

Agnes Scott College
37TH ANNUAL WRITERS' FESTIVAL
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This magazine was created by the Spring 2008 Dana Design team, which is comprised of Agnes Scott students and overseen by Professor Nell Ruby. Dana Design asks their clients to generate three words or phrases to trigger and shape the direction of the design project. Our cover illustration was inspired by the words New World, Festival and Hybridity. The image of the world map on the cover has been inverted to suggest a new way of looking. The imaginary animals and plants are superimposed over this new world as shadows and guiding constellations. The additional markings represent the trade winds and immigration routes and the design asks us to consider what would happen if the world turned upside down and the history and powers that dominate were overturned.

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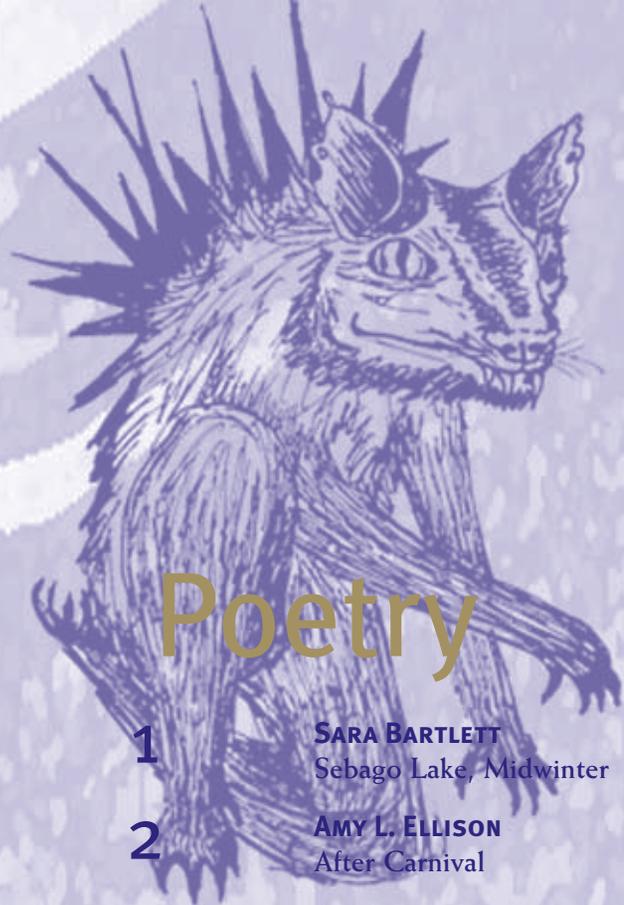


AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE
THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

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 Martín Espada, Rubén Martínez, and Gillian Lee-Fong-Farris '99.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected by outside judges as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers 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 James T. and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We wish to thank President Elizabeth Kiss, Dean of the College Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. We would also like to thank Professor Rachel Trousdale for organizing the Writers' Festival Contest and our outside selection committee for their time and careful reading.



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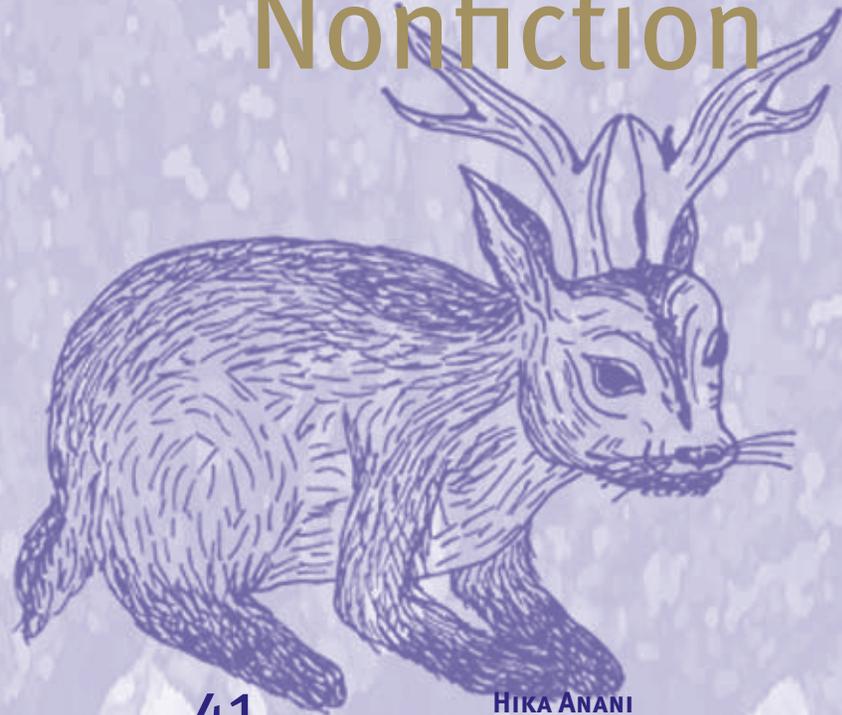
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One-Act Plays



Poetry





Dad's pickup cleared the thin divide
between dirt road and lake; for miles
we glided over hundreds of feet
of ice and water, of searing white
rimmed with sagging pine.

Grampa was out there somewhere,
and I still don't know how we found
his leaning clapboard shack
in the lake-field, where he sat with a pole
drooping into a hole cut in the ice.

The three of us watched the hole for a tug
and splash, a red flag snapping up,
and we sat so quietly, I thought the lake
had already accepted us into its freezing.

I stared into that hole, forgetting to feel
my fingers and nose, as my body
grew cold from the outside in,
like night closing around a campfire;

under the ice, cold-blooded fish finned
through black water, and frogs
burrowed in bottom-mud to sleep,
our bodies straining to preserve us
through winter to the thaw.
Leaning forward on my stool, hovering
over the thin circle, I saw my own face
wavering there, crossing strangely
with Dad's and Grampa's,
our ghostly faces trimmed in wool,
buoyant in the dark, icy water
that held it all – trucks, shacks, fish, frogs,
the three of us on solid ice, floating.

Except the girl, no one squats in Rio.
On Wednesdays, she leaves corrugated walls
behind for the Cristo Redentor, arms open to hikers
and gulls alike. Over the cliffs, aging fishermen
scale the sea while the thin bend of her shoulders
rocks with their chanting. Sometimes she sings
and the hikers thumb coins into her palm.
There is nothing to laugh at, not the cafés
selling bottled holy water, the blank-eyed man
and his pigeons, or the sweet wet scent
of newspapered boxes. Even so,
the girl lifts her face to the statue and
makes a vowel of bells and longing.

During the ribboned pretense of her birthday,
she lit stilted legs and made a wish from her house,
from the tequila-sodden father who introduced her
to many uncles, repeatedly. She grew up
underneath someone else's labor, unmoistened

by lipstick or ashtrays and fevered with the nineties.
She spilled onto the streets with nothing
but a roundness of eyes and a shoebox
holding the body of the tabby she loved,
the sentence for mewling. She buried it
under the statue for Lent, fasted forty days
too long. Even her hair abandoned her body
like a sad monk after a Candomblé mass.
Now, she hides her whiteness under
the Corcovado summer, finds an earthenware bowl,
draws a kind of x around the lip while yes,
the moon wraps her thighs around the Redentor,
rising again and again.

JESSICA HAND
Jesus Mirror

My seventh birthday—
I opened the biggest box
first. A giant fish mirror.
To symbolize Jesus' love,
my mother beamed.
I asked what symbolize meant.

By eleven I realized
I always looked fat
in the Jesus mirror.
I started throwing up
in secret. It was the only view
I trusted.

That's not entirely true.
I never thought I was fat,
and I never trusted, really.
But when prayers couldn't stop
slaps, belts, screaming,
when prayers couldn't

keep my sister home
or stop my father at night,
I pushed fingers down
my throat, searching for peace.

By fifteen my face
was an old, deflating balloon.
I buried buckets of vomit
in the backyard
while my mother pretended.
I muttered Jesus Dear Jesus
when she found the diet pills.

The night my sister said I'm pregnant
my mother shoved her across the room,
shattered the Jesus mirror.

I saw three broken women
and I understood symbolize.
I understood Jesus.

STACEY MANTOOTH
Agamemnon's Daughter

My father sang a melody
That lulled a beached army,
That made the seers listen,
That called me in wedding whites
To an altar with no bridegroom.

He made me the hunted hind,
Whose flesh gurgled in his stomach.
He made me the pride of his flock,
His calloused hands entwined in my curls.
He made me the weight of his crown,
Its flashing gold burning in the seaside sun.
He made me the first neck on his war blade
That sliced like boats through water.

He traded my breath for wind,
And when the soldiers turned
To the snap of filled sails,
He kissed me.

JAMES MAY
To My Grandfather's Hands

Turning the key,
flipping coins into chance,
and yes, holding
my grandmother's hand,
but more than anything else
I've seen you kill.

Deer, groundhogs, snakes,
squirrels too close to the birdseed.
I saw in you the stomachs of trout
shine like gemstones
panned from the red lake inside.
And the rabbit out back,
it had a name. What could I say
to stop you? It seemed you never felt
the shame I did—

just that clench of celebration
when the lead
was sharply planted.

But we do know, almost,
the deaths the lips
never confessed, all cataloged

a half-century ago
in Asia—a silence of so many faces
obscured by thick distances,

fog, orders executed
by your obedient fingers.
Is that why you tremor?

Do those shattered skulls
and blood-clogged tongues,
haunt you, old hands?

Of all the things touched
this guilt should not be one of them.

You talk in simple movements,

verbs in present tense: casting
the line, gripping the ball,
snapping that bridge of cards

to deal this game
that's now between us.

You teach it so well:
the one who best hides
what he's discarded
almost always wins.

Dead bird in the parking lot of a bar—
crest shooting from his head stiff
and bristling, down of the breast
quivering in wind, his Ford-blue body
still and light as a burnt match.
Dark shoots of grass snake around him,
throwing their flat bodies over the throat, the tail.
I catch a small light from the bird's upturned eye,
like a new coin glowing softly from the bottom of a fountain,
from the bottom of every fountain in all of Rome.
And it's as if I'm swept from Georgia,
standing again before the Trevi Fountain,
scarf drawn tight against the cold of December.
A child peers over the lip,
eyeing her watery outline, tracing the face
on a coin with her thumb.
She mouths an oath, its round urgency
polishing the coin as she kisses it,
feeds it to the water. How many coins

I have wasted here, trusting
in the sweet balm of this same hope.
But now, I remember the bird,
his eye beginning to cloud.
In its moist depth, I see the disc of sky,
white and distant. Through the tepid
waters of this new regret, I see
for once the hole the bird's nail-like beak
will punch in the sky. I slide my hands
beneath the bird and lift him to my face
until his eye is almost inside mine.
The sky notices how the bird's cold talons
grip my finger, though only lightly,
with the tenderness of the newly alive.

JESSICA L. MOORE
Story from Perry, Georgia

The orange lights shimmer over red Georgia clay,
At the comforting demand, "Wait here,"
I waited there,
"It will only take a second,"
Like a silhouette show I watch my Mother's body bleed
Into the black ink spilling behind the stained lace curtains of a jook,
With my head against the leather car seat,
I listen to the slap of money bets and spades,
Watch pretty women tumble from the door
With intentionally upright men,
I press my fat angel lips to the window and ask myself,
What is it to be a grown-up?
Is it milk white teeth launched in laughter?
Beige black topped palms on my behind?
Drinking Moonshine?

I waited like a child waits...it is a distracted wait,
From the car I slipped down in my white dress,
My grandma sewed sunflowers on it—it was my favorite,

Playing with my plaits—I watched the
stars through the Georgia pine,
Smelled the mud,
Mama be back soon—I told myself,
I play like my Mama,
"No Mr. Killroy, I don't want no moonshine"
Maybe that's how Mama says it,
Wander and run—dip and dodge—I danced
By myself between parked cars, this is how auntie moves her hips,
Stroll with lil fingers passing over each car,
Mama be back soon—I told myself,

From the darkness—screaming in laughter
like a hurt dog ahead of me,
Tall and lean,
So bright he shines clean,
Come Mr. Killroy,
I had seen him leave my house in the morning,
Kissing Mama Goodbye while she was in her bathrobe,
He grins like the Cheshire cat at me,

"Where's ya Mama, cutie pie?"

"She inside" I say,

"Let's go find her"

"I say Mama is inside" I insist,

We go where I know she ain't,

Men come—like they always do...when you're alone,

He filled the woods with his whiskey breath,

The pine blinded my eyes and my tears blurred my vision,

I didn't call for Mama,

Mama be back soon,

Mama be back soon,

Mama be back soon,

He followed the fast pace of my thoughts,

Just as hard as I was thinking it,

Parting red seas,

If this is what grown is—I wanna be little forever,

Mama came back soon,

After he walked me to the car,

Mama was so drunk,

She thought the red mess,

On my dress,

Was red clay,

She smelled like him,

I told her when she was sober,

About the moon and the pines,

The whiskey in his pores,

His smile,

How bad everything hurt,

We never saw Mr. Killroy again,

I never saw my white dress with the embroidered sunflowers again...

Either.

AUSTIN SEGREST
Barrel Roll

I knew enough about love to know that when my uncle flipped his open-cockpit twin during his mail route, which he'd let me co-pilot on special occasions, I knew when he turned and asked, calmly but somehow loud enough to breach the airshaft's window, "want me to turn it back?"—I knew with a steel swallow I could only nod. The pistol he handed back, the color of pond-ice, seemed heavy enough to pull me out. When he said, "put it in your mouth and I'll turn it back," and I started seeing red spots and shook my head that I didn't understand, and he said, "like this," and lipped the barrel like a sky-god, I knew enough about love to know this pact was my uncle's way of asking me to defect and verge on that jagged yellow rim inside his eyes where it was like his other side was always leaning over the abyss and catching

itself at the last instant, leaning and catching, the way he used to toss me to the rafters in his den while Mom threw a fit—I knew enough then about love to know I had done all I could, and my upside-down eyes, marbled with blood, rolled away, and when I woke up he'd caught me under the arms and was lifting me, putty, from the plane. Not long after, he let go for good. And when I heard, I saw him through the sky's scope, riding the horizon like a bullet, frozen, one perfect steel. Though I tell it like it's over and done with, who can stop reliving the past? Any minute we'll scrape the wiregrass racing under us, my uncle's grin twisting, waiting as long as it takes me to turn the gun on myself. My god, what might I have unlocked? The barrel's bead singeing the roof of my mouth, the long barrel balanced on the edge of my teeth, and lips closed, the warm surge and roar of engines as he rolled us out with love.



Fiction



JODY BROOKS

For the Love of Mother and Jack Daniel

George's mother started drinking more when her optometrist told her she would need glasses—thick glasses that slid down her nose—at the age of eighty-five. She hadn't been willing to admit that faces had gone blurry, that after eighty-four years of good vision, it had come to this. George finally noticed the problem when she'd seen what she thought was her cat, Attila, eating from the cat bowl and realized after she'd gotten a hand on him that it was a possum. Dr. Smith gave her a rabies shot just to be safe. She was up to two bottles of Jack Daniels a week and George felt that he had to keep a sharp eye on her, which he did through the window of his home office. The more he glanced out the window at his mother's house, the less he got done, and the less he got done, the more he resented her for slowing him down. It was, after all, her furniture store that he was running.

Tuesday morning, an hour before Anne had taken Max and Samantha to swim lessons, he'd seen his mother leave in her Cadillac. He sat in his office flipping through the new line of Thomasville bedroom sets. Outside, a police car eased into his driveway. George dropped the brochure and sprinted to the door.

Officer Bentley walked behind George's mother as she shuffled up the front walkway clutching her oversized purse. She wore blue culottes and her "I Grandma" t-shirt.

"Afternoon, George." George and Joe Bentley had known each other since childhood. They played baseball together in high school. "Hate to interrupt you in the middle of a work day but," he said, nodding toward George's mother, "I wanted to see that this young lady got home safely."

George's mother straightened her posture as best she could. The worsening curve of her back made this difficult. She cleared her throat and turned to Officer Bentley. "Thank you, Joe," she said. "Give my best to your mother." She pushed past George and into the air-conditioned house.

George stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind him. "Why you here, Joe?" he asked.

Joe took his hat off and scratched his scalp. "I don't like to have to do this, George, but I found her driving down the middle of highway 70. Darren left the ABC Store right after she did and drove behind her for a mile or so. He had to get back home so he gave me a call, told me I might want to come down and see what was the matter."

George hooked his thumbs through two belt loops and looked down the street. Carol Jensen's gray minivan moved toward them. They waved as it passed by.

"She say anything?" George asked.

"Complained about the tree roots growing into the road. Said the city ought to get that taken care of." Joe looked out toward the mountains. "She wasn't wearing her glasses. Couldn't see well enough to drive on one side. I hate this, George, but I have no choice but to suspend her license. If you want to take her back in for a driving test, you can." He turned to George. "I think it might be best if she gave up driving altogether. This isn't the first time someone's told me they've seen her. Jess just turned sixteen and I don't want to have to worry about both of them out there." Joe forced a laugh.

Sweat clung to George's back. If her license was taken away, he or Anne would have to drive her everywhere—the optometrist, the pharmacy, the grocery store, the doctor. Between Max and Samantha's activities and their errands and obligations, they already had a full schedule.

"Her car's parked over behind the old Drexel plant. Might want to go pick it up tonight and take it down to the store."

Inside, George found his mother sitting at the kitchen table. It was littered with reminder notes about picnics, meetings, practices. Her fingers hooked around a glass of lemonade. He poured himself a glass of

water and sat opposite her. She stared at her lap.

"Are you okay, Mother?" This, he thought, was the safe way to begin.

She glared up at him, her blue eyes swimming. "No, I'm not okay," she said. "Those damn trees. They must be over a hundred years old, maybe older. Your daddy would've known. He knew the age of everything in town." She pointed a crooked finger at George. "He would've done something about them too. The way they've just pushed up under the asphalt, it's a wonder anyone can drive on that street."

George was not going to acknowledge her excuses. "Where are your glasses?" he asked.

"Right here in my purse," she said. "What business is it of yours?"

"None usually." George tried to stay calm. He still had to call the La-Z-Boy distributor and get down to the store before his first appointment. "But when you go out on the road and endanger lives, then it becomes my business."

She set her lemonade down on top of a stack of papers. Condensation dripped down the glass and blurred the ink on a letter about the church picnic. "I watched that boy and his brothers grow into men," she said. "I worked with his parents to build this town into what it is. How dare he accuse me of not caring about other people's lives."

George took a deep breath. He knew this type of argument and had grown tired of it. She knew how to turn her mistakes into someone else's shortcoming.

"No one is accusing you of not caring," he said. His mother rolled her eyes so he decided just to come out with it. "Joe thinks it's best that you give up driving."

Her eyes flashed. "I'll do no such thing," she said. She took a sip of her lemonade. "Besides, I don't see what the harm is. The only places I go

are Ingles and Eckerd's and they're right down the street."

"Then what were you doing on highway 70?"

She shifted in her chair.

"The only thing over there is the ABC Store," he said. "Did you already run out of that bottle from Monday?"

"No," she said.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not," she said.

"Fine," he said. "Fine. But I have to take your license away."

She stood, walked over to George's side of the table and slapped him with her clawed hand. It was the first time she had ever hit him. He stood up, his lanky frame rising two feet above her hunched body. He fought the urge to grab her shoulders and shake. Outside, gravel crunched under tires. Car doors slammed.

"Your father never would have done this to me," she said.

