

# Agnes Scott

Writers' Festival Magazine 2006



Prizes in poetry, short fiction, personal essay, and one-act play will be awarded during the Festival by distinguished guest writers Percival Everett, Paul Muldoon, and Nathalie Anderson.

Works by finalists in the annual statewide literary competition sponsored by the English Department

CHRISTOPHER BUNDY  
MICHAEL COOPER  
CAILIN COPAN-KELLY  
KELLEY FRANK  
KRISTIN HALL  
K. RYNE HARRIS  
PATRICIA HENRITZE  
K. B. KINCER  
DELISA MULKEY  
MAHNAZ NAZIR  
LIZ OTT  
JENNIFER PENNINGTON  
LAURA NORTON RAINES  
BRITTNY RAY  
CHERYL STILES  
KIMBERLY WALLACE  
JAYME WALTON  
FEDERICA ZANET WILHELM

*Christine S. Cozzens*

**Agnes Scott College**

**35th Annual Writers' Festival**

**March 30-31, 2006**

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 Percival Everett, Paul Muldoon, and Nathalie Anderson ('70).

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 as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the Festival, and a prize of \$250 is given to the winner in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the James T. Kirk and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We wish to thank President Mary Brown Bullock '66, Dean of the College Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support.

**March, 2006**

*Editors*

Amber Dermont and Steve Guthrie

*Selection Committee*

*Poetry:* Terra McVoy

*Short Fiction:* Willie Tolliver

*Personal Essay:* Victoria Stopp

*One-Act Play:* Quiara Hudes

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## Poems by Cailin Copan-Kelly

### Eviction

“What we left ain’t here anymore,”  
Ms. Ida Breen says in the living room.  
But I’m sure she saw it on the front porch,  
the years since the camellias came into bloom.

She shuffles across the naked, stained floor  
and grunts at the missing green carpet.  
She stripes off

the coral sweet paint that covers  
the dining room and pastes up pale blue wallpaper  
from 1952, the year that hovers  
stagnant against the mantle, where her face tapers

into wrinkle and cancer.  
There is a spot in the mirror she tried to scrub off  
long ago, the night her husband danced her  
in front of the Christmas tree, before  
the in-laws came in from Bainbridge, it occurred

to her that that it was some smoke spot  
ingrained in the glass of her reflection,  
smudging out the bride doll in the  
children’s room – her veil a lace film  
of dust.

She rubs the clearness of the glass  
behind the shadow –  
“Ya’ll won’t find it, either.”



### Eurydice on Holiday

By the end of today, they will each have a hand  
locked and rocking in the hooked joints  
of clean fingers, clean laughter, as they swing  
beside the Seine, towards a theater playing  
*A Bout du Souffle*, towards linen sheets and  
iron curled balconies with an oil-on-canvas gloss.

By twilight, they are in Montmartre and she is running  
her hand through pale pink cambric in the fabric  
district. He is lighting a cigar on the street corner,  
aping Belmondo's Bogart.  
She brushes the ash from his finger.

Later, there is a neon haze to the hotel, the long hallway -  
she leans against the doorframe, her mouth ajar,  
his tweed arm scratches her dress.

But right now,  
their hands are crossed on a lace topped table,  
their words hemmed with wine.

### Pull the Butterfly from Your Windshield Wiper

Realize it will die like pressed petals  
on the hood.  
There will be a negative narrative on the station  
near Moultrie,  
it will twitch against the static.  
Repeat your favorites: laconic, languish, rust.  
It will rust yellow, its wing dust cemented in the heat,  
its feelers locked in the grate.  
Think of birth underwater, birth in a sauna  
but not cocoons, in reverence.  
Nudge out, out, out.

## Poems by Patricia Henritze

### Love

The house swells  
with furniture.  
Chairs crash out of windows  
as delicately turned legs  
reach for sunlight.  
Whole couches inch toward  
the crowded front door  
whispering threats at  
footstools rolling by.  
The crabgrass yard sprouts  
into a panic of flowers  
and birds blacken the deck:  
a thousand sitting wing to wing  
breathing the sticky air of plenty  
emanating from bursting doors -  
the few the proud the hinges not yet  
breached. The cat big as a Bengal Tiger  
purrs contentment lawn mower loud  
while the lap dog's strong bones  
stretch until his head fits  
snugly in the attic  
ears folded against trembling eaves  
his tail wagging down down  
down in the basement.  
You and I watch TV  
the screen drive-in wide and high.  
Our deep joy lulls us into half-sleep  
and we choke to death  
on an I Love You as big as Texas  
and our bodies aren't found for weeks.

### Surrounded

Across the fresh black tarmac,  
Furdy sleeps in his trailer without heat  
and pisses in the field that rolls  
out to touch the clearly blue ridge.

The car wide gate swings open,  
my grandmother steps out,  
Queen Anne's lace, delicate itchy weeds,  
sprouting to her knees on the side of the road.  
Her heels crunch in the gravel, she lifts  
up the letters, and we name each  
one, shouting over the noisy fish filled creek  
- *Rena, Elaine, Bud and the kids.*

Down past Furdy's field the Kaiser farm,  
dotted with a hundred swaying cows  
and a single, glaring bull, overlooks  
the Lyles, no longer farmers,  
and their two story house echoing  
rooms where children once slept.

A truck rattles by, we turn,  
wave, and watch them over the hill,  
down past Miss Susie's  
till we can't see. Then, with letters  
waiting to be gutted and plans  
for the river after lunch, the gate clanks;  
we retreat to the porch, its swing,  
and my grandfather, his morning smoke  
surrounding us, a hazy blanket in the early chill.

*Fish fed, letters got, coffee still on.*

**Here I Am**

My mother chews pimento cheese  
 for twenty minutes, rolling it around  
 and finally shoving it down her throat,  
 her clawed hand suddenly agile,  
 her swollen fingers useful  
 for the first time today. Her eyes,  
 one sealed shut, the other peeking  
 out through a milky lens, are watching:  
 Me sitting, me cleaning, me leaning  
 into her face with a damp cloth  
 and a fake smile. She stares, but forgets,  
 and I'm a series of snapshots, new again  
 in each frame. She says my name as I flash by  
 and we both stop. She sees me.

**Poems by K. B. Kincer****Driving to Italy**

I'm driving down I-75 under a sun  
 that bleaches the air of seriousness  
 and purpose and makes the road beckon  
 me onward, past the Courtland Street exit.

The Dogwood trees and Ornamental Cherries  
 spill over the guard rails, swollen with desire, bursting  
 to go anywhere and so I'll pass my exit and drive

and drive to Italy, where I'll wear dresses  
 that fall off my shoulders to reveal  
 my lacy black bra and sip espresso  
 outside a coffee bar on the Via Veneto.

Italian women will murmur, and believe  
 I own a dark past. Italian men will stare  
 at the soft valley between my breasts,  
 and slowly smile, while I sit with my face

turned toward the sun, next to a water glass  
 crowded with sprigs of Dogwood  
 and Ornamental Cherries, blossoming.

### In My Neighborhood

The big boys never let girls play stickball  
during the day. Only sometimes, at night,

when they wanted to rack up runs. We'd whoosh  
that broom handle past pitches all night, if they let us.

We never won. Even tired, their muscled bodies  
connected what seemed like every time, the ball

arcing beyond the streetlamp's haze into the dark.

### Juanita Kincer (1922-2001)

At Juanita Kincer's funeral, all the men  
told her son Larry she had been the prettiest girl  
in two counties. They knew she was pretty,  
but never thought much about it, her beauty  
an unexpected presence, like a Monarch  
fluttering above ragweed near the mine.

Their women thought about it. Juanita's  
clothing and home mirrored magazines.  
Eventually, they asked for her advice.  
She taught them to find *quality*  
at Wannamaker's and the Five and Dime.

After she died, those women donated  
fashion and decorating books in her name  
to the Benton Library. Juanita had willed  
her body to a medical college and after she'd taught  
the students all she could, she returned to ashes  
and returned in a box to her son.

She died as she lived, still, Larry cannot bear  
to view this heavy box that came in the mail today,  
with flyers from Nordstroms and the Dollar Store.



## Poems by Delisa Mulkey

### Knee-Deep in the Ganges

for Elizabeth Bishop

Because I have never traveled south;  
 because I have never seen water  
 flow backwards or pink river dolphins  
 break the surface, diving blindly, calling  
 their mates; because I have never lain  
 on my back under a tangle of ferns  
 feathering even the sunlight ocher and green;  
 because I have never seen the pale starbursts  
 of tarantulas camouflaged as lichens  
 on the mottled bark of an 800-year-old Seraya;  
 because I have never stood knee-deep  
 in the Ganges, either to bathe or launch away  
 the half-cremated body of a lover, believing  
 the soupy water holy and the dead's place  
 in Nirvana secure, while crocodiles  
 wake the surface, feeding on hands  
 that only last week held the weight  
 of my breasts in their mooned curves;  
 because I have never seen the sadness  
 of elephants coming upon elephant bones,  
 graceful trunks winding through skulls,  
 wandering a distance, caressing lost tusks  
 until their dim awareness finally abandons  
 them; because I have never written in my diary:  
*The elephant in Le Jardin des Plantes  
 was slaughtered. He wept. He will be eaten.*  
 Because I have been left to forget  
 the curve of your empty hand,  
 I only know love like we know the giant squid—  
 its body too delicate to be pulled  
 from the depths, we only know it exists  
 from the wounds on sperm whales  
 and the corpses found in their stomachs.

### The Guru

*Spiritual seekers have employed memento moris  
 to keep themselves mindful of death. An extreme  
 version of this technique involves sitting next to  
 or on top of a rotting corpse.*

~ John Horgan  
 Rational Mysticism

I woke 3:12 the morning of your death,  
 knowing I had just missed it—you.  
 Warm fluids pooled the bed, and I crawled  
 atop your body, pressing skin to skin—  
 those last few cells still pulsing with life,  
 determined as I to keep you intact.  
 I called no one but God and pleaded  
 for His grace, pleaded to follow after you  
 into the rising sun, a simple supplicant  
 on the *sajada* of your stiff, but still warm, body.  
 I visualized breath from your mouth,  
 a ghost of fog upon a mirrored expanse,  
 convinced myself I could hear a wet quiver,  
 a sigh inside the oyster of ribs. If I could just  
 pry open that shell, if I could just find  
 the sipping lip, detach that muscle, let it slide  
 down my throat, briny with copper. ...  
 But the room began to grow light,  
 then, dark again, as your body cooled,  
 softened to dough, while I sat atop your stomach,  
 a moonstruck mystic, and closed my eyes,  
 drunk with the need of you, with the exquisite  
 need of you. Even your smell, this new essence  
 a sticky and sweet brittle stuck between teeth.  
 Even this I chewed. Even this I praised  
 and never stopped praying, never stopped pleading,  
 as I sunk into you, as the dogs cried their fear,  
 circling the bed with toenails clicking on hardwood,  
 and the moon and sun worked their dark magic  
 time and again while your eyes swirled to clouds  
 and your skin shrunk to a crackled glaze.  
 And finally the faint thrumming buzz of scratchy  
 legs calling from outside shaded windows.  
 And it was then I understood God  
 is time, forever fleeing from us like the white stag.  
 I became as still as you when I pulled the arrow  
 of that pain from my heart and leveled it back  
 at the wide, white chest. What does it matter if God  
 loves you or not? I do. Even the dogs have stopped  
 their whining and slunk downstairs, driven past  
 hunger and worry, driven to await their own deaths.

### Driving Home

I have known the exactitude of spreadsheets  
and the languages of data hooking their barbs,  
roots, squares, deep into soft gray folds.

There was no escape, except to drive home  
the long way each night, through Ansley Park—  
just one segment in the diplopod of traffic. Suffering

in the hope he might appear: Baton Bob. 8 feet  
of liquid gold from the bottom of his platform  
glitter boots to the tip of his purple ostrich plume,

perfectly divisible by his two legs, a geometry  
of affine transformation marching past Shakespeare's Tavern,  
high-stepping and twirling, waving to the throngs.

Today, his tutu is carmine, a shade seen only in dreams,  
an assimilated illusion shimmering in the afternoon sun,  
and I imagine him up in the late morning hours,

a bit off-key when he sings *You make me feel mighty real*  
and twirls, once, in his silk robe, green dragons  
circling the air after him, before he returns

to the pink rhinestones, to the gluing of those distant  
stars into the stiff webbing of his miniskirt. Today,  
I am driving home from my grandmother's

funeral, but somehow forgot, and found my way here,  
where Bob tosses his pom-pom'd baton high  
into the white sky, twirls in six inches of heel,

and gracefully catches the flash while dipping  
into a deep bow. She lasted a year longer  
than my grandfather, and grew lovely in death,

her skin blue tulle worn over the whitest of marble.  
Then, the light changes and Bob blows me a twinkling  
kiss. I reach out the open window and catch it.

### Poems by Liz Ott

#### The Heart Poem

We are not girls, but here we have our hearts  
in our hands. Yours is purple, thick like rope  
cut off and frayed. And here is mine, bright red  
like lipstick, cherry flavored candy red.  
I put my heart back in and you do too.  
I take mine out again when it gets sore.  
Yours falls out on the floor and rolls beneath  
the comfy chair. You crawl on hands and knees.  
You find a heartprint of blood on the rug.  
We laugh, compare the sizes, the amount  
of liquid each heart holds. We dance the beat  
they thump when left on the kitchen floor.  
My heart hides sometimes behind my stomach,  
afraid of what we want it to do.  
Other organs agree; it's unnatural.  
You reach in, fish the sucker out.  
I cradle it, a kitten in my arms,  
until it softly starts to murmur, purrs.

### The Dreamer

Perhaps she had been ruined  
a very little by life, ruined by the movies  
into thinking all genius happens

as a revelation. She  
would be running to class one day thinking only of  
her skirt, how not to let it fly in

the wind but someone would be  
watching her the way fishermen eye the dark shadows  
of the water below them. And what

would they see? Not her barrette  
slipping out of her hair but speed condensed into her  
very being. Or maybe she would

be caught by her own self. One  
day she would open her mouth and out would come not the  
*Yes Sir* she intended but music,

one of those high, clear notes that  
shatters glass and reverberates down the hallway, sharp  
and sharper than a small, crying child.

### Love Poem, a Ghazal

Careful, you're about to read an ardent lover's  
ultimate story, not the gurgling of an infant lover.

You woke like a nuclear bomb exploding, said,  
"I thought you'd go and I wouldn't know where you'd went, lover."

She would not burn, even doused in gasoline  
or applied to the flame of a frequent lover.

We might have given up long ago,  
but one should never give up a decent lover.

The text was so subtle, reading it twice  
you'd never know they meant lovers.

He moved through her, a train through a tunnel.  
Who was she? Only the most recent lover.

I've never been called a liar,  
never been known to invent lovers.

He smirked when she closed the curtains.  
"Did you think I needed a hint, lover?"

Break her heart and rush off to another.  
No sense in becoming a complacent lover.

A dagger is a flimsy thing--better a sword  
driven into the heart of a tyrant lover.

You can spout aphorisms all night long, dear,  
but any fool knows you can rent lovers.

Years could go by and they'd never know what Bettie does--  
only one way to get torn up and bent: lovers.

## Poems by Brittny Ray

### Magda at the Window

she doesn't kill  
 the spiders  
 because her skin  
 is as dry as locust shells  
 left on the bark of pine trees.  
 she wishes she too  
 could leave herself  
 for some lovely curious  
 child to collect in bags among  
 bits of glass and yellow string  
 flattened pennies and chips of tombstone  
 for these are the things  
 we are made of  
 what god saves  
 and loves

### untitled (Magda)

she worked at one of those  
 stress away massage parlors  
 where the men would come in  
 hard like a rock  
 smelling like expensive cologne  
 or Skoal and Shell diesel  
 and she would knead  
 and stroke  
 and pulse her hands like a heart  
 until they melted right  
 in her hands like sticks of butter

a real load off

she could never go to church  
 with those hands  
 never pray to the blue-eyed God Almighty  
 with sticky stillborn hands  
 never kneel before the altar  
 as she knelt before men  
 while they shouted Christ exaltations  
 and secreted epiphanies in her mouth,  
 this was her temple  
 with rooms the color of Christ's blood  
 and incense burning she  
 anoints men with oil, wipes their  
 bodies with her hair  
 she believes in performing blessings  
 she believes in hidden saints

**untitled love poem**

im gonna collect  
 every word  
 you ever spoke  
 and put them  
 in a box somewhere  
 then  
 one day  
 let them fly out  
 like a cacophony  
 of colored moths  
 landing on brown  
 tree branches

**Poems by Kimberly Wallace****Cold Water**

If you are ever drowning you  
 should just hope for freezing water  
 I read it in a magazine  
 just a week ago it slows you  
 down the water slows you down and  
 keeps you like a meat slab like an  
 ice cube floating on the waves in  
 the water slows you down as you  
 wait for rescue they pulled a guy  
 out after an hour his skin was  
 blue they couldn't find a heartbeat  
 now he sells cars in Toronto  
 all the water has to do is  
 slow you down and keep you fresh  
 freeze your heart before it sputters  
 out and can't be started when they find  
 you with your frozen face high as  
 you kick against the ocean there  
 has to be someone looking out  
 to pull you from the water when  
 you can't go slower before the  
 cold drags you down and



### The Ghost of Lavinia

The blackened flagstones still return the heat  
 The blank sun spat. The doors are slatted tight  
 To keep the sleeping city from the street.  
 Lavinia is walking Rome tonight.

Her halting footsteps pass through mass and time;  
 She does not know how long she has been dead.  
 Her mouth is streaked with dark and clotted slime  
 And spattered ribbons stain her wrists with red.

The Rome she knew is dead. I only guess  
 At scraping trees, the scent of sun on stone;  
 This slender, lovely girl, her hair a mess,  
 Her voice turned strange. Her hands are not her own,

Their unfamiliar flesh the only husk  
 Of someone who walked Roman streets at dusk.

### Things to Not Want to Be the Last Thing He Ever Hears You Say

See you later  
 See you never  
 Feel better, that's an order  
 Don't worry, I made sure that there's  
     no porn on your computer  
     for your parents to discover  
     you're too far gone to remember  
 Everything will be okay  
 Everything will soon be over  
 Some of that smut that I deleted? Damn,  
     I thought your taste was better  
 If you leave me, I will hurt you  
     you can't hide from me forever  
 I'm so angry at you I  
     can barely string two words together  
 I need you, I wish I never

Loved you, I love you and  
 I love you and

anything anything anything anything  
 anything anything anything ever

## Poems by Federica Zanet Wilhelm

### Whitewashing

A few heartbeats, and a slam and you were gone. Have you ever been there? It was sudden, but not painful, the breath did not choke, the arm did not break, nor did the air press my chest, nothing like that. No symptoms but a race of hearts inside my chest where only one can be. I felt overcrowded and when I pressed my fingers to my throat and heard only one heart beating, I was relieved. They told me life was there two heartbeats inside me - One in my breast the other in my stomach - but I didn't know then, when the heart beats and the blood flows you are alive enough to feel ashamed to be relieved. Please, at least understand a few heartbeats don't make something real or alive. They are hardly enough to make you wonder. And I wondered about you when the blood flooded out of my body and I saw life coming out of me. I looked for you, if you were hidden in the red thread in the sheet, if your heart or your beats were there I could have found you. I used to think I could have buried you underneath the rose on the patio - my blood and your heart - and feel forever ashamed, looking at the roses blooming in the spring for having told you *it is not the time for us*. Is it why you went with the flow without even saying goodbye? You slammed the door, and have forsaken me behind. And I didn't even see your face.

### The Dead

The day after I saw a woman on TV, who said that we are all born alone, but that we never die alone, I saw death lying on the street while going to a funeral. Solitude is what one deserves, at least in his more intimate moments, when nothing is you, and everything has been ripped out, even the intimacy with yourself, gone. I was gone thinking if I was meant to pick them up, the dead, if someone had told me- and I've forgotten - that death was needed for the funeral. I asked, when I arrived if the dead was there, and they said yes, and there he was, still, in the open casket. He didn't look like the ones I saw, as for this one everybody was crying, his bed was of lilies, and he was a lily himself, white and blushed pink, intoxicating, the smell lilies have in a closed room, it gives you headaches, the smell, and the mess the yellow pistils make when you touch them. They disintegrate on you. His eyes were closed, no place to look at anymore, and everybody said shh as if he was a baby we shouldn't have waked. A dead is dead, alone or with others around, even when he looks alive he doesn't feel like having social conversation from the casket, with the holes of his body stuffed with stuff to keep him inside, he is not in the mood to tell us what it's all about, the fuss over him being dead, why people didn't fuss so much when he was still making love to anybody he could; and if he felt it, the loneliness when he was alive, and if he feels something now that he is dead, even just a relief for not feeling anything at all.

***La Vecia del Pan e Vin***

*The Pan e Vin is a folk tradition of Christian and Celtic elements of the Veneto region in Italy. The fifth of January, the night of the Epiphany people burn tall bonfires and place on top a puppet, in the figure of a woman called La Befana. While the fire burns both wood and puppet, the elderly can foresee, from the directions of the flame and the sparks, the outcome of the New Year.*

What is left after the fire  
could be the ashes of her  
reminder of what was  
prelude of what comes.

Her name was lost  
in time she didn't  
exist, when the fire was  
built with tall poplar tree  
that reached the sky  
enlightening the passage  
of the three Magi. Then the fire  
stood with chants  
never heard, words came  
enchanted by the Celtic North.

Sometimes in between the Magi  
and the Celts she appeared  
and nowadays each year, the fifth  
of January she wears  
the same dress, she gives  
herself to Men, she sits on top  
close to the sky, she admires  
the fire that starts underneath,  
she wonders, it seems, of her life  
before the fifth, January  
is her month, the only one she lives.

The flames come tall  
to her, she doesn't move,  
she doesn't cry, nor escape  
she knows her fate is showing  
which direction life will take.  
They say we must know  
the new that comes, even without stars,  
and the sky dark, she  
from up there will speak the flames:

*to the east, take your sac  
and walk, sell your things  
you'll have enough to live  
for the year coming;*

*to the west, in your shoulder  
is the emptiness of time,  
take your bag and your shoes  
and migrate for your life.*

Then wood succumbs  
to fire, and ashes cover  
the ground. On earth  
only a chant  
*E viva el Pan e Vin*  
she has spoken  
of life.

## Short Fiction by Christopher Bundy

### Three Weeks

The elevator was broken again, forcing Mr. Lau to climb the six floors to his apartment through the dim, narrow stairwell cluttered with bicycles, discarded junk mail and pieces of broken tile. He stepped carefully in the darkness for fear of another fall. A ribbon of dusty light the color of Mrs. Chang's chicken soup leaked in through the crude words and pictures scratched into windows painted over with dull brown paint: a stiff cock and balls, steam rising from a giant turd, *Kuanting fucks dogs*. Mr. Lau hardly noticed anymore the reek of piss and rat shit, the peeling wallpaper stained with mildew and cigarette smoke, the countless cooking odors, from cabbage and sweet potato to pork, radish and soy, or the musk of latex. When he chose the apartment, Mr. Lau had requested the sixth floor for good luck. Even now when he passed the fourth, he held his breath until he reached the fifth. Four shared the same sound as the word for death, and he had no intention of pausing there or breathing in its unlucky air.

Mr. Lau finally reached his heavily fortified door, a necessity against the burglars that prowled the east side of Taipei, and turned a set of keys one after another in three heavy locks. He pushed, but the door opened only a few inches before catching on the chain inside, and he banged his head against the sturdy steel. His 16-year-old grandson, visiting from Oakland, had chained the door and locked him out. Justin had been with him a week now while his mother was in Hawaii on her honeymoon with her new husband, Rick, her third. Rick had earned his private pilot's license and wanted to explore the islands' volcanoes from the air. The visit would give grandfather and grandson a chance to learn something about each other, his daughter June had maintained. Justin was supposed to stay an entire month, but Mr. Lau doubted the boy, with his black hair in a ponytail, would last that long away from his girlfriend. Already he had made three international calls to the girl, at Mr. Lau's expense.

At ten the previous evening, Mr. Lau told Justin he was going out for more cigarettes. To ensure Justin understood him, Mr. Lau included sign language with his poor English. He mumbled *cigarettes*, miming the action of smoking, and pointed to the door. He found it easier to speak in his broken English, a language he had tried to learn when he lived in San Francisco with his daughter June thirty years earlier. June's mother had just died, the result of a doctor's carelessness during outpatient surgery for a minor woman's problem, and a friend in America suggested the two move to California—there was a job for him. And though he had learned enough English to get by delivering paper for his friend's office supply company, long days driving around the Bay Area, the language always felt just beyond his reach, like trying to crack sunflower seeds from the shell with his tongue.

At age six, June had adapted quickly, but Mr. Lau had wished for his wife in those days, unsure of what to do with a little girl who grew so quickly. Mr. Lau felt cheated by the loss of his wife and missed his life in Taipei. Still, he remained in San Francisco for another ten years. By then, June was American and wanted no part of Taiwan. When she worked out a way to live with a friend's family in order to finish high school, he gave his consent.

With Justin, Mr. Lau found that enough English would float to the top when he went fishing for a word or phrase, though his grandson only flashed the same smirk of overstated confusion he had come to expect from Americans when he opened his mouth. Mr. Lau had counted on the fact that his words were inconclusive when he went to spend the night with Mrs. Chang, a widow and his girlfriend now two years. He planned to come home in the early morning so that it looked as if he

had returned from his errand late at night after Justin was asleep. Mr. Lau knew the boy slept late and was unlikely to notice his early return.

Mr. Lau banged his fist against the steel casing, an echo like dull temple bells up and down the stairwell, and caused his neighbor, Old Yang, to peek from behind his door with a knife in his hand, likely afraid that burglars had come again to steal his TV. He banged his fist against the door once more and then mumbled a routine apology to Old Yang until Justin appeared.

"Chill out. I'm not deaf," his grandson answered. He smiled at the boy, a put-on for Old Yang who continued to stare from behind his own door, and pointed at the small brass chain that kept him from his apartment. Justin rolled his eyes and let him in without a word, returning to the sofa where he watched television in gym shorts and a t-shirt. Mr. Lau enjoyed free satellite hook-up by way of an extra wire strung from a friend's apartment and he knew the boy watched Japanese porn while he was away. He searched the sofa for signs of bad behavior. CNN was on, but Mr. Lau picked up the remote from the coffee table and pressed the Recall button, bouncing the channel to the one previously viewed. A woman lay naked on her back, her eyes closed, her breasts bouncing wildly as a man thrust his body into hers. Mr. Lau winced at her high-pitched squeals and turned off the TV.

"Hey." Justin looked up from the television.

"Your mother don't like."

"What? I wasn't watching that." Justin grinned, a defensive strategy he had likely learned from his mother, and held up a cigarette, prepared to light it.

"No smoking."

"Why?"

"No smoking in house," Mr. Lau repeated, his voice rising.

"You smoke *in house*," Justin mocked.

In desperation, Mr. Lau dug up an expression he had often used with June. "Too young."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Too young." With only this simple declaration, Mr. Lau felt exposed standing in front of the boy, a helplessness he had come to expect when talking to his grandson. And English made him tired, just as it had thirty years earlier. He waved an arm at the boy and turned to escape the predictable end. He couldn't understand what he had done to deserve such disrespect from this boy. He gave him his own room, what he could afford in spending money, let him watch TV when he wanted, and took him out with his friends. The only time he left him alone was when he went to see Mrs. Chang and he didn't feel like sharing that part of his life with the boy.

"Whatever," Justin replied and moved to the terrace to smoke.

Though Mr. Lau didn't understand exactly what his grandson said, he knew it was rude and said so. "You dis-re-spect-ful." Worn down by the exhausting quarrel, Mr. Lau went to the kitchen to make tea, to be anywhere but in the same room with his grandson. Though he had warned his daughter this was a bad idea, she had insisted.

*Daddy, things are good for me now. It's my honeymoon. And what's so horrible about spending time with your grandson?*

Justin took his cigarette to the balcony overlooking the narrow street below and thought about how much this month with his grandfather was going to drag. The good part was that he could do pretty much what he wanted even if the old man told him not to. There just wasn't much to do. The biggest bonus of course was no Rick—an ex-flight attendant for United who flew flights to Asia for 15 years turned real estate agent. To Justin, he was nothing more than a geek with a worn-out Cali-tan and spiky, highlighted hair who spoke better Mandarin than he did. He could give a shit about Rick and the new house that came with him, all-Asia inside with his calligraphy



and cheesy Chinese furniture, the little rock garden out back. Still, Justin begged his mother not to send him to Taiwan, preferring to spend his summer cleaning pools with his best friend Jamal, getting high inside the AquaClean van, a sack of In & Out burgers for lunch, and Korn on the stereo. After his mother suggested visiting his grandfather in Taipei, Justin nearly split with his girlfriend to Santa Cruz for summer jobs at the beach, but when Casey decided she would rather work at her grandmother's daycare center in Alameda, he surrendered, pissed off at both of them.

*Come on, kiddo, do this for your mom. Rick and I need some time for us. Besides, what's so horrible about spending time with your grandfather?*

He thought his mom would have cried if he hadn't caved on that one, but he already had a list of reasons why he shouldn't have come.

*For one:* His grandfather's apartment smelled funny, like instant ramen and onions. And his grandfather looked weird, his teeth stained with tea and cigarettes, his hair white and wild with bedhead, his arms and hands covered in purplish plots of dried skin, and worst-of-all, a white hair at least six inches long growing from a mole on his neck—for good luck one of his grandfather's friends told him when he spotted Justin staring at the weird whisker.

*For two:* The guy didn't seem to like him much. Another *surrogate father*—Justin heard the words of his high school guidance counselor—in his life that didn't want much to do with him. Justin could tell from the moment he arrived in Taipei the old man didn't want him there. His grandfather went out and left him in the apartment with nothing to do but watch satellite TV—mostly Taiwanese and Japanese stations he couldn't understand. The old man shuffled off to the park at dawn for tai chi exercises, then to lunch with other old guys, who spoke to him in croaky Chinese he couldn't understand. He hadn't meant to lock his grandfather out of his own apartment—he thought he was doing the right thing by locking the door, his grandfather's reminder, *many criminal here*, fresh in his mind. He couldn't imagine why the old man would be coming home in the morning after going out for cigarettes the night before, until he remembered his mother sneaking into the house as if she hadn't been out all night. Like father like daughter, he realized. The image of the wobbly old man in bed with some old lady popped up like an unwanted Internet ad.

*You want come?* His grandfather sometimes asked. But Justin dreaded most outings with him, the two of them barely able to communicate, his clothes clinging to him from the moment he stepped outside into the unbearable heaviness of Taipei air. So Justin spent most of his hours inside with the A/C cranked, slouched on the sofa with his headphones on.

*And for three:* Justin was only half Chinese anyway. His father, Andre Alfred, a descendant of Haitian immigrants, was killed in a motorcycle accident when he was 26 and Justin was two. She called his father her *one and only obsession, like I had this crazy hunger for wild things. But he was not much of a father, that man. Nobody was gonna keep him down—not me, not you, not the US Navy. He got tossed out of there for smoking pot on his ship. And you, sugar, have some of that same wildness in your eyes. Nothing good can come of it.*

Justin didn't remember ever spending time with his father. He didn't trust his mother's view considering the kind of guys she fell for, and he wanted to know for himself what his father was like. He had seen a few photographs of the man, but could never find anything of himself in the pictures. He had trouble connecting himself to the tall, lean black man who hugged his mother or posed in sunglasses on his motorcycle. If he stared hard enough, similarities formed around his eyes and in his smile, but Justin felt he was stretching it, seeing likenesses where he wanted.

In California, Chinese were everywhere, and Justin didn't feel a part of them either, no matter how much he looked the part. Though he was tall at five-ten, his features were more his mother's than whatever of his father's looks he had inherited. His eyes were rounded but distinctly Asian, and his skin more brown than black, only a slight kink in his otherwise straight black hair. At

school, the other Asian kids made fun of him for being *blacknese*, calling him *rotten banana*—yellow and black on the outside. Sometimes Justin wished he were either all Chinese or all black—he really didn't care which.

*Your grandfather didn't like it one bit, his mother told him. He wanted me to marry a Chinese man, have Chinese kids, and live in Taipei, like Chinese people. When I didn't, and married a black man no less, he just couldn't deal. He wanted me to come back to Taipei, but it wasn't home for me anymore. When I didn't, he just sort of stopped dealing with me. Didn't know how to talk to me about it, and I figured he was too stubborn to get over it, so I sort of bailed on him too. He got over it, but I think he always felt responsible somehow. Like he had failed my mom or something.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Lau brought out a pot of hot oolong tea and two cups to watch a local morning program. Justin slouched on the sofa again watching MTV-Asia.

Mr. Lau poured two cups of the steaming tea. "Time to news."

But the boy ignored the cup of tea, blinking impassively at the sexy images of women dancing in hotpants and halter tops on MTV.

"Time to news," Mr. Lau repeated, his hand out for the TV remote.

"Alright, alright."

But Mr. Lau already reached for the remote in Justin's hand, causing his grandson to jump and swing his hand away, spilling a cup of hot tea on to his grandfather's lap. Though Mr. Lau's cotton pants absorbed much of the heat, there was enough of a sting to bring the frustration already simmering underneath rising to the surface.

"Ayuh!" Mr. Lau cried and bent over to wipe at his pants just as Justin stood, catching the old man under the chin with the top of his head. With a nasty sound like a knock on wood, Mr. Lau popped up, a jack-in-the-box with blood flying from his mouth where he had bitten a quarter-inch gash through his tongue. Blood dripped from his chin and to the floor where oily red splotches dotted the wood-patterned linoleum.

"What the hell?" Justin rubbed his hand over the top of his head.

"You sthupid!" Mr. Lau held his hand to his mouth.

"I'm sorry, alright! But don't call me stupid!" Justin grabbed the tea towel from the coffee table and handed it to the old man. His grandfather's words were too familiar for Justin. His first stepfather, Allen, a man so quickly in and out of his life he could hardly remember his face, called him stupid. *Stupid kids get Ds, Justin*, he yelled when he saw Justin's fifth-grade report card. *Do you want to be a stupid kid?*

Mr. Lau put the towel to his mouth and a series of loud knocks came at the door. Mr. Lau opened it to find Old Yang peering from behind.

Justin fidgeted in his chair, the bustling waiting room of the National Taiwan University Hospital just as small and overrun as the swarming streets, cramped restaurants and shops of the city that made him feel as if he never had room to himself. Wherever he looked there were people, bicycles, scooters, cars and buses squeezing past each other like they couldn't wait another second to get where they were going. He had seen horrible congestion in LA, but Taipei was another level of traffic hell altogether. He felt as if there was no way to escape the constant crowds of people who bumped and brushed and bruised past him wherever he went, no room at all for his tall frame. Justin liked his personal space and he wanted to swing his arms in a wide circle, knocking them away like bowling pins.



A toddler stood unsteadily next to him, holding on to his mother's knees and smiling up at Justin. He caught a whiff of baby shit and he pinched his nose at the boy. An infant from across the room wailed. The smell of smoke from an adjacent room—barely masking the odor of medicine—made him ache for a cigarette of his own. He dropped his head and turned up Godsmack on his iPod, the heavy drum and bass lines, low guitar riffs, and angry lyrics fueling the welcome isolation inside his headphones, a soundtrack for his frustration.

He would give anything to get back to Casey—some days all he could think about was how much he missed her body. She was the best thing in his life lately, one of the few people not telling him what to do all the time. He was psyched when they hatched summer plans to work at the beach together. When she changed her mind to work at her grandmother's daycare, he felt betrayed and sulked for weeks. Then his mother got married again, this time to slick Rick, and announced they were splitting for a third of the summer to Hawaii, which landed him in Taipei with his grandfather. Still, Casey, who had written him two letters and called twice since he arrived in Taiwan, was the best thing going, and Justin couldn't wait to get back to her.

Taiwan wasn't horrible. He had his iPod and his Game Cube with him. And he had found sanctuary in a local Internet café, where gamers like him spent time. He saw kids that reminded him of some of his friends back home and wanted to join them, but his Mandarin was so poor he was afraid they would just laugh at him. At least his mother wasn't on his ass about school, Casey, his friends, smoking weed—as if she and Rick didn't get high on the weekends—or video games. At least Rick wasn't walking around in his robe, skinny white legs shuffling along in slippers, drinking tea and burning incense.

Justin still couldn't erase the picture of the old man with his hand over his mouth and his eyes wide with surprise. He was shocked at how much blood had poured from his grandfather's mouth. Old Yang's daughter, who had driven them to the hospital, had eyed him suspiciously from the rearview mirror all the way there. The old man got out a few garbled words with his torn tongue and that seemed to settle the matter. It was an accident, but Justin couldn't stop thinking about it. He wanted to tell his grandfather how sorry he was, that he meant him no harm. He wanted to make it up to him, but didn't know how to help his grandfather feel better. He could start by not smoking inside and watching porn. He knew that pissed the old man off. Neither of the two mattered to Justin anyway. He wasn't supposed to smoke, but did it mostly to claim some space for himself, and the porn was already boring.

Justin and his grandfather didn't have much in common, though Justin did like the big park across from his grandfather's apartment where the old man and his friends did tai chi like slow-motion marionettes each morning. He hadn't made it to the park but once and it turned out to be one of the few places Justin found in Taipei where people didn't close him in. He wanted to tell his grandfather he knew a few tai chi moves too, that he wouldn't mind joining them. He just didn't know how to tell him. Several mornings he planned to get up with the old man and join him in the park, but he always overslept and eventually gave up on the idea.

A friendly young nurse showed Mr. Lau how to use the mouth guard that would keep him from biting his swollen and stitched-up tongue. He felt as if he might choke and spew the sour juices stirring inside his otherwise empty stomach. The nurse was pretty, like June though much younger, and he wouldn't want to throw up on her. Her ears, so small and rounded, and the way she brushed her long straight hair behind them, reminded him of June when she was in elementary school and beginning to grow so tall. It was just before her mother passed, before June became unmanageable, and before she stopped listening to him. He thought of his daughter in Hawaii with her new American husband, her third. He hoped she was happy, but feared she wasn't. Sorrow mixed with the sour stomach juices and he felt nauseous again.

Mr. Lau hadn't seen June in five years, and without warning, she announced she was getting married again, *In Honolulu, so don't worry about it. It's a little something on the beach, just the two of us.* Then she packs up her 16-year old son and sends him to Taipei. He had met the boy only once before, just after his father died. And then June went through an entire second marriage without seeing him. He never even met the man—Al or Andy or some other American name he couldn't remember—before she had divorced him in Portland and returned to Oakland with the boy. June told him through tears over the telephone that her husband had gotten into heavy debt, and she claimed he needed time to get things back in order before he could be a husband and a stepfather. And of course, she needed money.

Mr. Lau called Mrs. Chang to drive them to her apartment, where she had prepared her chicken broth and pork dumplings. *Zhaozi*, she said, offering the plate of dumplings to Justin, who thought she looked like a geisha, though he knew little of what geishas looked like and understood they were Japanese, not Taiwanese. Mrs. Chang was at least three inches taller than Mr. Lau and appeared as if dressed for a party. She wore a traditional Chinese gown of red silk embroidered with white, yellow, and pink flowers, and gold silk slippers. Her black hair was up in a formal bun. Her face was heavily made up in a pale, waxy base, lips painted in the brightest red, eyebrows plucked and redrawn with a fine pencil. Mrs. Chang watched Justin as he ate, her eyes magnified behind oversized plastic frames. She spoke little English, and Justin made no attempts to speak to her, so she smiled and offered more *zhaozi*. Though he had only picked at what was on his plate, he found the soft dumplings tasty and wished he could eat Chinese food like this more often rather than the bizarre dishes his grandfather ordered in restaurants.

His grandfather's mood had improved little since they left the hospital; the old man remained sullen and quiet save for the occasional grunt of pain. From across the table, Mr. Lau took tentative sips of his soup. Each time the spoon came to his lips, he whimpered in pain. Mrs. Chang scolded the old man for something Justin couldn't understand but also tended to his every need. She didn't match his grandfather, a sulky slob in stained khaki pants, short-sleeved white dress shirt, and unpolished black shoes, never a comb to cross his head. And there was the hairy mole. How could she get around that? Again, the idea of the two old people together made Justin uneasy. *Three weeks*, he chanted silently, a new mantra to get him through these days.

As Mr. Lau approached the fifth floor of the Garden Terrace apartments, he heard the ring of his telephone. He quickened his pace thinking it might be June calling to tell him her vacation was cut short and she wanted Justin back sooner. But the ringing stopped as he turned the last lock on his door.

Mr. Lau headed towards his bedroom, ready for bed, and the telephone rang again. He pounced, grabbing the receiver. "*Wei*."

Mr. Lau's eyes widened. "Eh?" It wasn't his daughter but a man speaking English.

"For you," he said and handed the receiver to Justin.

Mr. Lau stepped back into his bedroom, exhausted by the day's misfortune and wanted only to sleep into the next morning, weary of the long afternoon and the ongoing conflict with his grandson. He looked at the calendar hanging behind his bedroom door. Three weeks. He had no idea how to take care of a young boy and his failure at connecting with his grandson reminded him of his failures with June. He was unsuccessful raising his daughter and he had been a much younger man then, with greater energy and patience. He was too old for this sort of thing. But, still, he shouldn't blame the boy. The stitches in his tongue were the result of an accident. Perhaps next weekend he would take Justin along on his monthly mountain hike with his friends. He would show him how to soak in the hot springs and maybe let him have a beer or two over



their usual post-hike seafood dinner.

Justin didn't know what to say to the remote voice on the other end. It wasn't Casey or any of his friends, but a Sergeant Sam Chow from the Honolulu Police Department. Rick had nose-dived the chartered Cessna Skyhawk into the water—a night flight over Kauai. They hit the water at 245 mph.

*Probably didn't even know they were flying so close to the water. It happens with inexperienced pilots, Sergeant Chow told him. Spatial disorientation, they call it. It's how JFK Jr. died.*

Justin hung up the phone, pulled a cigarette from his grandfather's pack on the coffee table and lit it, but when he placed it to his lips, the smoke made him nauseous. He felt like he did the time he jumped too high on Jamal's trampoline, lost control, and belly-flopped onto a support bar, knocking the air from his chest. His arm caught between the springs and, before he could get free, he threw up his lunch, watching as hotdog and fries from Chuck E. Cheese splashed to the ground beneath him. How could he explain to his grandfather what had happened? Rick experienced spatial disorientation and mom's dead. The old man wouldn't understand.

For the first time, Justin saw his grandfather as the father of his mother and realized he couldn't remember seeing the two together—as father and daughter—except in pictures, and those were probably thirty years old. Together with the Golden Gate Bridge behind them. At Disneyland, his mother in mouse ears, his grandfather in Bermuda shorts, t-shirt, and Giants cap. On bicycles in front of the Chinatown Gate in San Francisco, his mother holding a bowl of shaved ice up for the camera.

The cigarette burned in Justin's hand, but he didn't notice. He could still hear the Sergeant's words *Spatial disorientation, they call it*. That seemed more like what he had been feeling since arriving in Taipei. *Spatial disorientation*. Justin found it difficult to apply the term to Rick and his mother. To him they were still waving him off at Oakland International, his mother blowing a kiss, Rick standing in linen shirt, shorts, and sandals, his hand up but motionless. Though his mother had continued to wave, Justin had shrugged his shoulders once and replaced his headphones over his ears, still angry at being shipped off to Taipei. Justin took deep breaths, the image of his mother waving him off for the last time making him nauseous. He didn't want to puke, not now, not here. He needed to try and tell his grandfather what had happened at some point, but when he saw the light underneath his door go dark, Justin decided to let the old man sleep. He would figure out a way to tell him in the morning.

Mr. Lau removed his shirt and placed it in the bathroom sink to soak the bloodstains, took off his pants, and slipped into bed. When his tongue smarted, he realized he had left the mouth guard the nurse gave him in the bathroom. He rose from the bed with some effort and shuffled back to get it. He smelled smoke and grunted his disapproval. The boy could've waited for him to go to sleep, no doubt preparing to watch an evening's worth of Japanese porn. But he didn't care—he was exhausted, his tongue hurt, and if all the boy wanted to do was smoke cigarettes and watch porn, let him smoke, let him watch. In three weeks he would be gone.

## Short Fiction by Michael Cooper

### Life in the Smallest Things

We caught the mouse the day Nick's mom shaved her head bald. By then, Dorothy was in her seventh or eighth chemo session, filling our house for almost two months with *raspy-gaspy* cancer coughs. At night Nick would click the ceiling fan to its highest speed to drown them out. When a *rustle-tap* joined the fan's whirring, he said it was made not by a rat or an avocado-sized roach but by a stray paper on the computer desk. But the *rustle-tap* was moving, and it wasn't in the computer desk's corner. Like any sane woman would, I made him turn on the lights the first few times we heard those new sounds, but there was nothing, just us in the sudden brightness looking at the blue-puffed crescents below each other's eyes. We'd turn off the lights and the *rustle-tap* would stop long enough so there was just darkness and silence, like we'd been swallowed by something big and were just waiting to be digested. In those moments, I wanted to tell Nick not to give up on his mother, to say something inspiring for him as much as me, but the timing was important.

The night before Dorothy shaved her head I decided to start with the smallest problem of them all, like the marriage counselor advised, so I started with the end of the line, addressing the *rustle-tap*. "We've got to do something about these sounds when the lights go out," I said when a scratching that sounded as if it was within the walls came from the lower left hand-side of the bed.

"The paper moving in the wind?"

"No, Nick, it's something else, like a rodent or something."

"Are we talking about the same noises?" He asked and I tried to detect humor in his words or tone, hoped to.

"Are you cracking a joke?" I asked.

I used to do the voice-over for Cartwheels the mouse on the short-lived show *Cartwheels in the City*, cancelled when second-year ratings plummeted after one semi-successful season on the Cartoon Network. Sure, it occurred to me that the mouse sounds in the darkness were made by that very same adorable ex-lab specimen, maybe coming back to reclaim his voice, drawn in a trembling outline, crossing the hardwood floor leading to the foot of our bed in jittery convulsions (Cartwheels always shivered with nervous energy because he was addicted to the globs of saccharine and puddles of ginseng-laced Budweiser that were tested upon him in the labs). His voice, my voice munchkinishly pitched to its squeakiest, still lingered in my head, even after the last TV check was cashed. His favorite apothegm to squeak was the one about rotten eggs: "*One won't go bad without the rest following.*" He was right; every month had its rotten egg for me recently: there was the miscarriage in November, my severance from Cartoon Network as the voice of Cartwheels the Mouse a few weeks later, Dorothy's diagnosis in December, her moving in just after the new year, and now another mouse's clankings coming in full sound with February's cold peak. Or were the sounds my imagination at work again?

Only Nick knew that the phantom munchkin voice was partly responsible for a nervous breakdown I had at the gynaecologist. The sagacious Doctor Diamond, whose long mouth sloped down at the corners like the spine of a harp when in thought, told me that my miscarriage was an occurrence of chance as much as it was related to some kind of bodily malady. Stretched out on a thinly-foamed medical bed, I absorbed this news. Then Diamond said, "all you can do is try, try again," and cheerily hummed a "Whistle While You Work" falsetto, and he permanently etched a distinct song in my mind as a soundtrack to my trauma. In one of the last episodes, Cartwheels



repeatedly sang a medley of "Good Vibrations," both Brian Wilson's version and Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch's. It was sung in his voice, my voice, throughout an episode where the sick mouse received shock treatment for one of his many psychological glitches from a back-alley rat who wasn't qualified for the work. I recorded the voice-over as I watched the episode play and I felt my brain vibrating as Cartwheels' head rocked with squiggly lines running around it. Then I recorded twenty-seven partial takes of both "Good Vibrations" versions, dubbing my vocals over their beats as they filtered into my subconscious. I felt those vibrations again with the shock of Diamond's news. It was like my baby had decided to opt out of the adventure of living and no one could tell me why, not Diamond, not the psychiatrist, not the marriage counselor, and not the obstetrician.

And what could either I or Nick say to one another about the miscarriage, the cancer, the unemployment, the *rustle-tap*, or the strain imposed by these things upon our marriage? Unfortunately, Valium can't inspire you to say the right things.

"Another session for your mother tomorrow?" I asked Nick, knowing the answer but just wanting to picture my voice's sound waves float out and expand into the darkness.

"Bright and early." Nick's words were punctuated with the *rustle-taps*.

Everyone's heard of the rhetorical question, "Can it get any worse?" and my simple answer to that would be, "For sure. Just sublease a condominium in Atlanta with mice."

"Well, goodnight," I said to Nick, only to be answered with a few emphatic *rustle-taps*.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was bright when I woke up, but it wasn't early. The bedroom's bathroom door woke me up. Moisture from showers makes the paint of that door stick to the paint of the frame so you have to pry it open with a pop. Dorothy stood in the doorway with steam moving into the bedroom from behind her. She had gotten her chemotherapy. Dorothy's neck looked like a stem to her lily-white face. A peach-colored bath towel was wrapped around her middle, tucked over and held in place by the hummock of her breasts. The strawberry-blonde, shoulder-length curls that had once characterized Nick's mother were gone and now just a lone rope sprouted from the top arc of her head, pasted wet over her brow and curling over to the side of her face behind her ear. I heard the phrase, "*Supernatural Giraffe in the Chiaroscuro*," said matter-of-factly in Cartwheels' voice.

"Good Morning, Dorothy," I said from within a cave of pillows, sheets, and comforter.

"It's almost one o'clock in the afternoon."

There was an expectant silence that I filled by saying, "I'm just a little behind is all."

"If sleeping all the time is how you cope with your problems, you're going to be behind a lot."

I waited for her to leave the room but she wouldn't. Then Dorothy simultaneously lifted an arm to readjust her curly cord of hair while reaching with the other behind her back like she was trying to scratch her shoulder blade. The peach-colored towel slid off of her drooping breasts and piled onto the floor with a moist thump. Dorothy didn't move to pick up the towel, but stood there with her arms akimbo, her eyebrows arched their highest, and her cross-eyed bosom puffed out towards me. I couldn't avert my eyes in time to avoid the brashness of her steel-wool-scrubbing-pad of a crotch. So, the chemotherapy didn't get it all.

Before she picked the linen from the floor, Dorothy said to me, "We all have our own problems, some worse than others, and we all deal with them in our own ways, some better than others." When she had the towel again folded over her breasts, Dorothy walked out of the room. Cartwheels' voice trailed behind her. He stated, "*A real woman*," without irony.

That's the thing about Cartwheels: he might be crude and tactless at times, but the mouse

always has honest-to-God hope, no matter how shitty his life gets. He has this saying about life in the smallest things. It was why he escaped from the lab in the first place. Turned out that he has cancer, too, which was the whole premise of the show: he sprung from the lab to find a cure, maybe from his sober cousin Mickey. The writers were still figuring that one out when the show was cancelled and they decided to leave the final episode, in the industry parlance, on a cliffhanger. But throughout every show, until the very last line, there was a hope that Cartwheels would find a cure for the little tumors that made his insides bumpy and his outsides jittery and he never doubted he would find it. "*Life in the smallest things*," he'd sing as he kicked his heels together and moved towards the sunset in the closing scenes. His silhouette would recede into a dot against the orange half-circle sitting on the city slum's horizon and the closing credits to the show would fly out from the distance; the first of these, in glittery-stripped bouncing letters, was Katie Williams as Cartwheels.

I was in the twenty-second week of pregnancy when I lost the baby. I had seen the fuzzy gray ultrasound image of my baby, along with the laminated charts on Diamond's walls illustrating the stages of a developing fetus, but I wonder how much life was in me, in it, before the miscarriage. Was it thinking, laughing, crying in there, its little heart beating? I expect to find out only when I die, at that moment when you're supposed to see all the faces of the people in your life lined up as you pass away, even the people you've just met once. There, maybe in-between the Piggly Wiggly cashier from 1984 and the Weimaraner that drowned in the pool when I was six, there'll be my unborn baby's pink face, like a closed rosebud with puppy eyes, and Cartwheels' quivering head somewhere next to it, Marlboro in mouth.

Nick's face was above mine then. His blonde-streaked brown eyebrows curved upwards to a peak that pointed to the creases of his brow. He said, "How you feeling, Catface?"

"Tired." "Mom's going to make you breakfast." Nick sat on the edge of the mattress and his weight made me sink towards him. I wanted to go back to sleep with my face tucked in his outer thigh. I looked at Nick and he was looking at the floor.

"How did the hospital visit go?" I asked.

"She's so stubborn and every visit she gets more so," Nick said, glancing at me with a flash of amusement in his eyes. "I didn't think she was going to let the doctors treat her this time. She kept saying the chemo is turning her into a zombie."

"She is something else," I said.

"Did you see what she did to her hair?" His voice sounded strained. He cleared his throat and said, "It's going to take awhile for me to get used to her like that."

I placed a hand on Nick's warm back. I felt the knots along his spine and I felt real selfish for moping around like I was, especially when he could use me for support, for once. I did know his month must have been as horrible for him as mine was for me: after all, he was babyless too, after the past two years of marking the days on calendars that might produce that magic baby. "Timing is everything in conception," Diamond instructed in one of our first visits to him, before I had finally gotten pregnant and had the miscarriage. And then there was Dorothy, always saying, "five years and still no kids?" The guilt trips and motherly manipulation now in the next room over, with a whooping cough. She didn't have the money for a nurse, refused to stay in a hospital, and had no one else besides her son; these were her favorite things to say.

"I'll never get used to her without all that hair," Nick said.

I was still choosing my words, trying to frame my apologies to him and offer some hopeful condolences when what sounded like a cinder-block being tossed through several sheets of glass came from the kitchen. Nick bolted towards the noise and I imagined Dorothy rolling on the floor, the peach-towel again shed from her and the strawberry eyes of her bosom joggling crazily back and forth.



No such scene, though. When I had robed myself and stepped into the kitchen, there was only Nick crouched to the tile floor over one shattered plate and a bunch of strings and clumps of scrambled eggs that stood out clearly against the floor's aqua-blue tiles. Both mother and son's hook-nosed profiles considered the white shards of ceramic and yellow-gray particles. I always thought the hooked nose was becoming on Nick, but a little too Romanesque on his mother. Then Dorothy stared at me. She was clothed, dressed in a white kimono that hung from her body like loose skin. I guess I felt like that right then, kind of how the tableau played out: bony and brittle, just like Dorothy looked, ghost-like with skin not clinging but sagging and my eggs shattered on the floor in a pile over which my husband tragically hovered.

Dorothy broke the silence by saying, "I'll cook more eggs for you."

"No thank you, Mom. I'll eat in a little while." I always felt a little weird calling her "Mom," not to mention at that exact moment.

Dorothy stood there looking flabbergasted with the kitchen window behind her, light reflecting through the every-kind-of-colored miniature glass bottles that lined its sill. Out in the building's back yard a weeping willow swished next to a bare-branched poplar, killed by some blight, which the contractors still have yet to cut down. A movement on one of its limbs made me look past Dorothy's head. A hoary squirrel was perched on a middle branch. It straightened on its hind legs as soon as my eyes locked on it and the thing seemed to stare back at me. I'm not sure if I saw its tiny lips move, but it said to me and me alone (because neither my husband or his mother acknowledged hearing a munchkin's voice), "*Bald eagle has landed.*"

"I'm just not hungry is all," I said because now Nick was looking at me too from his crouch on the floor.

"We're out of eggs anyways, I think," he said.

Dorothy finally broke her stony stare away from me and said, "I'll go to the supermarket, then. Pick up a few things."

"No, Mom," Nick said. "That's crazy. You need to lie down and rest like the doctor said." He stood up with a neat bundle of pointed ceramic fragments in his hand.

"Crazy?" Dorothy's directed her incredulous gaze to Nick. "Talking to your own mother like she's a child?"

"C'mon, Mom. Don't get yourself worked up over nothing."

"For your information, I'm not an invalid, or a child," she said.

Nick deposited the ceramic pieces in the pantry's garbage, keeping his back turned to Dorothy. He came back to the eggs strewn on the kitchen floor carrying a dustpan and he slid its lip on the tiles to collect the particles, pushing in some smaller pieces that stuck in the grout with his fingers.

Dorothy's gravely voice cut through the house's silence: "For your information, I've got cancer and the only way to treat it is to remain active." She glanced at me accusingly before again concentrating on Nick. "I'll be dead and gone if I don't."

Nick flinched at his mother's statement. He didn't say anything in response, but only dumped the eggs into the wastebasket along with the broken plate. When he was done, he went to the kitchen table and sat there holding his forehead in his hands with his elbows propped where he usually ate.

"Please, Mother," he said quietly.

"Dead and gone." And with that Dorothy left the kitchen and went to her room.

Nick never handled death very well and it stemmed from a rough spot in his childhood. His father's—Frank's—second heart attack at the inconceivably young age of forty-nine proved lethal. Nick was ten when his father passed away, old enough to comprehend mortality's severity, but too young to understand it was an inevitable part of life. Then there was another death around the

same time as his father's, the double death of his pet iguana, Mookie Blaylock. When Mookie died the first time, a month or so after Frank had his first heart attack, the lizard was loose in his bedroom, hiding under the bed. Nick and his father were trying to coax it out when Mookie darted from his cover towards the open doorway of the bedroom, where a terrified Dorothy stood. She jumped out of the room and shielded herself behind the closed door, except it never closed all of the way because the iguana's head was caught in the crack next to the door's hinges. Frank carried Mookie, limp with a trail of blood coming from each nostril, from the room and to his car in route to the emergency veterinary clinic down the road. A week later Mookie returned a fully-recovered, squash-and-hibiscus-eating beast.

Nick recreated several times the conversation that took place between him and Dorothy three years later when the lizard he thought was Mookie Blaylock died. He said that he had been weeping on and off for two days before Dorothy approached him.

"Don't get so upset," she told him. "We'll get you another."

"It won't be the same."

"Of course it will. The first one was replaced and this one can be, too."

Nick was stunned.

"Oh, Honey, you didn't know?" Maybe Dorothy really believed her son suspected Mookie had been replaced; I'm not one to judge.

Nick might have joked about the lizard's double death with me now and then, but I know the revelation had its impact, being that it occurred around the same time as Frank's death. Nick still carried the aquarium where he once kept Mookie. The tank sat in the condominium's storage closet on a stack of old board games, a mat of fake grass and part of a hollow log still visible inside the grimy glass enclosure.

Sometimes, when Nick and I talked about how silly and sad life was, noting moments like those of the Mookie Blaylock incident, we laughed until we cried, even a few times during that miscarriage period. I wanted to add some levity at that moment in the kitchen by mentioning Mookie's death, like when I told Nick that Cartwheels' voice triggered my nervous breakdown and he laughed until tears sprang out from his eyes. I didn't mind; that laughter enabled us to cope with things. But Nick didn't want levity at that moment sitting in the wake of Dorothy's death tantrum. He wanted his mother safe from the fate that devastated him during that dark period in his childhood. So I didn't say anything and there was only the faint sound of Dorothy's coughing coming from the guest bedroom.

"Let's go to the store," Nick said after a few minutes.

We drove ten miles to a supermarket that had just had its grand opening a few weeks ago, a place advertised to be the biggest in town. