made her think it was the alcohol that made me do what I done, but I knew what I was doing. I tell you, she ain't been right in the head since. Sometimes I never know if she is all there. It has been hard for me looking at her like this, but I did it to spare her the pain of losing him one day.

(LIGHTS UP on Nina and Tony.)

NINA
Antone you promised me you wouldn't drink.

ANTONE
You ain't mad on account of my drinking. That's not why you are mad, why you're carrying on so. You want to celebrate your son's birthday, WHAT SON? WHAT SON'S BIRTHDAY DO YOU WANT TO CELEBRATE? We don't have one. He's dead, he's gone, he's buried there in the back. What do I got to do to prove to you that I'm sorry, Nina? I don't know why you keep doing this, why you keep on bringing up this one mistake that happened over four years ago.

NINA
Five years.

ANTONE
You got to let this go.

NINA
Why do I got to let this go?

ANTONE
I made a mistake. I work hard-

NINA
Don't you think I work just as hard? Do I go knocking you around, not coming home all hours of the night, yelling about how much my feet hurt or how sore my muscles are from kneading the dough and cleaning the dishes, and wiping the counters, and packing the orders. I don't have you come home after you been working all day and make you cook a full meal and never show up. You work hard, I work hard. You've always been like this, Antone. You told me you didn't want to be nobody's daddy and I figured that you'd change your mind-

ANTONE
I wont tolerate this sassing in my house-

NINA
Oh, hush!

(getting up to put together plate)
Look at what I make you every day and do you appreciate it? Do you ever appreciate it? Do you ever stop to think about me.

ANTONE
I'm always thinking of you.

NINA
No don't.

ANTONE
There are things that you don't understand that I've never explained.

NINA
I've heard enough of your explaining.

ANTONE
You haven't heard it all.

NINA
I've heard all that I care to hear and I've come to a decision that I don't want to hear anymore. You're right, we don't have no son and that's all on account of you but you can't let me have anything, can you?

ANTONE
You're right. I wanted to kill him.

NINA
I knew it. You knew I was pregnant!

ANTONE
Don't you want to know why?

NINA
It doesn't matter why, you did it. I've been deciding all day whether or not I was going to make you these biscuits. I thought to myself it is wrong to make this man his favorite supper. But I decided that today it would be right. Today it is only right that I make you the last supper I will ever cook for you ever again. Antone, I'm tired.

ANTONE
Nina-

NINA
(Makes Antone his plate, places it on table)
I hope you enjoy your food. I made your biscuits special.

ANTONE
I can't eat like this.

NINA
Why not? I'm eating. It's our last meal together, don't you at least want to be civil.

ANTONE
We don't have to do this.

NINA
Ok.
(Ignores Antone and begins eating food)
You should try the chicken.

ANTONE
Nina-

NINA
Or are you gonna let them warm, soft biscuits get hard and cold like your silly selfish little wife?

ANTONE
Nina... I...
(Antone grabs a biscuit and takes a timid bite)
I said some things that I shouldn't have and I've done some things that I regret. Maybe I should have been more honest with you. I'm sorry.

NINA
Let's not talk.

ANTONE
This can't be it.

NINA
You know what makes my biscuits so good? I put honey in them. Most people's biscuits are tasteless and hard, they taste like flour and butter.

ANTONE
I didn't mean what I said. I wanted you to have that child.

NINA
They don't have that sweetness that brings out their flavor.

ANTONE
I should have told you this years ago-

NINA
And the jam, I make them all from scratch.

ANTONE
But if I told you, I knew we couldn't be together. But the first time I laid eyes on you I knew you was the one for me-

NINA
You know how long it takes me to do that?

ANTONE
And I had to have you-

NINA
Oh, it takes some time.

ANTONE
Well, the reason why I couldn't let you have that baby.

NINA
If I changed the recipe in the slightest bit you couldn't even taste it. You don't even taste the difference, do you?

ANTONE
I'm colored-

NINA
Just the tiniest amount of poison.

(LIGHTS DOWN on NINA and SPOTLIGHT UP on ANTONE.)