George balled his fists until his fingernails cut into his palms. "My father isn't here," he said. His father had been dead for five years and each year his faults had lessened in her memory. She remembered him as a kind man, a protector, and not the cold, distant man that George knew.

George grabbed his mother's arms. They felt like bird wings, delicate and breakable. "He's dead, Mother," he said. "Dead."

Max, flushed and smiling, threw open the back door. He wore swimming goggles and a Tar Heels t-shirt over basketball shorts. His plastic cape was tied around his neck, the tattered bottom dragging on the ground. He'd been wearing this outfit for two weeks. Samantha came up behind him, wet hair matted to her forehead. Anne lugged grocery bags and backpacks.

Anne stopped just inside the door and looked from George to his mother. "Is everything alright?" she asked.

George's mother reached for her purse. "No," she said. "It's not. Your husband thinks he knows what's best for me. But look at him," she said. "Look at you. You can't even get your own son into clean clothes."

"That's enough, Mother," George said.

She started for the door, her shoulder hitting Anne's elbow on the way out. George followed.

In the middle of the street, between his house and hers, George grabbed his mother's arm. She shook him off so he stood in front of her, to force her to stop.

"What's wrong with you?" he said. "Speaking that way in front of the kids?"

She stared through him. "Move, George," she said.

George knew he would get nothing more from her. She shut down when she knew she'd been caught. He stepped aside and watched until she got to her front door. He turned back to his house. Max's face was pressed to an upstairs window. Sunlight glared off his goggles.

Later that night, George tucked Max into bed.

"What's wrong with Grandma?" Max asked. He was still wearing his cape and his goggles.

"What makes you think something's wrong with Grandma?"

Max sniffed and sawed his forearm across his nose. "She didn't give me a hug, that's all."

"She'll be fine. It's me she's mad at, not you." He imagined all five of them, running errands together in the van, coordinating drop-offs and pick-ups. "How about you take off those goggles and get to bed? Long day tomorrow. Karate and—" he couldn't remember what came next.

"Caleb's birthday party."

"That's right. Caleb's party. Big day."

"Can't I just sleep with them on?"

"I think you'd be better off without them."

"How do you know?" he said.

The truth was that George didn't know. He didn't know if anything he did was for the best. He imagined Max, lost in a nightmare, tossing and turning, falling off the bed onto an eye piercing G.I. Joe. He peeled the goggles off Max's face anyway and untied the cape. "Tell you what," he said, "if you want to you can put these back on first thing in the morning." Before he turned out the light, George kicked away the toys beside Max's bed.

The next morning, George sat in his office, looking out the window. His mother hadn't left the house yet. It occurred to him that she would never ask for help even though she clearly needed it. The weeds were nearly two feet high. Two of her shutters hung at broken angles. She was bull-headed enough to never come out. George imagined her sitting in her chair with Attila, laughing about the day that he would crack and run to her for comfort. In her mind, this was probably all a game. This was probably a childish game to get him to break down. But he wasn't going to play. He was too old for that.

At noon, George walked across the street and gathered his mother's mail. The top envelope had the return label "Gordon's Gutters, Asheville." He wedged the stack of mail under his arm, opened the Gutter letter, and then knocked on the heavy wooden door.

After several moments, he heard shuffling, his mother's voice.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me."

"Me, who?"

"It's George. Open the door please."

"Why should I let you in?"

"Because I've got your mail." The sound of keys turning and chains jingling came from inside. When she opened the door, he had the distinct impression that his mother had shrunk. Her pale skin hung in folds around her mouth and her back formed a C. He held on to the mail and followed her to the living room. She eased herself into her chair and reached for her glasses. Attila jumped from the windowsill onto his shoulder. George flung the cat to the floor. His mother looked amused.

The letter from Gordon's Gutters began by commending its newest customer on having made a wise choice. "Mother," he said, "do you know anything about a gutter company called Gordon's?"

She looked up. "Gordon's?" she said.

"This letter says that you bought gutters for the entire house. The transaction is dated two days ago."

"A nice young man called and asked me about the last time I'd replaced them. I didn't know. That was always your father's job."

"A telemarketer?" he said. "You bought gutters from a telemarketer. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Well, he called and I picked up the phone and this young man was so nice."

"Did you buy anything else?" George felt his voice rising. He imagined for a moment being able to take her phone away too, but thought better of it. What if she needed to call him? Or Anne? "Mother, did anyone else call to sell you something?"

She sank into her chair, refused to look at him. She looked small and pitiful. He was not going to give in.

"No," she said. "Just him. His name was Brian."

George wanted to shake the letter in her face, make her understand that she'd fallen for a scam. "Mother," he said, "you have to understand that telemarketers target women like you."

Her whole body tensed. "And what is that supposed to mean—women like me? You mean old ladies whose sons treat them like infants?"

He was not going to get into this. She was doing it again, blaming him for something that she'd done wrong. He picked up the phone and dialed the number on the Gordon's letterhead. He got Brian on the phone and told him to cancel the order. George paced while they got the matter straight. His mother tuned him out.

While his mother opened the rest of her mail, George sat down and programmed Dr. Smith's number into speed dial, followed by 911, his cell, their home phone, Anne's cell, his office, and the store. He wrote them on a piece of paper and slid it into the plastic sleeve on the inside of the phone. He showed her the list and explained how it worked—press 1 for the doctor, 3 for me. She wouldn't look at him but she seemed to be listening.

"I have to get back to work, but if you need anything you call me. And if someone calls and tries to sell you something, do not buy it. Do not so much as talk to them."

She was looking out the window.

"Mother," he said, "do you hear what I'm saying?"

She did not budge. George left without another word.

That afternoon, when Max was running near the pool, he fell and cracked his goggles. His eye wasn't hurt, but he had to throw the goggles away, and along with them went the cape.

The next morning, George was called down to the office to handle a customer complaint. An out-of-towner had come to the store

specifically to buy a set of teak outdoor furniture and it had arrived at his house battered and dented. The man had driven an hour to lodge his complaint. He stood in George's office, which opened to the main showroom.

"I want a new set shipped to my house immediately," he said. "And I want some kind of reimbursement for all this trouble. I'm a busy man. I don't have time for shit like this."

George stayed calm. He wanted to ask the sweaty man why he didn't just call if he was so damn busy but the man was already making a scene.

"I apologize," he said. "This has never happened before," he lied. "We'll have a new set shipped out tomorrow morning. For your trouble, I can offer you a 20% discount on any accessory in the store."

"Do I look like an accessory man to you?" he said. "I don't need any goddamn accessories."

George cringed. He was sure everyone in the store heard that. He exhaled and, just to get rid of the man, switched the 20% discount to the teak set.

"That's the best I can do," he said.

After the man left, Barbara, the front receptionist, stuck her head into his office.

"Your mother called," she said. "Urgent."

George checked his cell phone. She had called it also. He called her back, expecting the worst.

"I need for you to go the ABC Store for me," she said.

George loosened his tie. She was okay. It was ten in the morning, though, and she wanted him to go buy her whiskey. "I can't right now," he said. "After work. I'll drop it by then." Her habits were beginning to

depress him. But she was eighty-five years old and if drinking was the one thing that gave her pleasure, then he was not going to take it away.

"After work?" she said.

"Yes, after work. I'm working, now. At your store," he said. "I'll take care of it. Don't bother Anne. She's busy today."

Just after one o'clock, in the middle of a sales meeting about the new line of pillow top mattresses, she called his cell phone again. George excused himself from the meeting and took the call in the hallway.

"Can you please go to the store for me?" she said.

George closed his eyes and squeezed his temples with his left hand. "I'm busy," he said. He was beginning to regret having told her to call at any time. "I will get to it when I can." He hung up on her.

At four, his cell rang again. Max was on the other end. He sounded out of breath.

"Something's happened to Grandma," he said. "There's a fire truck and an ambulance and police and Mom already went over there and she told me to call you and not to come."

George unbuttoned his collar. The room began to spin. "I'll be right there," he said. "Stay where you are."

It took only five minutes to get from the store to his mother's house, but in that time George faced the fact that he may never speak to her again. She may never live to see Max's prom or Samantha's first car. He had been so frustrated with her lately. He should've remembered the time and energy she sacrificed to raise him. He should've been a better son. By the time he pulled up to the house, he had convinced himself that she was dead.

Officer Bentley caught George's arm as he sprinted toward the house.

"She's fine, George," he said.

George stopped. He blinked a few times, hard, before he registered Joe's words. "What?" he asked. This was all he could say.

"She's fine. Nothing happened. There was a call to 911 and we responded. But she's fine. Meds checked her out. She's fine."

Anne came out of the house and walked straight to George. "She's fine, honey," she said. "I'm going to run to the store for her. Samantha's over at Jenny's. Max is at home. Should only take fifteen minutes."

George's tongue felt dry. Everything was happening too fast. The fire truck pulled away from the curb. The men in the ambulance finished packing up and closed the back doors. He turned to Joe. "Did she say why she called?"

"Didn't say anything," he said. "I got here first and when she answered the door she was holding her purse like she was ready to go."

George understood now. She'd needed someone to drive her to the liquor store. His temples pulsed. But maybe she thought she'd called him. It's likely, he thought, that she wasn't wearing her glasses. But then why would she be waiting with that ridiculous purse? No, she got tired of waiting. And now Anne is on her way to the store and she's gotten her way. George shoved his keys in his pocket, stormed into the house, and slammed the door behind him just as the quiet ambulance pulled away.

"Mother!" he yelled. She was not in the kitchen. "Mother!" George marched down the hallway. Attila darted out of George's old bedroom and under his feet. "God damn it, cat!" George caught himself against the wall and kicked the cat away. He stamped into the living room. She was not there. He threw open the door to her bedroom and found her motionless, curled on her side on top of the comforter. George took a step back.

Her face was blank, her wrinkles slack, eyes vacant. He had never seen her look like that. George stood there, stunned. He approached the

bed on unsteady legs. She stared at the wall beyond the nightstand. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

He lifted the blanket from the end of the bed and draped it over her feet. "Such noise," she said. She was shaking. "I watched those boys grow up, you know."

George drifted outside and let the front door close behind him. Upstairs, at his house, Max's breath made wet "O"s on the window. George looked up at his son, wondering what he was going to say, knowing that all he could do was take him to buy a new plastic cape and new protective goggles.

AGGIE EBRAHIMI

Let's See What is Happening Out There

My father was a soldier. Though, he never said which war. Only "I was in a war." I told my friends, "Vietnam." I extended my "Nam" to sound like a dropping bomb, a sinking plane, a tired breath. I told my friends, "Somalia," but pronounced it "sew-ma-LEIGH-ah." I told my friends "Persian Golf!" I told them, "You wouldn't understand," clicked my teeth, flipped my hair, and turned my back to walk away.

When he confessed, we were both cross-legged, face-to-face, on my bedroom floor. We were sitting quiet beneath my window, its blinds down, each of us pulling khaki fuzz from the carpeted field between our knees. When it rained, he would say, "Let's see what's happening out there." I hated the rain. I had questions. About guns, about eyes, about the way his torso trembled and his right hand burrowed in his pale blonde and thinning hair when he opened his mouth to speak.

I held his hands whenever they picked at the carpet or rested on his crossed thighs. I leaned forward. There had to be more. "Were you glad to come back?" I asked, during his fourth visit. "Most of the time," he said, "it's best to keep moving." I retracted my hands. He looked left a moment. Right a moment. He pretended to read what was on my wall. A Rosie the Riveter poster I'd used for a History project in eleventh grade. A bride's bouquet hanging upside down. A poem a friend had written. It began, "She looked for ministers in grocery aisles." A prayer. He looked to the window. It was not raining. "You can't understand." I don't remember which of us said it out loud.

He was my father. He was in a war once. I cannot tell you which one; he never said. Only "I was in a war." I had found him after three years of deliberate search – through yellow pages, investigators, family hearsay, intuition – to ask, "Who are you?" Or, "Who am I, to you? Did you wonder? Did you call and hang up? Did you remember and celebrate birthdays your own way, one cupcake for every year?" But when I saw him that first time, when he came to my door in a gray suit too large, when he said, "Hello, may I come in?" When he followed me to the floor, when he sat like me cross-legged though it wrinkled his pants,

I asked, "Is there anything you'd like me to know?" I should have asked, "Can I help?" That was when he told me, "I was in a war."

My mother had told me about great grandfathers, about distant cousins in India. She could tell me which teacup to fill first during dinner parties, which tongue to scald, which person deserved the curtest "Hello" and why. She could tell me what I dreamed of when I was four. She could remind me of ice cream flavors I've not tasted for years. But about my father she would mostly say, "I am your father." Or on rare days, sitting in her kitchen after a big dinner, tea and caramel brittle in between us on a hand-woven tablecloth, she could tell me who in his family frowned at her skin and who in hers worried about his prolonged bachelorhood, telling her legends about restless men who disappeared into forests or sprouted wings to battle with gods. She could recite every detail of the conversation she and he had, six months before my father proposed, that convinced her to surrender – which movie lit the wood-paneled walls of her parents' living room behind them, how she and he sat on the flattened cushions of her parents' burgundy-and-gold, damask couch, the color of his collared shirt, of her dress, of their breath hovering in between their inching together bodies. She could point to the places along her hips or thighs that bruised every time she fell from bed those nights he was away. I imagine he had been her guardrail, and if she inched too close to any one edge, he would throw his body onto hers like he was shielding some newbie from artillery fire during a ground attack. I never asked if this was true. And when I would recline my head against my cupped hands, smile and ask, "Did he snore?" she would simply chuckle.

He told no stories. Only "I was in a war." I could fill in the rest: He is a door gunner, wearing fatigues and helmet the color of sand. Two lines of soldiers extend from his left and right sides like long and unsteady wings. They lean against the front walls of a cement house, listening for movement or voices inside. Some of the young soldiers are chewing on their lips, some rapidly tap their feet against the dirt,

and some merely stand with flushed cheeks. But all of them, when they notice my father's poise, when they watch the stalwart way he bang bang bangs on the door, the mountains his words form when he calls, "Open up, please. United States Military," when they compare my father's voice to the meek banana chips of the translator, the men reassume whatever courage remains of the day and they wait for my father to cue their entry. Once inside, my father lightly ruffles through belongings, refolding what blankets and undershirts he disorganizes, placing jewelry boxes back where he finds them. He takes care not to muddy the carpet, apologizes for disrupting tea hour. And before any raid, while still at camp, he tells his troops, "Look men, I think this 'careful for the women and children' crap is nonsense. It's that kind of rhetoric that gets us into these situations. That kind of differential valuation of life that prolongs the lust for violence. So we treat all citizens here with respect, understood? Every one of 'em. Woman, child, and man. Even the ones whose looks we don't like, okay?" The grunts may not understand every word, but they trust my father and they want to believe that he's right. So they agree. When colonels tell him his lectures are bad for morale, my father says: "War is bad for morale, gentlemen. War." And sometimes: "You want to empty shells. I want to plant seeds. Let these kids know they're learning something they'll use in the future." He emphasizes "future."

They take him off ground combat for a few weeks. Put him in the choppers. He's the guy for whom the grass parts and applauds. He's in charge of directing air raids, but week after week, he fails to meet quotas. "Look men, drop all the rounds you want," he tells his gunners. "But what goes down will eventually come up. The earth won't forget." His gaze engraves the air ahead of him while he speaks. His words probe his soldiers' eyes for him. More often than not, his gunners loosen their grips, drop their heads, and move away from the hatch to slouch against the walls inside. He's reassigned to duster duty: Medevac.

Stories are suitcases. We fold the past inside, clasp the lid, and carry the bulk from town to town, knocking door to door to ask, "Do

you have enough closet space?" "Will this fit in your trunk by chance?" And on first dates, others ask of us, "Whoa! You goin' somewhere?" or "Gee, how long this date gonna last?" We chuckle, bang the suitcase, unopened, against the tight aisles of half-empty restaurants, and we walk home with the lid yet sealed, the contents unruffled. My father came empty-handed. He left his bag at the train terminal: "What's the point of lugging that old thing around?"

I have a dream every Friday and Saturday night that my father comes to visit me. We sit on my floor. We are encased in a golden orb seeping in from the setting sun. We fancy it has delayed its descent to hear more of our conversation. We both say, without saying, "I've never felt this broken open before." He exhales, relaxes, and says, "I am an orange, unpeeled." I nod and bounce and say, "I am a watermelon, split!" Before I met him, his face was replaced in the dream with the faces of other men: video store clerks, hamburger flippers, the older brothers of close friends, but always, there was the crack of confession.

I imagine he once talked more. Never a lot. Just more. He visits twice a month. On Sundays. He stays 45 to 50 minutes. That's about how long it takes for me to recount my half-months. We sit cross-legged on my bedroom floor. He observes my face when I talk. When I scan the room and then return to his eyes, he is still watching my face, his legs crossed, his arms hanging over his knees. I pause between sentences, hoping he'll ask a question, add an observation, offer a suggestion, a memory, an anecdote, a joke, a signal. But nothing. He used to nod in the pauses and say, "Go on." Later, months after our first meeting, he would just nod. And I would go on.

Two months ago, I said to my mom, "Mom, I've been talking to Dad. He was in a war. Should we blame him?" She answered by slowly pushing her hennaed hair back from her forehead, as if she were sweeping away raspberry vines concealing a rusty door I'd never seen. I yelled, "But he was a gunner!" I yelled, "A medic!" I yelled, "He is traumatized! Understandably." I could have said more. The standards. You know,

"He was injured. He humped too far. He lost good friends. He felt responsible. He memorized exploded faces. He played poker. He learned Japanese. He took up smoking. He carried pictures of us in his helmet. He landed on a beach. He sacrificed, Mom. He really did." But I didn't have breath enough and she had already left the room.

It has been three weeks since his last visit. Before leaving that day, he stood in my doorway fourteen minutes, one foot on the porch concrete and one foot on my runner rug. He stared at the doorjamb or at what fluttered beyond it. I could not tell which. He said only, "There is too much of us sometimes," and he looked at me. He cupped the right half of my face in his left hand. And then, he walked away, leaving only the heft of his handprint behind. I moved forward, stood where he had been. I watched him walk to the end of my porch, meander through the silver and blue sedans in the parking lot, and head towards the hill leading to the main road. I looked at the doorjamb. I stepped inside, closed the door, and I vacuumed my bedroom. I have vacuumed every day since.

Yesterday, it was raining. I stopped vacuuming long enough to pull up the blinds in my bedroom, thinking, "Let's see what's happening out there." A piece of paper, heavy as a ring, light as settling gas, fell from the sill to my feet. The paper was yellowed and hardened, having slept so close to the sun these weeks. I unfolded the message from its tight crib. It read, "Grace, I should have been more of a soldier."

My mother slips *Essence* magazines into the stack of library books beside my twin bed. "The other bed is for a friend," she had said. We were shopping for a bed worthy of a "big fifth grader" days after our move to Buckthorn, Illinois from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My mother had tidied up the short ponytail at the back of my head with the same agility that she had once used to harness the heat of the hot comb without searing the skin of my neck or ears, the same dexterity that used to weave precise cornrows in my head, her long fingernails clicking like knitting needles at the end of a row. She smoothed down the strands that couldn't reach the band and looked at her work. "What do you think, Regina?" she said and sat down on the one she liked. "Okay," I said and thought of Andrew Lang's *Yellow Fairy Book* that she had made me leave behind in the car.

My mother worries about me being abnormal. So to start freshman year out right, she has brought me pretty bra and panty sets, replaced my thick glasses with gas permeable contacts lenses. But she isn't worried that much. Because Keisha and I became friends last year, for one. And for two, because my mom used to be the head cheerleader at Alabama State University and can still do all of her routines, splits and everything. Though the years have tugged a bit and unraveled hips that were once tightly spooled and her skin sags a little in the places where she had accommodated her only child's need for lodging and then food, anyone can see she is a beauty. She needs everyone to see. And the less competition—friend, foe or family—the better. So my mother loves me like a vain woman loves her crippled girlchild—with compassion and relief.

"Regina, come on, girl!" my mom's voice rides into my bedroom on the darting spaceship that is the beginning of Anita Ward's *Ring My Bell*. I leave Zora's characters watching mauve when I can't find my bookmark and have to leave the book face down and pressed into my comforter. I drift out into my mother's galaxy. She is dressed in a black turtleneck spandex dress and matching pumps.

"I didn't know we were dressing," I force over the music. "I'm gonna

go put on my grey pants." They make my narrow behind look like an ass.

"The music's already on, baby! C'mon," she struts her way over to me and away from her sliding closet mirror-doors. She grabs my hands and pulls me into orbit. We do the bump until a missed beat (by me of course) becomes a natural transition into solo dancing. My mother and her reflection are seamless. I have my moments—when I'm not watching her or my own reflection and just dance. But when she comes sweeping around me, circling me with all her sensuality and athleticism, I start longing for the surface of my bed.

She dances at me. I'm supposed to dance back. She shimmy. I shimmy back. She does something I can't do and I become the cheerleader: "Get down, mom!" And she whirls and whirls her woman's body under my gaze, until she's in her own universe and I am the alien seeing myself out.

* * *

I've been praying for my booty to fill in since seventh grade, not sixth; I hadn't wanted to be greedy. But now I think I should have started earlier, like Keisha, because she's got hers now. According to my calculations, my butt won't be big until next year. So now when the dj at the annual school dance plays the jam from last year, I still won't have a big ass to roll in the cluster of fast and wannabe fast girls who laugh and sing and enchant with 'never trust a big butt and a smile, that girl is poisonousooooonnn...' Nope: I'm the girl that everyone trusts.

* * *

Keisha and I have been practicing our round-offs and cartwheels in my front yard since the Winter Olympics ended a month ago. We

are still hype off of Kristi Yamaguchi's win and Surya Bonaly's jumping finesse. So we try to land every flip strong with our hands in some elegant-feeling position. With each worthy landing, I glance at the open curtains of the house across the street. Are his hazel eyes watching me?

Keisha whips through the air, her two feet pounding the ground as one. While I determine the score for her round off, Keisha cuts her eyes over to Terrell's house, too. She can push the hair that flops into her face back like a white girl. I penalize her for doing this under what I imagine is his gaze. She gets a nine o instead of the nine five that she deserves. I take off into a cartwheel after delivering the news. I stick my landing, but there's nothing to push seductively out of my face as I look across the street. My hair stays where it's put.

* * *

"Your mom is a fox," Terrell says one day.

"Thanks," I say idiotically, as if he complimented me. We had been walking the three quarters of a mile to and from school together ever since the Monday morning after he moved in. He had called out to me—used my name—and ran the sixty yards fluidly to catch up to me. "Hey," he said. "Can I walk with you?" I laughed too hard, used too much slang and sweated the whole way to school.

We intuitively have started walking to school earlier, because we have begun to confide in each other—and because his girlfriend has started driving him home from school in the afternoons. It was that first Friday. It didn't take that long to trust, but to learn how to speak our insides out. He was outside before me standing on his corner of Oak and Algonquin hunched in upon himself, his perfect posture corrupted by the cold. His sand-colored skin brushed red by the wind at the nose, ears and cheeks. It was 7:20 a.m. instead of our usual 7:45.

"Hey," he said watching it swirl white out of his mouth.

"Hey," I attended to a pretend itch under my hat.

"Didn't want to rush today."

"Yeah, me neither."

He thinks of the comic book characters he emulates as he lifts weights. His dad used to beat him and his mom. That's why they're here—to get away from him and because Howell Hospital had openings for nurses. He's slept with three girls, but fooled around with many more. I read fairy tales—big, biblical-sized, color-coded fairy tale books. I don't even know who my dad is; my mom is supposed to be bad enough to make me not want him. I am a virgin, but have been felt up hesitantly once yet never been kissed. He drinks protein shakes for lunch in the school weight room to avoid the politics of choosing between the black table and the white tables. Though my brown paper bag lunch and me never had a choice, I understand how he feels.

"You have her eyes," he offers, quickly nudging the bruised apple closer to its foxy tree.

"Thanks," I accept.

"I've never slept with a black girl," he confesses. "Fooled around some, but never sex." I could be your first, I think. Then, I think why not.

"I don't know..." he puts his hands in his coat pockets and looks straight ahead. "I just..." He laughs uncomfortably. He glances towards me. I'm pretending to be occupied with zipping my coat against a chill I was bearing just fine until this moment. Pretending that my ears are all his, my eyes just happen to be occupied for the moment: "Mmm hmmm?"

"Their nipples are just so pink and pretty." He laughs again nervously. "I guess I'm a breast man." He says "breast" as if black girls

don't have them. I say: "Oh. Yeah. To each his own."

The rest of the walk to school is quiet. His eyes check for mine periodically, but my head is tucked down into my coat collar. When we get to the pole where the wind is shaking out the Buckthorn Buckaroos flag like a rug, he says "See ya later, Regina" in a voice knotted with emotion. I don't respond, because today he's talking to nobody; I've been erased by the pink of a nipple.

* * *

I usually worry in biology class. Not about biology. I'm a straight-A student. I worry that I will say orgasm instead of organism when reading aloud and people will know that I'm a pervert who has the potential to dog-ear the sex books in the back of the public library. I worry that I will die with David's solitary touch on my body. His head of curls rivals the naps on the heads of the black boys in the school. I study the back of his head everyday in class. Even the back of his head is self-conscious. I look at the fine-boned hand that eased its way onto my breast last summer.

* * *

I was the only black kid at Ariel's birthday party, because I'm the only black kid in the accelerated academic track at school—the only black kid most of these white kids know. Being in my stratum within a stratum at the party had me sitting between two other marginalized smart kids, David and Naveen, talking about our next section in biology class. So when Ariel switched off the basement lights to revive her party after a public belittling by her older sister, I got turned on by who I thought was

my own kind. When the lights came back on at Ariel's mom's command from on high (the top of the basement stairs), I, for the first time, was the black kid in my subgroup. David had anxiously felt my left breast, but had not cared to kiss me in the dark. In the light, we were not newly coupled like the others. It was Naveen, in his undulating Indian accent, who gave me a reason to not disappear with the humiliation and the lights: "So what do you think will be the hardest thing about dissecting the frog?"

* * *

I don't wait at Keisha's locker after school. I don't want to be a spectator of her Friday afternoon ritual: finishing the letter she had started writing to her boyfriend in study hall with an elaborate folding and his name in sweeping curves, the "i" dotted with a heart, then tagging along to find him before she gets on the bus and I walk home.

I stop off at the Walgreen's on my way home and get a pack of Bubblicious—original—and start chewing.

The areola is the pinkest part. The gum is thickest here so the dark brown of my first skin doesn't show through. But it sticks out like a keloid, shiny and unnatural. My nipple is caught in a flimsy pink lace that disintegrates into a dulled brown on the sides. The gum pulls away at the meeting of nipple and areola into a tattered net. The very tip of my nipple has a pool of the only natural-looking pink. When I look at the naked breast, I see that the point of its nipple has undertones of pink that I had never noticed before—my raw insides closer to the surface than I thought.

It's hard to get this stuff off. Pieces of pink sticking in my cracks and crevices. Shit, somebody is knocking on the door. I dab the blob wildly trying to get as many of the pink crumbs up as I can. I struggle

into my shirt—no bra. The collar pulls down all the ponytail stragglers, so that when I look into my mother's mirror-doors I am a star, rays shooting every whichaway out of my head. The knocker has to be wondering, so I stick the gum on the mirror and take steps a few at a time.

"Who is it?" I ask out of breath.

"Terrell." What is he doing here? His girlfriend is always at his house on Friday afternoons. I open the door.

"Hi." There's no smile with it.

"Hi." I don't have one either.

"Can I come in for a sec?"

I open the door wider for him to come through. I close it, but don't lock it, because I can feel behind me that he is just standing on the tile of the entryway; he has not crossed onto the carpet of the living room.

"I didn't mean to hurt you today," he says directing hazel at me and not the tile.

"I know it," I say with my back to the door and one hand on the knob.

"I don't think before I speak sometimes."

"Yeah."

He looks left into the living room for more words, but finds the mantelpiece. It's studded with cheerleading trophies and ornately framed pictures. I am in some of them.

He jerks his head toward the door: "I have to get back."

"Okay. Thanks for coming by," I say getting the door halfway open before he is next to me, lifting my face and kissing my lips at the same time. I don't let go of the knob, but hold his face with my left hand. I didn't know kissing would be so warm. I had always thought of it as

wet. He pulls back like an old key after it unlocks the lock, smooth and certain.

"I have to get back."

"I know."

When I open the door fully, I see my mother reanimate in our driveway out of the corner of my eye. She makes a scene of opening the passenger side door to gather her work things—a briefcase and the inevitable bag of purchases she makes from the Marshall Fields she manages.

"Hello, Mrs. Hines."

"Oh, well, hello, Terrell." She watches incredulously as he runs across the street and up to his door. He unlocks it and goes inside.

I stand still as my mother approaches the door. For sentencing, for, for...I don't know.

"Hi, mom."

"Hi, baby," my mother says as she comes abreast of me.

She reaches up to smooth down my rays and I surprise myself and pull away from her.

"Hmm," she does something like a smile, but not at me, through me, and kisses me on the cheek. "Order yourself dinner, baby. I'm real tired today. I'm gonna turn in early." Her walk is graceful, but labored, up the stairs to her room.

"Okay. Night, mom." I close and lock the door.

The sun and I get out of the bed at the same time Saturday morning. My mom has gotten up before us and gone to work, so when I open my bedroom door to go down to get breakfast, my bra is folded neatly near the threshold. My heart starts up a familiar nervous beat, but peters off when it loses its audience as I step over the somebody's-flesh-

colored bra. I take my shirt off while I am walking to my mother's room.
No gum on the mirror, I see. And no evidence of it on my breast except
for the sugary film gone opaque like a cataract over an eye.

ALISON HENNESSEE
Two Umbrellas

It was only Thursday and the niece was wearing her church clothes. This was strange to her, but no stranger, really, than the fact that she was not at school, or that all the grown-ups were wearing black or that her uncle was dead. She wasn't quite sure how she knew that her uncle was dead. Someone must have told her, must have made her sit on the couch and sat next to her, holding her hand, must have broken the news softly, hoping not to upset her too much, using gentle words that didn't sound too adult or too sharp—she couldn't remember this having happened. But since she knew, her mother or her father must have told her and she trusted them to have told her the truth.

The niece knew what dead was. Last summer, her cat had brought two baby bunnies and laid them on the porch. The cat hadn't killed them, just picked them up by the scruffs of their tiny necks with a soft mouth and deposited them on the welcome mat. The niece and her mother had tried to take care of them, even though their arms and legs were useless worms and their eyes were only sealed slits in their faces. The niece woke up every hour during the night to feed them soymilk with an eyedropper, but in the morning, the smaller one was a stiff little lump, and by dinnertime, the other was gone, too. The bunnies were dead and the niece understood that they were never coming back. She buried them in the flowerbed beside the garage and made two little grave markers out of Popsicle sticks; she had eaten the popsicles first.

She knew that her uncle was going in the ground and that it was right to be sad now because she would never see him again. She stood in the church trying to understand what the priest was saying, but it was hard to concentrate because she was wearing her favorite dress, gray with a white bib and little pink flowers all over, and new, black patent-leather shoes. The shoes were so shiny that if the niece squatted down, she could see a wobbly, blurry reflection of her face in them. Whenever she got tired of standing, she crouched behind the pew to inspect herself in the tops of her shoes.

Her cousin was in the church with her, sitting on the other side

of the niece's mother. He was a year and a half older than the niece, and a boy, but they were still good friends. They spent most of their time together climbing around the rock quarry that lay behind the grandmother's house, making wishing wells in the crevices and claiming the larger rocks for their native lands. She believed she would probably marry him someday, because she liked him more than other boys she knew, who mostly scared her.

Thinking that maybe they could draw on the offering envelopes together, the niece reached behind her mother and poked her cousin in the shoulder. She was ready with a grin for him, but when he turned around, she saw that his face was blotchy pink and white, and his mouth was contorted and he had screwed up his eyes, either to hold back the tears or squeeze more out. He looked at her for a moment, letting her see how sad he was, then pressed his face into his mother's hip.

The niece had not thought that her cousin would feel so sad; she and he seemed so much the same, and the niece herself felt hardly anything about the death. He was her uncle, true, but she did not know him. The death of the bunnies had been much harder; they had been small and downy and smelled a little like grass.

Nevertheless, it rankled that her cousin was crying when she was merely bemused by the affair, so she decided that she would have to cry as well. She tried to think of things about her uncle, hoping some tender memories would make her cry; but she couldn't remember anything. He had had a moustache, she thought. A neatly combed black moustache that wasn't prickly like her father's chin when he hadn't shaved, but which was smooth and seal-sleek. Then she realized that this was not a memory. There was a picture on the bookshelf in the living room of her uncle holding her as an infant and in the picture he had a moustache.

What about the small room under the eaves in her grandmother's house that was lined with musty books and boxes of magazine clippings and old report cards? Could this have been her uncle's room? No,

the niece decided, it could not. The uncle's son had lived there; she remembered that through a bright nebula. He was her cousin, too, but he was much older than she was, not a grown-up, but a teenager, a word that tasted like Sweet-Tarts when she thought it. She had once found a Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots set in this back room, on top of a pile of puzzle boxes, and when she had asked to take it home with her, her mother had told her that it belonged to her teenager-cousin, who might want it one day. The niece grumped about this; it wasn't fair, because teenagers, she knew, did not play with toys.

She knew that her uncle had been sick for a long time, even longer than when she'd had the chickenpox and had to stay home from school and soak in the bathtub with oatmeal. He had been sick for as long as the niece could remember. She had one memory about her uncle, though he was not in it and the memory was cracked and chipped with age. The niece and her family had gone to stay at her aunt and uncle's house in Hoboken. The first night they were there, the niece woke up in the middle of the night, rolled to the edge of the bed, threw up into her shoes on the floor and went back to sleep. She did not realize she was sick until she woke again the next morning feeling clammy and unsteady. It wasn't bad: the niece spent the day in her pajamas playing Trouble and watching Disney movies with her cousin, who wanted to play video games, but had been instructed to keep her company.

That afternoon, the niece and nephew's mothers came into the playroom. They were going to visit the uncle and they wanted to know if the nephew wanted to join them.

"I want to come," the niece had whined. She was feeling better and lounging on the couch was beginning to lose its charm.

The niece's mother looked nervously at the aunt. The aunt shook her head and said, "We can't. Not with her being sick." And despite the niece's alternating indignation and piteous pleading, she had been made to stay home.

The niece did not know what to make of this memory. It was strange, not heartwarming, and didn't even really include her uncle. She had nothing of him in her head, not even one grainy, coffee-colored image to grab onto. She felt guilty, like she didn't belong with all these good weeping people. The guilty feeling increased until the niece decided she would have to fake it. She turned down the corners of her mouth and made her chin quiver. She was good at the chin quiver. She could almost always work one up and it looked especially pathetic: she had watched it in her cloudy vanity mirror. Then she made a few whimpering noises, not too loud, and squeezed her eyes until they were half open, hoping they would at least water. Finally she let out a lilting sob that she thought sounded convincing. Her mother looked down at her through her own tears, and put an arm around her shoulders. The niece wrapped her arms around her mother's waist, and tried to progress into blubbering.

After a minute or two, the niece felt a finger prod her upper arm.

"You're faking," her cousin hissed in her left ear. He looked at her and almost smiled, but caught himself: he was too sad to smile at being a better crier than his cousin.

"I am not," the niece whispered back. "I'm crying. See?" She wiped one of the few tears she had managed to extract onto her index finger. He tried to dodge her, but there was nowhere to go and she smeared it on the nephew's cabled sweater.

"Sick," he said, pawing at the spot she had sullied. "You're gross, and that's not really crying, that's just watering." He allowed himself a smirk. "Faker."

"Am not! And you're faking, too." The niece didn't say this with much confidence; it would be hard to fake a puffy face and swollen eyes.

"Uh-uh. I've been crying all day. I loved him more than you did."

To demonstrate this, the nephew began crying again, this time more loudly, adding a little quaver to his sobs. The niece ground her

molars together, and resumed her crying, too, not managing much in the way of tears, but getting a steady stream from her nose, which was always running anyway. As the niece increased the intensity of her mourning, the nephew sat in the pew and put his head in his arms, rocking back and forth. The niece hyperventilated and produced a fit of hiccups. When they were both wailing loudly their mothers, though reluctant to discourage their children's expressions of grief, whispered to them that they should wait until they got home, where they could feel as sad as they wanted. The mothers sat the niece and the nephew down next to each other in the pew and plied them with stubby, no-eraser pencils and the cards from the hymnal rack intended for newcomers, and told the children to draw until the end of the service.

After a man stood up at the lectern to say how much he would miss the uncle and the life they had shared; after the family stood by the edge of the hole in the ground into which the uncle disappeared; after the hymns and the psalms and the silence—then everyone went to the grandmother's house. The grandmother lived at the end of a gravel road that dead-ended into the cemetery where the uncle had just been buried, next to the niece's grandfather, who had shared a name with his son. The niece and the nephew didn't have to ride in the limo back the house; their mothers let them walk because it was quicker and they were beginning to fidget.

During the walk back from the gravesite, the niece was quiet. At the grave she had felt a little twist in her stomach as the coffin went into the ground and when the ceremony was over, she hung back; she was afraid to leave her uncle there, afraid to leave him in the dirt and the wet, with no one but his same-named father, whom the niece had never met.

"When I die, I don't want to be buried," she said, following her cousin through a patch of brambles at the outskirts of the cemetery. He held a branch for her so it wouldn't whip back at her shins.

The nephew snorted. "That's dumb. You have to be buried.

Everyone gets buried."

"Well, I don't want to be," the niece repeated stoutly.

"You'll be dead. How are you going to tell them not to?"

"Before I die, I'll tell them I don't want them to put me in the ground. Then they won't."

"So what are you going to do instead?" the nephew asked as they slid through the gap in the chain link fence that separated the woods from the road.

The niece thought a moment and wasn't sure. She didn't know of anything else to do with dead things. "Well, they can bury me," she conceded. "But not in the dirt. In a little cave made out of snow." Once after a snowstorm, there had been a brief thaw and then a snap freeze, creating a crust of ice on the top of the snow. The niece had burrowed mole-like under the mantel and made a network of tunnels around her backyard.

"What if you die in the summer?" the nephew asked. They were walking up the stairs of the grandmother's house.

"I won't," she said, and knew she wouldn't.

Inside, the grown-ups were milling, drifting slowly from the living room to the dining room to the den like debris in an eddy. They murmured to each other in slipper-shod voices, as if the uncle were not dead, but merely sleeping upstairs and no one wanted to wake him. Every table in the house was covered in food—platters of cheese and fruit, trays on which crostini were swirled in rosettes, each crunchy oval a petal. Antipasti of pickled vegetables sat beside plates of half-moon anise cookies decorated with wiggles of chocolate. The house smelled strongly of pitchy espresso.

