

UNLEASHED



43<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL WRITERS' FESTIVAL

# 43RD ANNUAL WRITERS' FESTIVAL



With Agnes Scott celebrating its 125th anniversary, this year's design team wanted to explore a new side to the Writers' Festival. The past few years have had designs that take place in fantasy, so this year we took inspiration from a more urban realism. The grit of cities, the unclean lines and crumpled paper of rough drafts and the demons we all face when trying to express ourselves through the written word. We have aimed to represent the process of writing through short comic series—climbing out of the shadow of previous poets, facing the dragon of nonfiction truths, making others believe in your fictional creations and fighting against the inner editor when trying to write new script material. This year our team has had five student artists, and I've been honored to be one of them. We each took on the persona of a genre to represent in the magazine, but we all focused on the same word as our jumping point. Unleashed. Whether it is unleashing your new perspective and truth or just unleashing your creative energy, this year's finalists are representatives of this theme. They've unleashed themselves into the world, and we're proud to have them at this year's Writers' Festival.

Happy reading,  
Maggie Berardo, Class of '14

MARCH 27-28, 2014

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Jacqueline Goldfinger - one-act play

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the festival's statewide literary competition and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's festival are Nick Flynn, Terrance Hayes and Louisa Hill '09.

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 for her guidance; Demetrice Williams for her event planning and management; and Roger Reeves, William Boyle, Nicole Sheets and Jacqueline Pardue Goldfinger for their time and careful reading as our outside selection committee.



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## Leyogàn

Sydney Bolding  
University of West Georgia

*Tout moun se moun, men tout moun pa mem;  
All people are people, but not all people are the same.*  
—Brochure from HCM.

In the hills we separate ourselves among the church,  
relieved to press our cheeks to the cool hand of  
concrete. From there  
you can hear the mangos shuffle their weight under  
the stress  
as the truck rattles its gate, how a woman pleads half  
a gud from  
the ground. The meat packed next to auto parts,  
dirt-stained toys  
stacked insufficiently beside artwork and cigarettes.  
The market flutters  
like a guild made of American head-wraps, tiny  
hands, clippings  
of disaster. The dead drop their bones in a tin can  
and look up.  
The preacher lifts his face off the floor and prays for  
boils on our skin,  
for death's furious watch to rot what we treasure, for  
the lot  
portioned to Job. Over the street, the sound of feet  
shuffles like hymnals,  
worn and stiff inside themselves. The items we wait  
for or lost clot  
in bibles clinging to dust and chiffon hallelujahs.  
Travel guides  
lament in the mud. Where streetlights should stand,  
the small glare  
of Jacmel trails into chalky hills, drains into the  
harbor where mariners  
slowly pluck tilapia scales one by one while their  
wives manicure  
the fryer. The Caribbean bickers with Chaîne de la  
Selle, realizes  
he is no better than the thief hovering at his brow. It  
is December  
and hot. From the hostile where we sleep, our  
expectations are neither  
met nor mentioned. We raise the windows, and the  
voices we hear deliver  
nothing but more distance. In this, it resembles  
praise.

## Say Yes

Hank Backer  
Georgia State University

The accordion of traffic yawns and wheezes  
ahead of us, but then the only season that insists  
on smelling good drowns through the freshly  
cracked window. The swallows fuss at each other  
over the sidewalk carpeted with mulchy blooms,  
while catalpa worms perform acrobatics on the mesh  
they've made of air. *We've got 72 hours*, I tell your  
hands,  
nestled between your knees. *The sooner the better*,  
you tell Jesus, who's weeping on a bumper sticker.  
*Sometimes you open a window and the world says yes,*  
*you know?* A tuft of milkweed answers for you by  
sashaying  
into the car and landing, barely, on your knee.  
You could blame me but you don't, though I grated  
your nerves at RiteAid, useless and poking  
through the aisles, examining nail clippers,  
uncapping and sniffing various tubes of deodorant  
while you asked the pharmacist who sipped  
a sweating bottle of milk between customers  
*how the hell do you sell out of Plan B?* Thus  
our current predicament—worry, if nothing else,  
brewing inside you between RiteAid and whatever  
shitty drugstore should've been ten minutes away.  
When we get home, morning has already baked  
into afternoon—you ignore the directions and take  
both pills at once, briefly suffer nausea, then sleep.  
I lie beside you, counting the cicada's whirr,  
the robin's call, dogwoods littering the street with  
petals.

## For the One on the Other End of “Amanda, listen, I’ve changed”

Rachelle Bowser  
Georgia College

Amanda, what is he changing into?

He's putting his fist through your wall.  
Leaving him is only a matter of time.

Drive to that spot on the edge of town,  
roll up the windows and give it all hell.

Ignore the cars and the other people, honestly:  
what is he changing *from*? If you have to,

stay to watch the night come in  
just to say the sky looks lonely.

Watch the streetlamps clicking on again, the locks  
of the Allegheny beginning to fill, the river

giving the river back, your own tears  
in a clamshell mirror. Listen, the sky

isn't lonely. This isn't the edge of anything.

## Suicide By Cop

Brian Heston  
Georgia State University

*“Armed man shot by Philadelphia police in a standoff  
near City Hall might have been attempting  
“suicide by cop.”*The Associated Press

When you stepped from your stoop morning was  
breaking.  
Lamps still cast their dim light across the pale  
sidewalks.  
Your steps echoed through slumbering streets.  
I see you with chin bent to your chest,  
fists balled in your pockets.  
Only two miles away, just three stops on the subway.  
You arrived with burgeoning rush hour traffic.  
The Glock is the mystery the news goes on and on about.  
How a gun could be sold to someone so broken.  
It's where you aimed that haunts,  
in the direction of parked person-less cars,  
dark windows absent of movement.  
Red lights clogged Market Street.  
Faces stared through sun-drenched windshields.  
But your back remained to them. You had yet to shoot.  
Your figure must have seemed no odder than a  
vagrant's.  
But once the pop of bullets started,  
shattering glass and binging off brick and concrete,  
traffic began to honk in distress like a mechanized  
flock of geese.  
Nothing to be done but to duck down behind the  
dash and hope.  
Sirens finally blared in the distance,  
growing louder until four black and whites  
screeched into view.  
They lined up across from you,  
their hoods shimmering against the backdrop of the  
too bright sun.  
It was fully light now,  
like a theater when the closing credits roll.  
Cops with weapons pulled,  
stepped from their cars to crouch behind open doors.  
Their shouts filled the morning.  
You turned to face them, your arms now stiff at your  
sides.  
They called for you to kiss the pavement.  
But as the 46 bus detoured from its City Hall stop,  
you slowly raised to aim again. Silence spread everywhere.  
Then a voice cried *Shit*, and they opened fire.  
The pigeons fled their ledges.  
Though the leaves of the dogwoods  
hung limp in the nowhere wind.

## Southern Sepulcher

Jacob Collum  
Berry College

### I. Half-Seen

I have half-seen  
the birth of seven sons –  
each a king – I have  
half-seen through a caul,  
in a mirror  
held by budding rods  
planted in the four corners  
among the rank red  
rocks where rose water  
flowed forth once –  
where we sat beside  
the dank, fresh earth  
churned from digging,  
longing for crimson  
pomegranates seeds, for figs  
but ate hyacinth bulbs  
instead and over-ripened apples.  
In the mirror I saw  
candles flickering in the half-  
light of spring, resting  
on ebony between two  
apple trees, we came  
straight from the sea  
to eat our sardines and break  
our bread – we spoke  
and said: The world  
is a painted egg  
with tendriled cracks along it.

### II. Diaspora

I stewed in red, fermenting  
and awoke to the pallid sun  
crested the pines – I woke  
with a mouth full of pity –  
you can't know cotton  
without pity. One must have a mind  
like Tennessee to see  
the urns on the hills – the birds  
and bush. One must know  
the Negro or the aspects  
of negro life to know the south  
or the rivers they speak of  
nights of wickedness and woe,  
terrible and tragic.  
Wandering the earth  
in great migration  
I came across a mountain  
made of sand that stretched  
beyond bounds and a sign  
that said: *don't let the sun  
set on you here –  
you may not pass through.*  
So we went west  
to test our luck on stranger skies  
and when I died  
they buried me  
beside a brothel.

### III. Kings

The serpent king was born  
a boy upon a broken brow  
razing hyacinths from spring's  
soft bloom, south of the mason-dixie  
as the fingers of the sea stretched  
across the world to meet,  
and doves drowned  
fitting from olive trees.

*The Earth is round  
and Heaven is a sphere  
that surrounds it.*

The fisher king will be reborn  
on the border between  
Georgia and Tennessee  
underneath the cedar  
trees there are railway tracks  
that run westward  
past leaves turning  
brown from scaly green  
and a church with a sign  
that reads : *Sapristi  
la lumiere soit et vous –  
allez-vous-en,*  
with dust and ash  
on earth floors  
if you have eyes  
then let them see  
that there's decay here:  
an alligator tail  
nailed to a cedar tree.

You were stark  
in the lamplight cast  
on Cherry Street –  
your heart's soft beat  
folding perfectly  
in me, I whispered,  
“We were the victims  
of a vast and vapid  
wasteland.” And it was  
beautiful to be  
undone.

## In Spoleto

Diamond Forde  
University of West Georgia

Still Georgia lives in the mind, a state  
incessant and dogwood clustered,  
the gold glow of Waffle House.  
Here there is only the taste of cornettos,  
teens who strike their names into the aqueduct;  
Small town troubles, cuneiform  
and familiar, like turning tables in cafés,  
like skipping the stones of your name.

At home, I walk into restaurants,  
into the cautious recognition of strangers  
whose gazes fall in waves across me.  
They know me in spring dresses, pinching  
grass at Fowler Park, or in the theatre,  
huddled in the cheap seats.

Here I know the need to toss  
into stone walls, to stop home's persistent  
digging. Even in this city lined  
with history, the layered rock that marks  
the hum of time, people earn a name  
or lose one.

I peer into pink-lights and gas lamps,  
nameless. What's left but my jaw line,  
the flat splay of nostrils in damp rays  
like the fantasy of far-away? No distance,  
just the clutch of a home that keeps  
knuckling me back.

## Mosquito

Diamond Forde  
University of West Georgia

Outside, on the patio, a citronella's light  
distorts your face. Your eyes suddenly sunken.  
Over wine, you tell me you don't miss her,  
and I'd hear you if I wasn't thinking  
of other nights at cocktail parties, your gaze  
working past me in search of some sliver  
of her smile. Or nights she wasn't there—  
you looking for her in the noise and toss  
of winter wind, summer shade, hell, anywhere.  
You tell me it's finished but I can't shake  
my urge to press this mosquito into wax,  
to watch the candle give, to feel it, buzzing,  
drown. No doubt my fingertips deserve  
the heat, the hurt. No doubt I'd burn for it.

## tending the loquat tree

Robby Nadler  
University of Georgia

i've got your silver  
dollar, but i won't  
tell you which  
pocket it's in. i call  
you *buckaroo*  
and  
say  
*this is that magnificent*  
*hour*  
of gloaming. nobody dies  
in our french  
film nobody  
asks for a better drum.  
you lead a  
waltz  
and rain  
slips  
the open  
window, the sound of  
its brothers coming  
after us  
like applause.

## housework

Robby Nadler  
University of Georgia

some griefs don't come  
when you call them by their names  
small goblins living in my silverware drawer  
a pair of extra chopsticks waiting  
to be used  
some griefs bless the bedroom  
smelling up the sheets with camphor  
until in sleep an orchard  
roosts amongst the laundry  
trunks and roots whole into  
the lacquered dream of seeding  
some griefs open their mouths  
to catch the rain and drink  
despite the full cup left  
on the table for their  
pleasures  
and then some griefs make you do all the work  
wash the floor and cut  
the long-stemmed roses diagonally  
ensured their green necks  
don't strain to hold brilliant  
iceberg aloft



## 13 Black Birds Looking at Away

Jessica Melilli-Hand  
Georgia State University

### 1.

The first three rosaries that ever were were black  
black  
for grief for beauty for burnt mustard seeds and  
what the smoke released.  
Some say the threads snapped when God and  
Lucifer played tug-of-war,  
best two out of three. Some say God never was.  
However  
it happened, when the beads scattered with the  
sound of every Eve  
clicking heels across marble-floored sanctuaries—a  
rush of wings.  
Growth of eyesockets, of sharpened feet. Beads  
pupiled into eyes, moved  
among the mountains. God said let there be beaks;  
Lucifer said  
let something bleed. Black blackbirds, colored  
blackbirds, and black birds unrelated to blackbirds  
sucked voices out of God's three minds. If we  
knew how to listen we'd hear  
God's thoughts in their calls:

conk-a-reee o-ka-lee chakchakchak caw  
tjeet tit-tit-tit tsk-*tsk-*tsk* chiff-chaff squee  
weeee seep seeeep seeeeep*

### 2.

Not all blackbirds are black birds: the Purple Martin,  
the Brown-Headed Cowbird, the Yellow-Headed  
Blackbird, the Red-Winged Blackbird, the Yellow-  
Winged Blackbird, the Red-Breasted Blackbird,  
the Rusty Blackbird, the Tricolored Blackbird, the  
Bronzed Grackle. The Fish Crow does not look like  
a fish. The American Crow does not look like a flag  
or a baseball. Poe lied too—ravens say *Kaugh*.

### 3.

A raven named Nevermore did not fly  
out of the Plutonian night.  
A raven named Never wanted more.  
The raven and The Raven's speaker  
both wanted more Lenore.

### 4-12.

When Crow lived alone in the oak, Crow  
was happy. For a crow.  
Then 8 cars came with windows full of crows.  
Former Town Crier Pluto Denn cried Crow  
went crazy! Crow didn't know each crow  
came from loose electrons vibrating Crow  
back out on equal-angled light waves. No, Crow  
thought those other crows had to go so Crow  
cracked windscreens, but every eye of every crow  
kept moving. Poor Crow cried all 27 crow-  
cries. No magic. Every driver heard Crow  
land on every roof of every car, and Crow  
bent down to peck those upside-down crows  
while drivers looked for their dead. Crow  
didn't care what Athena said. Crow  
ripped rubber from wiperblades. Crow  
left his third leg in the sun so Crow  
made evening last all afternoon. Crow  
found his nest removed. When Crow  
whirled the three tenses together, when Crow  
edged the circle of cars, cawing, when Crow  
made man and woman one in Egypt, when Crow  
stole sun, burnt feathers, made moon, and when  
Crow  
flew from the southwest at sunset, the other crows  
did all of these with Crow. But when Crow  
flapped wings without flight, the other crows  
and their cars crashed together. The other crows  
broke apart like stars. Now Crow  
could live alone in the oak, happy. For a crow.

### 13.

Blackbird wore sheep's white cotton clothing  
so they thought he was a wolf.  
The boy who cried, cried.

## Hole in the Wall Diner

Jessica Melilli-Hand  
Georgia State University

Snakeback's flipping flapjacks, but Mama won't eat.  
Charlie had to sink on down, invite worms  
to skin-feast, to liver-lunch, that's why.  
Charlie already gave away his spleen. They're eating  
a hole in his heart beside the hole in his heart.  
Hunger hovers below ground, like above. Hunger  
won't hush-a-bye, little baby, little heart-hole.  
Hunger holds our feet to this earth-walk,  
then lets go. Who knows where? Hunger's not there,  
though. Streets of gold, some say. No one's cold,  
some say. Lambs get bold, some say. The hunger left  
the lion, 'less the Good Lord's lying, 'less this earth's  
the only ride. Let light be the answer  
to plant-hunger, then let the plants be the answer.  
Let the cow have a stomach for every kind of hunger,  
let the mother have a steak, the baby a breast.  
Let's tell her  
Charlie sleeps.

## Hunting Mule Deer

William Walsh  
Georgia State University

The fall I turned seven, a year before my daddy was murdered,  
he took me hunting with his best friend, Gus Reynolds,  
beyond forty miles of cane-break in West Texas on property owned by a football coach Gus knew from his playing days. With a cooler full of Cokes,

long-neck bottles of *Lone Star*, and a gunny sack of sandwiches, we drove two hours beyond Odessa to the coach's ranch to hunt his land. If not, Gus said, he knew another spot. It was my first time hanging out with Gus and listening to my father talk about work,  
"Anything you hear from up here, you don't repeat." When we arrived,

Gus told daddy to stay put riding shotgun. He had to smooth out a few things still lingering from his last visit, but was pretty certain his invitation was still open to hunt the old man's property. Gus and I walked up to the porch since the old man had a soft spot for kids with no front teeth and bad haircuts. When Gus knocked

on the front door, the coach stepped onto the porch and said he'd be more than happy to let us hunt, but first Gus needed to do him a favor. "See that old mule standing by the barn?" he said, pointing to a skinny jackstock.

"I've had that mule for nearly thirty years. He's sick an' in a lot of pain. I just can't bring myself to shoot 'em.

Gus, would you shoot my mule?"

"Coach, I'd rather not shoot your mule.

I'll mend fences, shuck corn, brand cattle.

I'll do whatever I can, but I'd rather not shoot that mule."

"I unnerstand, but my wife and daughter are away shopping and it'd be the greatest favor you could do for me while they're gone. I'd do it myself, but it's like shooting a favorite dog or your mother-in-law."

I stood looking up to both men. "Seeing how you've been so generous to me all these years, okay, I'll do it. I'll shoot your mule."

"Young feller, you ever been hunting?" he asked me. I shook my head no. As Gus and I walked back to his station wagon, he said, "I'm gonna play a joke on your daddy." I thought, "Okay."

Gus slammed the car door shut and pounded on the steering wheel.

"What's wrong," my old man asked him. "That son of a bitch told me to get the hell off his property and that we couldn't hunt and that I was the sorriest football player he ever coached in his entire life and you weren't much better. He wondered how the hell the F.B.I. ever hired you, because you're so stupid you couldn't hit the ground if you fell out of an airplane."

"He said that?"

"He sure as hell did."

"He don't hardly know me. I ain't met the man but once," my daddy said shaking his head.

"I'm gonna fix his ass. Boy, git out here with me." Gus jumped out of the driver's seat, leaned into the window at my father and pointed to the man's mule. "You see that mule. I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch's mule."

He high-tailed it around to the tailgate and grabbed his shotgun. I trailed behind. He winked at me then loaded one round, lowered his rifle, set the sights and as the mule lowered his head to eat a snip of alfalfa, "*Bam!*" One shot through the neck and the mule fell over peacefully with a thud.

I was too scared to look at my daddy. I felt bad for the mule. Gus just stood there milking this for all it was worth, staring off at the dead mule as if he had just laid down a pronghorn antelope with a bow. Then as I took a deep breath, "*Bam! Bam!*" my old man had his 30-30 shoulder-locked. He turned and looked toward Gus. "I just got two of his cows, let's get the hell out of here."