ANTONE
And I was afraid, I thought, what if he don't look like me. And I couldn't stand him not looking like me. If he looked like my daddy... I never told you about my daddy... He was a colored man, a dark man. If I was dark, would you have loved me?

(Starts clearing throat)

He fell in love with my mother, and she looked, well... she looked somewhat like you. And he decided he had to have her and he did. I needed you just the same...

(Clears throat)

She wanted to have me, even though my father fought hard to sway her mind.

(OFFSTAGE Nondescript voices arguing. Could be anyone, sound tech, understudy, guy who brings in the morning coffee.)

She was stubborn. Selfish. Soon everyone in the town found out and they killed him.

(Sticks finger in ear)

I didn't have no daddy.
(wiggles finger and clears throat)

I sure as hell don't know how to be no daddy. Don't you know they would have killed her and me too if we hadn't gone away, changed who we were.
(Coughs)
I changed who I was on the outside but I can't change my blood...
(LIGHTS UP on full table.)

And I would have told you, I wanted to tell you so many times... Nina are you listening to me?
(coughs)
It's so cold in here.

NINA
What was that you said, dear?

ANTONE
I'm colored.

NINA
(Comes out of haze)
Colored?

ANTONE
HAVEN'T YOU BEEN LISTENING TO ME?
(starts to clutch chest)

NINA
Why didn't you tell me?

ANTONE
I couldn't because (begins to unbutton shirt)... I...

NINA
Antone!
(Nina runs over to Antone, pries the biscuit from his hands and begins kissing him frantically)
Why didn't you tell me? Antone!

ANTONE
And... that's why
(his head begins to rear back)
What's happening to me, honey?

NINA

We've got to call the doctor! I've got to call someone!

ANTONE

Am I going to die?

(ANTONE strokes NINA's face. NINA cries.)

(SPOTLIGHT ON NINA AND ANTONE.)

ANTONE

(to the audience)

We kill the things we are afraid to love.

NINA

(Holding the cold, dead ANTONE)

Oh, Antone...

About the contributors



Na'Aisha Malika Austin is an artist. Of words, sound, photography and many other mediums. Her works always seek to speak and reveal the truth. From the age of five she had always shown a great interest in the art of storytelling, both fiction and non-fiction, poetry and song-writing. Her photography, poetry, fiction and essay have been featured in *Azizah Magazine*, on the PBS Documentary "New Muslim Cool," and other publications. Na'Aisha is a Woodruff Scholar and an Agnes Legacy student of four sisters in her family.

Megan Bell is a senior at the University of West Georgia majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. She plans to graduate in the fall 2013. She has been studying poetry since her admittance to UWG three years ago. Megan is the President of UWG's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society and the Public Relations Editor for the campus literary journal, *Eclectic*. She has written and performed for Carrollton's community theatre troupe, Theatre On Cedar. She would like to thank Drs. Gregory Fraser and Chad Davidson for their mentorship, encouragement, and unfailing patience. She has no idea what she wants to do after graduation.

Elizabeth Bohnhorst is a teaching fellow in the MFA program at Georgia College and assistant poetry editor of *Arts & Letters*. Her work has appeared in *The Pinch*, *The Dunes Review*, and her poems have been twice nominated for the AWP Intro award. She is also a regular contributor to the fledgling online literary journal, *Trop*.

Sydney Bolding is a graduate student at the University of West Georgia where she is pursuing a Masters in English. She would like to thank her mother who is her most loyal and best friend; Dr. Lisa Crafton for leading her to be a confident, hungry, and driven woman of intelligence; and Dr. Chad Davidson for giving her all his support, trust, and devotion—but most of all, for being her biggest fan.

Anna Cabe is a senior English literature-creative writing major from Collierville, Tennessee. A winner of last year's ASC Writers' Festival in the creative nonfiction category, she's excited to be participating in the festival again this year. When not reading or writing, Anna likes cooking, eating, tutoring, traveling, films, and sleeping when she can find a minute. She would like to thank her friends and family for their unwavering support.

Stephanie Lynn Devine is a first year Ph.D. student in Creative Writing at Georgia State University. She holds a Master of Arts in English and Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her fiction is forthcoming in *Glassworks Magazine* and *Fiction Southeast*.

Monic Ductan's stories and poems have appeared in *Sleet Magazine*, *DOGZPLOT*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, and numerous other journals. Monic is twice-nominated for the Pushcart Prize this year. She studies poetry writing in the MFA program at Georgia College, and she blogs here: monicductan.wordpress.com

Mac Gay is a Georgia native, author of two chapbooks: *Dearests* and *Physical Science*, and is currently looking for a home for *Anecdotal Evidence*, a full-length collection. He is an MFA student at Georgia State University and teaches at Georgia Perimeter College and the Montessori School of Covington.

Ruth Elizabeth Johnson is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College. She is majoring in English-Creative Writing and Political Science with a minor in Theatre. Perhaps ironically, she didn't start writing until high school, and thus, as a child, dreamed of being Amelia Earhart, not a writer, although she does now. After college, she hopes to pursue a career in either television writing and producing or political communications—or even both, if she can manage it! She would like to thank her professors at Agnes Scott for encouraging her to write everything from poetry to plays, and her mother for pushing her to start writing in the first place.

Keely Lewis is a junior English-Creative Writing major, where she also works as a Center for Writing and Speaking tutor. Though technically a resident of Chester, West Virginia, during the school year she lives in a dorm room in Decatur, Georgia with her ailing betta, Ngoc, a cardboard T-Rex named Yann, and a life-sized poster of the Eleventh Doctor.

Tim Payne is currently an MA candidate at the University of West Georgia. He enjoys reading, writing, and cycling on the weekends with his good friend, Carl.

MacKenzie Regier is a senior English major at the University of West Georgia. Editor for UWG's Art and Literary Magazine *Eclectic* and a Presidential Scholar, she looks forward to studying abroad in Italy this May before moving on to pursuing an MFA in poetry.

Kristy Rutland grew up in a very small town in South Georgia and has a large extended family with lots of life stories, from which she draws much of my nonfiction and fiction pieces. She also gave birth to her first child this year, and she hopes that her experiences will serve as material for essays and stories for years to come. She has been attending the wonderful Georgia College and State University for several years now, and hopes to graduate in the summer with a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing.

Melissa Sullivan is a Master of Arts student in English at the University of West Georgia where she focuses her studies on poetry and creative writing. She lives in Villa Rica, Georgia with her husband, Chip.

A native Georgian, **Lauren Williams** divides her time between writing and miscellaneous living. She writes her experiences into poetry, non-fiction, fiction and her blog: laurendalex.wordpress.com. Her poem "Rough Draft Prayers" appeared in the University of West Georgia's *Eclectic*—art and literary magazine in 2012, and she looks forward to receiving a B.A. in English with a Creative Writing minor this spring from the University of West Georgia.

Cheryl Wollner is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College double majoring in History and Creative Writing. She has worked on fiction, non-fiction and poetry with Dr. James May and worked on dramatic writing with Professor Dudley Sanders. Her future plans involve combining the fields of history and creative writing to write historically focused children's cartoons.

Ally Wright is getting her MFA in Writing from SCAD's Atlanta campus, where she gets to take classes in a beautiful old house called Ivy Hall. Originally from Columbus, Georgia, she migrated to Atlanta to attend Emory University, graduating with a BA in Art History in 2010. She has worked with or written for The NAMES Project Foundation, *Atlanta InTown Magazine*, and WonderRoot Arts Center. Her work has been published in the *Ivy Hall Review* and is forthcoming in SCAD's literary journal, *Document*.

A native of New Jersey, **Najah Yasin**, a senior at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia has about one pair of good shoes and a spirit for creative writing. While at Wesleyan she has founded a writer's workshop and resurrected the *Wesleyan Literary Magazine*. Her motivation is her unconventional upbringing, eccentric mother and unfortunately action-packed life. Malcolm X is her hero and she writes to Barbara Streisand.