The niece and the nephew didn't know how to behave inside, where there was so much food and no one eating. The niece felt like she

should tiptoe. So when they had stood awkwardly in the every room, the nephew decided it was best to go play outside. They took paper napkins and bundled food inside them: water crackers and rectangles of cheddar cheese; fistfuls of garnet grapes; some of the store-bought cookies shaped like pink and green leaves a great aunt had provided. They stuffed these packages into the nephew's pockets, because the niece's dress had none. Opening the front door a crack they saw that it had started to rain again, so they armed themselves with their umbrellas. The nephew's was yellow and too big for him to hold without jabbing his cousin in the head with the spokes. The niece's was pink and had her name on it in periwinkle script.

Standing in the front lawn they debated what to do. The niece suggested they go to the pond across the street and pick cattails from the shallows and then fight with them like they were bulb-ended swords. But the nephew reminded her that they were wearing nice clothes and they agreed they should be good. The quarry would be wet and slippery in the rain and barely cleaner than the pond, so they ruled this out, too. The neighbor's cats were inside because of the rain, and they were not old enough to walk to town alone.

The niece's family's station wagon was parked right in front of the grandmother's house. It was light blue and called Road Runner. Without consulting each other, the niece and nephew looked at each other and at the car and knew that they would roost on top. If the niece and the nephew had ever climbed on top of the car before, she could not remember, yet today it seemed somehow familiar. The niece held her umbrella by the handle with her teeth, so she could use two hands to crawl up the windshield and hoist herself over the luggage rack. Her cousin, because he wanted to show that he was stronger than a girl, climbed up the back of the car, where there was no shallow slope and nowhere to gain purchase with his feet. The niece was already sitting on the roof when the nephew made it up. They set their umbrellas on their sides, resting them at an angle so they would shelter the children from the

rain. Then the nephew extracted the snacks from his pockets. There was silence for a time as they sat pretzel-legged, munching.

After the niece had twisted open the last leaf-shaped sandwich cookie and scraped out the chocolate filling with her bottom teeth, she looked a little shyly at her cousin. She knew that he had won that afternoon at the church. Among his theatrical sobs and moans, there had been real tears; hers had all been false.

"Are you still sad?" she asked, prying filaments off the grape stems.

Her cousin chewed his cheese, and shrugged. "Yeah. He's still dead, so I guess I'm still sad."

"He is going to stay dead, isn't he?" she asked, her voice a little unsteady. She did not like the prospect of her uncle having to climb out from under all that wet dirt.

"He's going to go to heaven," the nephew said confidently.

"But won't he still be dead in heaven?"

The nephew paused and took another bite of cheese. "I think in heaven, you're kind of dead, but kind of not."

The niece nodded. This didn't make any sense to her, but it made her feel better. It proved that her cousin was sometimes only as smart as she.

It had started to rain harder and the niece and nephew's knees were getting wet. They drew their legs into their chests and huddled in closer, the shiny black snouts of their shoes touching.

"Do you remember that house on the island?" the cousin asked, picking at a mosquito bite on the niece's shin. She had been saving that scab to pick herself, but she did not stop him; she didn't mind.

The niece watched his hands. "What island?"

"You know, the one where he lived? You take a ferry to get there?"

The nephew looked expectantly at the niece, waiting for a sign of recognition.

"I don't think I ever took a ferry," the niece replied. She didn't admit that the only ferries she knew of had dragonfly wings and hats made out of acorn cups.

"I went there a bunch of times. My mom took me; Dad never came." The niece didn't hear any gloating in his voice, though she knew he had the right to it. "He lived in a house near the beach with his friend. Mom said they were like best friends."

"When I grow up I'm going to live with my best friend in a house that's painted every color, except for orange, because we don't like orange," the niece chimed in. It was true; the two girls had already determined this. "I wouldn't want to live with anyone else."

The nephew looked up. His mouth was turned down on one corner and his eyebrows were crowding together over his nose.

"Can I live there, too?" he asked, still working at the scab.

The niece considered a moment. "As long as you don't marry any other girls and bring them there. Then you can live with us."

The nephew smiled. He had pulled off the scab and a little byroad of blood was winding down toward her lacy sock. Quickly, the nephew bent down and licked the blood off her shin. Then he pressed his napkin against the spot he had made. The niece could feel the crumbs making little indentations in her skin.

"You're sick," the niece said. She meant it, but the epithet was more like a term of endearment than an accusation.

The nephew nodded and grinned, displaying large gaps in his smile where he had lost teeth. He pushed up his sleeve and displayed a coppery scarab beetle on his elbow. With a clumsy tug, he pulled off the scab and bright blood slowly pulsed to the surface. Twisting his arm around

awkwardly, he proffered his elbow to the niece. "You can have this."

The niece hesitated a moment. Something about her cousin's offer made her feel a little timid and she could feel her cheeks pinking, but she was pleased, as if she had been accepted into a club or chosen to play kickball at recess. She bent her head over her cousin's arm and licked his elbow. The blood tasted like a jungle gym.

"There," the nephew said, as the niece opened up her napkin and tied it around his elbow like a bandage. "Now we're even."

They stayed outside until the guests began to depart, filing out slowly into the damp twilight. They watched these relatives they did not know drive away and called after them puny insults that twisted the children with knots of laughter. When the grandmother came to the front door to shout them in, she saw only the umbrellas, blooming like inverted primroses on the roof of the car.

SIMON KRESS

The Complete Works of Calliope Fitts

Edited by F. Summers Thimblecraft, PhD

"I fly," wrote Hafiz, the 14th-century Persian mystic, "my ashes will be what I am." With that as my epigraph, and with great honor and gravity, I undertake the execution of my dear late friend Calliope Fitts's literary estate. She, with that deathbed humility so common to writers of genius, requested that every item of her astonishing oeuvre be consigned to the devouring flames. While tormented by my unfaithfulness to her last wish, I sincerely believe, reader, that posterity will acquit me of all wrong. For a true writer of genius is as precious to this world as an osprey, a Clementine, or a dimple, all those solitary glories that make this life more bearable and, at the greatest moments, luminous. To follow through, then, with my most reverend friend's final wish would be to commit a crime against existence so heinous that a Judas-like ending would be my only course. So, to avert such a tragic end I have chosen to deny the insatiable fire its sustenance and deliver to you, reader – posterity – the extraordinary corpus of Calliope Fitts in its grand entirety: "A Hole in The Wall: Three Endings and Three Beginnings."¹ Now, like the archaeologist whose work is merely to dust away the centuries, I leave the masterpiece to stand in its own stark perfection, beginning, as she wished, with the end.

Incredible, you say, that this man – no matter how learned – this modern-day Casaubon, had found the key to all mythologies. But not so incredible, I say, when you look upon yourself. The mysteries of sex, of citrus, of thunderstorms, of iridescence – have these not become commonplaces? Have your once digressive perambulations not straightened into a Euclidean

¹ I hasten to add – parenthetically – that, while scholars may quibble, this title I have ascribed to Miss Fitts's work stands upon the evidence of numerous references to all and parts of the title scribbled upon cocktail napkins, grocery lists, the backs of business cards in Miss Fitts's own unmistakable hand (for she, as her closest friends know, threw nothing away). "A Wall of Three," "Ending Hole," "33," are only a few of the remarkable title's permutations, a testament to the unrivalled fecundity of her imagination.

certainty? Have your breath and your heart not regulated to the shock of smell, color, sound? No, not incredible that this man could order the knowledge of the ages as effortlessly as a filing clerk. After a time, all our lives take on such an order. We build walls, lock doors, spy on our neighbors, declare certainties, fear flying, bury the dead, imagine the unborn. Imagine this then. Imagine the incredible:

Having returned home late, after a lecture on polygenics, which concluded with a typically lavish and interminable reception of Spanish wines and soft cheeses, Philip Turnweather stood at his kitchen counter and opened the brown-paper-wrapped book from Dungles Booksellers. What he found altered the course of his life, opening in his nearly perfected system a hole that no amount of reasoning could plug. The book, titled *The Unprecedented Flight of Simmons Magee*, by Fraginard Timms, told of something that could not be assimilated into Haynes's order-of-all-things. "Little is known of the freckled lemur," the work begins absurdly, "living as it does like a harried fugitive in the Zambezi jungle, but research has revealed one definitive trait: the hand of the freckled lemur is composed of five opposable digits, as it were, five thumbs." What became of Philip Turnweather, upon absorbing the full impact of this revelation – where he traveled, the cities he saw, the man he met who did not exist, and the manner of his death – is a story for another time.

Permit me to interject briefly. Reader, even you of the most dismal resources, will mark the manifestly unorthodox technique of beginning with the ending (in this case endings). I need not remind the astute that

this is not without precedent. Among many fine examples, the most noteworthy must be that of the notorious iconoclast Paulo Umile, who, toiling upon his barren wine estate in Istria, produced after decades his heartbreaking ending, which, incidentally remained incomplete – that is, without beginning. The ending begins and ends simply: *He wept.*

(For laughter, for longing, for release? We know not the cause of the weeping, nor the character's name, his provenance, his sleeping habits, his memories. I need not elaborate the tragedy of this tale, readers will apprehend instantly the unbounded sadness of having ended what was never begun. "Da dove cominciare? Da dove cominciare?" Umile was heard crying in his last days, as he expired in the summer drought, clutching a bottle of dust.)

Now, having ended so brilliantly, a terror looms over the present work: can this story ever begin? Or will this brief swelling of retroactive possibility be eclipsed by a consuming hole of proleptic emptiness: He wept. Here we tremble. But let us continue with our second ending.

It all seemed so astonishing, she thought, that the world could go on living like this, even with the best modern medicine. But soon an alternate feeling began to take over and to undermine her assurance like dissolving sand. It had always been thus. It could be no other way. She, her cheek pressed against the pulsing tissue, peered out on a sullen boy and his coal-smudged sister (there were no doubt thousands more in that rain-swept field) peering back at her, through a hole in the wall that was someone's heart.

Many have sought to interpret this bizarre passage. For some it conjures the fire-swept barrens of Gettysburg, where a woman (a nurse?)

lies uncomprehending in a covey of mutilated bodies, one of which supplies the aperture through which she stares. But why this curious brother-sister pair? Have they come seeking lost fathers? Lost cousins? Or is their work more sinister, more chill? Are they scavengers? The opportunistic buzzards of the afterlife? We must admit the weird, after all, for this is a story of revelation, albeit a negative and life-altering one, not unlike the revelation of Mr. Turnweather. I would be remiss in my duties if I failed to tell you that Ms. Fitts was at this time on the verge of her own sort of revelation. Readers should not be surprised at this fact, for is not one's life the very breath of imagination? Sadly, I cannot tell you more; Ms. Fitts with the custom of her New Hampshire upbringing felt it immodest to expose this still-budding revelation to others.

One item here does bear elucidation. Why the rain? you ask. Consider this: Among Ms. Fitts's papers I have discovered a black leather notebook, small in size, which contained the following upon the first page: "Fantasy is a place where it rains." The rest of the notebook is blank. The phrase has been attributed variously: Bergerac, Leopardi, Nabokov, and the 16th-century mystic Magdalena de la Cruz, among others. I, having grown weary of these tedious lineages, prefer to attribute it simply to the Spiritus Mundi, which defies that baroque and rickety construct we call authorship. (Imagine a world of pure elements in which the brilliant entities – Plato, Aquinas, Da Vinci – reside side by side, beyond space and time, breathing the same rinsed air, imbibing the same wine, breaking the same bread. Every author of genius is merely an ambassador from this one better world.) I attribute the line simply to greatness.

I sense, too, your anxiety, reader, at this notion of a heart organ as a wall. Observing my rule of discretion, I will merely refer you to the little known manifesto by the French symbolist Phillipe Tuillery: *Le Cosmos Corporel* (1883). Readers may recall more readily his *Zedenery* (1898), the 900 epigrams (there were, of course, only 857) each beginning with the letter Z. Ms. Fitts had little time for such frivolities, but she, nevertheless,

found in *Le Cosmos* the thematic center of all her work.

Now for our third ending, which sets all we know on end.

He felt himself rising then, the swell of *cantaloupe* in his abdomen, the graze of flask along his insole. The grass beneath his feet unbent itself. *Culprit, keel, blouse, farrago*. His body, levitate, unclenched, the gravitas of mortality, responsibility, meaning, unbolted itself and fell clattering to the pavement; he rose like a dirigible unsleeving from its scaffold. *Plaster, flesh, compendium. Ratatouille*. He realized then what the traveler had been telling him. *Lucidity*. His shoulder blades nudged the delicate membrane of the sky.

My esteemed colleague, Professor Reinhold Ewart, confirms the physiological accuracy of this account. He informs me that Daniel Douglas Home, the famous Scottish medium, described the sensation of flight as "an electrical fulness (sic)" in his feet and a eery feeling of dissolution at his center of gravity, like sand draining from a fist. What use is this pedantry, you protest, if we know not the reason for the boy's flight? Allow me to continue, for I am troubled by the same anxiety. In his recent psychobiography of J.M Barrie, *Fantasies of Flight* (2004), Daniel Ogilvie notes this common feature of levitation: "a core component of flying fantasies is the manifestation of underlying yearnings to return to less troubled times." We may wonder then from what trouble our character is escaping, or, if we accept Ogilvie's antique ratiocentrism, from what trouble our character is wishing to escape. Readers will note instantly the resonances of this high-flyer with the archetypal boy-bird, Icarus, image of the poet's ambition. Is our hero attempting to escape a tyrannized and haunted land of busybody kings, bull-lusty queens, and commonsense ploughmen? Why resort to the air unless you are fenced

by impenetrable walls?

And what of this traveler? you ask. Numerous theories have been forwarded attempting to identify this mysterious figure. Cavalcanti, Quixote, and John the Baptist – are among the many ridiculous propositions. I prefer, like Keats, to remain calm in the face of uncertainties such as these, "without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." We are, after all, on the verge of our desired beginnings.

Sitting in the broom closet, to which he had grown accustomed, Francis listened to the sound that brought him here every afternoon at 1:43. Behind the wall, the intermittent rasp and shirr and plop of water, which described a body moving, barefoot on the wet tile. Every movement appeared before his eyes: the planing of a slick bar of soap up a hamstring and over the scoop of a buttock, a tendril of hair streaming across an eyebrow and capering there, pendant with a body's private labor. As the weeks went by this subtle titillation of the eardrums overtook him and the usual matters of living began to lose all sense. Taking up residence at the center of his life was this morning fugue of desire. Each wringing of hair, each tossing of hips, each bending of knees – a subtle variation on the theme. Soon the hours between each performance became almost insupportable with suspense, like the violinist's bow hovering millimeters above the still quavering strings. He knew he must get closer.

What deserts of solitude! What bondages of desire! I pray I do not commit indiscretion when I tell you of Miss Fitts's own habit of afternoon showers and the number of hours I have spent waiting with

patient expectation. "A moment, Summers, my knight!" She would cry flippantly. And, I, out of chivalrous courtesy, would hum Mozart's "Turkish March" until she emerged.

I came to know Fitz through a 1"x 1" chink in the drywall. The laborious shoe tying, the two-handed lighting of a cigarette, the sad laughter as he wooed me with those silhouettes of earless dogs, cast upon the arrivals board at sunset. Why this odd arrangement, you ask, this conceit of the hole in the wall? I have only this rather pathetic tale to enter as a plea. At the age of four, my life took on the figure of grotesquerie, abruptly, when my father burned the house down around us as we slept. In the early morning hours I woke to find flames crawling up my legs, my sister's nightdress on fire. Having barely escaped, I huddled in the roadway, watching the house collapse. A boy of twelve or thirteen came down the road then and gripped my hand and led me away.

Who was this boy? In my own blistered hand I found a hand of four agile fingers and one stumped knuckle where the thumb should be. I understood immediately: ours was a pact of deformity. Where he lead me was here, to this lonely bus depot, at the end of highway 10. He clothed my scorched body with this wall, and he gave me a 1" x 1" eye to see. But now, by what I witnessed in brutal silhouette upon the arrivals board last night, my eyes too are burnt and my boy is gone.

The premonition of violence hovers over both these bizarre tales. What nightmares had begun to seep into Miss Fitts's beginnings? Who was this scorched girl? Who was the mutilated boy? In later years,

Miss Fitts became more and more obsessed with the recovery of her ancestors, feeling, as she must have, the fear of lost histories as her own death approached. Sitting upon her lovely veranda on those last August evenings, she would often mention to me as I rose to leave, my empty brandy snifter in hand: "Oh, and I must tell you of my great uncle Magnus! But that can wait for tomorrow. I can see the weariness in your shoulders. *Bon soir, mon chevalier!*" This continued night after night until, I shudder even now to say, she passed from this world, the story of her great uncle Magnus still untold.

Why, you ask, should I suspect a connection between this mysterious uncle and the macabre twins? Only this: that the diligent accessionists at Hollowsfield Manuscript Archives and Rare Book Library contacted me last week with a peculiar discovery. Enclosed in a hollowed-out copy of Price and Dingwall's *Revelations of a Spirit Medium* (1891) was a small leather-bound notebook with a curious insignia blazoned on the cover. It showed, below the letter M, two parted hands extended and thumbless. As though this were not bizarre enough the notebook was without content, the entirety having been incinerated. Only a single letter was legible on the last page: Z. I cannot even pretend to unravel this mystery. Miss Fitts, in her last months, grew ever more hermetic, even as she maintained her famous charisma. On those fine August evenings of perambulating conversations not once did she hint at the dark and vast territories that lay beyond her eyes. Never did she acquire that haunted look of the visionary. She remained master of her senses. Thus, I find myself now poring over her words to me, believing perhaps that the entire story of Magus lay in those words: "Oh, and I must tell you of my great uncle Magnus! But that can wait for tomorrow. I can see the weariness in your shoulders. *Bon soir, mon chevalier!*" I turn now with desperate expectation to the ending and final beginning of her tale.

And when we woke we found ourselves in a kingdom of the body. No, not a kingdom, my

companion corrects, more a hamlet, a village, or that singularly humble gathering place of potlucks and memories we call a town. A town of the body then. Now, adventurers we were and well-traveled – cities we had seen of playing cards, villages of goose feathers, unsettled territories of rhetorical questions – so to find our intrepid feet on Dirty Ankle Rd. in the town of End was novel, but not implausible. What we found behind the used tire outlet along Dandruff Shoulder, however, was: There, as peaceful as a sleeping pasture, a field of fingers, ruffling almost imperceptibly in the wind. Then, the wind dying, the blades of fingers righted again in the stillness to point skyward. And there, in a shady corner of the field, a Brueghelian peasant swung his scythe, while upon his sweaty cheeks and in his curly hair settled the fine parings of fingernails. This man, Peter Humble, was End's sole inhabitant and the man who made me at last give up my wandering.

Permit me this one personal reflection, reader, as you tremble silently in the expansive vista of this final beginning. Today, as I sit at my window, my duty accomplished, I draw books promiscuously from my shelf and ponder the weight of genius. *The Last Pirouette*, by Irwin Goss. *The Contortionist's Daughter*, by Grayson Hackles. *In Potentia*, by Pervius. As I leaf through each tome I rub the ashes between my fingers, for each has been burnt out. As I smile in my reverie, I look out my study window to chance upon a passer-by: a man notable for his fastidious dress and his fine intellectual mouth. He believes he has just chanced upon me and stands conspicuously, his gloved hands crossed and resting upon his ebony cane, staring into my room. What must he think of me? Reading these hollow texts?

Feeling whimsical, I provide for him a private spectacle. I give

him to think that I, like the smoke of the library that smolders in the grate, am escaping to drift over rooftops, transmogrified. I laugh to imagine his quizzical lips parting ever so slightly to register his profound astonishment. Why do I tell you this? Because in it lies the key to all mythologies, which Miss Fitts discovered at last, that the precise weight of genius is zero, and that the greatest work of all is the one that at its moment of perfection ceases to exist. Its monumentality—its gilded syntax, its resplendent imagery, its subtle evocations of the Book of Daniel, and its perfectly calibrated modulation between philosophy and art—evaporates, transfigured into that vague ideal that surfaces from time to time in the delicate fragrance of a pear. And I, born away in the haunted eyes of you, my witness, have completed her masterpiece. Let this be my epitaph: *I fly, my ashes will be what I am.*

Creative Nonfiction





HIKA ANANI

Blend With Ours Your Voices

"You know the words now. Sing along." These words, as much as I can recall, are the extent of any conversation I may have had with my maternal grandmother. But our lack of verbal exchange was not a lack of communication. As I look back now, I see the gift she gave me, hoping that one day I would be smart enough to realize she had left it behind.

She was frail, but her stature still tall. Her hair was peppered with white but still full. Her voice was raspy with age and illness, but there was still a slight rumble—though I am not sure if it was the timber of her voice or the reaction in my stomach. My grandmother was 63 years old when I met her. She was everything foreign to me.

My parents were born and raised in Nigeria. After coming to the States to go to school, they remained to raise their growing family. My father's parents died when I was very young, but we kept in constant contact with my mother's family. There were always plans to go home to Nigeria, but with the family lovingly nicknamed "The Brady Bunch" the trip was too expensive. The alternative was to bring Nigeria to us. My mom's mother was the first. For the longest time this is what she was to me—my mom's mom. Calling her "grandmother" or "grandma" was taking too much ownership. When I met her, I wasn't ready to do that.

I wasn't nervous about meeting my grandmother until the family mini van pulled into the driveway and my father and grandmother stepped out. My mom and siblings (except for my youngest brother who was just a few weeks old), raced past me to greet our grandmother. As for me, my feet were firmly planted in one spot. Nothing registered for me except for the feeling that all of a sudden I wanted to be as far away from her as possible. She had a presence about her that was different from anyone else I had encountered and that frightened me. Who was this woman I had not known for twelve years of my life?

I immediately felt ashamed of my reticence to make her feel welcome. She was after all my grandmother. But more than that she was a stranger. My childlike mind could not reconcile the two. The only

way I could find to cope was to withdraw. But my mother wouldn't let me do this, taking my hand and making me say "hello" that very first day. From that point on, though, I made little effort to engage in conversation. Avoiding my grandmother was the easiest way for me to handle my discomfort, even with the knowledge that this was hurting me just as much as her. But though the object of avoiding my grandmother was to hold my fear at bay, I was still unsettled inside. I wanted very much to form a relationship with this woman. To be comfortable enough to laugh with her as my sister did. Or to sit on the couch next to her and listen to stories as my brothers did. But the closest I could manage was outside the door to whatever room she was in.

Until the day my mother sent me in to sit with my grandmother and keep her company. She was sick with cervical cancer and spent many hours in her room resting. It was June and the guest room that my grandmother occupied was hot. The ceiling fan was of no use, merely re-circulating the stifling air. The head of the bed was along the shortest wall with the rest of the furniture and closet surrounding it like a "U." There was a window to the left of the bed, but there was no breeze and the soothing blue of the walls was not quite as cool as Benjamin Moore had promised.

When I entered the room, she was sitting on the edge of the bed, surveying the neighborhood through the open window. She was dressed in prints that looked "Nigerian" to me—in yellows, reds, greens, and blues that should have clashed, but didn't. Her body seemed so fragile, even though she was sitting up and seemed to actually be feeling well that day. I was sure if any wind stirred up outside the window it would knock her over. The farthest place from her was the rocking chair in the corner. I sat without rocking, not wanting to catch her attention, but knowing she sensed my presence. When she failed to look at me but continued to stare out the window, I knew she was ignoring me. Even though I had made no effort to befriend her and at the moment wanted to go unnoticed, I felt slighted that she would not acknowledge my presence. I was confused.

An hour passed and I wondered if it would be wrong to slip out of the room and go terrorize my younger siblings. I started to raise myself out of the rocker when she began to sing. In her hands was an old Scottish Psalter, a Presbyterian hymnal my mother had brought to the States with her. Her voice was not the melodious wind my mother had always bragged it was. It wasn't soft and beautiful like I had imagined it would sound. Yet, the music she made had a haunting, arresting quality that kept me in the rocker.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him, all creatures here below
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*

After this song she turned to look at me. And for the next hour eye contact never broke, except for her to turn to another page in the old Psalter. As the time progressed, I realized a certain pattern to the songs. For years I had looked through the hymnal, singing the songs I knew and "dog-earing" and making up tunes for the ones I didn't. My grandmother flipped through the hymnal, singing from the turned down pages. It seemed that even without my saying so, she knew the ones I wanted, or needed to hear.

When she finished, she closed the book, and after a long moment of staring at me, lay down and closed her eyes. I slipped quietly out of the room, picking up the hymnal on the way out. We had not spoken, but I knew she understood me. She had not made an effort to engage me in conversation, but she had still tried to teach me things that she knew I wanted to know. And though I still made no effort to get to know her on my own, my reticence decreased the next time my mother sent me in to sit with grandmother.

When I walked into the room, she looked up at me. I tried to smile, but when she did not reciprocate, I knew I hadn't arranged my face quite as

well as I had hoped. So I handed her the hymnal. The only offering I had.

*Man of Sorrows! wondrous Name
For the Son of God, who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim!
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!*

"You know the words now. Sing along." I had not even realized that my grandmother had stopped singing until she addressed me. She began a new chorus and I hesitantly joined her:

*All hail the power of Jesus' name!
Let angels prostrate fall...*

*When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll...*

*Onward! Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war...*

Hymn after hymn we sang. For the first time, I allowed myself to completely relax in my grandmother's presence. We could not connect in dialogue or action. But in spite of this, she loved me enough to hand down her most precious legacy: a love for hymns.

I would love to say that this was the turning point—that from then on we spent hours together, getting to know one another, singing our songs. But it wasn't. Though I no longer felt like a stranger around her, I had only made my way up to 'acquaintance' when she went back home to Nigeria after four months. And I would not see her again before she died.

I didn't know what to feel when she died. My brothers and sister

were saddened by the loss of a recently found treasure. My mother's sorrow was intensified by knowing she could never talk to her mother again. My father tried to be a support for the family. And I filled my mind with things like school that had to go on despite a loss in the family.

Really my problem was continuing to run away from things that were uncomfortable and frightening. How could I mourn the death of a person whom I had avoided in life? I refused to face my emotions...again. My philosophy had always been that if there was the possibility of failure, disappointment or discomfort, avoid it. I never entered contests, applied for positions, or introduced myself to new people. My grandmother was no exception. My discomfort with her kept me from broaching any type of relationship.

Then I had to move into the guest room once occupied by my grandmother. The arrangement of the room stayed relatively the same except for new sheets on the bed and different knickknacks on the dresser—empty picture frames and unlit candles. The afternoon that I finally transferred my things, I sat on the side of the bed for a moment. I had not been in the room that often since my grandmother died. Even though she had been gone for quite sometime, her essence never left that room. It was like perfume that lingers even after the person is gone. The longer I was in the room, the more I felt like she was still there. All of a sudden I could remember things about her that I did not realize I had noticed in the first place. The strength of her hands. The knowingness of her smile. The way you knew that she knew.

I began to remember her hymns. Her favorite one was *It is Well With My Soul*. But she sang others about grace and mercy, the cross of Christ, the rewards of perseverance, the benefits of friendship. The song that I remember most is *Onward, Christian Soldiers*. A song about conflict and victory. The fifth verse of that song reads:

*Onward, then, ye people!
Join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices
In the triumph song
Glory, laud, and honour
Unto Christ the King!
This, through countless ages,
Men and angels sing.*

I knew then that my grandmother had known how to reach me. She had bridged the gap between us and I hadn't even noticed. The room became a testament to the triumph of our relationship. Within it we blended our voices in songs sung by countless ages before us. Songs that will continue to be sung after us.

I cried over my grandmother's death for the first time, the day that I moved into the old guest room. I cried that I would never have an opportunity to talk to her again. I cried that we shared so little. I cried that when she was here, I was not brave enough to know her.

SARA HENNING-STOUT

The Pony Man

*When it's midnight on the meadow
And the cats are in the shed And the river tells a story
At the window by my bed
If you listen very closely
Be as quiet as you can
In the yard you'll hear him
It is the pony man
—Gordon Lightfoot*

I am five-years-old and his wide palm stretches the full breadth of my back. I can feel the vibrations of his voice seeping into my skin and soothing my fidget-prone mind. The rhythmic circles he traces loosen every fiber and chase away every care. I listen very closely, as quiet as I can. The origin of sleep is in this melody and this man. He is safety, stability and strength. He is my father.

*We're always there to greet him
When he tumbles into town
He leads a string of ponies
Some are white and some are brown
And they never seem to kick or bite
They only want to play
And they live on candy apples
Instead of oats and hay*

I am ten-years-old and sick. Some strange bacterial bug crept its way into my spaghetti squash and now my insides want out. Curled up tight I wish for nothing more than to stave off another wave of nausea. I pry myself from the comfort of the futon and wading through my lethargic sludge, force my legs to carry me to my parent's room. Through the haze of drowsiness, he comes to my rescue. Repeating the soothing

rubbing, relaxing the muscles of my back as I shiver and sweat. As the last shades of queasiness fade and he senses my ease, he begins to sing. I sink into the sheets and let the words envelope my senses, soothing my thoughts and my stomach.

*And when we're all assembled
He gives a soft command
And we climb aboard our ponies
As in a row the stand
Then down the road we gallop
And across the fields we fly
And soon we all go sailing off
Into the midnight sky*

I am twelve-years-old and I am scared of heights. One month ago he fell from eight feet up, sailing off a ladder and into the noontime sky. Decrepit Birkenstocks, the ladder's rust and a flooded flattop garage roof led to the sharp smack of concrete. One metal plate and three screws later his body displays a stability that his mind cannot echo. Sequestered to the first floor study on a pullout sofa he cannot resist the urge to walk, even when he shouldn't. In his personal prison within the walls of our house, I stand as he explodes, erupting with the built-up pressure of disability.

Tonight I cannot take it. Urged on by my mothers' encouragement I attempt to unfold my unhappiness, my anger, and my fear, pushing it out through the blockade of sadness that is jamming my throat. He hears my upset and feigns compassion, but there is something between us that surpasses either of our control. This is the first window I have into his head which houses a mind that is not his own. It is only after he has recovered that he will tell me how he is split in two. A disorder that plagues his mind hurling him from monumental highs to overbearing

lows. But tonight, there is no comfort; I must sing myself to sleep.

*And as we gaily rock along
Beside a ripplin' sea
There's tom n dick n sally
And Mary Joe and me
And the pony man is leading
Cause he's traveled here before
And he gives a whoop and a holler
At Mr. moons front door*

I am fourteen-years-old and awash in confusion. The fibers of the rug I am sitting on sting me with shock. I have just witnessed my foundation sever in two. They sit across from me the stocky white candle on the glass-top coffee table forming a seemingly impenetrable wall between us. My mother struggles to maintain her stoic façade; my father is a weeping mess. I blame his weakness and her unrelenting strength. My eyes burn beyond the boundaries of tears. I am lost and the only ones who can find me are walking away. Through the haze of my confusion I seek solace in the roll of toilet paper I use to blow my nose. They have left me to pick up the pieces of our family and divide myself in half. He looks at me across the fiery barricade with a desperation that sabotages fatherly compassion. At this moment he is not himself. He has been divided and conquered by the enemy that is his mind. There will be no song tonight.

*And then we stop to rest a while
Where the soda river glides
Up to the slip comes a pirate ship
To take us for a ride
And the pony man's the captain*

*And the children are the crew
And we go in search of treasure
And laugh the whole night through*

I am seventeen-years-old and bracing for the future. He has technologically armed me against the academic rigors of college life with a new computer, a printer and an ipod. The tumult of divorce has worn us both thin. In a heroic act of fatherly compassion he has kept my childhood home as a last thread tying me to the family we used to be. He pays two mortgages as a rent on my affection. I repay him by moving away. Giving my mother full custody I move my life into her basement as a final attempt at establishing a sense of stability. In her living room he sits on the couch yearning to understand. His only consolation lies in my imminent departure. The emptiness swells in my stomach and I am full of sorrow at the disconnect that has developed between the two of us. He rises from his seat and moves to leave, loving me and letting me go. Wrapping his arms around me I hear again his voice singing and soothing me.

*And when the hold is filled with gold
And the sails begin to strain
And the decks piled high with apple pie
We head for port again
And down the whirling staircase
So swift our ponies' fly
And were safely in our beds again
When the sunbeams kiss the sky^a**

I am twenty and I miss him. Fragmented visits show me only the hyper-intensive mania and the bottomed-out depression. When his own father passes the disease spreads across his face as he screams and cries

in anguish. I feel awash in loss. I want to reach out to comfort him but he will not listen because his head is full of cacophonous chaos. In this time of mourning I need a father and what I am left with is a marionette of a man with strings being pulled by some unknown hand. All I have are memories. I can only reminisce about my grandfather and the man my father used to be before he was swallowed whole. But I am not yet ready to give up and let him go because when I close my eyes it is midnight on the meadow and he is my pony man.

ERIN LOWRANCE
In Times of Draught, Fling Mud

1959

"Today I got the last throw, brother!"

My father threw jibes over his shoulder as he ran into the red shingled house to wash off the result of the mud fight he'd just concluded with his little brother. My Uncle Will slumped back into the mud hole like a bloody tar baby. Raindrops were slurped up by the Carolina red clay and Grandma BJ's drawlish yet shrill cry of disapproval rang out over the thunder of the rain.

That's how Uncle Will tells it, anyways. He says it'd been a scorching summer that year, the kind where even little boys look forward to a rain to cool things off so they wouldn't attract flies with their sweat when they played outside. It'd rained sure enough, slow at first while Daddy and Uncle Will played cowboys and Indians or touch football with the other neighborhood boys, or some such game boys in small town America played in the 50s. Like a frog that gets boiled to death if he's left in a pot of cool water that gets heated up gradually, Uncle Will and Daddy kept playing as the rain started out as a drizzle then steadily picked up momentum.

The raindrops got heavier. Soon it was a regular downpour, the kind that soaks through the canvas of your Converse sneakers and the cotton of your socks first as if the rain were welling up from the ground and not falling from the sky.

"We must've been rough housing, or playing tackle football, or else it was a real physical game of cowboys and Indians -- maybe it was a war," says Uncle Will. "Because before we let ourselves admit that we should head inside, one of us -- probably your father-- pushed down the other."

The one that'd been pushed must've landed in the mud. Then he must've pushed back.

"Or, maybe as we were heading inside I jumped into a puddle that splashed brother Jeff up his pants leg."

Maybe mud decorated brother Jeff's brand new Converse like a Jackson Pollock painting. Maybe brother Jeff became afraid that his Momma would switch him with a hickory branch for muddying up his new shoes. So maybe, in a childish tantrum, he splashed brother Billy back.

Whoever instigated they were both sure of who finished.

"I wasn't a good older brother," said Daddy reflecting on the event. "My pride would never let me lose. I *had* to throw that last clod of mud."

1994

Swollen clouds burst for the first time in months and leaked onto the green shards of grass. The storm seemed to pour in one steady stream, gray and viscous like the pus from a festering wound. Hearing the foreignness of rumbling and gushing over our heads, my sister and I perked up like muskrats in the prairie. From the fogging window we watched the rain break up the cracked Carolina clay into chips and churn it into a flush of rust-colored swill. Relenting to the instinctual pull that, like a knee-jerk reaction, calls little ones to bathe in the wetness of the Earth, we ran giggling out the back door. The swinging porch door slammed behind our pattering feet. Our laughter echoed off the flagstone, in chorus with the cat's panicked meow.

Momma stood at the steps of the porch hugging her Florida brown arms. She half-heartedly warned us from behind a smile that we'd both catch our death of cold, just in case the neighbors were watching. Really, she was there to watch for lightning. In the meantime she provided the pie pans and dutifully pretended to taste our runny batches of Mississippi Mud Pies. We decorated them with hydrangea petal sprinkles and ignored the shoots of grass lodged within like eggshells. Leaving them on the porch steps to "bake" when the sun came out again, we'd later try and

trick each other into eating a slice.

At the instruction of my older sister Claire, who was, at 8-years-old, woman of the world, we lathered our Casper skin with slogs of mud and pretended we were receiving a spa treatment. That year Momma hadn't gotten any further in nursing her vegetable garden than tilling the spot on our property -- just below the line of dogwoods -- that collects the most rainfall. The turned-up dirt that had baked into bricks during the drought now melted into the most luxurious mud that two bathing beauties could ask for. We rolled around in the stuff until our toe-heads dripped with clumps of what looked (but did not taste) like brownie batter. Back then, worms didn't bother me.

Seeing the familiar sight of Daddy's tweed hat bouncing along the rock wall that divided the church where he worked from the manse where we lived my sister and I schemed to bombard him with muddy hugs as he made his way home from work. He slogged his way, head downcast, through puddled places in the yard that had forgotten how to drink water. Sure that we'd get him this time, we jumped out at him just as he was turning the corner of the house that would lead to the door. Safety for him, as we would not be allowed to cross that threshold until Momma had hosed down a layer of our skin with the dreaded high powered garden hose.

Alas, two waifish mud people intent on soiling his black clergy suit stood in his way. Momma must've alerted him though, because as soon as we came running he pulled out two handfuls of mud from behind his back and hurled them at us. They thudded against our rib cages and knocked the breath right out of our war cries. With the time it took for us to spit out the clods of mud that had made their way into our opened mouths, Daddy was able to lunge through the door to safety. There was a puckish gleam in his icy blue eyes as he flashed past us.

"Don't you know, girls, that I always get the last throw?," he cried as he ran past.

2007

Daddy never documented in his last will and testament what he wanted for his funeral. We all put together a puzzle of details he'd mentioned to us in passing over the years and what we were able to extract from his toxin-flooded memory in those last days: Cremation because he liked the biblical symbolism of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust, earth to earth"; lots of old hymns--which one's were anyone's guess; no memorial speeches; we were to keep it simple and to keep the focus on the resurrection. But as we planned the funeral it became clear that even those details would not be sufficient to comfort Momma that we were doing what he'd wanted.

We had only one other resource; another memory, of a sermon he'd preached years ago. After days of searching we finally found it. 1987. "When I Die."

In it he restated some of the basic details we each had remembered him mentioning. He did not want to be at the center of his own funeral. He even specified that, if, for whatever reason, we had to place him in a coffin, to put his coffin in the aisle of the church facing the cross and not in front of the alter. That place belonged to someone else.

But there was one specification, a symbolic expression that he had not reinforced with much theology and therefore seemed out of place in a funeral blueprint whose focus was not on the dead. He wanted every member of his family and whoever else that felt so moved to take part in the ritual act of shoveling dirt onto his remains at the internment.

Momma went first with the well-trained sympathetic attendants from Ramah's Funeral Home at either side of her to catch her should she faint or become suddenly too weak to lift the shovel. I wondered at the time if they really thought they'd have to do that. Did they not see her strong Florida brown arms? The finely churned red clay-- the stuff that

tied Daddy to the Carolinas all his life -- spilled off of the shovel and the occasional rock tinked off the petit mahogany box like a muffled anvil. I went next, then Claire, then BJ, then Pawpaw.

Was it just my imagination or did the dirt turn to mud by the end of it as our tears poured out of our eyes and welled up from the ground like a hard summer's rain?

When it was Uncle Will's turn he scooped deep into the mound and extracted a heaping clod of earth which he ceremoniously poured into the hole, letting his tears trickle into his black bearish beard and wet the ground below.

Passing me on his solemn march back to his seat he bent low and whispered in a voice that ringed with my father's intonation.

"Remember how I was telling you about that big mud fight your father and I got into when we were boy? How he got the last throw then and left me covered in mud?"

He grinned sadly.

"Well today, I got the last throw, brother."

Jessica perches on the edge of her seat, stretching the pages for class discussion taut between both sweating hands. Her eyes betray the zealot's frightening glitter as she licks her lips and dives in to her rant against the semicolon. My eyebrows rise and rise and reach the upper limit of muscular contraction. "Blasphemy!" I whisper.

She freezes. "You actually like semicolons?"

"Are you kidding?" I blurt. "I'm a semicolon slut!" A frisson of titillation and dismay circles the table, every mouth in turn elongating into a surprised "O."

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The semicolon is the seal, still warm, of Eros on written language. It signifies

union by a grammatical invitation to intimacy; the semicolon is the shared blush of a successful seduction. As with all seductions, the relationships between clauses joined by semicolons are ambiguous; this is not the punctuation of hierarchy, but of nuance.

Other forms of punctuation—periods, apostrophes, question marks, exclamation points, even the interrobang (a question mark superimposed over an exclamation point, denoting both astonishment and confusion)—exert themselves over their surrounding clauses with clear purpose: separation and stratification. The colon, for example, tells the reader that the words that follow it proceed in sequence from the words that come before. An apostrophe indicates either possession or what is left out of a word, but either way, its duty is to denote ownership and exclusion. Periods are the nuns in the dance hall of a paragraph, holding a ruler between swaying couples to make sure they are twelve inches apart. As for the comma, although it may at times approach the semicolon's impulse toward union, it also tells us which clauses are subordinate, and to whom, and keeps the items in a list from bumping up against each other. Additionally, the comma insists on space in a sentence for pompous

little interjections like "indeed," and hallmarks of rhetorical sorting such as "therefore" and "however." (In British English, where the comma may join independent clauses, the comma's duties may overlap with the semicolon's, but here in the U.S., it is not so.) Only the promiscuous little dash approaches the semicolon's energy, but it is too hyper for real romance—too much the flibbertigibbet to sustain the consummation that the semicolon celebrates.

The semicolon proposes the union of equals, the lovemaking of the ideal marriage, but the semicolon does not reveal all the secrets of the bedroom. Although the use of a semicolon between what would otherwise be two sentences joins them into one sentence together, it doesn't tell the reader why. This coy maneuver tempts the reader to make the interpretive leap and decide what links these two independent clauses, as one must sooner or later find oneself, at date's end, on the doorstep, where one must choose, considering the evening's sequence of feints and approaches, whether or not to lean in and try for a kiss. The semicolon invites the reader to puzzle out degrees of connection.

When the semicolon joins long, comma-inclusive items in a list, the semicolon represents, if not actual union, then the proliferation of the free-floating erotic energy that can surprise even the most sedate among us. Consider the surprisingly good-smelling neck of a colleague whose shirt tag, white and sharp cornered against her skin, begs to be tucked down; the muscular hands of a grocery checker (a hockey player on Saturdays) rolling a can of soup across the scanner; receiving the look-and-look-again, crossing the parking lot's hot asphalt to the bank door, of even the chubbiest stranger; finding oneself, at a party, pinned to the floor by the grin of a man one would not so much as have coffee with: these moments are the semicolon's to store, to log in its book of potentials. The semicolon holds these small, unlikely connections worthy of our appreciation.

As an agent of connection, the semicolon's drives in syntax enact metaphor's arrangements in image. In her essay "A Meditation on

Metaphor," Alicia Ostriker recovers metaphor's etymology to demonstrate its nature:

Metaphor: a carrying across. You see the word on delivery vans in the dusty avenues of Athens. *Metaphoros*. A carrying across, a getting over, a bearing there, of what? Of course, of love. Of the erotic. Metaphor: that which joins, that which announces connection, overlap, shared essence, and yet retains the actual distance between whatever objects it brings together.

The semicolon is metaphor's syntactic equivalent, marrying clauses with the very joint that holds them apart. It is the unveiling, if not of love's contents, then at least of love's architecture.

A ringing bell and a buzzer greets the silver ball as it slaps against the insides of the pinball machine. Brandon's fingers slap against the white buttons to send the ball crashing through. Few blunders stand in its way, and the black digital billboard above the glass case lights up with large, orange letters to announce his locked ball. He neglects his surroundings in favor of the black-sided tall and long machines. Brandon gets his next locked ball with precision, draws attention, and puts his initials—B. J. V.—up on the Grand Champion screen for *Simpson's Pinball Party*.

Dressed in tank tops or long sleeves, Brandon stands in the smoke-filled building of the Van Dyke Sports Center in Sterling Heights, Michigan. The clank of pool balls as they smack against the green felt sides of the tables barely makes it through the murky atmosphere of the sports center. There are numerous televisions that announce the latest Lions' loss or the chances of the Red Wings gaining reverence with another Stanley Cup win.

But Brandon's no where near the gambling pool players or the avid sports fans, but in the darkened, sectioned off portion of the building filled with video games like *Centipede* and *Killer Instinct*. He marks a striking difference from the burlesque sorts with cigarettes hanging from their mouths. Fair in coloring and thin in size, he looks his thirteen years of age as he bends over the pinball machine. Marco stands at the machine to Brandon's left, and looks nothing like his son. Unlike Brandon, Marco has black wavy hair, and only differs from the other men in lacking the stereotypical cigarette.

Blank in expression for the most part, Brandon's temper rears when his meticulous maneuvering of the ball ends between the white and black flippers. "Fuck," Brandon says, hands pounding on the glass. Numerous gazes drift in his direction as he spits out more profanity. He lashes at his surroundings—his dad, the machine, the guy standing next to him with the can of Mountain Dew—but it's clear he's taking out his anger on his personal imperfections. "My ball drained." Teary eyed, he shakes the machine; once amendable to him moving forward, it tilts and he loses his

second ball.

"We're going home now, Brandon," Marco says.

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They play almost every weekend after Brandon turns eight years old. Playing, like most things for Marco, becomes an obsession early on. His previous obsessions ranged from collecting baseball cards—he stopped after obtaining a Babe Ruth card—Super Nintendo Games—he especially loved *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*—and comic books—he preferred silver aged books. Brandon's mother, Carol, doesn't believe he'll sustain this obsession. He may not have if Brandon hadn't shown signs of becoming a prodigy.

Playing comes in slow steps for Brandon. The first games are short, with few free games, as he finds himself distracted and unnerved by flashing lights, loud sounds, and cigarette smoke. He covers his ears to avoid the sounds, mouth for the smoke, and closes his eyes. With time, he learns to play with squinted eyes and a clenched jaw.

After playing for a while, Brandon starts coming home and saying, "D'oh!" in a loud tone. This is the first of many catchphrases from *Simpson's Pinball Party* that enter his vocabulary.

"What?" Carol asks. Brandon's eyes twinkle and he repeats it again.

"I'm going to kill you Bart!" follows. Entranced by the sounds of the machines, he starts repeating words from *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, as well.

Since Brandon is quiet in his enthusiasm for pinball, Marco often serves as a mouthpiece for him. "He got his name up on two machines today" and "Brandon only put enough money for one game in and played for three hours" and "Brandon lost his temper and we had to cut it short again." With time, Marco appears to grow frustrated and jealous with his son's talent, but says it's Brandon's temper that makes him reluctant to continue playing. "I know he's better than me," he proclaims. "He pops more games than me and gets better shots. It's just the temper."

But Marco seems enthusiastic about his son's playing. Only Brandon listens to him as he babbles about Theater of Magic, Junkyard, and World Cup Soccer. Brandon looks at the printed out pictures of machines on wasted ink and paper, enjoys the game as much as his father, and even longs for smoke-filled rooms with half-broken machines.

While Brandon only smiles as the prospect of playing pinball, Marco bounces around the house when he has five dollars to spend. "We're going to play the pinnies!" he announces as if he's entered a trance. This excitement often vanishes if he comes home without popping a game.

Unlike his father, Brandon can keep a ball sweeping through a machine for over an hour without letting it drain. Catching attention from professional players is only natural, and so are the tournaments that follow. Brandon may be thirteen, but he's compared to Tommy the pinball wizard. He deserves this title because while he may not be deaf, dumb, or blind, he is autistic.

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There are two timelines for Brandon's life. The first follows his birth on April 15, 1994, the silent years afterward, the pneumonia, the seizure, and though unrelated, the eventual diagnosis of autism. He attends school at an Autistic Impaired program and eventually he's mainstreamed into special education classes prior to entering middle school.

There is a secondary timeline. It starts with his interest in balloons and water and ends with drains and pinball machines. Around age four, he forms an interest in things going down holes, and eventually decides that all holes are drains.

Everything produces drains. He spends years of his life creating them from toys with open slots or on pieces of paper. The paper often comes from the yellow pages or textbooks. Brandon would hunch over these books with a black ink pen and draw drains over the phone number

for Hungry Howie's Pizza. The drain, drawn as a circle with many lines, stretches over the advertisement and number.

He often forgot his birthday gifts of toy cars in favor of crayons, broken apart and used only for his artistry. The drains morphed as he grew older, gaining new models in squares, triangles, and octagons.

Another period of drain evolution comes on restaurant menus. He draws eyes peering out from the drains. "What're those eyes?" Carol would ask.

"Lizards!" Brandon would say. "There are lizards in the drains."

Experiments followed. Brandon would take an otherwise useless *Hot Wheels* car into the bathroom and shut the door behind him. Only caring about the drain in the toilet, he would reach through the water and place the car into the hole before proceeding to flush multiple times. Afterward, plumbers came out once a week for six months until his parents realized their error. They fixed it with a lock on the wooden door that kept Brandon out of the bathroom long enough to realize it was wrong to destroy the plumbing.

Pinball was a reversal of this drain fascination. Instead of watching objects slide down a drain, he worked on stopping silver balls from doing that very thing. Every pinball machine had a built in drain. Brandon had to conquer its power. He'd spent several years of his life figuring out drains; he'd spend the next several years resisting their call to perfect pinball playing.

--

Brandon continues school like most kids, and also comes to hate it—like most kids. Here he advances forward—he learns to read, starts to speak up, and earns as when he's not too lazy for homework. Because of school, he acts like an almost-adolescent boy, ditching homework for playing outside as if math problems make his life difficult. Attending separates him from pinball filled weekends where he becomes a celebrity

at the Sports Center and local laundry mats.

"I'm too lazy" becomes his new catchphrase.

"I guess you're too lazy to play pinball this weekend," Carol retorts, manipulating him to do homework, chores, and pull the ingredients out of the fridge and cupboards for dinner.

It may seem as if Brandon hasn't made progress, but he lengthens his sentences and embraces teenage angst. At thirteen, he has his first crush, a girl named Brittany with short brown hair. Just as he would go around the house announcing information about drains and lizards, he repeats her name as if he's under her spell.

Homework remains difficult because of his laziness and "hard life." Fall, winter, and spring are the months where he plays his interactive computer pinball game on Carol and Marco's black Dell Dimension. Though Brandon claims to be lazy, he spends more time on this game learning how to perfect his score through cheating than on his arithmetic problems. But proper guilt tripping by Carol sends him from the computer to the kitchen to drop down at the gray kitchen-table with his homework for the day. The homework is difficult for him, but it's clear that once he gets past his whining, he'll know how to do it.

And in the end, Brandon may find the trials of life more difficult because of his autism, but he still plays a mean pinball.

LAURA CHANDLER SMITH

An Extra Car For Harry Backlund

I love life. Not just as a yummy breakfast cereal, but as a board game, too. In fact, ever since I played it for the first time at a sleepover with my cousin in third grade, Life has been my very favorite board game. Before that it was Chutes and Ladders: something about the notion that the spin of a spinner was all that lay between transgression and fun seemed very real to me as a child, but Life bewitched me at the age of nine, stirring my imagination like it had never been stirred before. It wasn't a rush like that of endless possibility, because by then I was old enough to realize that in reality, there had to be more to life than accounting or superstardom; the magic for me was in how vividly I could see it all, limited as it was. I could see the job, I could see the house (always the Tudor), I could see the kids (Alistair, Davina, Ginevra, and Julian), and I could see myself winning a fifty thousand dollar dance contest. Perhaps most vividly of all, I could imagine the man of my dreams in the pale blue peg stuck in the hole next to mine in the roof of our green plastic station wagon, and since seventh grade, that smooth little man-peg was Harry Backlund.

In my day, the timeless thirteen-year-old's struggle to balance burgeoning feelings of independence with the insatiable desire to be liked manifested itself as an awkward, two-grade school that was largely divided between punks and posers. Most of us listened to Good Charlotte. Some of us were lucky enough to go to their concert, and as the lead singer looked out over the crowded mosh and sang, "Do you really wanna be part of the crowd?" there was a collective roar of "No!" whose solidarity would have brightened the day of even the glummiest of fascist dictators. Thus Harry Backlund, with his sandy brown hair and standard blue eyes, patently preppy clothes, and good-boy academia, was an object of ridicule amongst everyone outside that small circle of sickeningly cool individuals that no one but over-forties referred to as "the 'in' group."

But scoff-worthy though he was, he was irresistible to me. As seventh grade passed oh-so-thrillingly into eighth, I was every day more delighted to find myself in his company as his best friend and I became

best friends, too. And so while we were usually a jolly group of three or more, and while I could never quite look at him as just a friend, sometimes just Harry and I were friends—awkward, uneven friends, but friends nonetheless.

And as we became friends, I got a better idea of what I was dealing with, and it wasn't exactly what you'd expect. He was handsome, honest, laconic and cool, sometimes clueless, and sometimes frustratingly boring. But he had integrity, and sharpish eyes and a smallish mouth and sometimes, when something was so funny that he couldn't play it cool, he'd double up in laughter, and all kinds of dimples would come out of the woodwork of his face, and his mouth looked silly, all stretched and misshapen, because it simply wasn't big enough to handle hilarity of that scale. He didn't attract me in those moments, I loved him willingly.

That muted sort of longing aside, as months went by my friendship with Harry was one of my favorite things about life. I was something of a new kid in that group of friends, but they were funny and entirely good-natured and honest, and I was, I think, the only one who made me feel like I didn't quite belong. Furthermore, I was happily exempted from a majority of the vicious politics of junior high, as people and friendships grew and changed, and people went for gossip like it was money. And though I had plenty of unrequited woes of my own, a smidgen of painful humiliation was avoided in that I never presumed he felt the same. And yet, if I was honest with myself, deep down I had trouble believing that he couldn't.

I thought he was the best boy. Ever. No qualifications. And maybe I wasn't as pretty or as skinny or as cool as the girls he went out with, and maybe I embarrassed myself, a lot, but I was original and sincere—I had a brain and lots of feelings, and between all that I knew what I was about. And it's not like I was a total loss in the looks department.

But the indignant tone is largely a superimposition cast in hindsight. At the time I couldn't fault him for not liking me. He had something about him that I simply didn't. Maybe it was the ability to hold back.

Every time life gave me a good idea I kept it, in a mental container whose physical counterpart would have been a collection of cool rocks and pretty pebbles. I treasured them, my thoughts were my darlings, and I was like a proud parent who couldn't resist showing them off at every opportunity.

Harry had darling thoughts too, I could tell. Maybe he didn't dote on them as vainly as I did, but he had them, and sometimes, when we were engaged in creative pursuits or what my friend Davita calls "deep chats," our darling thoughts would play together, and even though he was perhaps smarter than I was, our ideas mingled as equals. And as foolish as I made myself in wishing he was mine, I think it did me some good. Harry Backlund made me humble, and he made me like it

After a few years, though, the absence of reciprocity began to eat at me from within. I moved in with my sister in Maine for the summer before my junior year, in order to prescind from several things, including him. It worked fairly well, I came back in September feeling nicely grown. I still thought it would be lovely to kiss him, but I no longer *felt* it. I was perfectly happy to be his friend.

Once again I was unrequited, and now it stung in a way it never had before. Harry barely spoke to me, and never unless I'd spoken first. Not even to say hi while passing in the hallway. Maybe I had changed, but he had changed. Always a good runner, he was now an all-out track star; always a musician, he was now a god; and always a smart guy, the history teacher now called him out to the hallway when giving back exams, presumably to tell him how brilliant he was, while I, her TA, was forced to type up his in-class essays. I'm not going to lie, it was bitter work, but his star just kept on rising.

By senior year, pretty much everyone, including many of the same people who once snickered at him for being something of a parody of himself, talked about him with reverence. My feelings therein no longer smarted, and I felt good about myself and undiminished by his

illustriousness, but when Ms. Landreau, the twelfth grade history teacher, asked me to type up an essay and pulled his out of the pile I put my foot down. I couldn't help it. I told her in a few brief sketches my feelings about Harry Backlund and his essays, and to my intense relief she seemed utterly unperturbed. His was just one of the best, she told me, and pulled out one which happened to be by our mutual best friend, and though Nick and I had drifted considerably in the past year or so, it was in a natural, friendly way. I was perfectly glad to type up his essay.

Now Harry and I had two classes together, and his behavior towards me, or lack thereof, had passed cold and was approaching bizarre. He ignored me, to such an extent that other people noticed, and when forced to talk to me for whatever reason, he looked at me like we'd never even met. Sometimes I'd say something to him, or ask him a question, and he'd not so much as look up from what he was doing. At which point I officially couldn't believe him, and decided to let it go.

Even supposing I could look around the elephant of my own bitter feelings, I couldn't like the new and improved Harry Backlund. His laconic grace had crusted over into standoffishness: he didn't deign to speak as much in class, and when he did he smirked a lot more than before. It was a fine-looking smirk, to be sure, one I rather envied in fact, but it wasn't as funny as his laugh. And that was about all I could say, really, because I could no longer get close enough to judge him without suffering the slightly nonplussed, devastatingly superior expression I had once affectionately deemed the Look of Death. I still called it that, I just felt no affection.

Little though he mattered to me, as senior year wore on Harry Backlund was the original chunk of ice in my snowballing sense of purpose. Contrary to popular belief, he was only human, and I began to think longingly of proving it. Moments of satisfaction peppered my experience that year. I was always eager to find out how I did on biology tests, for instance, and I didn't care if the teacher got the wrong idea. I wasn't in it for the grade—I was in it to learn, and to know more—

specifically, to know more than Harry Backlund, and nothing gave me joy like those occasions when I knew that it had been my score which set the curb, that at the very least we'd tied.

For reasons occult to me, in the second half of the year Harry slowly seemed to be phasing in a program of acknowledgment where I was concerned, but I didn't really care. The old Harry was dead, and the Boring Bug and the Arrogantfly had mated and laid their eggs in the shell where he used to be. So it appeared to me, at least. More than his brain, or his guitar, or the look on his face right before he laughed, what I had loved the most in him was the fact that when given the choice between doing the right thing—the kind thing, and looking good, Harry generally did the right thing. At the end of the day I knew it wasn't a crime to ignore me, or even to despise me, and maybe Harry was still doing the right thing, I didn't really know him. All I knew was that now he always looked good.

I can hardly think of our old friendship without a moment of silence, and the truth is that I miss it. I think I loved him, as much as love can exist when it's only half there. I adored him, I admired him, I trusted in his honesty and his integrity; I have found nothing to replace him.

Not that I'm wallowing in *weltschmerz* or anything. Far from it, my amazement in life is alive and healthier than ever. I imagine the future with relish, and while I haven't got all the details worked out, I have a goal in mind: whether through fame, fortune, or supreme and enviable happiness, I intend to beat Harry Backlund.

My cousin and I still have sleepovers from time to time, and, grown-ups that we are, we play *Life* until the wee hours of the morning. I'm still the green car and she's still the blue, but now I stick a little peg in the white car and put that one in play as well.

"What's that for?" she asked, the first time I did it.

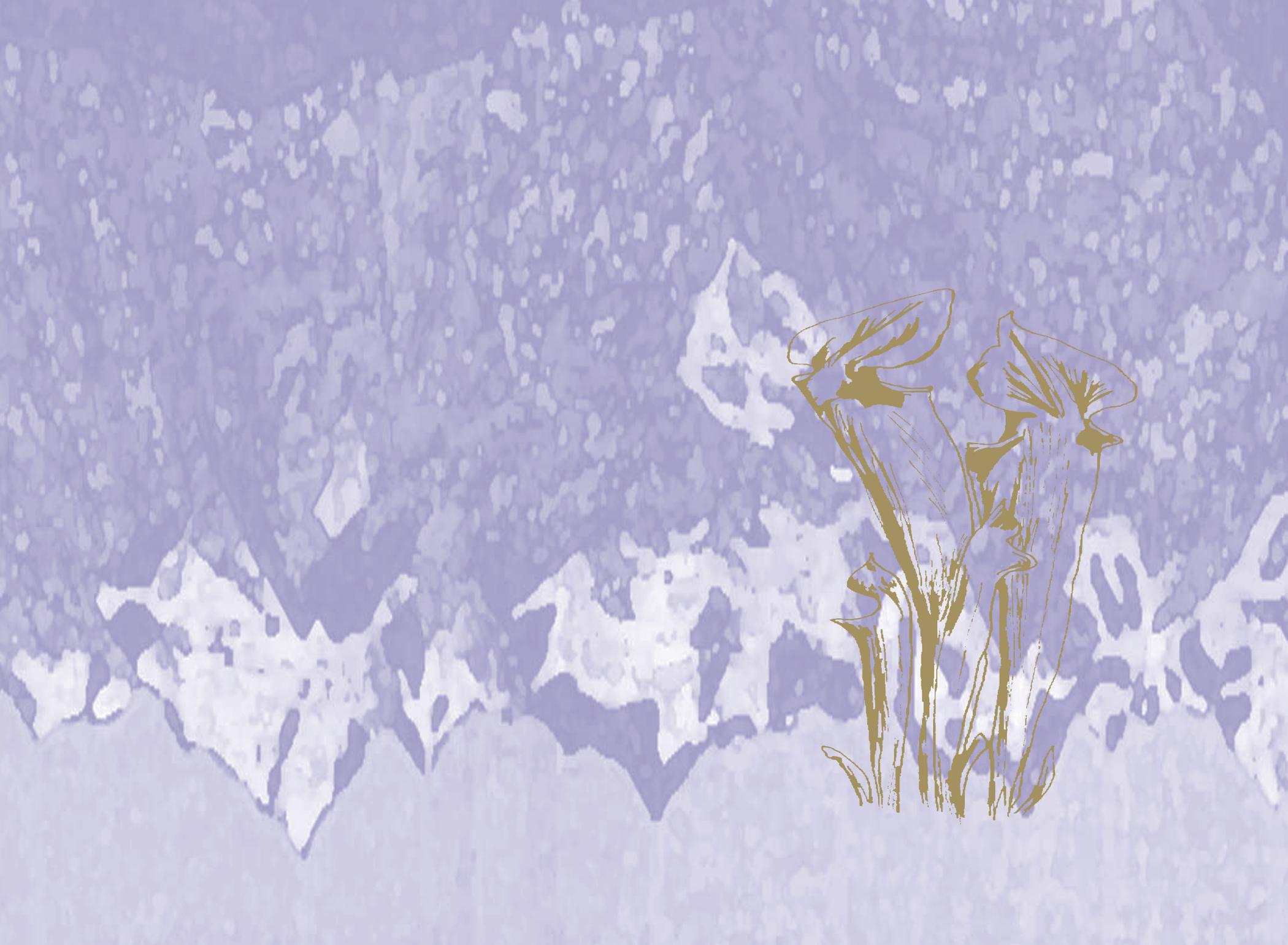
"Harry Backlund," I said.

"Why?"

I smiled. "Because that's how I'll know if I've won."

One-Act Plays





EMILE JONES

The essay formally known as craft:

A Play In One Act

LIST OF CHARACTERS

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR:

An almost retired dramatic writing professor who loves Aristotle and needs a break from work.

EMILIE:

A student struggling to write her craft essay. She is easily pressured by her fellow classmates.

MARY:

A student struggling to write her craft essay. She tries to take control of situations and is known for her "MaryPope" glare.

LYNDSEY:

A student struggling to write her craft essay. She's sweet and knows what her wants. She's a natural born leader.

CATHERINE:

A student really struggling to write her craft essay. A follower. Brilliant but not always the brightest crayon in the box when it comes to common sense. She's Canadian.

FIRST-YEAR:

Work-study student in the Creative Writing department.

SET

A classroom in the creative writing wing of Wallaby Hall at Martha Davis College, an all women's institution.

TIME

The final moments of the final class of the final semester of the final year of the four over-worked, somewhat lazy students.

SETTING:

The classroom of a tired man. It is set up not in a novice professor lecture style, as it would have in his earlier years, but instead in a disjointed semi-circle. He wears a bow tie, tweed jacket, white collared shirt, brown slacks, one brown sock, and one black sock, and brown loafers. He is the only person in theatre who is aware of his sock color infidelity. Only four of the desks are filled with bodies eager to learn. The rest will remain the vacant reminder, to the professor as keeping his touch, and to the four remaining students as a painful tribute of the pitfalls of higher education. The walls of the classroom are devoted the professor's love for the Aristotelian principles as well as his books which have not been touched in years except for a selected few which he has loaned out to exceptional students. There is one door out and one door in, these are the same.

AT RISE:

The professor, DR. KENNETH TAYLOR, writes on the invisible chalkboard aptly placed on the fourth wall. Four students sit with at least two desks between one student and the next. The students, MARY, LYNDSEY, CATHERINE, and EMILIE, all sit and pay the most careful attention to their most feared professor. There is also a clock on the fourth wall and a large lamp on DR. TAYLOR's desk.

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

(showing the signs of a wearied man)

And so, I offer you congratulations for making this far in Advanced Creative Writing. However, I would advise you to not take this offer because--

(looking at the clock on the wall)

--we still have fourteen minutes and twelve seconds of class time remaining on our hands and one final assignment to hand in.

(The students glance at one another.)

CATHERINE

(mouthing)

No!

(DR. TAYLOR notices this.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

Is there a problem, Ms. Boyle?

CATHERINE

(quickly, trying to stay out of trouble)

I didn't do anything! What?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

I wonder if the dreadful face which you just construed was in regards to the final assignment that I just mentioned or if it was in regards to the precious time you have left in my class.

CATHERINE

Both!

(she pauses)

I mean neither!

(she pauses)

I mean neither!

(she pause again, grappling for the right words)

I'm sorry. It's just that I have written a forty-nine-page hybrid between a graphic novel and lyrical poetry and now I still have to prove its value by writing even more about it.

MARY

Yeah, you're trying to make us write it to death!

(The door to the classroom opens and a FIRST-YEAR walks in lugging a huge book in her hands.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

Interesting. Write to death! Hold that thought, Ms. Pope.

(The FIRST-YEAR finally makes her way to the professor.)

FIRST-YEAR

(gasping and trying to her breath)

Where--

(gasp)

do--

(gasp)

you--

(gasp)

want--

(DR. TAYLOR grabs the huge bound essay from the girl.)

FIRST-YEAR

I don't get paid enough for this. I hate work-study. I had to carry that big book up eleven flights of stairs--

(DR. TAYLOR is pushing the FIRST-YEAR to the door while she is blabbering on.)

FIRST-YEAR

--and for what? Five bucks and eighty-five cents an hour before taxes, that's what! I'm living below the poverty line! If I fell carrying that monstrous book up the stairs I probably wouldn't even have gotten workman's comp! I'm sick of--

(DR. TAYLOR slams the door on the FIRST-YEAR.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

(to himself)

She'll most likely be in here one day.

(sighing)

When that time comes, I'll retire.

(He holds his huge craft essay to his chest for a moment as if it is a sacred text.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

Now!

(He then slams down his 767 page craft essay in the middle of the semi-circle.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

The Craft Essay! This is the pinnacle of your career as an undergrad! It was my crowning achievement! This is your chance to be as pretentious as you want and tell your superiors just how smart you think that you are!

EMILIE

But, I thought--

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

You thought what, Ms. Jones?

EMILIE

I thought that our craft essay was just to let you know how we went about writing our final project and what inspired us?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

(brushing her off)

Of course it is for that, too.

LYNDSEY

You know that we can write. You've seen my poetry, Mary's non-fiction short stories, Cat's graphic poetry novel thing, and Emilie's teleplay. Why do you want to know what we think of our stuff?

MARY

Isn't that for the Lit crit students to do?

CATHERINE

She's right.

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

But don't you want the faculty to know of your brilliance?

MARY

I don't think that we really care that much.

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

You care, Ms. Pope. You have to. Everyone cares what others think about your work. Even if you profess that you don't care, you do. It's human nature. I do and I'm one of three people in the world who's an expert in the usage of sound in Robert Frost poetry. One of three! I'm invited to a symposium every year because people think I'm brilliant and I still care what others think about my work!

(He takes a moment to pause after his outbreak. The students do not seem impressed.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

You students will write this essay. It doesn't have to be as prolific as mine. And I assume it will not be.

(letting out a pompous laugh)

But each and everyone one of you will write it!

(CATHERINE stands up to orate to the class.)

LYNSDEY

But--

CATHERINE

(clearing her throat)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

No, buts! You must complete this assignment. It is essential to your creative writing education. It is the culmination of all you've learned.

A good essay does not a good drama make!

(The students laugh.)

CATHERINE

Isn't the culmination of our creative writing education to produce a piece of creative writing?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

What's a thesis but a dramatic question!

EMILIE

An essay isn't drama.

(The students stop laughing and stare at their teacher.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

By the way you students are acting, you could have fooled me!

MARY

(laughing)

EMILIE

What I mean is that an essay doesn't have the same elements as great drama.

And I suppose the inciting incident is what? The opening paragraph?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

You're finally starting to learn! The last five minutes of your last day and you're beginning to learn, Ms. Pope. It seems that I am the protagonist

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

It most certainly does!

and that you, faithful students, are my antagonists. You will write your craft essay.

CATHERINE

Can't we borrow some of your's?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

(not laughing with the students)

No, you can't.

(LYNDSEY raises her hand. The other students stare at her.

No one ever raises their hand in his class.)

LYNDSEY

Whatever is in that book doesn't change the way your creative work is perceived.

(The students pause and look down at his huge craft essay.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

You're right. But everything in that book--

(pointing to the book)

--changes the way I read my work. And if that's all I get out of it. That's enough. And then some.

(He glances at his watch.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

Okay, here's what we'll do. I'm going to leave to classroom. You all are to compose a craft essay together.

(The students begin to smile.)

LYNDSEY

Together?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

Yes, Ms. McAdams. Together, I want you women to create the most dramatically satisfying combination craft essay possible.

EMILIE

Combination?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

All of you working together.

CATHERINE

But, look how big your book is! And you want four people to do one!

MARY

It'll kill the first-year for sure.

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

Well, since all you students think that your craft essay should be short then I want you to give me the TV Guide version!

CATHERINE

Huh?

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

A craft essay in one sentence! You have five minutes! Remember that "brevity is the soul of wit."

(He winds a white kitchen timer to five minutes. LYNDSEY gets up out of her desk.)

LYNDSEY

That's impossible!

(The professor heads to the door.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

You students waste away for simplicity. Here you go! Take it! It's yours!

(He exits and the girls stare at each other.)

EMILIE

There's no way.

MARY

True. And why did he just quote John Donne. That didn't even make sense.

(The door opens again and the professor sticks his head back in the classroom.)

DR. KENNETH TAYLOR

No one passes this class until I get the essay! Hurry your time is running out! Remember, nothing is as important as this craft essay. Nothing!

(He shuts the door again. The students just sit there, shocked at their usually stern professor. Finally after they waste about thirty seconds staring at each other.)

CATHERINE

(quickly)

So, what do we do?

EMILIE

I guess we have to talk about how we are influenced and how we approached our work.

MARY

Yeah, and we have to do it in about four minutes and thirteen seconds.

EMILIE

Ok. How about we all write down why we started writing, what influences us, and how we approached our creative pieces. Then we'll try to put it all together! Quick!

(The girls all seat down and pick up their pens. No one writes. They simply sit. Finally, LYNDSEY gets up and starts to wander around the room, searching for inspiration. The other girls quickly follow suit. MARY and CATHERINE bump into each other.)

MARY

Cat! Watch where you are going!

CATHERINE

Sorry! You got anything yet?

MARY

No.

(The girls continue walking around the room. Finally, with three minutes on the clock the girls begin to write.)

CATHERINE

(mockingly)

Nothing else matters!

(she pauses)

What a load of bull! If we don't finish this then there is nothing afterwards? Blackout? The end? I don't think so!

EMILIE

Cat! Write!

(Time passes. LYNDSEY trips on the Dr. Taylor's massive craft essay in the center of the room.)

MARY

Oh, dramatic irony!

(After about a minute to girls one by one lift their pencils. CATHERINE is the last one to finish.)

LYNDSEY

Okay! Let's pass them around and read them!

(The girls pass around their papers. They are all standing now.)

CATHERINE

Okay. Here's Mary's! She decided that she wanted to write non-fiction when she realized that she didn't have the most down to earth family.

LYNDSEY

Mary, no one's family is down to earth!

CATHERINE

I'm not so sure that qualifies as a reason to start writing. Now if you were an alcoholic, heroin addict, manic-depressant at the age of fourteen then I would say, "That girl must be a writer!"

MARY

What? That's absurd! Not all writers are alcoholics!

EMILIE

Yeah, but it sure helps your street cred.

LYNDSEY

True!

(The girls laugh and look at the clock.)

LYNDSEY

Ahh! Two minutes and four seconds left! Everyone! Get serious!

MARY

Okay. Let's just read one. And then we'll try to make the one-sentence craft essay.

CATHERINE

Ooh!

(She pauses. The girls wait for her to say something.)

LYNDSEY

Yes, Cat?

CATHERINE

How about we play like 'interrogation' or something!

MARY

Huh?

(CATHERINE grabs EMILIE and throws her down in a chair. She grabs a lamp off of DR. TAYLOR's desk and shines it in EMILIE's face.)

CATHERINE

What's your most influential piece of literature that you've ever read?

(LYNDSEY and MARY laugh and join in on the fun.)

EMILIE

Uh.

MARY

Hurry, Jones. Time is a wasting.

EMILIE

Probably, Ayn Rand's *The Anthem*. Or maybe Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

LYNDSEY

Why?

EMILIE

I don't know. Because they're both amazing.

MARY

(frustrated)

Great! I can see our one sentence craft essay.

(she pretends to read a paper)

"Tony Kushner is an inspirational force in my life and my life of writing."

(looking at EMILIE)

Lame!

EMILIE

Well, I don't know why I have to be the one being interrogated!

(She starts to get up. MARY pushes her back into the chair.)

EMILIE

Ouch.

(rubbing her back)

That hurt.

CATHERINE

What has inspired you in your life?

EMILIE

I don't know. Everything, I guess.

LYNDSEY

You need to be specific!

MARY

Give us a moment when you were truly inspired. From your childhood perhaps.

EMILIE

Uh. Hang on.

(thinking)

Okay! I got it! When I was about seven my family went out to dinner at a local pizza place. And it was crowded and noisy. It was the most popular place in our small town so everyone you've ever met and their mothers were at the restaurant. My mom, dad, and ten year-old brother were busy talking to their friends leaving me, as always with the "babies", my three year-old sister and four year-old brother. When all of a sudden my mom came up to me and told my Dad that she and I had to leave the restaurant and that he needed to take care of the other kids. My mom and I walked out the front door. "Where are we going I asked?" With four kids, my mom never had time for just me.

LYNDSEY

So, where'd you go?

EMILIE

Hang on. I'm getting there. So, we get in the car and drive to a near-by college. We walked into what my mother told me was a black box theatre and watched a production of *The Glass Menagerie*.

MARY

So, how is an overly dramatic, Tennessee Williams' play inspirational?

EMILIE

At the age of seven, I felt like I was entering the adult world. These people smoked onstage! I mean really smoked on stage. I watched an alternate, grown-up world in front of my eyes.

(thinking back)

I don't remember how well done the production was. I guess it doesn't matter. But I do remember being invited into that older world.

(laughing)

"I descended the steps of the fire escape one last time. But I didn't go to the movies. I went much further than that. For time is the greatest distance between two places." It's remarkable what stays with a person through the years.

(The students smile and then notice the clock-biting zero.)

EMILIE

Oh no! What do we do! I wasted all the time talking about something as unimportant as a theatre outing.

(The professor's footsteps are heard ascending the stairs.)

MARY

What do we do?

CATHERINE

What will we say?

LYNDSEY

Emilie, you talk! He likes you!

EMILIE

I don't know what to say to the man! I still have about a year's worth of revisions at least! And even after that I won't be done with it! I need to beef up my teleplay! It's not good yet but maybe one day it will be! The craft essay? I just don't know how to put it into words! I can't define everything that has influenced me that would take years! That would take--

(struggling to pick up her Professor's 767 page craft essay)

--767 pages to adequately define every moment of my life!

(The door handle begins to jiggle. The professor is about to enter.)

CATHERINE

What are we going to do?

MARY

Barricade the door!

LYNDSEY

What! We can't do that! We aren't at war!

(CATHERINE has already run to the door and is bracing herself against it.)

MARY

(joining CATHERINE at the door)

Yes, we are! And we're going to lose unless you tell him our craft essay, TV Guide, one sentence!

(LYNDSEY runs to the door to help brace it.)

EMILIE

But! Why me--

LYNDSEY

Stop asking why you! Why not you? Just do it, Emilie!

(EMILIE takes a deep breath. Has her creative writing career lead up to this moment? Has her life lead up to this defining moment? Is this the climax? It must be everyone is

speaking in (!)s.)

EMILIE

(yelling, caught up in the action)

Our one sentence craft essay is--

(The scene freezes. The door is halfway open and DR. TAYLOR's body is almost all the way in the room. CATHERINE has fallen on the ground but MARY and LYNDSEY are still trying to push the door closed. EMILIE moves her head and realizes that she's the only one not frozen in the tableau of 'The Great Craft Essay War.' She looks around the room. Has higher education sunk to this she wonders?)

EMILIE

(looking back an the scene)

Do I come up with a--

(imitating DR. TAYLOR)

"one sentence craft sentence, the TV Guide version"?

(addressing the audience)

Does it matter? What does matter?

(EMILIE begins her great monologue like the one Tom leaves us with in The Glass Menagerie or Prior in Angels in America or the speech my mother gave me before she left me at college.)

EMILIE

What matter's to your audience is purely your work. What you produce. Did it make them laugh? Did it them cry? Did it make them question the world in which they live? Did it make "the strange familiar and the familiar strange?" What matter's to the author is something more personal. It can't be duplicated, re-imagined, or relayed. It's for you and only you. That's the art! That's the--

(BLACKOUT. Nothing is left.)

(Lights up on an empty living room. The table is set for 10 with what appears to be very good china, but there is a pile of napkins resting over one of the tall chair's backs, as though someone had to dash off in the midst of placing them on the table. There is a bottle of wine on the table, but it is already half gone, and the cork is lying next to it on the table, staining the tablecloth red. Also, on the floor to the upstage right side of the table, what used to be a loaf of bread lays scattered and shredded on the floor; there is evidence of some very sharp little puppy teeth in the way the bag is torn.)

Lisa: *(Offstage)* Mom! Mom? Dad? I'm here! Helloooooooooooooo?
Aristotle! Come here, buddy! *(There is silence)*

Mom?

(Lisa enters through a doorway upstage left. She is an average girl on almost every count, neither thin nor fat, tall nor short. Extremely dark hair and eyes, and her hair is long and a bit tangled. She looks puzzled. When she sees the napkins over the chair, she almost automatically walks over and begins to place them next to the plates, but she stops when she sees the bag of bread. She sighs and bends down (inadvertently crouching below the table) to pick up the bread. Mom enters with an empty glass of wine with her lipstick on the rim, and begins to search for the napkins where they were, puzzled at their disappearance. Lisa stands up with the bread, and Mom lets out a scream of surprise, causing Lisa to gasp as well and drop the bread.)

Mom: Jesus! You scared me half to death! I didn't even know you were here, honey. Why didn't you yell out or something?

Lisa: Geez, Mom! I did yell out, a whole bunch of times. Sorry I scared you. Where is everybody? I thought I was gonna be late.

Mom: Your father is sleeping in front of the TV pretending to watch football so he doesn't have to help in the kitchen, Aunt Ruth had a food order mix-up to sort out and is still in Columbia, your grandparents are both not feeling well and are saying it's too cold to come over, the neighbors we invited had to go out of town suddenly—someone's cousin died, or something like that—and no one has heard from your sister

since three days ago... I can only hope she's on her way, but she's not answering her phone. Anyway, I'm glad you're here... can you start cutting up some onions for me?

Lisa: Mom! It's my birthday! I don't want to cut onions on my birthday, I hate—

Mom: Oh my God, it's your birthday! I completely forgot, pumpkin! Happy birthday!

Lisa: *(Jokingly)* I would think that you, of all people, would remember!!

Mom: Oh, I know, but there was just so much to do, and so many people coming, it completely slipped my mind. I'm so sorry. What do you want for your birthday?

Lisa: Well, I don't want to slice up onions, that's for sure. Besides, they make my eyes water, which fu— *(catches herself)* messes with my contact lenses, and I always cut myself with the knife.

Mom: You're a big girl now, it'll be different this year. *(Lisa rolls her eyes)* Anyway, let's just finish up dinner and get everything in the oven, and then we'll work on doing something special for your birthday.

Lisa: *(A little resentfully)* Fine. Just let me finish cleaning up this bread.

Mom: What bread?

Lisa: I don't know. You must have left the bag too close to the edge of the counter... Aristotle is short, but he can jump pretty high. Anyway, it's all over the floor over here.

Mom: *(Gasps in dismay)* He didn't! Good thing your father didn't find this. *(Runs off through the door, calling back over her shoulder)* Stupid dog's probably off somewhere eating the rest of the loaf right now, which he's just going to throw up tonight at 5 am when I've finally gotten to

sleep. Start the onions, will you, Skippy?

(Lisa sighs and picks up the rest of the bread, exiting through the door to throw it away. The phone rings... a cacophony of different sounds erupt as what sounds like 6 different ring tones sing out from 6 different phones placed throughout the rest of the "house." A Man's voice yells, "Will somebody get that?!" And the ringing stops. We hear the sound of chopping on a cutting board after that, and then...)

Lisa: Shit! Shit! I knew it, I just fucking knew it! Shit! *(She comes running on clutching her finger, dripping blood on the tablecloth and the floor as she searches for a napkin. Finding one, she wraps it around her finger and sits, disgusted, in one of the chairs. Dad enters behind her, unseen.)*

Dad: Happy Birthday, Skippy!

Lisa: *(Startled, she jumps)* Jeeeesu—you scared me!

Dad: Sorry. What happened to your hand? I walked through the kitchen, and there was blood all over the cutting board! I hoped your mother had finally given it up and sacrificed the dog. I didn't even know you were home.

Lisa: It's just my finger—I cut myself slicing up the onions.

Dad: Don't you do that every year?

Lisa: Thanks for pointing that out there, Dad. Yes, I do do this every year, and yes, I'm fine, by the way, in case you were worried.

Dad: *(He notices the table for the first time, accusingly...)* You got blood all over the tablecloth. And is that a napkin around your finger? *(When she nods, he criticizes...)* Honey! Why did you run in here?!

Lisa: *(Defensively)* I was pretty much just concentrating on stopping the bleeding! Besides, we're out of paper towels, and someone forgot to replace the roll!

Dad: Don't look at me, that's your mother's job.

(Mom enters holding the phone in one hand, the dog—a fat dachshund—in the other)

Mom: *(Blowing into the room, very angry)* Well, that's it... Allison isn't coming.

Dad: WHAT?!

Mom: *(Ignoring him, focusing all her attention on Lisa)* She finally had the courtesy to call and tell me this, two hours AFTER she's supposed to be here! I can't believe this! How can she not come home for Thanksgiving? And Skippy's birthday?! She and Andrew are in Pennsylvania with his family! How DARE she pull a stunt like this?!

Lisa: Don't yell at me, ma. I'm the one who's here.

Dad: *(Pacing angrily)* She just doesn't care. She's ruined Thanksgiving, and she just doesn't care. She doesn't give a damn about this family anymore. She's going off to grad school, this is the last Thanksgiving we all would've had together before she goes off to Costa Rica or God knows where to study turtles or whatever, and she can't even have the decency to show up? Or even to bother to call us in advance?!

Lisa: She told me.

Mom: *(Flabbergasted)* What? When? Why didn't you tell me?!

Lisa: She didn't want me to tell you guys because she didn't want you guys to bug her every day for the next month until she gave in and came home for Thanksgiving; she said that we'd all be better off and more relaxed without her here anyway, and that she wanted to spend Thanksgiving with Andrew's family. I mean, I can't even really blame her... Andrew's family is so nice and normal.

Dad: We're normal!

Lisa: You're kidding, right?

Dad: No—what's wrong with us?

Lisa: I hate to be the one to break it to you guys, but we are probably

about as messed up as they come, and Thanksgiving is the time it all comes out. Thanksgiving is the most stressful day of the year for me. *(They react with surprise and protest)* Think about it—we're a bunch of noisy crazies getting together and playing the *(in a childish voice)* "I'm thankful for my mommy and daddy and this yummy food" game... I don't even think Yiayia and Paupou understand how Thanksgiving actually started. Did you even celebrate Thanksgiving growing up, Dad?

Dad: We celebrated something, sure, but no one really understood the pilgrims and turkey tradition. Actually, most of us ate lamb or ham (although I think your Yiayia made a little turkey for her), and we talked about Greek politics or 'Da Bears' rather than sharing what we were thankful for.

Lisa: My point exactly.

Dad: I do worry that you and Allison missed out on understanding the importance of big family celebrations like Thanksgiving, though. I just can't even believe she's not here... I don't care that she's celebrating Thanksgiving differently, I just hate that she's not here for our family celebration. It's not the holiday, but the gathering itself. To tell the truth, I probably wouldn't even really celebrate Thanksgiving now if it weren't for your mother loving it so much. *(Mom gives him a startled look but doesn't respond until she answers Lisa's question)*

Lisa: But Mom, is this anything like the Thanksgivings you had growing up?

Mom: Well... no, not really. We always had a huge houseful of people in a tiny house, for one, and we all helped in the kitchen, for another. I always peeled the potatoes and sliced the onions when I was a kid (I stood on a chair to reach the sink), and I was so proud when I'd see those things is the dishes Mom cooked! Mom always cooked traditional Thanksgiving food, which is almost impossible to do in this family because everyone likes different foods and things. Thanksgiving was about nurturing the

people you love when I was little, but now that I have my own house, it seems like there's no one living here who needs or wants nurturing!

Lisa: You see what I mean? And think about how stressful Thanksgiving is for you... you have to cook for a million different dietary needs because our family is so ridiculous. Think about it: Dad's allergic to garlic, Grandma's allergic to gluten, Paupou's diabetic, Allison doesn't eat pork, Aunt Ruth is lactose intolerant, and Yiayia is just going to criticize whatever you cook anyway! Just thinking about it makes me want to blow my brains out, and all I have to do is chop onions!

Mom: Yes, but I just look on that as a culinary challenge. It doesn't make me hate the holiday! I can't believe you don't like Thanksgiving!

Lisa: Thanksgiving is just an excuse for everyone to have to say something nice about each other, to eat too much, and then to sit around watching football for the rest of the day. I hate football! Besides, think about it from my perspective... today's my birthday. And you didn't even remember. You're too stressed out with all your cooking and your planning and your missing daughter and your delinquent dog to even remember my birthday! And this happens what, every four years? Every four years I don't get to celebrate my birthday with my family because everyone's too busy being so damn thankful! *(She is worked up now)* And you know something else? I hate turkey!!!! Yup. I think it's disgusting and dry and not worth all the fuss. Just because the pilgrims weren't smart enough to bring any delicious pigs or cows with them on the Mayflower, I have to suffer through turkey every single year. And not just turkey, but cranberries, and stuffing, and sweet potatoes! Fuck it all! I hate this stupid, made-up holiday.

(Long pause)

Mom: I'm sorry I forgot your birthday, Skippy.

Lisa: *(Exploding again)* You're missing the point! I don't care if we celebrate my birthday with fireworks and a party at Buckingham Palace, I just

want to be with my family on my birthday, not stressed out, not angry at everyone, not avoiding all our real issues, not even being forced to say nice things about each other, just being together and enjoying each other's company. But that's impossible in this family. I don't blame Allison at all for choosing Andrew's family over this crazy house... I wish I were with John and his wonderful, normal, loving family right now at his grandparent's farm enjoying a delicious, Southern meal that's just like every other meal in that house, not some contrived imitation of a meal that may or may not have even happened somewhere in the bowels of history! *(She pauses for a minute, then continues calmly)* Look, I'm sorry to just explode everywhere like this, but I just can't take it anymore. We don't ever fucking talk in this family. We sit around and eat turkey and watch football, and no one ever says anything worth remembering. My sister is an anorexic, suicidal walking time bomb, you two have been on the verge of divorce for years now, and I am a basket case just trying to live up to your absurd expectations of who I should be... I'm sick of trying to be the A+ student who never says boo. I'm sick of cleaning up bread and cutting up onions, and sick of watching football. I'm sick of trying to hold this family together when no one will even fucking remember my birthday. I'm sick of it. *(Quietly, with great resolve.)* I can't do it anymore. I won't.

(The oven timer dings in the kitchen. Mom and Dad both come to themselves, and Mom hands the dog to Lisa and bustles out of the room, while Dad picks up a wine glass from the dinner table and pours himself a glass of wine. Awkward silence. Dad sits down, and looks at Lisa.)

Dad: Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you say anything sooner?

Lisa: Would you even have heard me?

(Mom re-enters with a tray of potatoes)

Mom: *(Falsely cheerful)* Well, everything's ready. It looks like it's just going to be the three of us for Thanksgiving dinner this year! Lisa, go out and get the turkey from the countertop, will you?

(Lisa resignedly exits. Mom puts down to potatoes and looks at Dad. Her look speaks volumes. Suddenly, from the kitchen, and huge crash is heard, and a very large dish breaks. Blackout.)

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

Hika Anani is a senior at Agnes Scott College, with a major in English Literature-Creative Writing. She actually enjoys reading more than writing (gasp!), but loves the feeling of accomplishment that goes along with writing a difficult piece more so than the relish of finishing a "hard" book. Her love for writing, whether it be a short story or nonfiction essay, comes from her delight in hearing or telling a good story. Hika thanks her mom for teaching her how to tell a story and hopes to pass it on. Maybe at a summer writing camp for teens...on a ranch.

Sara Bartlett is studying poetry at Georgia State University.

Jody Brooks lives in Atlanta, GA, where she works as an editor, teacher, and writer. She left North Carolina as a young girl, grew up in Southern California, and has a degree in architecture from UC Berkeley which she now uses to design, build, and structure stories. Her work has appeared in *Sub-Lit* and *Mud Luscious*. She works with The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation and is currently finishing her MFA at Georgia State University.

Aggie Ebrahimi earned a Master of Arts degree in English and a Women's Studies Graduate Certificate from the University of Georgia in 2007. She is currently a first-year doctoral student at UGA, studying Creative Writing and English with Judith Ortiz Cofer. As a Master's student, she specialized in Multicultural American Literature, with particular emphasis on the Beat Generation and mid-century civil rights movements. In her doctoral work, she aims to use

the creative arts to fashion a more complicated, more multifaceted, and more colorful public portrait of relationships, multicultural identity, and Iranian American experience.

Amy L. Ellison is a graduate student in English at the University of West Georgia. Her poems have been published in *The Eclectic and 32 Poems*. She was chosen by John Poch to receive The Eclectic's Kay Magenheimer Poetry Prize, and honored by Paul Guest and Terri Witek as the recipient of the Reader's Choice Award. She will graduate in May after completing her creative poetry thesis, entitled "Lessons in Subtraction," and looks forward to working on her PhD.

Shawna Floyd is a sophomore at Agnes Scott College; a freshman at life, love, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. She hails from the tribe of the ground-bound caterpillar/ moltin laRva/ persistent pupa w.holed up in silk-wound and hard-shelled studies/ emergin in imago skin/ to stir up the dust and stir up the winds...

Jessica D. Hand, a fire-hooping-skydiving-poet, earned a Creative Writing BA from Carnegie Mellon University and is working on her MFA at Georgia State. She was a finalist in the 2007 Agnes Scott Poetry Competition and is published in *Java Monkey Speaks 2*, *Toast*, *The Minnesota Review* and has a poem forthcoming in *Redactions*.

Alison Hennessee is a senior at Agnes Scott College. Her interests include: badly behaved rabbits; wiggly food and food that makes noise; discreet osculation; reenacting the Wars of the Roses with sock puppets; Euell Gibbons; the Mauve

Decade; winning contests by eating Crisco; the corner of West Washington and Pulaski; Wilkes County, the Moonshine Capital of the World; and inventing coldblock. Coldblock is like sunblock, except it protects you from the cold. You could, theoretically, cover yourself in coldblock and go outside in the snow, but for modesty's sake, you might want a light jacket.

Sara Henning-Stout is a Senior English Literature and Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College. After recently rediscovering her interest in creative writing, Sara forayed into the world of nonfiction for the first time last August and has been consumed by its art, its honesty and its exhilaration ever since. Sara hopes to ultimately pursue her Doctorate in English Literature and someday teach at the University level. For right now though, she's just delighted to be graduating and thrilled to the moon to be honored as a finalist in the Writer's Festival.

Emilie Jones, a native of Clinton, South Carolina, is a proud senior at Agnes Scott College in the English Literature - Creative Writing and Theatre departments. At the height of the Writers' Strike, Emilie completed her first screenplay and, she fervently hopes that this does not prove to be a bad omen to her future. Emilie's mother taught her the twenty-three helping verbs and her Grand Margie taught her the importance of descriptive details in stories. Emilie wishes to thank her roommates for inspiring the zany college students who inhabit the world of her play. She also wishes to thank Mom, Dad, Stewart, Elliott, Mary Elise, Dink, Grand Margie, Lyndsey, and Puff

Simon Kress was born and raised in Camden, Maine. From the ages of four to sixteen he worked as an apprentice cheesemaker. At seventeen he moved to a small coastal town in Chile to play for the local chess team. He has lived in many places since then - North Carolina, Mexico, the Czech Republic - specializing primarily in billiards and scrimshaw. He now lives in Atlanta, Georgia where he is writing a doctoral dissertation, entitled "In Praise of Mushrooms," that explores prosopopoetic fungi in contemporary Irish poetry. He has published poems in The GSU Review and Red Line Blues. He is now at work on a collection of children's parables. This is his first short story. You can find more of his work at www.myspace.com/periwiggie.

A native North Carolinian, **Erin Lowrance** is a student at Agnes Scott College where she is currently pursuing a degree in English literature/creative writing with a minor in French. Erin's greatest joys since being at Agnes Scott have been entertaining her love affair with the written word and, in the words of the college's motto, "engaging the wider world" through study abroad. While she has no set career ambitions or plans for graduate studies as of yet, Erin is hopeful that both writing and travel will be a part of her future after Agnes Scott. She can be contact by email at elowrance@agnesscott.edu.

Stacey Mantooth is a senior at Agnes Scott College. She is a double major in Creative Writing and Classics.

Eliana Marianes is a sophomore at Emory University, where she is a double major in Theater Studies and English. She is heavily involved in the theater scene at Emory, performing with Theater Emory, Ad Hoc, and Rathskellar, and she hopes to begin directing next year with SAP productions. She was blessed with the opportunity to travel to England this past summer in order to attend Oxford University, and she thoroughly enjoyed this chance to travel around the country studying and enjoying all the wonderful theater that can be found in England. She would like to thank her wonderful boyfriend, Jarrod, as well as her family, for their love and support.

James May is a native of Pittsburgh and graduate of the MFA program at the University of Houston. His poems have most recently appeared in *Cimarron*, *The Atlanta Review*, *The Texas Review*, and *Sojourn*. He lives in Decatur.

Nick McRae has studied at the University of West Georgia and Masaryk University. His art and poetry have been published or are forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Stirring*, *Death Metal Poetry*, and *Rock & Sling*. The winner of the 2007 Kay Magenheimer Poetry Prize and a 2008 Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets fellow, Nick has worked as Managing Editor for the AWP award-winning journal *Eclectic*, and as Editorial Assistant for *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* and *Lifewriting Annual*.

Jessica Moore is a student at Agnes Scott College.

Dorine Preston is a Seattle-area native and a PhD candidate in English at the University of Georgia, where she has been the Assistant to the Editors of the *Georgia Review*; she is now completing an internship with the University of Georgia Press. Her poems and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Isotope*, *Ninth Letter*, *New Delta Review*, *Coconut*, *Court Green*, *Memorious*, and the *Georgia Review*.

Alison Schultz is a senior English Literature-Creative Writing and History double major at Agnes Scott College. Though her first love has been writing ever since she was a child writing romance stories about vampires in notebooks, she plans to pursue her second love of medieval history after she graduates. When not in Georgia, she spends her down time in her native Michigan with her family. She thanks them for inspiring the words of "Sure Plays a Mean Pinball," especially her genius brother, Brandon.

Austin Segrest is getting his MFA in poetry at Georgia State University.

Laura Smith, hopeful graduate of Agnes Scott's class of 2011, is a left-handed vegetarian from Saint Paul, Minnesota. Successful novelist and author of a bestselling baby-naming book, mother of five, widely syndicated music critic, and licensed taxi driver in the Greater London area are among accomplishments she would someday like to list. But for now she is pretty much your average nineteen-year-old college student, who enjoys, you know, doing stuff.