## Rules for the Wingwoman

Monica Prince

Georgia College and State University

It means letting her smoke on the back porch with the band, even though she promised to quit months ago; taking dead turtle shots even if you might be allergic to Tabasco sauce; loaning her your favorite lipstick knowing she won't give it back because she'll lose it between his couch cushions if she's successful. It means kissing his friend with the goatee despite your aversion to facial hair; driving her car home at 1am to crash on her couch in high heels and skinny jeans while she giggles incessantly in her bedroom, even though she promised a girls-only night; nursing a melting gin and tonic in a bar called The Dusty Spur while a man who claims to be Kenny Chesney's nephew teaches her to play darts regardless of your deep-seeded disgust for country music and ignorance of who the fuck Kenny Chesney is.

It means introducing her to your boss' cousin/brother/uncle when you run into them at the town's Christmas Parade (Winter Festival, if you live in a city), whether or not he's too old, young, or stupid for her. It means pretending you're in high school (middle school, fifth grade) again by daring him to fish his guitar pick out of the back pocket of her jeans so he can feel her ass because that's what she wants. It means evaporating when he leans in close to her, places his hand on the small of her back, and whispers something clever that will make her laugh but means the same thing: *Come home with me so we can fuck.*

When you pick her up tonight wearing your three-inch red heels, the New Year's dress you bought on sale four years ago, and gold hoop earrings—you have to work for her. You dress her so

she looks a step above you but couldn't be arrested for solicitation, feed her mixed shots so she can still walk in the silver high heels with the straps that wind up her calves, and keep *her* phone in *your* clutch so that if by 1:37 in the morning she's sitting in a corner with a glass of vodka-flavored ice, she won't text her ex-boyfriend to come pick her up so they can "talk." Before you leave the apartment, go through the checklist: ID, wallet, keys, cell phone (charged), shoes. Yes, shoes. This is not a drill.

These are the rules:

If you're bar-hopping, end at the bar you feel the safest, where the bartenders know your name and you're bound to get free shots and the bathrooms never have people fucking in them. Don't pay for more than one drink at every location, and if you're staying put for the night, no more than three. Pre-game drinks don't count.

Stick to one form of alcohol all night; let her choose.

Change her order if she requests bourbon or whiskey; keep her from calling top-shelf liquor.

Use your peripherals—the guy playing darts keeps walking back to the section of the bar where you're sitting to stare at your breasts and catch your eye, so let him buy the next round.

Never flirt with men who seem dangerous—not creepy, dangerous, like they're likely to follow you home or shove you into a wall out back. Creepy men are usually harmless—might make you uncomfortable and prompt many eye rolls, but they won't hurt you.

Always tip your servers or bartenders well—they have the power to throw out any guy who gives you drunken unwanted attention. Make friends with the bouncers, too.

Flirt with men your age or slightly older who find you mature. Anyone under the age of twenty-one shouldn't be talking to you.

If she sets her sights on someone specific, keep the conversation going but don't dominate it, don't touch him, and don't make excessive eye contact with him.

Vanish often.

Talk to his friends, especially the ones who aren't used to women talking to them.

If she looks like she might be drinking too much, swap a couple of her rounds with water or make her chase her shots with it. Don't let her tell you she can handle herself. When she does, laugh at her.

Go to the bathroom as a team to discuss the man and make a plan for what she wants. Take anything from her she doesn't need for tonight—makeup, quarters, flask—and leave her only with her credit card, driver's license, cell phone, and keys. Tuck a condom in her bra strap...tuck two, different sizes. (You never know with these Southern boys.)

When she wants to go home with him, when she's touched his shoulder four times a minute for the last hour, when he's kissed her cheek or her hand or her neck, when his friends have started to disappear, follow suit. Text her when you get home "good luck U" and keep your phone on all night, just in case. In the morning, send her the checklist—dress, bra, panties, shoes, keys, ID, credit card, cell phone, jewelry, his name—and go for a run. Make coffee and watch the news. Order in Chinese and read the self-help book that you bought when you thought you were getting out of control. Wait for her call so you can do it again.

Every now and again, she'll fall in love and not sleep with him on the first night. She might just get a phone number and a kiss on the cheek. You may have to play the friend-for-my-friend a few times before he has the nerve to be with her alone, before he stops feeling guilty when his roommate comes home to the sounds of bed creaks and muffled gasps. You might not go out for a while, or find someone else to occupy your time while she's in love. You'll slowly integrate the new couple back into your old routine, minus the binge drinking, social smoking or last-call panic where everyone lunges for the nearest body to validate their existence. Girls' nights will be bitch fests where she complains or praises her new man, characterized by bottles of wine, expensive cheese, cheap crackers, and chocolate squares. (Feel free to buy cheap wine, too).

When he cheats on her/comes out to her as gay/joins the Marines without proposing/moves out of the state/betrays her in any way, shape or form, go back to the rules. Buy a new dress for the occasion—her return to the dating scene, her first night as a free woman, whatever she wants to call it—rinse, and repeat.

You may not get laid this way. There's a high chance you will never fall in love with this system. Some nights, both of you will go home with someone. Some nights, you'll give up on a sure thing to get her home safely. Some nights, you will have no desire to do this because what you really want is consistency but your youth expects recklessness and so does she. So you will put on that strapless dress with the green trim and smear on that cheap eye shadow from Wal-Mart and take out \$40 from the ATM because you're a good friend.

You're a damn good friend.



## Lavender No. 19

Sybil McLain-Topel  
Savannah College of Art and Design

### La Lavande.

*La lavande me manque.*

Lavender is missing to me. This is the French construction of the phrase ‘I miss lavender.’

When I say I miss my lover, I say in English, I miss you. In French I say, you are missing to me: *tu me manques*. Listen for nuance. The noun for me, myself, and I now rests in shade. My lover takes on full sun. *Tu me manques*.

Subtle. Thought. Shift.

Early one Saturday I wrestle with the gray stems and twisted stubby stalks of lavender growing their third year beneath the window of my first husband’s bedroom. They are stubborn. I don’t know what to do with them. They don’t look like photos of lavender fields, row after endless row spread across hectares of French land, knee-high carpet of plush blue-purple buds holding down dry Gallic earth. Photos that hide the gnarled branches and roots beneath twilight petals, petals that release pungent oil, oil that makes the south of France one long inhalation for my soul.

Nothing like the dry driftwood knots under my knuckles that won’t yield to my vision of how these plants should behave. Like my first husband, who is distant, who is at work, who hates yard work.

If I cut them back, will the woody stalks sprout new shoots or just rot?

### Hey 19

My nose filled with stale cigarette smoke and the foul arrogance of the man next to me who was about to miss his reservation at a five-star restaurant in Paris. He had peppered me with attitude for much of the flight, but at least had the grace to buy me a cognac when the plane turbulence caused my fingers to crunch the armrests with fear. It was dark and I could feel the cold Atlantic beneath us. I knew we would crash. I’m sure my naiveté amused him from time to time during the six-hour flight from New York.

The plane began to descend. Out the window stretched green fields sewn to earth by threads of bushes and trees, a quilt of welcome. Morning sun spilled jonquil rays of spring. My first smell of lavender fields was only days away.

Turbulence would never have the same effect on me again.

In the summer of my 19th year, somewhere in the South of France, I captured stalk after stalk of lavender buds and let them dry. The stems turned light gray, the buds lost their hard purple edge. But the oil remained and crushing the buds between thumb and forefinger and mashing them into my palm, the scent unfurled. I tugged the precious buds from their stems and made sachets. They went in my suitcase, tucked into my American clothes, next to the few French things that journeyed with me to my sophomore year in college.

*Inventory:*

*One t-shirt with a witty French slogan.*

*Two bottles of wine, one a gift from the swimming pool manager where I took the girls to swim almost every day. He was nice to us all summer long, a mustache with the promise of handlebars to come whisked his upper lip like a brush. He was tan. Like a refugee from Jacques-Cousteau’s boat. The other bottle of wine a gift from a gentleman farmer who bottled it himself, somewhere on the outskirts of Paris at his gentleman’s farm. He made meals for me because I was the guest of his son. His son was the friend of one of my French professors. The son and I became lovers on white sheets, near Paris. Not right away, not the first day in Paris. Not on the spring day when I landed in Paris, and dinner was veal, pan-fried with a delicate cream sauce and I don’t remember dessert because the jet lag dragged me under and they put me to bed gently and left me to wake up in a blue-sky April morning and fed me sweet red strawberries for breakfast.*

*Strawberries taken by surprise from their garden moments before.*

*We made the white sheets red in July. Maybe again in August. It’s hard to say now. He visited me in Southern France where I cared for the two young girls. He visited me when their parents were not home. We hiked in the woods and I fell in the orties bush and learned the French word for stinging nettle, orties brulantes, burning nettles.*

### Stateside

In New York, the customs agent asked my age.

I beamed my prettiest smile.

“I’m 19 and I’m going to drink that wine in Tennessee, where the drinking age is 18,” I said. *Please don’t take my souvenirs. They’re mine. I’ve heard stories of things stolen in customs. At least I didn’t try to sneak in stinky cheese and garlicky saucisson.*

He laughed and tucked the wine bottles back where they belonged, snug in American clothes, next to sophisticated little lavender sacks. I sashayed off to catch my plane to Knoxville.

### First Garden

Lavender would not grow at my first house, a white brick home in Nashville, where I went into labor with my one and only child about seven months after moving in.

Our pitiful plants fought with shade and poor soil. My son grew.

My first husband, a young attorney, competed for billable hours, worked Saturdays at the office and sweated his way through yard work on Sundays. A few herbs poked their way to the light here and there, the oregano thrived and lemon balm invaded like an unwanted weed, like the university that kept creeping across the street into our yard, the one that finally took over the house.

### Le Crepuscule

At my second house, the big one, the one in the correct suburb with correct neighbors, where my child attended the right school with the right people, the lavender thrived. My French interior designer was jealous of my lavender, which satiated me in a strange way, like a middle-schooler winning an award.

The first husband bought a midnight blue Nissan Exterra without letting me know. I bought more time with the designer. *C’est la vie, n’est-ce-pas?* To each their own.

When the lavender outdoors would not bend to my will, I brought it in.

There’s a color in the evening in the sky, after the sun sinks. It’s not blue and it’s not purple and it’s not lavender. It’s that intense shade some call

periwinkle, but it’s darker. It glows. In France that part of the sky after sun fall is called *le crepuscule*. The color we put on the kitchen walls should have been called *Le Crepuscule*. But it was called Paris Evening, like a Liz Taylor wannabe perfume, a knock-off.

We kept painting the walls in colors that reminded me of Southern France, terra cotta for the play room, light lilac for the guest room, jonquil sunshine yellow for the sitting room off the kitchen, the one that opened to the screened-in porch painted the parched gray of lavender stems.

### Alabaster Moonflowers

At my third house, the one for divorced parents trying to pretend they still live in the correct suburb, the one where parents still strive to send their kids to the right school, not only did my lavender thrive, my rosemary grew to the size of a small car.

Sage showed up in our cornbread dressing for Thanksgiving. Chives came back year after year, their purple buds an early spring tease of lavender scents to come.

White clematis installed itself in the humid mulch at the base of the backyard deck. The vines climbed the deck posts and flowers unfurled like white flags of hope under the sun. At twilight, moonflowers opened their lustrous white petals.

The hammock in the shade of the deck gave a valley view of the backyards of homes beyond. I painted my bedroom a light lilac, like the guest bedroom from the big house, the walls now the same shade as the sunlit room where my military man and I broke the rules.

Alabaster skin, chipped front tooth and freckles - *taches de rousseur*.

Freeze tag brought us together in another state when he was 4 and I was 8. When he was 38 and I was 42, he lived not too close and not too far.

We became children again, the salty sweat of play fresh on our lips.

When he left I was barren. He never explained. Why. He left.

### Clinging

Trying still to stay in the neighborhood so my son could be near his father and keep attending the

right school, I moved across the street to a house that was smaller still. The new owner bought my third house because of the rosemary, chives, clematis, sycamore trees and lavender, all of which I had planted, watered and nurtured for several years.

In my fourth and last house I didn't paint. I left the walls a dark chocolate brown in the front hall. I stole a few lavender plants from my old garden, but they failed in the dusty red clay on the hill.

My old young lover had a new baby. He told me the day I saw him by chance at the airport. I understood then what he couldn't tell me in the room with the lilac walls.

Youth. *La jeunesse.*

### Summer Harvest

On the day I left town, I drove by all the houses. The magnolia my son's father and I planted at the

little white house in Nashville lived still, sweeping beautiful boughs out toward the street, embracing the neighbor's yard. That tree's 18, going on 19. The university rents our first home to students now. The herb garden's long gone.

At the big house, the lavender was ripped out years ago. New owners planted something green and leafy, mundane, correct in a neighborly fashion. Tame.

At the smallest house, on either side of the front door, knock-out roses thrived and Russian sage pretended to be lavender in color and bud, with a tedious scent that's nothing like the real thing, but much easier to grow.

### *La lavande*

Intense heat, powerful smell, purify my soul and bring my youth back. It was stolen from me one day in the South of my birth.

## Million-Dollar Wound

Robby Nadler  
University of Georgia

I remember being twenty-one. I remember graduating valedictorian of a Top 25 university. I remember I fought with my family after the graduation ceremony and refused to eat dinner with them that night even though we had reservations at a restaurant I picked. I remember moving to Austin the day after I gave a commencement speech on how to get yourself dismissed from jury duty. I remember doctors saying I would survive the year, but that my body was symptomatically relapsing. I remember my family never knew there was a time bomb in my brain and it had been detonated. I remember I was given a timetable for how many years I had left to live. I remember I multiplied that best-case scenario number by 365 and it still seemed small. I remember being determined not to depend on my family in that they didn't know I was leaving Los Angeles, they didn't pay a dime to cover the cost, or they didn't get my address in case they wanted to visit because I didn't want them to see me growing sick.

I remember there were no what-I-thought were considered "real jobs," where I wore a tie to work, owned seven suits with at least two of them colored blue, and earned a minimum of fifty-thousand a year. I remember that my student health insurance was going to run out in three months and that my medicines cost thirty dollars a daily dose. I remember applying to over twenty restaurants, coffee shops, and fast food establishments after I became desperate. I remember none of them gave me an interview because my education level rendered me overqualified. I remember that it never occurred to me that I could lie or simply not fill in the college attended section of those applications. I remember it was late June and the intense heat with humidity never abated at night, upsetting my mood. I remember not knowing any people in this new city aside from a person whom I met during a scouting trip to Austin who wouldn't return my calls now that I relocated a few blocks from his apartment. I remember I once sat outside his door on a Sunday evening until he came home. I remember he told me I had spunk, and I never saw him again. I remember my savings account never dipping below a thousand dollars throughout college. I remember when four digits became three, and I still had no job.

I remember being on an awkward date one Sunday afternoon with a much older man who

bought me drinks and was the head of the local Freemasonry chapter. I remember he took me to his lodge office and we had sex there simply because I could then tell people I had sex in a Masonic temple. I remember before we left the bar an older woman strolled in. I remember my date saying I needed to meet her. I remember he introduced me to her as the lady in hats. I remember she liked my face and gave me her business card. I remember my date joking that she owned a male-escort/strip service. I remember the lady in hats preferred her own phrasing as *concierge in underwear*.

I remember not wanting to do it. I remember my pledge not to depend on my family's help. I remember I had only a month's supply of medicine left. I remember deciding you can be the valedictorian of a Top 25 university and that doesn't mean walking around in your underwear while men stick dollars into the elastic waistband is beneath you if it means survival. I remember I called her on a Wednesday evening. I remember she called me back with my first booked job the following Friday morning.

I remember the gig was dancing at Charlies, a gay bar built in the shadow of the Capitol Building that was known for being serviced by older men of mixed races, but there were never more than two dozen patrons at the busiest of times. I remember guys my age never frequented the bar, and I had little to worry about in terms of people in town recognizing me. I remember wondering why anyone came to that run-down dump equipped with a pair of rhinestone-covered cowboy boots that twirled over an oak dance floor. I remember I later found out one of the largest cocaine rings in town operated there. I remember the cocaine dealer being fond of me. I remember on my twenty-second birthday he placed hundreds of dollars of product in my underwear. I remember him being angry that I refused to keep it. I remember he gave me his tattered St. Louis Cardinal's baseball cap as a consolation gift, the one he always wore. I remember him leaving me alone after I put it on.

I remember his name was Michael. I remember he was of Sicilian descent and hailed from Brooklyn. I remember he partnered with a short, brown man, named Jason, who was both Filipino and Jewish. I remember Michael invited me over to have a threesome. I remember him saying he doesn't pay for sex, but will cook an amazing breakfast in the



morning consisting of sausages, Belgium waffles, and omelets. I remember making up the name of a current lover to change the conversation. I remember he wouldn't accept this answer and kept asking anyways.

I remember once he drunkenly told me based on the first night I showed up that he didn't think I'd last a week because I was too pale, my body out of shape from the medication, and I didn't even own the right underwear. I remember he placed a bet with the bar about how long I'd last. I remember he lost over a thousand dollars on the bet. I remember working myself into the body I needed. I remember taking over twenty injections and supplements a day on top of my regular medications. I remember the FDA issued a recall for one of the supplements I took because it caused liver failure. I remember finishing that bottle of pills after I learned about the recall because if I couldn't make the money to buy my medicine then I wouldn't live long enough to die from a bad liver. I remember I soon owned an underwear collection valued at over two-thousand dollars.

I remember there were always two dancers per shift. I remember Guy, my dancing companion, was a tall and chiseled straight guy several years older than I was, paying his way through Texas State in San Marcos for Engineering. I remember him flirting with the rare straight girl group who meandered in during a bachelorette party. I remember he liked to talk about blowjobs from girls. I remember he kept telling me I had to try pussy. I remember changing in the backroom after my first shift, and he cornered me. I remember I went for the bowie knife I kept on my key ring. I remember before I could reach the knife he put an arm on my shoulder and said I reminded him of a kid he picked on during high school. I remember him saying he always felt bad about teasing the kid. I remember he said if I wanted to survive there then I had to avoid pissing off Michael. I remember being curious why and he wouldn't tell me what Michael did for a living because the less I knew in this job the better. I remember this was before I learned about the cocaine. I remember after learning the truth that my original distaste for Michael turned into fear. I remember learning ignorance, even if only feigned, is salvation in many cases, and that was the only way I finished shifts when he was in the bar. I remember asking Guy about what happened to that kid in high school, and he said he hanged himself from a football goalpost the day before homecoming.

I remember that I stopped telling people I went to college. I remember guys never tipped you if they thought you were smart enough to do better with

your life. I remember none of the guys with more than enough money to give away ever tipped me. I remember that Michael aside, I met the nicest men on Earth in those bars and clubs. I remember being booked in Houston, Oklahoma City, and New Orleans. I remember hating Houston, but the guys loved me, and I could walk away three-hundred—cash—a night. I remember that is where I met the Boeing engineer who described my ass as the quadratic equation, then introduced me to his family for Sunday Southern brunch. I remember in Oklahoma the men paid for all my meals and one lonely guy in his early thirties drove me to where the bombing took place. I remember him saying his father was in that building, and then I realized why he looked so lost. I remember it was Halloween in New Orleans and there were ten-thousand people who dropped by the bar. I remember an old flame from high school recognized me, but I didn't go back to his hotel room because it was obvious he was positive. I remember that no matter where I traveled to that I enjoyed myself and left being thankful that I heard those terrific stories that I'd one day try to tell.

I remember one night Ronnie and Patrick, my two favorite admirers in Austin, were in their late forties and drunk for sad reasons. I remember going over to talk to them. I remember they each tipped me five dollars, something they did every time they saw me. I remember asking what was wrong and them insisting I wouldn't understand. I remember asking again and they told me. I remember when they finished talking about how Patrick's mother was sick they were still crying. I remember I told them of my own experiences of my sick mother. I remember them saying the reason every guy in the bar liked me despite the owner insisting I be fired because I didn't have a six-pack like the other dancers was that I didn't make the customers feel old, ugly, and unwanted the way the other dancers did. I remember they never touched me and would hand me the money in my palm. I remember they thanked me for listening. I remember that there were two, gentle souls raised in old Texas that were alone and drunk before seven o'clock on a Thursday, and it made me sad. I remember I gave them each a hug. I remember they tipped me another ten dollars each.

I remember whenever Michael was around I wished Ronnie or Patrick or any of the other guys who would intervene when he became too loud would magically appear to deflect his path toward me. I remember everyone was somewhat intimidated by him, but the regulars felt that it was their duty to protect me. I remember being so grateful for that loyalty despite the fact I never thanked them for

their help. I remember I closed my eyes and held my breath to bear Michael's whiskey exhale as he whispered insults and come-ons in my ears, both about fucking me. I remember reminding myself this was all to survive and pay for graduate school applications so that I could get out of Austin, back onto my father's health insurance, and lead the life I had the talent to lead. I remember Patrick called me once when he became a vegetarian a few months after the owner got tired of my lack of abdominal definition and fired me despite the patrons continuously asking for me back. I remember calling Patrick back to thank him for being so nice the week I was accepted into graduate school in Montana. I remember thinking of how great it would be to leave the people who knew this part of me and hide it from everyone else. I remember how much I came to feel for people whose livelihood depended on the generosity of a dollar and that I ate, paid my rent, bought my meds, and applied to school with those green kindnesses. I remember the other dancers had their own reasons for dancing. I remember running into one a few weeks before I left Austin named Quentin, a straight boy in his mid-twenties. I remember asking how his baby was doing after the operation he financed through dancing. I remember tipping him five dollars and wanting to hand it to him. I remember he insisted I put it in his briefs and said the baby was great.

I remember missing it. I remember being thankful to be done with it. I remember one day while I was still working I dropped into the local army surplus store. I remember I bought a pair of combat boots. I remember I bought real dog tags with other people's names on them. I remember I bought a cap from Desert Storm. I remember these were all accessories to match the new camouflage print briefs I was going to dance in. I remember those briefs cost me seventy-five dollars. I remember the getup was supposed to make me lots of tips. I remember Michael seeing me in it from afar and moving toward me. I remember I could smell his skin seeping alcohol from its pores all the way from the other side of the bar. I remember praying in my head that he would go easy on me. I remember he stopped and stood and stared at me from a few feet away and did so for the first time without any interest in my body as if I were diseased—which I was, but he didn't know that. I remember how he said the week before this incident that I had become his favorite, and suddenly, I felt awful that I had disappointed him despite how much I feared interacting with him. I remember he finally approached, and when I dropped to my knees to meet him at eye-level, he yanked me by the silver chain of the metal-beaded necklace so that my ear would sit by his lips. I remember him saying *You didn't earn those*. I remember him saying it again.



## As Fit As a Thimble

Vivian K. Phillips  
Agnes Scott College

### Amen

We say it at the end of every prayer, so I thought it'd be good if I started my essay with it. The word 'Amen' is a funny little thing. Its intended purpose is to end things, it's like the phrase: "It shall be done." or "So be it." But with us; it doesn't have to be. It can be used with as an agreement such as "I Approve!" a complement to the pastor if he's doing a wonderful sermon, or simply an exclamation of happiness. My grandma Sadie always wanted a refrigerator when she was a housewife in the fifties; she got her wish in 1956. It was a brand new *Frigidaire* refrigerator with a self-making ice-box. Without fail, every time she opened it, she'd exclaim: "Frigidaire, Amen!" To this very day, she exclaims that phrase anytime she's gets food out of a refrigerator, regardless if it's a Frigidaire.

### Brown, John (May 9, 1800 – December 2, 1859)

A martyr or a madman? That question has lingered with white people and APUSH textbooks for over 150 years. Well obviously he *must* be a madman! What sane and good-Christian white man would put his life down on the line for some niggers during 19th century? What man in his right mind would steal George Washington's personal sword and pistols, believing that those items would invoke a revolution across the nation and inspire slaves to overthrow their masters? Why on earth would a white man kill other *white* men for those considered only 3/5 of a man? John Brown, that's who. Or as my grandpa would say, "The only white man who gave a damn about me." and pours two drinks for himself and one for Brown every year on Brown's birthday.

### Chitlins<sup>1</sup>

A traditional African American soul-food dish where the main ingredient is pig intestines. If you do it right, it takes three days to make. Two days to for the intestines to sit in lukewarm water so it can be cleaned easier and then half a day of boiling it in water mixed with baking soda. After that, you can do whatever you want with it, but pan-frying is the best choice. You and your toilet will know if the cook took any shortcuts in the cleaning phase. This dish best represents the creativity and determination of the enslaved Africans in one spoonful. When life<sup>2</sup> gives you pig intestines, you make a delicious bowl of chitlins.

### Double Consciousness

A term created by W. E. B. Du Bois is his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here is an excerpt, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." I like to think nowadays that this has now evolved into a mental filter for black folks or a filing cabinet. I used to look down on black kids who couldn't "act right" or "acted ghetto" around white people, but now I envy them.<sup>3</sup> It must be nice not having to be trapped between the "white" and "black" world or being constantly aware of your own race when you're the only black kid in the room. Must be real nice.

### Ebonics

No language is above any of the others. I repeat, no language is above any of the others. Unfortunately the act of speaking ebonics is looked down on. It's been debated by many linguistics on whether ebonics is different dialect of English or a mixture of African languages and English and is a whole new language in itself. Ebonics was derived from the enslaved Africans learning English by ear as well as being able to communicate with other Africans from different parts of Africa. Over the years African Americans expanded the language into what you hear today. Ebonics is not slang, slang comes and goes, but ebonics has evolved over time. For a black person to speak ebonics today would cause many to think that the person is stupid, uneducated, or simply "too black." It's very sad when a black person's intelligence is judged by how well they enunciate a language that was forced down their ancestors throat.

### Frederick Navarro

The boy who called me "Nigger" the first time in my life, I was in 7th grade.<sup>4</sup> I pretty much was just walking right past him and then he just blurted it out. Two thoughts went through my mind, the first one

was "I wonder if I'll get suspended if I punch him." and the second was, "Wait, he's Filipino. Aren't we on the same side?" That day I consider that day the birth of my black consciousness, my epiphany.

### Ghetto

Originally an Italian term for the place of living for Jews in Europe. Contains the word 'ghet' which is a suffix meaning, "slag" or "trash."

### High John the Conqueror

In African American folktales, the most famous amongst the enslaved Africans was the trickster, High John the Conqueror. High John was an demigod and walked on the ocean floor underneath the slave ships all the way to America. Most of his stories entail him making a fool out of Ol' Massa or outsmarting the Paddyrollers. He'd often disguise himself as slave or an old African man. He was meant to bring joy to the slaves when they had none and some of his stories even had codes of where to go when a slave was planning to run away. He was an inspiration for B'er Rabbit and many other trickster type characters. With the abolishment of slavery, there was no need for a High John anymore. He was recently brought back to light by Zora Neale Hurston in one of her short stories. In the story he teaches a whole plantation of slaves how to fly and all Ol' Massa can do is watch.

### Icarus

Icarus was one of my favorite Greek mythologies when I was younger. It fascinated me that Icarus wouldn't listen to his father about flying too close to the sun. In the myth Icarus flies too close to the sun because he feels like a god while in the air and believes he's entitled to be on Mt. Olympus. For some reason I always cheered for him and thought he truly deserved to be there. I liked the fact that he died doing the impossible and I also like to think that the Greek gods respected him for at least attempting. His father, Daedalus wouldn't have *dreamed* of flying near Mt. Olympus because he knew the consequences. But Icarus was innocent and naive and because of it he was free. Free to do as he pleased.

### JET

JET magazine was founded in 1951 John Johnson and is currently the only major black themed magazine where the editor-in-chief is African American. Essence magazine has a white editor-in-chief, while Ebony magazine has Mexican editor-in-chief.

### KKK

Founded in Pulaski, Tennessee the Klu Klux Klan was created by Civil War Confederate veterans meant to keep the newly freed slaves frightened and oppressed. The origin on the white sheets was to cover their identity as well as pretend to be ghosts of killed Confederates. In 1915, the KKK placed their headquarters in St. Mountain, Georgia. When my parents moved to St. Mountain in 1993 (two years before I born), my father claimed he could see the crosses burning on the edge of the mountain, that was also the year my father bought a gun for the first time. Luckily the KKK went bankrupt a year later and dispersed, along with the passing of law that all current KKK members would be on surveillance by the Atlanta police department.<sup>5</sup>

### LeVar Burton (born February 16, 1957)

A man most famous for playing Kunta Kinte, in the revolutionary TV series, Roots. He then went to have a star cameo in the music video "Word Up!" by the group Cameo in 1986, which at the time was #3 on the Top 40. Next was the host of *Reading Rainbow*, the series ran for 23 seasons, making it one of the longest running children's programs on PBS. And finally his last huge role was as Geordi La Forge in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* television series. So here we have black actor go from a slave to hip hop idol to teacher to an engineer in outer space. Not too shabby.

### Mammy

The archetype usually for a large, homely, black woman who used to take care of white children of rich families in the South.<sup>6</sup> My great grandma Juile was a nanny of a white family in Arkansas. My mother would always tell me of the stories about great



grandma Julie and how she raised two white boys who loved her more than their own mother. The part of the story that always stuck out in my mind was when the white lady who was interviewing her asked if she'd recently had babies. When Juile said yes, the lady hired her on the spot. Juile then found out the woman also just had a child and wanted her to be the wet nurse. But she couldn't just pick the white baby up, oh no. To feed the baby my great grandma had to have the infant wrapped in a blanket and had to put a terry-cloth napkin on the baby's cheek so it wouldn't touch her dark skin on her breast as it suckled.

### **Nig•ger/nig•ga (noun)**

#### **Definition of NIGGER:**

A name coined for the descendant of the enslaved Africans. Usually used for males more than females. In current times is often used as a racial slur where a different ethnicity—usually caucasian—exercises their need to show their social superiority.

*ex. "Get off my porch you, Nigger!"*

#### **Definition of NIGGA**

1. A term used by fellow African Americans usually to scorn another black person for shaming the race.

*ex. "Ain't that a shame. If Marcus keeps actin' like a nigga he gon' end up in jail."*

2. A term used by fellow African Americans usually as a form of endearment or friendship.

*ex. "You's my nigga, got that? I'll always have yo' back."*

3. The word that comes before 'please.

*ex. "Nigga, please. No way that shit's going down."*

### **O.J. Simpson**

Yeah, he did it.<sup>7</sup>

### **Panthers**

Mostly known as the Black Panthers;<sup>8</sup> was a revolutionary socialist group that believed in protecting the black community from police brutality in the ghettos. They were founded in Oakland, California by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale on October 15, 1966 and promoted the idea that, "Black is Beautiful!" during the late sixties. Was seen as an extremist

group in older people's eyes, but was seen as a means of being heard by younger people. The uniform was a black leather jacket, black beret, and black leather gloves.

### **Quilts**

During the times of slavery, slaves had to find a way to communicate with each other secretly when it came to escaping. After Negro spirituals, quilts were used to pass codes between one another. If there was a quilt with a red 'X' in the window then that meant Ol' Massa was watching close, so act natural. If there was a quilt with a northern star stitched on it that meant someone from the Underground Railroad was coming. If a quilt was primarily blue, that meant if you were going to run away the best bet was to wade through the water to throw off the dogs.

### **Railroad**

The Underground Railroad was an underground network made of freed slaves, abolitionists, and Quakers. Most famous of the Underground was the great conductor Harriet "Moses" Tubman; a former slave that had a \$100,000 bounty on her head and freed more than 400 slaves in her lifetime.

### **Sick Kitten**

"Child! Stop actin' like a sick kitten on a hot brick!" This is a saying from my grandfather. It usually means, 'stop whining or acting lazy.' Through my family I learned we had many sayings that'd been passed down from our family. Such as, "You gonna believe me? Or your lying eyes?" and then there's one in our family that goes back to the times of slavery: "There's weevils in wheat." Which means there's a traitor in our midst that means to tell Ol' Massa.

### **Topsy**

The topsy-turvy doll was a double ended doll. These went into mass production after the civil war and were given to little southern girls to play with. The white end of the doll was named Eva, she was said to be well manner, beautiful, kind-hearted, and honest. The black end of the doll was named Topsy who was a recently freed slave girl who was said to have nappy hair, was loud and obnoxious, always broke things around the house, and always told lies.<sup>9</sup>

### **Umoja**

One of the seven principles of the African-American celebration of Kwanzaa, and is considered the most important out of the seven of them. It means, (Unity): To strive for and to maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.

### **Venus Hottentot (before 1790 – 29 December 1815)**

No one knows her original name, but her English name was Sarah Baartman. Baartman orphaned African girl was sold to an animal trainer in England and was put on display as a circus freak because of her large breasts, butt, and arms and was called "The Hottentot Venus". She was seen as exotic and beautiful, but also a savage. When the circus went out of business, she was sold to a college in France where she was examined as a specimen. She became famous for how large the labium on her vagina was and scholars from all around Europe came to inspect it. Scholars wondered how her breasts and thighs were so large even though she ate regular meals like them. When she died, she was dissected, her vagina and brain pickled in jars, and her skeleton was put on display in Memoires du Museum d'Histoire Naturelle in France. It wasn't until 2002, Nelson Mandela demanded that her remains be brought home and buried. My mother did a one-man show of Baartman and played Baartman. My mother has wide hips, big breasts, thick thighs, and is one of the most beautiful people in the world. At the end of the one-man play my mother acts as Sarah and screams in pain as they dissect her and tear her apart "...like hyenas clawing at meat."

### **Weave**

Maya Angelou has said that a woman's hair is her glory. But in this day and age, black women will do just fine with some fake glory as well. Black women are the only customers of the weave industry and it makes over 3 billion dollars a year. Long hair, short hair, blonde hair, red hair, you name it... there's a weave for that. One of the most common questions I get when my hair is down is, "This hair all yours?" Yes, yes it is, you've asked me three times already.

### **Xavian Cornelius Johnson**

That name up there is not a real person, but you've pictured what he'd look like, didn't you? I'm

99.8% percent of you pictured him as a black man and it's all because of the name. Black people are famous for so-called "ghetto" names. It's no secret that people with "black" sounding names are less likely to get a job than a person with a "white" sounding name when the employer is looking at a resume. So why do black people do it? Don't they know it's bad for them? African people used to have African names until they were kidnapped and renamed and forced to work for Ol' Massa with similar names, and because of it they lost touch with their roots. When their freedom was regained and civil rights became a real attainable thing for African-Americans, the tradition of naming their children with more elaborate names. Names with root sounds from languages like Swahili, Somali, and Jula and it evolved. This most likely happened without parents even realizing it and thus created, "black names."

### **Yellow**

High-Yellow is black slang for a black person who has really light skin. It's mostly used in a derogatory way, because black people have assumed for years that the lighter your skin, the farther you'll get in life. And for the most part, they've been right. Some black people are so high-yellow that they can "pass." This means they can pass as a white person and try to hide their black roots.

### **Zion<sup>10</sup>**

The term Zion is often affiliated with Jerusalem for the Jews. Jerusalem is seen as a safe-haven or a promised land. In Jewish mythology whenever Zion is mentioned it's usually when the Jews are in Babylonian captivity. The enslaved Africans in America saw themselves as the Jews and adopted the word Zion as a word for freedom or civil rights.

<sup>1</sup> Or if you want to get technical, "Chitterlings."

<sup>2</sup> Ol' Massa

<sup>3</sup> We wear the mask that grins and lies / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes / This debt we pay to human guile / With torn and bleeding hearts we smile... (*We Wear the Mask* by Paul Laurence Dunbar)

<sup>4</sup> A black kid's unofficial Rite of Passage. If a black kid goes through their entire childhood without being called a nigger, then they're either 1) so scary that people won't say it to their face. 2) home-schooled and haven't been introduced to the internet 3) or a fantasy of an unrealistic black couple who obviously haven't had children yet.

<sup>5</sup>In the 1970s an undercover cop infiltrated the KKK. His acting was so believable that he became one of the most valued members and the right hand man of David Duke, the Grand Wizard. This cop's name was Ron Stallworth...and he was a black man. How he pulled off this feat is that most of his conversations with the Klan occurred via telephone, they never caught on to the act. But the times when Stallworth's presence was requested, in which case he would send a white officer in his place. When the cat was out of the bag, David Duke still didn't believe he'd been talking to a black man all along because he claimed that black men "pronounce words and letters a certain way."

<sup>6</sup>When the white male children grew up many people noticed that their wives were either black or that they'd have affairs with black women. All the way up to the 1980s (southern) psychologists believe this disorder came from having black nannies and called it, The Mammy Complex.

<sup>7</sup>And you can keep him, White People.

<sup>8</sup>Not to be confused with the 'Black Panther' the comic book character written by Stan Lee and illustrated by Jack Kirby in July 1966. And is known today as one of the most popular black superheroes and was also one of the first.

<sup>9</sup>Sears was one of the main companies that marketed the dolls during the 1950s.

<sup>10</sup>How long did it take you to realize this was in alphabetical order?



## The Eighth Wonder

Karmen Cook  
Agnes Scott College

*"How are you two doing this afternoon?"*  
*"We're doing just fine! How are you?"*  
*"I'm great, thank you. I'll be your server this afternoon. Can I get you—"*  
*"Where are you from, dear?"*  
*"Monroe County, GA."*  
*"No, I mean where does your family originate from?"*  
*"I'm not actually sure of that. Why do you ask?"*  
*"Oh, just because you're so different. I mean, you seem so poised and confident. And your hair is so curly. You sparked my curiosity. You're just so intriguing to the senses."*

I've always thought that my curly hair came from my grandmother, but if it is that important to you, I guess I could tell you that my great-great (way back) grandfather may have had something to do with it. I imagine that his hair was always neatly combed and presentable, as he was the son of a plantation owner. That hair mixed with my great-great (way back) grandmother's likely kinky hair had a major impact on what you are so fascinated with today. I try to keep it straightened while I'm working so that you won't feel the urge to touch my hair as you're in the process of asking my permission to do so. My apologies for tempting you today. Would you mind passing me that glass? It's a little hard to reach across this table to fill it with water. Height was not one of the things that I inherited.

I carry myself with confidence and ooze intelligence because I am both of those things. I learned them from my mother. Another customer asked me if I was from somewhere in Europe. I was extremely confused by it. I'm not a really big geography person, so later I just assumed that black European women were super classy in order to turn what was an awkward moment into a compliment. Can I get you another glass of sweet tea, ma'am?

What's that? Do I know the musical significance of my name? Of course I do. Would you like to hear about the time that I chose not to perform La Habanera for my district piano recital because I thought it would be too corny? I won that year, and every year after. I won every year before that too, but you didn't ask about that part. I could tell you about the miniature busts that rest atop my piano when I play. Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin. They all stare breathlessly to see what I'll churn out next.

I also learned how to play the saxophone during my middle school years, although I regret never learning how to play my favorite song "Ribbon in the Sky" by Stevie Wonder. On my wedding day, I'll just ask my cousin EJ to play for me as I walk down the aisle. I passed my saxophone along to him and he's worked wonders with it ever since. My sister Kirsten passed it along to me. She nicknamed it Chipmunk Holyfield. No one is sure why. What do I not play? I don't know how to play the guitar yet, but I'm working on it. I would take lessons, but I'm here working most of the time so that will have to wait. My seventeen-year-old niece plays guitar and sings like an angel. Maybe she can teach me when I have more time.

Yes, I do come from a family of talented musicians. My grandparents are wonderful singers. I love to hear them sing together. My grandmother is a member of the church choir, but sometimes I think she sees every one else as her backup. She's the only person I know that will start a song and never finish it if she can help it. She'll grab a mic, come down out of the choir stand and walk through the pews, singing to each person as if it is her personal concert and there is no sermon necessary. Yes I sing too. I joined the youth choir for a short stint when I was in high school and my grandmother wanted me to sing a duet with her during an upcoming church service. My mother and my aunts told me to say no immediately upon hearing the idea. My grandmother is a diva. They explained that if I agreed to sing with her, it would turn into a competition of riffs and never-ending runs between the two of us. It happened once with my Aunt Lisa and no one ever volunteered to sing a duet with my grandmother since then. You can probably guess that I politely declined her invitation.

No one in my family has ever sought financial gain through music. We do it more for ourselves and to share it with others. My favorite things to play are Christmas standards, and my mother will always sing along no matter the time of year. She has a deep tenor voice that you wouldn't expect to come out of a woman standing only five feet tall. My voice? It's all over the place. I can do high notes and extremely low notes with the same amount of effort. When I was in the a cappella group at Agnes Scott it made me feel like somewhat of a unicorn; some weeks I would be a Soprano, other weeks I

would be an Alto or even Bass. Yes, I go to Agnes Scott. Yes, it is a great school. I'm a Creative Writing Major and History Minor. No I do not want to be a teacher.

Here's the extra bread that you asked for. No you didn't get me off track at all. Curious minds always want to know about Agnes Scott. My grandfather? He's a very soulful singer like my grandma. He's the one that got me to join the youth choir in the first place. When it was time for me to lead my first song at church I was a nervous wreck. He told me "Rabbit Foot, you gon' and sing that song at church. Imma be there, so you can just sing to me and pretend to look at everybody else." Why does he call me Rabbit Foot? Because he thinks I'm a good luck charm. All of my other female cousins are less than savory characters, to put it nicely. I did sing the song. I should probably mention that my grandfather is a deacon of our church, and that all of the deacons sit on the right side of the congregation. He told me to sing to him, so I did. As I spent the majority of the time staring towards the far right of the crowd, I wasn't nervous. Periodically he would make a circle with his finger to remind me to pretend to sing to everybody else.

You want to know how I ended up with this particular name? It's a pretty funny story, but my father still doesn't think so. Camille was my father's intention, but my mother aspired to something completely different. She wanted my first and middle initials to match with my sister's initials: K(for Kirsten) and Q(for Qiana, who goes by her middle name. Her first name is Arius). She also really wanted a Coke when it was time for my birth certificate to be signed. It just so happened that when daddy left to get her a Coke, they entered the room with the birth certificate. That's why I stand in front of you today and not Camille. Mama always gets what she wants. I'll definitely get you a Coke after a story like that, sir.

I don't know any specifics of what region of Africa my ancestors may have come from. None of them had the time to document anything, sorry. They were too busy being chained to each other and stacked like mere cargo, wallowing in their own filth mixed with everyone else's. I'm just as uncertain of my past as they were of their futures. The chances of our paths ever crossing are pretty much slim to none. Sorry to disappoint you. It must be nice to know of your German, Hungarian, Icelandic descent and to compare notes with your friends and family. As you sit at my table, I envy how naïve you are to the history around you. All of your culture and education blinds you to the fact that I can be like you and not like you at the same time.

Because I am cultured, I couldn't have come entirely from enslaved people. Because I am cultured, I should be able to unpack every detail of my past. Would you like some Parmesan cheese with your pasta?

No, you didn't offend me at all. But I do hope you leave here today knowing who I am as opposed to what I am. So many times in a week, I get asked questions about my potential mixed racial identity and my country of origin. For years I've simply assumed that I was a black girl from the country. Apparently in the city people require a bit more explanation of these kinds of things.

You have a wonderful rest of the day. Come back and see us soon.

*A Venezuelan woman comes into the restaurant one evening with her son and a friend of his. She traveled from Venezuela to see him graduate from culinary school in Atlanta. I was carrying on a conversation with them, as I try to do with all of the customers that ever sit in my section, regardless of language barriers that may be there. I genuinely enjoy people, and I'll play charades as long as I have to because I love the interaction. Her English was shaky but understandable.*

*"Friend, I just want to let you know that you are beautiful young lady. Very cute. Your smile is big and fills this room. It warms me. You are kind. Take our picture?"*

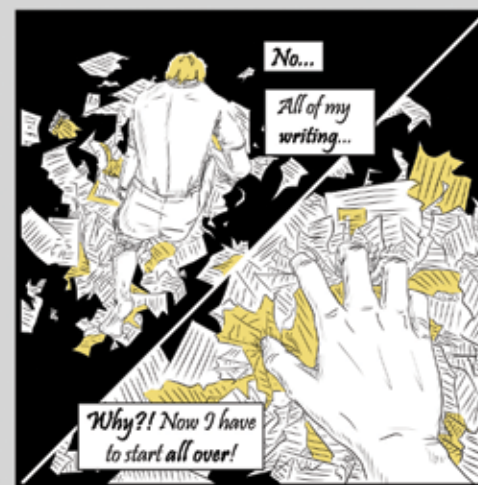
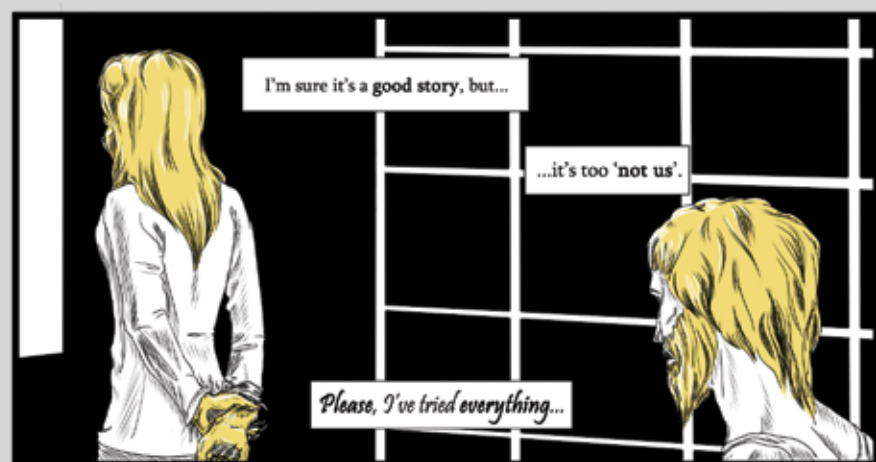
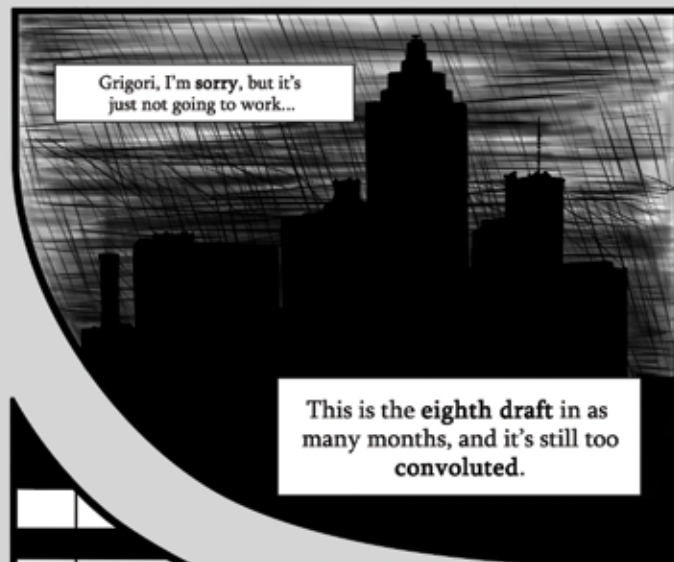
*She pulls out her smartphone and I reach for it to take a picture of her with her son at their celebratory dinner.*

*"Oh, no! We take one together so I can have it with me always. I will print it back home to remember you!"*

*She hands it to her son, who is beaming as we hug together on the bench, posing and smiling together.*



# FICTION



The end.

## TO THE AXOLOTL

Casey Cox  
Berry College

A cool breeze rushed across the yard, scattering leaves and swinging the porch's screen door open and closed. I sat in one of the rocking chairs, watching the mockingbirds flit and tumble while making their laughing calls. The sun was just beginning to set beyond the yellowing grassy hills and thick pine trees.

I heard the doorstep creak behind me, but I didn't turn my head. Light cascaded across the floor and I could see the small figure in the corner of my eye, silently standing in the doorway. His shadow stretched out, almost touching the edge of the porch. I could hear him breathing, short and quick, somewhat uneven. I continued to stare at the maple tree rocking in the wind, and waited for him to speak.

"Jörmungandr is dead."

His small voice rang into the twilight. I closed my eyes and let out a deep, long breath. The doorstep creaked again, and I felt his fingers clutch my forearm.

"Are you asleep?"

My eyes flashed open and to his face. His round cheeks were wet and flushed. His dark eyes were like pools of muddy water I could see my distorted reflection in.

"How did it happen?" I asked.

He shrugged and looked away. "I think it was the fish I fed him. They must have been bad."

"Where is he?"

"Still in the tank." He pointed in the direction of his room. "I—I don't know what to do..."

I stood up slowly and put a hand on his little shoulder. "It's okay, we will take care of it."

He led me through the kitchen where Mama was leaning over a pot of soup, singing to it and coaxing it to boil faster. We approached the back room where we all slept. The tank sat on a shelf against the wall, hidden in the shadows. I turned on the light and advanced slowly, seeing the small white body floating near the surface. In life, Jörmungandr had lived up to his mythic Norse name and terrorized many fish and people alike. Now his mouth hung open and his eyes stared blankly as his head bobbed in and out of the water. The majestic purple gills that once protruded from his neck were white and shriveled, and he began to look more like a tiny serpent than a salamander.

"I want to bury him under the big tree."

I nodded at the request and reached for a small net sitting on the shelf. "Go see if there is a shovel in the shed."

He turned and I listened as the patter of feet faded out of the room. I scooped the little amphibian body out and let the water trickle from the holes of the net. The tiny white toes poked out of the holes and his face pressed against the netting. His eyes were black with death, but I felt like they could still see me.

Carefully I walked across the room, Jörmungandr swinging slightly with my movement. My steps

screached across the porch until I stopped and looked out at my little brother crouched under the tree, scratching furiously at the earth.

"What are you doing?" I called, drawing closer.

He whipped his head around at me, his eyes sad and frustrated. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm digging a grave," he said through gritted teeth.

I paused just a few feet behind him. "Could you not find a shovel?"

He reached beside him and lifted something metal-looking. "All I could find was this."

I sprang forward and grabbed the cold metal thing. I studied it and turned it over in my hands before I realized that it was part of a broken music stand. Memories of sixth grade orchestra engulfed my mind as I stared at the part where the sheet-music rests.

"Can I have it back?" he asked quietly. "It may not be a shovel, but it works."

I reluctantly handed it back and watched as he clawed at the dirt with a music stand that now again had purpose. Once the hole was big enough, we placed the small white body in the dirt. My brother stood and grabbed my hand, sniffing softly. I wanted to say something, but words would not enter my mind. All that flowed in my consciousness were the five stanzas I had practiced for weeks on my rental violin in sixth grade. We looked down at the dead salamander for several minutes without speaking. Its open mouth already had the red earth flowing

out of it and its small paws had disappeared in the ground. I could feel its struggle, its last desperate moments before giving up. And now it looked like it was drowning again, choking on air and dirt, scrambling for any source of relief. Before I knew what was happening, my hands flashed down and grabbed at the dirt, throwing it over his body and covering the creature completely. My brother didn't move but continued to stare blankly where his only pet would remain.

When the salamander was out of sight, my heart quieted its pounding in my ears. I stood slowly, wiping my hands on my pants and feeling the dirt beneath my fingernails. My cheeks flushed as I gazed down at the lump in the ground. So small and insignificant, and yet it would be missed dearly by one young heart. My brother sniffed louder so I took back his hand and smiled when his fingers wrapped around mine. The wind raced through our hair and drew leaves from the tree, landing them on the grave of a sea monster. My brother picked up the music stand and turned away. I began to hum the only five stanzas I knew by heart as I followed him, hand in hand, back to the house where dinner awaited us.



## DIG

Christopher Hayter  
Georgia State University

This faint noise I can't place calls in the back yard. *Chy-shyun*, goes the sound. When I go out I find my son digging a hole. The sun shines down on him, his torso bare and shining with sweat. Sand caked with perspiration into mud covers his hands and spots his back and chest. The rest is smooth in its ten-year-old newness.

The ground in our yard is more sand than dirt. This place must have been under water at some point back in time. I step lightly down the gravelly path on the side of the house. I inch off the walkway onto the sand, and my sandal kicks over a tiny sliver of worn-smooth shell, possibly a clam or some ancient bivalve.

I just watch him for a while, with his *chy-shyun* into the earth, followed by a gentle swish of tossed sand. The yard is three lots big—all the homes in the neighborhood are like that. His hole is only a half-foot deep, but it's getting pretty wide, already six feet in diameter, give or take.

I ask Ilya what he's doing.

"Swimming pool," he says, not stopping his shovel.

I breathe and take it in as the sand swishes against my feet, tiny granules sliding between my bare toes. I should have known it was the pool. He'd been asking and I said no; I can't afford a swimming pool. This isn't my yard or house. If I owned a house his mother would have gotten it. But he's ten, still young enough, naïve enough, to believe he can build one, or so it now seems.

The heat has grown more intense in the moments since I've been standing under the sun, and I don't really want to argue with him for the few weeks of summer I have him, or even try to explain why building a pool won't work, so I just say okay and turn to go back inside.

Halfway to the house, I turn back and ask, "Do you need anything?"

Ilya says, "I'm all good unless you got another shovel and want to help."

Thankfully I don't have a second because I don't want to help him; that would be the wrong kind of encouragement. I tell him I'll be inside, that I'll bring iced tea out later. Gravel crunches under my rubber sandals.

Once in the house, I peek outside through the blinds, half believing I might see something else and not Ilya slowly descending into the ground, but he is, and the shovel goes *chy-shyun* and the sand goes *swish*.

His mother doesn't have a pool. It's not as though Yelena and I were well off when we were

married. Professors barely earn enough for the newspapers that line our cages. I know he doesn't expect a pool—he knows enough to see what we're capable of, which may not be very much. She's a researcher in psychology, I'm in anthropology, and we couldn't stop being the professions. The little ticks, the idiosyncrasies, the stuff that gets on nerves after eleven years took on a greater scope. A tooth-paste tube squeezed from the middle wasn't careless, it was a sign of neediness, a demand to be taken care of. The sink of dirty dishes wasn't just lazy or sloppy, it was a fundamental rejection of the construction of a feminine archetypal paradigm. Sure, those little household things were the impetus for fallout, but the underground subconscious, the failings, the truth was visible for us to read on the surface. All Yelena and I could do was pick each other apart.

We should have been strangers. It would have tasted better, less like a tire fire. We didn't want Ilya to see our damage, to hear our battle, our constant mission to deconstruct each other. We didn't want to break him along the way. We couldn't allow that. We had to stop mattering. For his sake.

I couldn't tell how he would take it. I didn't know if he was like me or not. The one thing I knew was that I couldn't bear to think of him growing up as awkward as I was, afraid of everything. A few years have passed since the separation, and while he has seemed okay for the most part, the digging is clearly an adaptive behavior responding to a lingering unarticulated anxiety.

I'm off all summer, done with teaching my four sections of Anthropology 101 at the community McCollege the next town over. The July heat only serves to add to my lethargy. I have nothing to do but observe Ilya.

Claire Marie gets home in the evening. It's still bright and warm, the rented house a sauna. Ilya has come in, taken a shower, and is sitting in front of two oscillating fans that cool him every three and seven seconds. He stares into the space between the two fans. Claire Marie wanders around the house for a while, going from room to room, not really doing anything. She has an office job at the college, filing and the like. Despite her abundant passions, her omnivorous education with a BA in English, BS in biology, BFA in Dance, half an MFA in Sculpture, and half an MA in Education, it's all she's qualified for. She eventually sits down next to me on the couch.

I regularly can't believe that I'm forty-four and have a girlfriend. A girlfriend is something a teenager or college student has. Claire Marie is thirty-one, which seems like a baby. I really don't have any idea what I'm doing. If we broke up and she moved out I would not be able to afford to rent this little house. Maybe I could get a roommate or boarder until I found another girlfriend. The idea makes me shiver.

She pats me on the head, ruffling my hair and walks toward the other room. As she reaches the hall I see paint under her fingernails, though I can't tell if it's still there or there again. Claire Marie is a bad artist, but only because she plays clarinet all the time. She's actually incredibly talented at the clarinet—good enough to perform even—but she can't stand in front of people, so she just plays at home.

I hear the clarinet tone from the kitchen. Ilya spins with a start, then quickly recognizes the sound and refocuses on focusing on nothing. His body reclines into a squishy pillow; his eyelids slide halfway down. I wonder if Claire Marie ran the clarinet through the dishwasher again. Last time it came out with tomato seeds stuck to it. I can't tell what Ilya thinks of her. The second oscillating fan finds me for a moment, but then turns away.

Claire Marie tries to talk to Ilya at dinner—about school, about books. Did he find the copy of *The Phantom Tollbooth* that she left with his laundry this morning? Has he given any more thought to playing soccer this fall? He doesn't say much in response, just one or two-word answers. He stays relatively quiet throughout the meal, but he's interested in her, looking up to her, then quickly away and back again. She's a curiosity—Claire Marie is older, but not old, and she's younger than any other adult he knows.

After dinner I clear the table. I scrape some leftover rice into a Tupperware and stack the plates in the dishwasher. From the other room I hear Claire Marie telling Ilya about her clarinet. By the time I've loaded in the cups and silverware, she's playing. A long level tone. A D, I think. The water whooshes and the hose slurps as the dishwasher fills.

I slide into the living room and plant myself on the couch. Ilya holds the clarinet. Claire Marie points as she tells him which keys to hold. His breath flows into it. A pterodactyl screech, and he pulls it away. She tells him to maintain a seal over the reed—to exhale patiently. Not much sound

comes out. He continues to try. A half hour later he's fashioned a clear C.

Later that night, I'm sitting up in bed, looking in at Claire Marie in the bathroom, as she dries off after her shower. She has an interconnected tattoo of flame and thorny vines across most of her upper body, from just below her neck, over her breasts and belly, weaving down to just above her pubic hair. Instead of leaves, the vines lead to music notes. My eyes wander through the maze of thorns. It always looks a little different. Is that her body or the artistic illusion? She's never said anything about it. I wonder if that image is something I could get tired of looking at. She throws the towel over the shower door and comes into the bedroom. Does she want me to get burned or prick my finger? Should I be afraid to touch her? She climbs onto the bed, staying above the sheets. Her hair is still wet. Water droplets darken the pillow with tiny spots. The spots look almost black, the same as her short hair. She rolls on her side and says, "He's so like you."

I'm not so sure. He seems more like his mother than like me.

Claire Marie closes her eyes and nuzzles her face against my side. She takes in a slow breath and hums, the sound she makes when she's ready to go to sleep.

I slide my hand into the curve of her waist and ask, "Tonight?"

"I told you," she said, putting her hand on top of mine, not pushing me away but not pulling me closer either. She doesn't want to have sex when Ilya is in the house. We had that fight his first night here. I said dumb idea, she said she wasn't dumb, I said not you—the idea, she said it's the same, I said it's not. That kind of nonsense. She can't bear the idea of him hearing us, the walls being the tissue paper that they are. That night, I argued to change her mind but simultaneously agreed with her. I didn't say so, buy I eventually gave in and let the fight pass. He must already know something happens in here, whether he's visiting or not. Would anything change if he lived here? Surely, we'd have to make love at some point.

The next day he's back out in the sand with his shovel. The sun's not as bright, concealed by the rolling fog. The muggy air hangs, sealing in the heat. Everything looks gray under the veil of fog, shades waffling back and forth as clouds wander by.

*Chy-shyun* and *swish*.

I always figured one day he'd beat me at basketball. It's the natural transitional stage in father-son relationships. I knew one day he would find out I'm flawed, imperfect, but I didn't expect this hole in the ground. Now he's out there trying to provide, trying to be an adult, trying to be the adult. He keeps getting deeper. Soon I'll barely be able to see him.

Claire Marie asks what he's doing.

I say, "Sinking."

The day goes by. Fog burns off, more creeps up, over the hills, from the sea to take its place. Claire Marie goes out to the cement driveway at the side of the house to smoke. She looks down the gravel pathway at the backyard and watches Ilya a little more closely. Smoke trickles from the end of her cigarette. She holds each puff as though she's trying to save it. She shrugs and comes back inside. "He's still out there," she says.

The next day I want to keep him out of the dirt, so I ask him to come shoot baskets with me. He nods consent and follows. We walk up the front driveway, a low incline, across the flat, gravelly street, up a forty-five degree driveway to the house across the street from ours. It's at least twice as big as our house, vacant as long as we've lived here. The court is short and wide. The edge of the driveway flattens at no more than a free-throw line, but the sides are wider than the double garage door, at least a pro three-pointer.

He doesn't know how to shoot. I've neglected too much. I show him where to put his hands, how to use his whole body in a fluid motion, that it's a push more than a throw. His eyes focus, and he doesn't blink much. He's not bad at dribbling—he takes to it quickly, doesn't even have to look down much when bouncing the ball with his right hand.

A few hours later, Claire Marie gets home. Her brakes screech as she inches down the driveway. I tell Ilya I'm going to head in. He stays and plays longer.

The next day, before I really notice, Ilya goes out alone to shoot. I observe him for a while through the blinds of the living-room window. The block is so barren, even a falling leaf seems like a raucous parade. After an hour or so I notice a neighbor kid wander out from his house, one down from us. He goes over to Ilya. I see the two in profile. Immediately, I see that this other kid is big, almost a foot taller than Ilya. He has to be older, at least thirteen or fourteen. The two boys talk; I can't hear the conversation.

They start to play. The game goes on for an hour, they develop rules—winners and losers go to Ilya, so he takes the ball out after every basket, some

sort of attempt to level the playing field. The big kid doesn't get possession of the ball unless he causes Ilya to miss and he gets a rebound. Ilya complains when the kid blocks his shot; after that, they big kid only puts his hands straight up, but doesn't block the ball. What's wrong with this kid? Why doesn't he play with kids his own age?

Later, after both boys have gone in, I see a car pull into the big kid's driveway. A woman gets out and walks in the house. Something compels me. I walk down the street. I pass the house next door, the one between ours and the one the big kid and the woman went into. The Waddels. That was there name. What happened to them? One day they lived there. The next day they didn't. I can't remember how long ago that was. Low-lying shrubs cover the Waddels' entire yard, this kind of blue green leaf covering the rounded toadstool shape. The branches of the bush look dry, almost dead.

I ring the bell, still not exactly sure what I'm going to say. The woman answers the door. A tall woman, she has pink skin and wavy gold hair. I tell her our boys were playing.

Her eyes sharpen and her jaw clenches. She says, "Oh, god, what did he do?"

"What?"

"Thank god," she says.

I ask what she means.

She sighs, her face slacking. "I'm expecting a call one of these days," she says. She steps onto the porch and shuts the door. Nodding her head a little, she says, "I'm going to be that parent on TV, with reporters circling the yard, asking what went wrong." She sighs again, "I can feel it."

My chest clenches a little. I suddenly regret letting them play together. Saying so is the wrong approach. I ask what she notices.

She says, "It's probably nothing, you know? Maybe it's just paranoia. He's never actually done anything."

I relax a bit, too. To cut off the potential friendship without any reasons that I can explain to Ilya might be worse. I can watch them. I have the time.

She adds, "I just...I worry. I'm not home much."

"Anyway, it seemed okay. My only concern is that Ilya—that's my son—is a little younger than your son, and quite a bit smaller. I just want to be sure they're careful. Everything looked fine when I popped my head out the window for a second, but, well, I don't see Ilya as much as I would like, and I'm not sure how he handles himself—I'm not..." I struggle to find words.

"Single parent too?" she asks with a close-lipped smile.

"Divorced. Yes," I say.

She asks how long.

"A little over two years," I say. "Seems like longer, though."

"Six, here," she says. "Sometimes it seems longer, though sometimes it seems like yesterday. Depends, really."

She tells me a little about her life. Her name is Susan. She and her ex-husband owned a video store. I probably went in there a few times, now that I thought about it. She tells me about the VHS to DVD conversion, how it nearly destroyed their business, that it took three times as long for them to switch over than the chain stores. They took a big loan to make the switch. By the time they'd replaced the tapes with discs, everyone was renting movies through the mail or playing them on computers.

"Video killed the rad-i-o star," she says with a shrug.

"The divorce was hard on Lethem," she says. "I mean, of course it was. That's all you ever hear: it's hard on the children. Lethem, though, he didn't really get along with his father. I don't think my husband really liked Lethem, to tell the truth. The kid has always had a sense of entitlement." She paused and stared into the street. "I'm sure that's our fault."

I don't say much about Yelena. She doesn't ask, and seems to take my nods and sympathetic hmms as my contribution to the conversation.

For the next few days I hang out in front of the house to watch the boys play. When Susan gets off work, she comes out the street and we chat. She tells about her job at the bank; it's a small town, so she sees all the finances of people. She tells me how she knows so much about the people in town, how much money they have, how much they put in and take out. "It's a strange thing to drive past someone's house and know they can't afford the car in their driveway, or see someone at the supermarket buying generic spaghetti sauce when they have more money in the bank than I will have in my life."

I nod repeatedly. These individual spending habits follow systemic tendencies in our culture. I decide not to try to explain Thorsten Veblen. No one wants to hear historic economic patterns.

Later that evening, Ilya and Claire Marie continue to practice the clarinet. He's now playing "The Bear Went Over the Mountain." He plays carefully, rarely missing a note, but so slow that it's almost a dirge.

My cell rings that night. It's Yelena. I want to let it go to message, but feel uncertain whether that would make things worse. When I finally respond she'll

reprimand me for keeping her in the dark, for hiding things. I answer. Her Russian accent has almost disappeared. I wonder if that was a conscious change. She reminds me of the exchange date, which is still two weeks away. I tell her I remember, that I won't forget. Her new partner is a practicing psychiatrist. How that works for her I will never understand. Does he analyze why her accent has fallen away, why she hides it? Does he tell her that she doesn't need to hide it? I loved her accent. I never questioned it. The accent gave even mundane communication a new kind of gravitas or, occasionally, humor.

There was a time when we were happy. I couldn't have imagined it. Yelena and I would wake up early and watch Ilya sleep. I'd wipe the drool off his face with a cloth. She'd laugh and whisper, "The son is like the father, yes?"

The next day I'm thinking about Yelena's call. I won't have Ilya much longer. I continue to meet Susan in the driveway to talk while the boys play. It's nice to have someone to talk to. When I mention Yelena is now working out of the university hospital, and Susan quips, "This woman has to be gotten to a hospital. —A hospital? What is it?—It's a big building with patients, but that's not important right now."

I haven't seen *Airplane!* in a while, but it always brings a smile. She's probably trying to soften the mood, get away from talk of divorce.

I realize when Ilya goes I won't be able to have these chats with Susan any longer. Watching the boys is our excuse for friendship. Without the act of observing the children while they play in the yard of a vacant house our friendship would be a violation of something. Our friendship hasn't exactly been a secret. On several days, Claire Marie has come home while we're still talking in the street. Claire Marie never so much as asks who the woman was. I can't tell if she cares or not. That evening I go inside a little earlier.

At dinner, helping himself to a second piece of chicken, Ilya says, "I saw Lethem throw a rock at a crow."

Marie reacts before I do. "Why did he do that?" He shrugs. Still chewing, Ilya says, "It was kind of weird."

"Did he say anything about doing it?" I ask.

"He doesn't like crows, I guess," Ilya says. "I didn't say anything about it. Then he told me he killed a cat once. I didn't believe him. I think he was making it up." Ilya laughs a little, and bites into a steamed carrot.

Claire Marie looks at me. Her mouth is squeezed tight like a sea anemone.

The next day I go out with Ilya and stay at the court the entire time. He doesn't ask me about staying. When Lethem comes out I don't move off the court.

Lethem asks Ilya if he wants a game.

I say we're just shooting around today.

Ilya says he's bored and goes back down the driveway, crosses the street, and goes into the house.

I stay in the court, bounce the ball onto the smooth white cement of the neighbor's driveway. Lethem is a weird looking kid. His head looks like a puffer fish with dirty blonde hair. I take a shot. The ball bounces off the back rim with a ting sound and flies down both driveways, hitting the garage door of my house at the bottom of the slopes.

Lethem looks at me. "Are you going to get it?"

I just stare at the kid. His skin looks like the grill at a greasy spoon.

Lethem smirks. "You're trying to bang my mom, aren't you?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," I say. I cross my arms in front of my chest, as if in a defensive position.

"I know what it's like," he says. "Are you into choking?" His oily grin gets bigger. "Last guy was." He laughs. "So there's that to do deal with." He looks down the driveways at the ball. "And the overnight terrorists. You know about those, right?"

I have an almost overwhelming urge to punch the kid, to break his nose. Then a car drives by. It's Susan. She slows down and waves. Lethem waves back. I make a slight nod.

Lethem follows after the car, in a sprint. He almost runs into the back of the car when she stops

in her driveway. He quickly jumps around it and races into the house before she steps out.

I wait at the basket. Susan waves again and walks over to the court. She says, "The boys done for the day?"

"Seems that way," I say.

I feel like I'm holding back a flood, and I have to stop it up somehow. "Lethem was saying something about the last person you dated."

Susan twitches, then shakes it off. "I'm sorry?"

I shake my head too, then look up at the basket. The fog is beginning to roll in. "I don't know how to talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about," she says. She turns back toward her own house. "I'm just chatting. I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea."

"That's not what I meant," I say.

"I know you're dating that little girl," she says. "My husband does the same thing." Her tone lowered. There's a scratch in her voice.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I was trying to find out more about your son. I'm concerned."

"I'll handle it," she says. "Anyway. I have to make dinner."

"All right," I say.

She goes home. The fog continues to drift in.

Claire Marie has brought home a second clarinet. She says she borrowed it from a friend in the music department. Ilya's eyes open a little wider when he sees it. He races through dinner.

Later that night, in the living room, they're playing a duet. Ilya very slowly plays "When the

Saints go Marching in," as Claire Marie follows with the harmony. She echoes his notes, modulating the pace; he continues on, tiptoeing through each note.

I wake up late the next day. It's Saturday. Claire Marie is home. I hear her in the kitchen scrubbing dishes. I wander out, and sit at the table. Toast crumbs form a circle around where a plate must have been.

Claire Marie says, "I don't know what happened yesterday."

I don't respond right away. "Nothing happened," I eventually say.

"Not about that," she says, setting down a scrub brush. "I'm not trying to control anything. That's not who I am, and I think you know that, or you should," she says. She's looking out the window above the sink into the back yard. "It's Ilya. He's back in the dirt."

There's a crack sound and I tilt my head trying to wrap my mind around the noise. Nothing follows. All seems well. Ilya must have hit a tree root or rock or something. A few moments later I hear a cry. Panic pulls at my stomach. I react slowly, like in a dream where you can't move. Claire Marie is out the door before I stand. I follow her out, trying to project calm. If something has happened I have to be in control, I have to appear confident and safe, I have to assuage fear.

A box sits in the sand just outside of the hole. It's shabbily constructed, little more than plywood and cheap nails. Cracked gray wood lays in pieces, the top broken off.

Ilya looks down into the box. His arms waver at his sides, his hands shake. Claire Marie has stepped in front of him, between him and the box. She pulls his face to her chest, covering him, shielding him, and wraps him up in arms. He shakes. She softly whispers, "Sssh."

I've reached the box and stand above it, gazing down. A clear plastic bag inside. Sand has seeped into everything, but I can still make it out. "Canine," I say. It's withered, part mummified maybe. Still a few tufts of fur. No bigger than a baby.

Ilya is teary. He sniffles. Tear and snot has started to bleed into Claire Marie's shirt. Ilya's legs wobble, and she squeezes a little tighter. He says, "I don't want it here."

I look down at the dog. With a small stick, I hold back the plastic. Everything is dry. "Decomposition dates it at least six years." It's from before Lethem would have been old enough to figure out how to do this. "Aside from the cheap wood, the burial was done lovingly, wrapped gently in the plastic, like a blanket. Someone cared about this animal. This pet."





## WHEN EMMY WENT MISSING

Halden Ingwersen  
Agnes Scott College

Emmy went missing at six in the afternoon.

It wasn't even late in the day. The sun was still up, people were out places, running errands and living their lives and nobody even noticed when she stopped being. And, yes, I know she didn't stop *being* but she isn't here and when someone's not right in front of you how do you even know they exist anymore?

On the first day of Physics last semester Mr. Daugherty tried to explain Schrodinger's Cat to us, and told us that if you couldn't observe something you couldn't prove its existence. Emmy didn't get that then. "Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it's not there," she told me. "Like air, right?" I wonder if she gets it now.

She's probably dead anyway, same as the cat, so like it even matters.

The sun was up and bright when she went missing, and I bet if someone had been standing around to notice they could have read every single stupid letter on that license plate of whatever big white van pulled up to pull Emmy in and drag her off. Because it's always a big white van with two dark-eyed men who have ski masks instead of names.

Emmy went missing on November twenty-second.

One day she was there and then she was just gone, a magician's rabbit vanishing back into the hat like he'd never pulled it out in the first place, like it had never been there at all. And since everybody thinks I'm some child who can't handle real life, nobody would tell me right away, nobody would give it to me straight what had happened, except for my brother, who said that things like that "just happen sometimes" and "good people get hurt and there's nothing we can do," but I never asked him what he thought about it. He just thinks he knows everything all of a sudden because he's home from college and apparently that makes you worldly or some bullshit like that, so now he's sure everybody wants his opinion all the time, which they *don't*.

Emmy always had a crush on my brother. She used to convince me to go with her to his baseball games when he was in High School, when he played for the Alexander Penn High Porcupines. I hate baseball. She hates baseball. But she'd sit there and stare at him in his uniform and cheer like she knew what she was doing and she'd nudge me until I invited her to stay for dinner afterwards so she could listen to my brother repeat the whole game all over again while she stared at him with her big brown doe eyes.

Hated. Emmy *hated* baseball.

"He's just so interesting," she used to gush, lying on the floor of my room and staring up at the Led Zeppelin poster on my ceiling. "He says such clever things. And he's athletic, too. Your brother, he's a—*a Renaissance man*. You're so lucky." I wondered how being a baseball playing know-it-all made him that great. I wondered if I'd have been a Renaissance man too, if I didn't have glasses thick as the bottom of a Coke bottle.

And I never told her about the time I went to get my brother after baseball practice and I saw him screwing Amanda Rolph in the dugout because if I'd told her I would have had to watch her heart shatter into a dozen little shards that I'd have to pick up and glue back together and I didn't want to do that because I'd have cut my hands on them.

Emmy went missing on Maple Street.

Maple Street, if you don't know it - and I don't know why you wouldn't know it because everybody knows it - is right down in the shopping lane between Park Road and Church Street. It's busy down there. Sammy's Pizza, where everybody goes to get grape pop and cheese slices and play pinball after school, is right there. That dusty bookstore with the cat that hisses at kids is there. The second-hand store run by the Jamaican lady is there. Maple Street is always really busy. Maybe not as busy in November at six as it would have been in July at six but there's still plenty of people. There should have been enough people to notice.

Maybe she didn't go missing on Maple Street. Maybe she went missing in a dark alley. That's always where you're supposed to go missing from, when you go missing, and nobody ever said she went *missing* from Maple, it was just the last place she was *seen*.

Maybe nobody saw her go because nobody was looking at her. She was so proud of herself, how she swore she could fade back and disappear if she wanted to. I never told her that nobody could miss her, since if her big floral skirts didn't catch someone's attention, the clacking of her big wooden bangles would. I used to hear that clacking and follow it right to her.

I still hear it sometimes, when I'm trying to fall asleep.

She didn't even do anything wrong. She didn't walk around at night in bad neighborhoods. Emmy's scared of the dark, she'd never do that. I was usually with her, and I'm a big guy so of course I was always

a good escort and all but I wasn't there that day and I wasn't there because I'd been sick and even if I hadn't been I was going to fake it that day anyway because Mr. Garver was handing out Calc tests and I hate Calc because it's almost as bad as Trig and I wouldn't have let wild horses drag me to school that day. But maybe if I'd gone I could have walked her home. And maybe if I'd walked her home we wouldn't even be having this stupid conversation because Emmy would still be here.

Emmy went missing walking home from school.

Everyone at school keeps treating me funny. Half the school stares at me and the other half won't look at me. Half of them nod their heads real slow and say in these morbid fucking tones, *it's ok, I understand, if you need me we can talk*, like they're all suddenly these little saints or something. The other half won't talk to me at all.

The only person I want to talk to is Emmy.

Sarah Maypother came walking up to me yesterday after Chem with the most awful look painted on her face. I've never trusted Sarah, not since the seventh grade when she had a crush on me a mile wide and kept trying to convince me to try out for Drama Club just in hopes that someday they would put on Romeo and Juliette and someday she'd play Juliette and someday I'd play Romeo and then she'd get to kiss me and six years of plotting could come to a head. But I wouldn't do it and guess what? It's Junior year and the Drama Club still hasn't put on that awful play, so she hasn't had the chance to kiss anyone, except for Jonie Schmitt's pet iguana once on a dare in Sophomore year, from what I've heard, and she still can't shake the name Lizard Lips.

"Hey," she said in this soft, simpery little voice. "How've you been feeling?"

I stared at her. "Fine..." I said slowly.

She nodded somberly, like I'd just said something very wise. "Good. Good. Well, I just wanted to talk to you. See how you were doing."

When she's talking to me I'm just looking at those Lizard Lips. How chapped they are, like she needs a tube of cherry chapstick something fierce and she's just blabbering on at me about "God's plan" and how everything works out how it's supposed to and all this bullshit. And I just gave her this look that could have wilted every plant the 4H club ever grew and turned around and hoofed it right out of there, leaving Sarah gaping at me with her lizard lips.

I like the ones who leave me alone better. I don't want to talk about it. I just want to bring Emmy back. And if I can't have her back with her crooked teeth smiles and her frizzy hair bouncing when she walks and her warm hands with the chipped red Revlon nail varnish than at least give me the mouth and the hair and the hands alone. I need to see her and know she didn't vanish into thin air. All I want is a body.

Emmy would have hated that. She cried when we had to dissect frogs in class. I felt sick but since she was my lab partner and she wouldn't do it I had to do it instead. But they wouldn't have to dissect her body. They know what's in those things already, hearts and bones and livers, and if she's gone from it then it's all just meat.

Emmy always wanted to be a vegetarian. Maybe because her cousin was a proper Hippy who'd burned her bra and started living barefoot on a commune, and Emmy thought her cousin was the grooviest lady she'd ever met. She made a big deal of it last year on Thanksgiving, when she wouldn't touch the turkey. She'd made her grandmother cry that day, and later Emmy came over to my place and she cried, too, because she felt so bad. She didn't try to be a vegetarian after that. Not in front of her family.

Emmy was all alone when she went missing.

"You miss her, don't you, son?" the pastor said to me last Sunday, after service. I didn't feel like going but since my parents seem to think church is the best thing for me right now, I went. It's easier to just go along and make them happy than fight it. They'll win in the end, one way or another.

I nodded at him but didn't say much. The less you say the more people fill in their own blanks and that suits me just fine these days. And I couldn't tell him that, no, I didn't miss her. Missing her would hurt sometimes, and I didn't feel that. I felt dead inside, like when she'd gone I'd been cut open and had everything inside scraped clean like a Jack-o-lantern and then put back together. I can put on a shit-eating grin but there's nothing inside, nothing at all, and I can't remember what it felt like to feel whole.

"I heard you two spent a lot of time together."

I side-eyed him because I really wasn't sure where he was going with that. When the police said the same thing I knew where they were going, but I was pretty sure it wasn't the pastor's job to accuse me of homicide.

"It's hard to lose anyone at your age, but a girlfriend in particular—"

I figure I must have made some kind of face because he nodded all sage, like he'd unlocked the mysteries of the world and of teenage hearts. He must have thought that he'd figured it all out, and that nobody else had, and he was this genius who'd cracked the code of why I was so upset over this.

God forbid I just missed my friend. I must have been in love with her. There's no other sensible alternative!

Emmy used to be real into occult stuff. Tarot and crystals and candles—all that jazz. And she used to read these hippie books about what dreams meant and what the day you were born had to do with your personality. And this one time she read a book about true love and soul mates. And when it was over she sat me down and said to me, "I think we're soul mates."

And at the time I stared at her, because it was the craziest thing I'd heard in my whole life. I'd never hear anything crazier until six months later when my mother told me that Emmy had gone missing.

"No, really," she insisted. "I read this book, and it said that soul mates don't have to be a couple. It said that your soul mate might be a tree, or a dog—"

"Ew," I interjected.

"Shut up, it's not like that. What I'm saying is you don't have to be romantic with your soulmate. Maybe sometimes it's just this living thing that is on the same plane of existence as you are. Something that understands the way you think and they were put on Earth by God just to be a match to you. And maybe both soul mates will have their own lives and marry other people or only speak once a year or something...but they'll always be connected. That person just—just gets you."

And I told her she was a loony because all I could see were those gross Precious Moments dolls my aunt collects and all the sappy little poems about true love, and I couldn't ever see Emmy that way.

But it's been three months since Emmy went missing. And the longer she's gone, the more I'm sure that I'm never going to get her back, and the more I'm sure that I've lost the one person in the world who was going to get me how no one else ever did.

Emmy went missing on November twenty-second, nineteen seventy one, at six in the afternoon. And sometimes I wish she'd taken me, too.

## OBITUARIES

Jessica Mejia  
Agnes Scott College

17 \_\_\_\_\_ The Tribune Monday, July 16, 1951

### *Obituaries*

Van Caulfield, the twenty-year old artist who had lived in a secluded wooded area from the time he was one, which provided him the inspiration for the abstract painting that won him that coveted art award and made him an international star in the avant-garde world, was found dead last night from suffocation in his studio apartment in Paris.

He leaves behind a red cap.



## KEEPER

Robby Nadler  
University of Georgia

For his thirteenth birthday, Nathaniel Albert Goedicke gave himself the present he wanted for as long as he had the ability to want things by running away from home and giving himself to the lighthouse keeper. It took him almost three months to walk and hitchhike from the small town in Arizona he lived in to the coast of Maine. Even then, it took him another month until he found a lighthouse with a green flag, the symbol for a free keeper, waving atop. It was difficult to knock because his hands were badly burned from the sun, but there was no doorbell. A burly but handsome man in his thirties answered the door, which Nathaniel knew from books always faced opposite the water.

*I've come to give myself to you.*

And with those words, the boy collapsed under the lintel.

He woke in the lighthouse. There were clothes laid out for him— too big, the keeper's no doubt, but they were better than his jeans, which had split at the crotch seam. An open door in the room led to a bathroom. It didn't matter that the water was cold. It would take a week of bathing to wash off all the dirt from the deserts and mountains he crossed. Washed and dried, Nathaniel followed the sound of a radio to a small kitchen. The keeper was eating an orange, looked at the boy, and then ate another segment.

*Go back home.*

Nathaniel said no.

This exchange happened two more times, and, after the third, Nathaniel pointed out that according to the lighthouse keeper's code, any keeper who displays the green flag over his lighthouse must allow anyone to offer himself to the keeper. After denying the person three times, the keeper must oblige if the person still won't leave. The keeper turned red and put his hands over his face. The code was meant for women, and he had hoisted the flag hoping for a wife. He wasn't picky at this point. Any woman would do. But a boy? He had never heard of a man—much less a boy—invoking the code, but there was nothing in it to allow him to turn the boy away.

Nathaniel walked to the table with one hand held onto his pants to keep them from falling. He looked at the bowl of fruit: oranges, bananas, apples—fruit that had once bored him with their ubiquitous presence in the kitchen back home—longing for a piece. He hadn't eaten much on his journey. The keeper saw the boy staring and nodded. Nathaniel

took a red apple in one hand, a green in the other, and alternated colors with each bite.

*You'll go to school.*

Nathaniel hadn't considered this. He only planned so far as to what would happen once he reached the lighthouse. Possibly he would do some light, spousal chores, but, for the most part, he envisioned himself hand-in-hand with the keeper as they spent their days looking at the ocean. Still, the demand was reasonable, and, according to the code, all reasonable demands had to be met in order to stay at the lighthouse. The boy nodded.

*You'll also work. This job is meant for two people, for a family. I can't afford to take on an extra person and not have you contribute.*

Perhaps the juices from the Granny Smith hit him, or perhaps it was the word "family" being referred to him. Nathaniel's lips puckered and, again, he nodded.

But in the years that followed, the boy lost his smile. School was rough. He didn't do poorly, but no one spoke to him. Not even the teachers. During roll call, a silence would linger after Fergusson, Rebecca. The teacher would look up from the roster, see the boy sitting at his desk, and then look back down to continue with Henry, Jacob. The boy didn't bother to raise his hand during questions because he knew he wouldn't be called.

News that he had been the one who had taken the lighthouse keeper's code spread through town, and everyone sympathized with the keeper who was bound to such an unfortunate coupling. In fact, no one in town spoke to him. The boy knew that they wanted to if only to say the meanest things to his face, that they probably did say those things when he wasn't around, but, according to the code, it was also forbidden for the town the keeper served to speak ill of the code taker.

After school, the boy would go through town on foot to buy supplies the keeper wrote on a list and left him every morning on the kitchen table. There was no refrigerator in the lighthouse, so food had to be bought daily. He also bought soaps, kerosene, rope...an endless restock to keep the lighthouse going. Careful not to antagonize anyone in town as he did his duties, he stopped speaking entirely. He developed an intricate sign language of pointing to express his needs and managed to find answers to his questions on things such as cash register displays. What he couldn't convey—say a can of corn advertised cheaper on the store's window than what he was

charged—he ignored. It would be almost five— six in the winter when there was snow—in the evening when he carried the goods in.

Because autumn was stirring, the days were shrinking. It didn't leave the boy with much time to prepare. He would run up the cylindrical staircase and wash the mirrors and glass. This was his favorite time of the day. For all the silence that pervaded his life, the quiet high above the town, his face reflected over the background of sky and sea in the large mirrors he went over with using the green flag as a rag, which had faded to the color of pond water, was good to him. It was in those moments that he turned around to the expanse that went on past what he could see, and in that unknown he smiled to himself with the knowledge that in it lay whatever this life would send out to reach him. There was nothing of that possibility in the desert he came from.

And then he would hear the keeper below turn on the shower. The only interaction the boy had with the keeper would be if they squeezed past each other on the narrow stairs as the keeper began his shift and the boy ended his duties. The chances of this happening were small, but he greatly enjoyed the times when it did.

The boy would spend his evenings doing homework and making a large dinner, which was also to be eaten as lunch by the keeper when the boy was asleep. Exhausted, after nine but before ten, the boy would pass out in the keeper's bed, the only room in the lower lighthouse aside from the kitchen, which had been left unmade. At six in the morning, the boy would wake to fix the bed, dress, and prepare a large breakfast, which would be eaten by the keeper as dinner at whatever time the keeper descended from his post while the boy was at school. In this way, though they lived in the same dwelling, neither of them slept or ate together nor saw each other, and there was nothing the boy could do about it except leave.

It was a Saturday. On weekends, the keeper had the boy repaint the whole structure. It was a miserable task but preferable to school. Despite being sixteen, being stronger and better fitted for the work he did on a daily basis, the boy felt weaker than ever. The loneliness that had driven him from the desert all those years before followed him to the ocean and grew. He hadn't heard the keeper's voice since the day the demands were set, and the voices he did hear were never talking to him. He had become a lighthouse amongst ships—in view of the traffic of the world

but kept apart. And whatever happiness that was supposed to reach him, with each day he became more certain it had already sank to the sea's bottom.

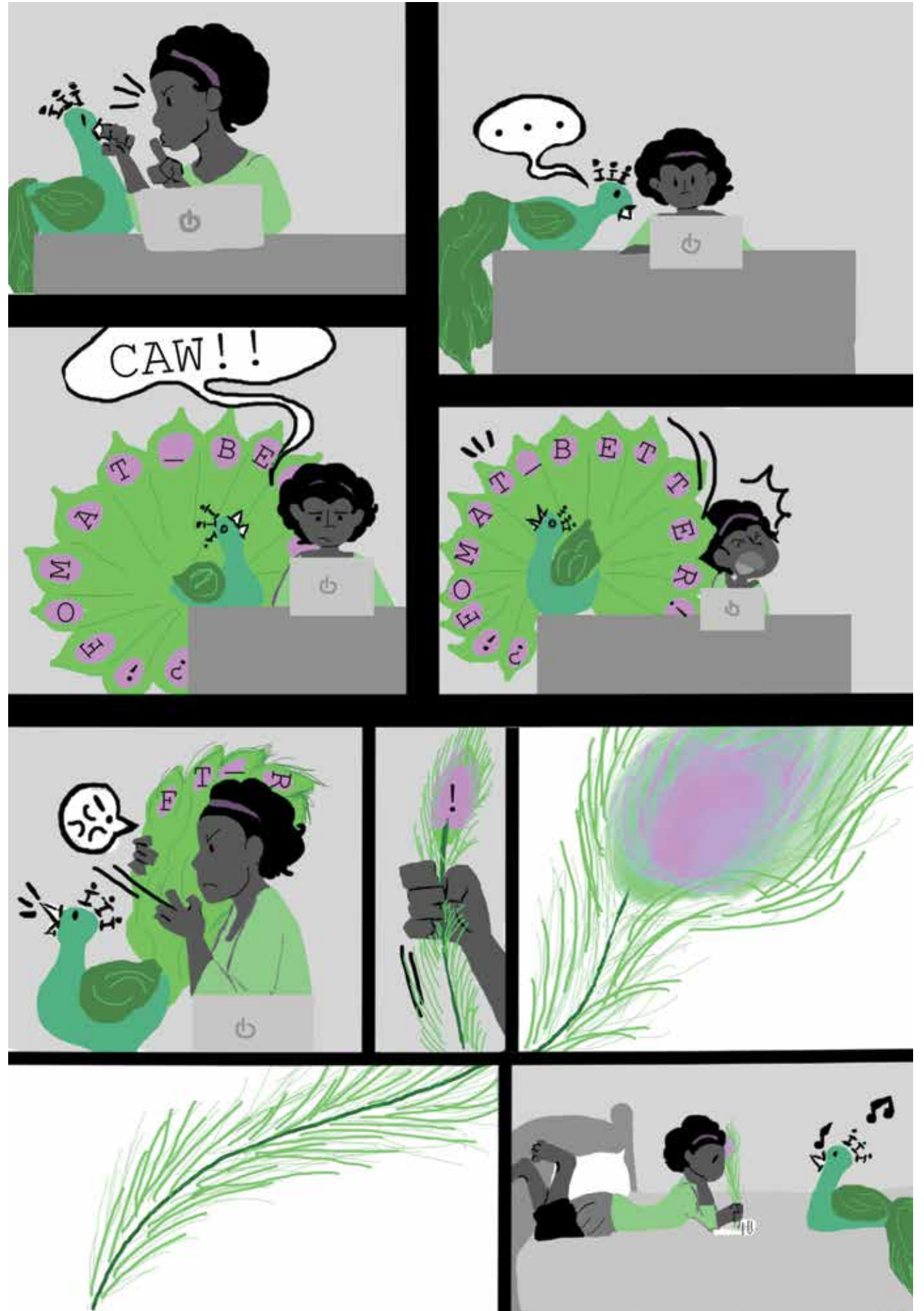
Having not heard his own voice in years, he began to call out his name to remember what it sounded like. It only made him cry, and he went back to his duties by breaking three eggs into a pan that had been sizzling with onions and ham set over a portable propane stove. He didn't hear the keeper walk down the stairs or right up to him.

*Shhhhhhh.*

At first he wasn't sure if it were the pan or someone else making the noise, but before he could turn around, he felt the strong grip of the keeper take him with one arm close to the keeper's chest and cover his eyes with the other. Nathaniel stood still. With the arm over his eyes, the force of the keeper tilted Nathaniel's head upwards, exposing his neck. Even though the keeper dropped the arm holding Nathaniel's body to his, Nathaniel didn't attempt to run. Whatever end was coming seemed reasonable.

Of course Nathaniel couldn't see it, but if he could, he would've seen the long Albatross feather the keeper pulled from the part of him tucked in the back of his pants. Nathaniel could only tell it was soft and seemingly endless in length, and the keeper slowly drew the feather back and forth across the boy's neck, slowly let the boy's head relax into the keeper's chest and let the boy go.





# SHANGRI-LA

Heather Poole  
Young Harris

## Cast of Characters:

ELLA Mid to late 20's, attractive, quiet type

WOMAN 1: Dancer, bruised

WOMAN 2: Dancer, bruised

WOMAN 3: Dancer, bruised

WOMAN 4: Dancer, bruised

WOMAN 5: Dancer, bruised

JAMESON Brooding yet attractive, tattooed, facial hair, athletic

BARTENDER: Clean cut, tall, a Man's man

**Place:** Setting changes between Bedroom, Inside Bar, Outside Bar

**Time:** Present

## Scene 1

**Setting:** A woman, Ella, in a small bed. Simple bedroom layout: bedside table, vanity with mirror and small partition with windowpane to indicate a wall. Woman is dressed only in tan panties and tan camisole.

**At Rise:** Lights — soft blue — come up on stage left.

(Sound: Chopin Nocturne op. 9 no. 1 playing.)

(Ella gets out of bed, ribcage lifted before head. Body follows fluidly. Gets out of bed and half dances, half stumbles towards stage right. Soft blue light follows her. A woman comes on from stage right side curtain, tan leotard, hair up and gets behind woman, holding her hips. They sway together in time with the music. One after another, 4 more women join the two on stage, all in tan leotards. They pass Ella off to one another lovingly. After each has held Ella for a moment, two women pick her up by her legs, as two hold her arms out and one acts as a spotter. They carry her to center of SR and hold her up like Christ crucified. Ella appears to be sleeping, and her head hangs limp to one side.)

(Light: Spot)

(Under the bright light, it is now obvious all the women but Ella have bruises on their faces and bodies.)

(Sound: music fading)

(The women carry Ella back to bed and the soft blue light follows them.)

(Sound: Rain stick)

(The women all clasp hands and walk off stage slowly.)

(Fade Out)

(Lights: Soft oranges to indicate sunrise followed by spot on Ella in bed.)

(Ella gets out of bed and walks backwards off SR.)

(Black Out)

## Scene 2

**Setting:** Bed remains on SL but lights should be black there. Stage Right Partition to act as bar, three bar stools (one will remain empty) silver trashcan DR and a silver pipe along with some general litter.

**At Rise:** Lights Up. Bartender behind bar cleaning a glass with a red rag. Ella enters from SR in a sweater and jeans. Her hair is up. She carries a purse.

ELLA

(Pulls out cell phone, looks at it, returns to purse. Looks at bartender.)

Whiskey Sour...please.

BARTENDER:

Yes, ma'am. You alone?

ELLA

(Obviously feeling out of place):

What? Oh, yeah...yes.

BARTENDER:

Not for long.

(Nods towards a young man heading to the barstool beside her; Jameson.)

JAMESON

(to bartender):

Gin and Tonic please, sir. Thanks.

(Bartender hands each their drink. Wipes down bar, uninterested in the awkward interaction.)

JAMESON

(looking around the bar):

Slow night, huh?

ELLA

(following gaze):

Yeah, I guess that means he'll notice if we don't tip him well, won't he?

JAMESON

(laughing sincerely):

That's very true! I'm Jameson.

ELLA

Ella, nice to meet you.

(They shake hands as drinks are placed in front of them.)

JAMESON

(Taking a sip):

You are very pretty, Ella.

(Ella shifts, uncomfortable with the flattery)

JAMESON

I'm sorry. That was forward. But...I just thought you should know.

(Lights: fade)

(Numerous empty glasses are placed in front of each to indicate they have now been there for a while. Ella has taken her hair down.)

(Lights: up)

(Jameson and Ella laughing at a joke)

JAMESON

Okay, okay, but serious question: Where would you go if you could go anywhere. I mean...like anywhere, ever. No stressing about money, appointments, anything.

ELLA

(Thinking for a moment)

Hm...I need a second. Where would you go?

(Tosses her hair behind her shoulder.)

JAMESON

Probably some deserted island. Not have to interact with anyone, no forced stuff, no faking... Ya know?

ELLA

Not a people person?

JAMESON

I like...select people.

(Puts his hand on her thigh)

ELLA

(Tenses but doesn't move Jameson's hand away)

Okay, I know where I would go!

JAMESON

(Moving hand away):

Let's hear it!

ELLA

Shangri-La.

JAMESON

Ya lost me.

ELLA

Shangri-La. It means paradise... I want to be wherever that is.

JAMESON

(Obviously affected by her answer but not wanting to show it)

So, like a desert island?

ELLA

(slapping at him playfully)

Sure, with only one other person who happens to be super anti-social.

JAMESON

That's cute. You're cute.

(Beat.)

So, what do you do for a living?

ELLA

This and that mostly. To be honest, I'm in between jobs right now. No one is hiring and the people that are hiring don't want someone as under qualified as me.

(Beat.)

Sorry, I'm such a Debbie Downer...what about you? What do you do?

JAMESON

I work for an advertising company. It's not especially exciting, but it pays the bills...

(Pause)

Ya know...the company I'm with has been looking for a secretary. It's not huge money, but it's something. Would you be interested? I know I'm just some guy in a bar, but if you want to give me your number I could talk to some people.

ELLA

(smiling)

Oh my God! That would be fantastic! Yes, yes, thank you so much!

(Digs a pen out of her purse and jots her number on a cocktail napkin.)

JAMESON

Thank you.

(Pockets the napkin.)

(Ella's phone buzzes, bringing them out of a potential "moment".)

JAMESON

Important?

ELLA

I don't recognize the number. But I had no idea it was so late. I really need to get going. My cat, Maverick, will be hungry, and no one wants to come home to a grumpy cat.

(Laughs awkwardly)

(Ella pulls out her wallet but Jameson places a hand on hers as she digs for a card)

JAMESON

It's on me. Thanks for the company.

(Ella thanks him and smiles, getting up.)

BARTENDER:

Have a good night, ma'am.  
(Eyes the empty glasses.)  
Do you need a cab?

ELLA

I'm good, thank you. Have a good night.

(Ella walks downstage right, towards trashcan, smiling. Before she is halfway to the front of the stage, Jameson is behind her. Lights dim and the spotlight is only on the two of them.)

(Ella's phone rings.)

(Sound: (Ringtone) "Creep" by Radiohead)

ELLA

Hello?

JAMESON

(On his phone):  
Wanted to make sure you gave me your real number. Wait up. I will walk you to your car.

ELLA

(laughing awkwardly)  
Oh, okay, thanks. I'm just parked right over here.

(Indicates spot in the audience.)

(Jameson puts his arm around her waist, grabbing her forearm. He squeezes.)

ELLA

Ouch, lighten up, huh?

(Giggles nervously)

JAMESON

(Angrily):  
Shhh, it's okay. I'm not hurting you.

(He tries to stroke her arm, still holding Ella.)  
I love your freckles. I noticed them on your neck when you pushed your hair back earlier. Do you have them...everywhere?

ELLA

(growing more uneasy):  
Why don't you call me tomorrow? I think you had a little too much to drink maybe.

JAMESON

What's your problem? Don't you like me?

(Beat)  
You do. You like me.

(Grabs her by both arms, spinning and pulling her into him. They are face to face.)

ELLA

(Trying to pull away from him. It is obvious he is much stronger.)  
Ouch! Jameson, let me...go!

JAMESON

(Through clenched teeth):  
Stop talking so much.

(He pulls on her even harder. She is still jerking about, trying desperately to free herself.)

ELLA

What—

JAMESON

Your mouth could be put to so many other uses.

(He tries to kiss her.)

ELLA

(Pulling away):  
You're drunk, stop. Just...leave me alone. Please!

(Ella tries to look around, hoping someone will overhear the struggle and help her. It is obvious no one is around.)

JAMESON

I said *stop. Talking.* You want paradise, right? Let me give it to you. You know you don't want to fight.

(They are at the trashcan now, and Jameson grabs for her shirt, trying to rip it off of her.)

(Ella is at her pocket, desperately fumbling for her keys. Jameson is relentless, shaking her, pushing her, trying to get her on the ground. He stumbles, intoxicated.)

Ella grabs her key with arm nearest the audience and places the black metal base of the key into her palm, the length of the metal sticking up between her index and middle fingers. She rears back and punctures him in the chest. He goes down, startled by the pain.

Ella tries to run further downstage but Jameson grabs her ankle.

She goes down. Jameson climbs on top of her, holding his wound with one hand and reaching to unzip his pants with the other.

Ella spots the pipe and grasps for it. Finally, barely, she gets it. She knees him, causing him to roll over. He curses, clutching at himself. Weakened, Ella is still on the ground. She crawls away, but he grabs one ankle. She kicks and manages to hit him in the nose. Instinctively he puts both hands to his face. Ella jumps up, still grasping the pipe.

She is shaking and terrified, her hair a wreck, her clothing askew. She bashes him over the head repeatedly.)

(Lights: fade to black)

(Blood placed under Jameson's head like a halo.)

(Lights: up)

(Jameson is lifeless; his hands have fallen together as if in prayer.)

Ella throws the pipe down and steps behind trashcan.)

(Noise: vomiting)

(Ella walks towards SL. Lights blacken behind her and come up on her bedroom set.)

Ella sits at her vanity and brushes her tangled hair. She puts lotion on her obviously bruised knees and legs, crying.

Noise: Chopin Nocturne op.9 no. 1.)

(Ella removes her sweater and jeans and is once again in tan camisole and panties.)

(She sits in bed, and removes a pill bottle from the drawer of the bedside table. She knocks all of them back and lies in bed. As soon as her head hits the pillow, black out on SL and soft blue light on stage right. The five women are standing there, hands joined, beside Jameson's body looking towards SL.)

End Scene





# MATILDA

Stella Lingcong Zhou  
Agnes Scott College

## List of Characters:

- CECILY REESE:** A 30-year-old housewife. She is married to a successful businessman who does not come home very often.
- TIM:** Cecily's neighbor. He is a busy and ambitious realtor who is suffering from the financial crisis of 2008. He is slightly jealous of the Reeses' success and fortune.
- RUTH:** A 60-year-old old woman. She is Tim's mother, a lonely and annoying old lady.
- Scene:** The living room of the Reeses' fancy house in Bel Air, a suburb of Maryland.
- Time:** Thanksgiving night in 2008.
- SETTING:** The living room of the Reeses' fancy house in Bel Air, a suburb of Maryland. The audience can see a sofa, a television set, a bookshelf, a coffee table with a knife, some facial tissues and a bottle of wine on it in front of the sofa, and a side table with a disc player, some family photos, and a makeup mirror on it.
- AT RISE:** CECILY REESE is all dressed up in expensive clothes and holds a makeup mirror. CECILY applies red lipstick over and over again, with no facial expression.

CECILY

(slamming her lipstick and the makeup mirror on the floor and weeping)

This is so unfair!

(CECILY picks up a knife from the coffee table, touches the hilt with her thumb and wanders the room anxiously.)

CECILY

(wandering and pondering)

What if... What if...

(CECILY stops, looks at the knife and cuts her left forefinger with the knife.)

CECILY

(crying and shaking her left hand)

Damn! It hurts!

(CECILY drops the knife on the coffee table and sucks her left forefinger for a while.)

CECILY

(murmuring)

What else... What else...

(CECILY finds her cell phone in her pocket and starts searching.)

CECILY

(murmuring)

How...many...sleeping pills...to die...

(CECILY puts her phone back in her pocket, rushes to the side table, searches the drawer and finds the medicine bottle. She returns to the coffee table, sits on the sofa, unscrews the bottle, empties the bottle, puts all the pills on the coffee table and starts counting.)

CECILY

Two...four...five...eight...twelve... That'll do!

(CECILY pours herself a glass of wine and puts the glass beside the pills.)

(The doorbell rings.)

CECILY

(ignoring the doorbell)

Okay. Okay. I can do this.

(CECILY drinks the wine from the glass. She puts one pill on her palm, looks at it. Then the second.)

(The doorbell rings. CECILY is clearly disturbed. She frowns and looks at the direction of the sound. Then she puts the third pill on her palm.)

(A knock on the door. CECILY puts down the pills and stands up.)

TIM

(offstage)

Mrs. Reese! Mrs. Reese! Open the door! It's Tim here!

(CECILY panics. She hides the knife in the drawer and puts all the pills back in the bottle.)

TIM

(offstage)

Mrs. Reese! I know you're here! I can see your car out here! Open the door! It's freezing!

(CECILY puts the bottle back in the drawer, picks up the makeup mirror, takes care of her hair and applies more lipstick. She drinks from the glass in a hurry while standing up to open the door.)

TIM  
(offstage)  
Mrs. Reese! Come on! We're frozen to death!

(CECILY chokes from the wine, coughs and curses.)

CECILY  
(putting down the glass)  
Coming!

(CECILY lets TIM and RUTH in. TIM is in his thirties. Dressed in a fancy suit. Stressed. RUTH's hair is going gray. She is in her sixties, silent, and arrogant.)

CECILY  
(smiling)  
Sorry, Tim, I didn't hear you. Happy Thanksgiving! And this is...

(RUTH crosses her arms and looks away.)

TIM  
(speaking fast)  
This is my mother, Ruth. Mrs. Reese, can I ask you a favor? I have some business emergencies I need to take care of. Would you please keep an eye on my mom for a couple of hours? Two, no, maybe three. I'll call you when I'm ready to come back. Could you do that for me, please? Mrs. Reese?

CECILY  
(stuttering)  
Well Tim... I don't know... I mean, I'd love to help but it's Thanksgiving. I've got something very important to do. I think my parents are coming.

RUTH  
(rolling her eyes)  
You think?

CECILY  
Oh, not "I think." My parents are coming. Yes, they are coming. Besides, look at how messy my living room is right now! I really don't want your mom to feel uncomfortable in this mess.

RUTH  
(looking around, commenting in a judgmental tone)  
Well, it's not that bad.

(RUTH wanders around the room and sits down on the sofa. CECILY looks displeased.)

TIM  
Mrs. Reese, please! I wouldn't have asked you if it wasn't an emergency! Don't you want to help a good neighbor out? It's Thanksgiving. I can't take my mother to work!

RUTH  
And why is that?

TIM  
(stuttering)  
Well... It's... It's... Um...

CECILY  
(amused)  
Yes, Tim. Why?

TIM  
(getting impatient)  
Mrs. Reese! You can't do this to me! Don't you remember once I...I...

CECILY  
Huh?

TIM  
Well, don't you remember I helped you get rid of that dead cat on your lawn that night? That was a neighborly gesture! Right? If I hadn't done that, it probably would have been stinking by the morning.

CECILY  
But didn't you hit that poor cat with your car in the first place?

RUTH  
(amused)  
Wow, it's killing me to watch.

TIM  
Oh Mrs. Reese, come on. It's just four hours!

RUTH  
Sorry, Tim, I—

TIM  
If it was Mr. Reese, he would have helped me!

(Silence.)

CECILY  
(provoked)  
Fine. I'll help you this once. But don't you ever dream of coming to another Reeses' party again! And now I need more wine!

(CECILY goes offstage with the glass and the empty bottle.)

RUTH  
What did she mean? What's with a Reeses' party?

TIM

(disappointed)

It's not the party I care about. I'm afraid I might lose her husband's connection. He's like...a big person in my business. He knows people... Why am I telling you this? You don't understand anyway.

RUTH

(looking contemptuous)

I don't like her. Look at those legs. I've eaten carrots thicker than those legs. I don't trust people that skinny. She's a phony bitch!

TIM

She's a well-married phony bitch. I can't risk losing her husband's connection in the business. Now she's already upset, so keep your voice down, Ma!

RUTH

Don't talk to me that way! I drove for two hours to see you on Thanksgiving night. Now you're leaving me to this complete stranger. Well done, Tim. You really are your father's son.

TIM

There's a recession right now! Ma, I'm just trying to make a living. Okay? You don't know, then don't judge. Look at Mr. Reese. He has money. He has social status. He has a beautiful wife and a daughter. Then look at me. What do I have? I'm just Tim the neighbor to them. I bet Cecily doesn't even know my last name.

RUTH

They have a daughter? What's her name?

TIM

Matilda. I don't see her that often. The Reeses are really overprotective.

RUTH

How old is she? Is she sweet?

TIM

(impatient)

I don't know, okay? Go ask Cecily yourself! It's not my daughter!

RUTH

How dare you talk to me like that! I told you to go find a nice girl and get married and you just don't take it seriously! Look at me, don't I look like a grandma? But where're my grandchildren? Huh?

(RUTH looks upset.)

TIM

(kissing RUTH on the forehead)

I love you, Ma. I'm sorry. It's just the stress.

RUTH

You better be. Can I at least walk you to your car?

(RUTH and TIM go offstage.)

(CECILY enters. She has gotten a new bottle of wine, some cake and hot tea ready.)

CECILY

(imitating TIM dramatically)

"Oh, Mr. Reese would have helped me." What does he know about Mr. Reese anyway. And where is that old woman now...

(looking around)

Ruth? Where are you, Ruth? You know, you can't enter any other rooms, Ruth! Where are you?

(RUTH enters.)

RUTH

(sitting down)

I was just walking my son to his car.

CECILY

You need to tell me before you go to other places. If anything happens to you, it's my responsibility, okay?

RUTH

(amused)

Jesus, don't be so serious. I'm not a kid. I can take care of myself.

(noticing the wine)

Woo, the red!

CECILY

That's not for you.

(putting down the hot tea)

This is for you.

(putting down the cake)

And here, I got you some cake. In case you tell your son you starved in my house.

RUTH

(drinking and eating)

Well, when's the family reunion?

CECILY

What?

RUTH

You know. When are your mom and dad coming? They're coming, like you said, right?

CECILY

(looking panicked and stuttering)

Right. Right. Umm, you know what, I just recalled. My parents are going to my sister's house this year. It will be just you and me tonight.

RUTH

(grinning)

Of course. Absolutely.

(She rolls her eyes without CECILY noticing.)

(CECILY sits down on the sofa.)

RUTH

(coldly)

Where's your husband?

(dramatically)

"Mr. Reese."

CECILY

(suddenly feeling slightly depressed)

He's at work.

RUTH

On Thanksgiving? Huh.

CECILY

What's with the "Huh"?

RUTH

(puts down the tea cup complacently)

You know he's out there fooling around, don't you?

CECILY

(provoked)

How could you say that? My husband is a decent man. He never--

RUTH

Well, I don't mean to upset you. What do I know? I'm just an old woman.

CECILY

(a pause)

So you came to see Tim? I wonder what could possibly go wrong with him at work on a Thanksgiving night that he has to leave you with a neighbor. Well, what would I know? I'm just a housewife.

(RUTH looks a little furious.)

RUTH

(coldly)

You don't need to get back at me like this. I'm only telling you the truth. Not that I care or anything. It's your husband. Not mine. I kicked mine out of the house the moment I caught him in bed with my sister.

(CECILY stands up and wants to go offstage.)

RUTH

Hey, where are you going?

CECILY

(coldly)

I've got something to do.

RUTH

What, you got something better to do than talking to me?

CECILY

It's important. And private.

RUTH

(shrugging and eating her cake)

Okay.

CECILY

I...I'm leaving.

RUTH

(drinking her tea)

Okay.

CECILY

If you need anything, just call my name.

RUTH

(impatiently)

Are you leaving or not?

(CECILY finds the sleeping pills bottle in the drawer. She goes offstage with the pills in her pocket.)

RUTH

(finishing her tea)

Cecily! I ran out of tea!

(CECILY remains silent.)

RUTH

(checking out the new bottle of wine)

Mom? Can I have some adult drink?

(CECILY enters.)

CECILY

You ran out of what?

RUTH

(showing CECILY the wine)

Can I have some?

CECILY

No.

RUTH

Why not?

CECILY

I can't let you get drunk in my house. Your son will be mad at me.

RUTH

Oh, come on. He doesn't care. No one cares.

(CECILY hesitates.)

RUTH  
Just one drink, please?

CECILY  
Fine. Just one.  
(CECILY finds RUTH another glass and pours. She stops when the glass is half full.)

RUTH  
More. More.

(CECILY hesitates but continues pouring.)

RUTH  
That will do.

(CECILY starts to go offstage with the rest of the wine.)

RUTH  
Where are you going with that?

CECILY  
I have things to do.

RUTH  
Where're your manners? Leave the guest drinking alone in the living room?

CECILY  
Well, technically, you're not a guest when you--

RUTH  
Yeah. Whatever. Give me the bottle! What was that cake you just brought me? Could you be a doll and bring me more?

CECILY  
(sighing)  
Yes. Wait here.

(CECILY goes offstage. RUTH wanders around the living room and picks up the family photos on the side table to take a look.)

RUTH  
Hmm. Look at this. Well, well. There they are. Mr. and Mrs. Reese.  
(looking at other photos)  
Where's that baby girl?

(CECILY enters.)

CECILY  
(questioningly)  
What are you doing?

RUTH  
(putting down the photo)  
Nothing. Oh, here's the cake!

(RUTH reaches for the plate.)

CECILY  
(dodging RUTH's hand)  
You can't just go through others' stuff like that, okay?

RUTH  
Just family photos. What's the big deal?

CECILY  
(seriously)  
It is a big deal to me. It's supposed to be private.

RUTH  
Whatever you say. They're your photos.

(RUTH eats her cake. CECILY goes offstage.)

RUTH  
(looking at her watch)  
What! It's already nine! Cecily! Cecily! Come here! Right now!

(CECILY enters.)

CECILY  
What now? Do you need me to bring you the whole cake from the kitchen?

RUTH  
Forget about the cake. It's nine o'clock already!

CECILY  
Great! Are you leaving?

(RUTH crosses her arms.)

CECILY  
Okay, I didn't think so... What's the matter then?

RUTH  
It's nine! Time to watch TV!

CECILY  
We don't watch TV.

RUTH  
Yes, you do. Turn it on for me. I want to watch Desperate Housewives!

(CECILY turns the TV on and gives RUTH the TV remote.)

CECILY  
Happy? Now, leave me alone.

RUTH  
Oh, honey. Nobody deserves to be left alone on a Thanksgiving night.

CECILY  
(impatiently)  
Listen, I really don't have time for TV. I...

(RUTH presses the TV remote quickly. CECILY is going to get offstage.)

RUTH  
(murmuring)  
ABC... Come on, where's ABC...  
(turning to CECILY)  
Cecily, help me find ABC!

CECILY  
(looking tired and impatient)  
Ruth, I told you, I don't watch TV. Can I leave now?

RUTH  
(not listening to CECILY)  
Oh, there it is!

CECILY  
Ruth.

RUTH  
What? Sit down and watch with me.

(CECILY sits down reluctantly.)  
(Sound of commercials.)

RUTH  
Let me tell you something about this show. So there're four women living in this little town. A mutual friend of theirs kills herself. Shot in the head. And they're trying to figure out why, but they also have all kinds of problems at home.

(CECILY is not paying attention. She drinks her wine, and applies her lipstick with the makeup mirror in her hand.)

RUTH  
Hey, I'm trying to talk to you here! Show some respect!

CECILY  
(putting away her lipstick and the mirror)  
Okay. Okay. Why does their mutual friend kill herself?

RUTH  
I don't know. Who knows?

CECILY  
What are they like? Those housewives.

RUTH  
Well, you know. They have their own troubles.

CECILY  
(murmuring)  
I bet they're just like me.

RUTH  
You're nothing like them. Those are attractive women!  
(the look of yearning)  
And one of them, oh my, doesn't she know how to cook!  
(pointing to the table)  
Cecily, hand me that plate.

(CECILY hands RUTH the plate, clearly annoyed.)

TV ANNOUNCER  
Sunday 9/8c. The whole new episode of Desperate Housewives. Here on ABC.

RUTH  
(turning off the TV)  
I guess it's not on the air during Thanksgiving.

CECILY  
(sarcastically)  
It's because today is Thursday.

RUTH  
(rolling her eyes)  
Watch your tone. I might be old, but I'm not dumb.

CECILY  
I can't say the same.

(CECILY starts to go offstage.)

RUTH  
Hey, you have any books for me to read?

CECILY  
(coldly)  
There's the bookshelf. Take whatever you want.

(RUTH reaches for a book, but knocks the wine glass over.)

RUTH  
Whoops.

CECILY  
Yes, go on. Just stand there and do nothing.

(RUTH shrugs, sits on the sofa to read. CECILY uses the facial tissues on the coffee table and cleans fast.)

RUTH

This is interesting!

(RUTH bursts out laughing loudly.)

RUTH

Haha, this is hilarious!

(CECILY cleans the table and frowns.)

RUTH

(laughing so hard)

What... How could... He... Haha!

CECILY

(disturbed)

Shhh!

RUTH

(still can't stop laughing)

Wh...what?

CECILY

Keep your voice down. I'm trying to clean here. Shhh!

RUTH

Don't shush me, young lady.

(CECILY does not respond but rolls her eyes.)

RUTH

I saw you rolling your eyes!

CECILY

And what are you going to do with that? Huh? Arrest me?

RUTH

I can't believe my son just left me with such a mean woman.

CECILY

(provoked)

Excuse me?

RUTH

(angrily)

I drove for two hours to see my son in this little suburb. This is what I get for Thanksgiving. Cold shoulder. That's what I get for Thanksgiving.

CECILY

(angrily)

You want more? Go ask your son for it. Don't come bother your neighbor, okay?!

(RUTH is astonished at what CECILY says.)

CECILY

I'm sorry, Ruth. It's the wine talking. I...

RUTH

(furious)

You think I wanted to bother you? I barely knew you, okay?! Tim put me here, what can I do? I know no one here! Maybe I should just go out and sit on the street so you won't be bothered. Isn't that what you want?

CECILY

Ruth. I never meant to--

RUTH

(coldly)

Save it. Say no more. I'm going out for a walk.

(RUTH starts to walk offstage with clear anger.)

RUTH

(murmuring)

What a careless, phony bitch!

(RUTH goes offstage. CECILY frowns and looks at RUTH's direction for a few seconds. She takes out the pill bottle and sighs. She puts all the pills in her hand, clenches and trembles.)

RUTH

(offstage)

Cecily! Cecily! You there?

(CECILY is in a daze. She stares at the pills in her hand and trembles.)

(A knock on the door)

RUTH

(shouting)

Cecily! Open the door! I forgot my coat. It's snowing! I'm dying! Hurry up!

(CECILY sighs, puts the pills back in the bottle again and puts the bottle in her pocket. She stands up to let RUTH in. RUTH runs in and sits on the sofa.)

CECILY

(smiling)

Want some tea?

RUTH

(raising a hand coldly)

Don't bother. I'm still angry.

CECILY  
Ruth, I'm really sorry for what I said. Can I do anything to make you feel better?

RUTH  
When I was outside, I saw a family dancing in their house. What about you put some music on. Let's dance.

CECILY  
I don't dance.

RUTH  
I haven't danced for decades. Not after I got the divorce.

CECILY  
I'm sorry, but I can't dance. You can dance on your own.

RUTH  
(turning the music on with the disc player)  
Then watch me.

(RUTH holds the wine glass and sways alone.)

RUTH  
Cecily, what're you waiting for? Come on!

CECILY  
I told you. I don't dance.

RUTH  
Come on. I'm not complimenting you, but an elegant lady like you doesn't know how to dance?

CECILY  
I'm not quite in the right mood.

RUTH  
(looking surprised)  
It's Thanksgiving! When can you be in the right mood more than now?

CECILY  
Not everyone is as happy as you. No one is as miserable as I am.

(RUTH turns the music off and looks at CECILY.)

RUTH  
I'm sorry, you think you're the only miserable one? I have been divorced for twenty years. I have lived alone for twenty years. I can't even have a Thanksgiving dinner with my son at the age of sixty! But am I whining all night? No.

CECILY  
You don't understand.

RUTH  
What could possibly be wrong for you? At least you're still married. At least you still have your daughter.

CECILY  
(bitter smile)  
You're absolutely right. Now if you'll excuse me, I really need to get this done right now. Can I get you anything else?

RUTH  
I'll let you know.

CECILY  
Fine.

(CECILY goes offstage. RUTH drinks more wine alone, looking slightly drunk and upset. She puts the glass down.)

RUTH  
Cecily!

CECILY  
(offstage)  
I'm busy!

RUTH  
Come here!

CECILY  
(offstage)  
What is it? The wine bottle is on the table! Do it yourself! I'm not your maid!

RUTH  
Cecily!

(CECILY enters.)

CECILY  
What is it, Ruth? I told you I've got things to do!

RUTH  
I can't. I don't want to.

CECILY  
Okay, what's wrong now?

RUTH  
Have you ever felt that you've got nothing to live for? That you'd rather die to feel better?

CECILY  
(awkward and hesitant)  
No... Why?

RUTH  
I shouldn't have put it that way. If you are dead, you're not supposed to feel anything, right?



CECILY  
I...I guess. What are you talking about anyway?

RUTH  
Cecily, I feel like dying right now.

CECILY  
Oh come on...

RUTH  
No, I'm very serious. You see, my husband left me, my own son is ashamed of me, and even his neighbor hates me. What's the point of living, eh?

CECILY  
I don't hate you. Who said that?

RUTH  
You did.

CECILY  
And when did I ever do that?

RUTH  
Well, I don't know. Probably the moment I came in, or the time... I don't know! Don't ask me!

(RUTH covers her face with her hands.)

CECILY  
Ruth, come on. You don't mean that.

RUTH  
I meant everything I said. You don't understand me.

CECILY  
I do understand you. I do. But it's no use killing yourself, okay?

RUTH  
Cecily, tell me, what if one day, your husband doesn't want you, your daughter leaves you, and even Tim despises you, eh? What would you do? Wouldn't that make you want to end everything?

CECILY  
Well... I wouldn't agree with you.

RUTH  
I'm more than serious, Cecily. Life sucks. I just want to go to heaven and drink with the angels, maybe. I only have one last favor to ask.

CECILY  
Which is?

RUTH  
Hand me a knife, would ya?

CECILY  
(sounds nervous and anxious)  
Don't do that, Ruth! How am I supposed to tell Tim that his own mother killed herself in my house? You put that horrible thought off, right now. Don't bring it up again. This sounds ridiculous! Why would you want to kill yourself? Just because no one is around?

(RUTH looks at CECILY, and bursts out laughing. She laughs so hard that CECILY looks terrified.)

CECILY  
Ruth. Ruth. Come on. Stop it. Ruth.

RUTH  
Look at your face! I was just messing with you! You seriously believe I was going to kill myself because of all that crap? You're such an innocent young lady.

(CECILY is irritated for being fooled by RUTH's false threat. She looks at RUTH with rage, suffering and despair.)

RUTH  
Why are you staring at me like that? It's just a joke. Take it easy.

CECILY  
No, it's not. You're doing this on purpose.

RUTH  
It's a joke. Of course it's on purpose. Okay, come on. Why are you so serious?

CECILY  
(shouting and crying)  
You get out of my house right now!

RUTH  
What? What did I do?

CECILY  
(crying hysterically)  
You know exactly what you did! Don't you ever make that killing yourself joke again! I don't understand? I understand a million times more than you do!

RUTH  
Okay, what's going on here?

CECILY  
Don't act like you don't know anything! You already knew what happened to Matilda, right? You already knew why I'm upset, right? Your son must have told you about that accident, right?! You know everything and you just want to make fun of me!

RUTH  
Cecily, what's going on? I swear, Tim doesn't know and I don't know a thing...

CECILY

(shouting)

Oh shut up! Shut your big fat lying mouth! You know exactly what's going on. You know I'm the one trying to kill myself!

(Silence with CECILY breathing heavily.)

RUTH

What?

CECILY

What?! That's all you can say?

RUTH

Seriously, what?

CECILY

(irritated)

You!

RUTH

Why would you want to kill yourself? For Matilda?

CECILY

You don't understand.

RUTH

Well, I don't. And I certainly don't want to. If you really want to do that, do it. Just remember that no one will understand why you do that. Not me, not Tim, not your husband, not Matilda. It's not the right thing to do after losing someone.

CECILY

Oh come on. What do you know about losing someone?

RUTH

Maybe I don't. But you need to stop being a whiny baby about it.

CECILY

(furious)

How could you say that? Don't you have a heart? Were you raised by a stone?

RUTH

Now you've crossed the line, young lady.

CECILY

(furious)

You think this is a joke? This is real! I was going to kill myself!

RUTH

Just don't do it now! I don't want to see anyone dead in front of me on a Thanksgiving night.

(glancing at CECILY and drinking from the glass)

That's bad luck, you know that?

CECILY

(sneering)

What do I care about luck? I'm dying, okay?

RUTH

Do you think you can get me more cake before you... you know.

(pause)

Or just give me your recipe? Is it anywhere in the kitchen? That cake is just fabulous. What did you put in it?

CECILY

You're unbelievable, you know that?

RUTH

Well, I was complimenting your cake. So, normally, people just say "Thanks, Ruth."

(CECILY says nothing but buries her head in her arms.)

RUTH

Well, I'll just...

(pointing elsewhere)

I'll just...leave you alone here, I guess.

CECILY

(looking up)

You really like my cake?

RUTH

Well, yes, of course. That's a superb dessert! I can't imagine anyone would hate it.

CECILY

(murmuring)

But he never said a thing. After all these years.

RUTH

Who?

CECILY

My husband.

RUTH

He surely doesn't know about good dessert.

CECILY

You're right. No, he doesn't.

RUTH

You see? It's not your fault. He's the idiot here.

(Silence.)

CECILY

Wait here.

Where are you going?

(CECILY goes offstage to get the cake. RUTH sits down comfortably and drinks her wine, but occasionally looks nervously in the direction CECILY left.)

Cecily?

(Silence.)

(standing up and looking nervous)

Cecily?! Don't kill yourself right now! It's too much!

(offstage)

Ruth, you want two slices?

(relieved and sitting back on the sofa)

Yes, please, darling.

(CECILY enters with the cake in her hand.)

Who were you shouting at?

Nothing. No one. You heard it wrong.

(CECILY looks at RUTH but stops asking. She gives RUTH a plate with some cake in it.)

It's lemongrass.

Lemon what?

Lemongrass. The secret ingredient in my cake. It makes the cake have the... interesting taste.

I see what you mean. It does taste... I don't know. I think "interesting" is the right word.

I just had some before you came. Just found out that my husband bought a lot of lemongrass and left it in the kitchen. Maybe I used too much of it today, do you think?

I'm sure it only makes the cake taste better. It's such a great night with amazing cake. Come here, take another bite!

(RUTH feeds CECILY some cake with her fork.)

It's such a shame that I can never taste this delicious cake again after tonight.

Why not?

What do you mean "Why not?"

I'm confused.

Aren't you supposed to be... you know.

What?

Dead. Are you still killing yourself or not? Not that I care. Just asking.

Well. Right. I almost forgot. I am going to.  
(realizing something)

And you will stay out of my way, right?

Seriously, baby, I couldn't care less. I need some facial tissues. Where can I get more tissues?

It's on the coffee table.

You used them all.

Huh?

To clean that table before.

Right. Right. Well, let me see...

(CECILY opens the side table drawer to find more facial tissues. Instead, she takes out a framed photo. She looks at the photo in her hands and starts weeping. RUTH stands up and walks towards CECILY. RUTH looks at

the photo in CECILY's hands.)

RUTH

Oh! That's the little girl! Isn't she cute, Cecily?

CECILY

(stuttering and trying to stop weeping)

Can you believe it? She's...she's out there all alone. I must go. I...I...I must do it tonight! I have to!

(CECILY takes out the pill bottle out of her pocket.)

CECILY

(smiling)

See? I've got everything ready. I'm gonna see my baby tonight.

RUTH

Wait! Wait! Don't do it until Tim comes to pick me up.

CECILY

I'm pretty sure he'll be here any minute.

RUTH

Just call him and ask.

CECILY

I didn't know you wanted to leave so soon.

RUTH

Well, you know me. Hate to bother anyone!

(CECILY calls TIM.)

CECILY

Hey, Tim, hey! It's Cecily Reese. Listen, your mom wants to know when—

(RUTH takes the phone from CECILY's hand.)

RUTH

(trying hard to lower her voice)

Son! Come pick me up right now... Of course you can leave! Let me talk to them then... No?

(speaking up without her knowing)

Tell them it's a family emergency. Tell them Mrs. Reese is about to kill herself and call Mr. Reese right now... Yes, tell them... Oh it's not a joke, silly boy. This is real. This is more than real. She has the pills and everything ready. Why do you think I need to leave right away? You—

(CECILY takes the phone from RUTH's hand and hangs up.)

CECILY

Are you out of your mind?! Why did you tell him?

RUTH

Why not?

CECILY

Holy... You are drunk!

(CECILY panics, wanders around the room and talks to herself.)

CECILY

(murmuring)

What now. What now. Tim will stop me. Tim will tell my husband. He'll lock me up. I'll never see Matilda again. Never. I'll be all alone again!

RUTH

(looking dizzy)

Cecily. Cecily. Will you stop? You're giving me a headache.

CECILY

(furious to RUTH)

All alone again! And it's all your fault!

RUTH

(looking dizzy and sitting on the sofa)

Cecily, I'm not feeling well. Cecily, Cecily, get me another piece of cake.

CECILY

(pointing at the door)

Leave! Leave right now! I'm going to see Matilda. I don't have time for you!

RUTH

Don't you want me as company?

CECILY

Look around. I am all alone. I'll always be alone. I'll always be by myself.

(sitting down on the sofa and shouting at RUTH)

Are you blind?

(RUTH does not talk. She struggles to stand up and turns on the music. She walks towards CECILY and shows one of her hands.)

RUTH

Mrs. Cecily Reese. May I have the honor of this dance?

CECILY

(furious)

What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you understand? I want nothing to do with you! Nothing! I just started to trust you. How could you tell my secret just like that? How could you? I can't believe it... I can't!

RUTH

But nobody deserves to be left alone on a Thanksgiving night. Listen to me. I'm sure Matilda is not alone in heaven. Trust me, the last thing she wants to see is her mom staying alone because of her.

(CECILY wanders the room for a while. Then she sits on the sofa and buries her head in her arms. She grieves silently with no tears. RUTH stealthily puts Matilda's photo back into the side table drawer. Silence.)

Dance? RUTH

No. CECILY

(RUTH drags CECILY to the center of the room. They dance slowly and beautifully. RUTH hums with the music. CECILY says nothing at first. Then she puts her head on RUTH's shoulder and starts weeping.)

There, there. Let it out. RUTH

(CECILY continues weeping and soon stops. They continue dancing for a while. CECILY finally loosens up and starts to smile.)

Ruth, I'm tired. CECILY

Me, too. RUTH

(CECILY and RUTH sit on the sofa together.)

That was fun. CECILY

Told you! RUTH

We should do this again sometime! CECILY

(surprised) RUTH

Sure. Definitely. When? How about this weekend? I'll bring more wine with me if you--

(closing her eyes) CECILY

Shhh... I have a headache.

(pause)

I want to sleep.

(CECILY puts her head on RUTH's shoulder and falls asleep immediately.)

RUTH

(sighing)

Okay, maybe just for a while.

(RUTH falls asleep as well.)

(A knock on the door.)

TIM

(offstage)

Mrs. Reese! Mrs. Reese! Open the door!

(A knock on the door. TIM enters in a hurry.)

TIM

Sorry the door was not locked, so I just let myself in. What is going on? I couldn't get Mr. Reese on the phone!

(noticing RUTH and CECILY on the sofa)

Mom? Mrs. Reese? Are you still okay?

(TIM comes closer to them and sniffs.)

TIM

Is that...?

(TIM picks up the plate with the rest of the cake and sniffs.)

TIM

Eh. Smells like pot.

(TIM notices the empty wine bottle.)

TIM

(surprised)

They're drunk?!

(Blackout.)



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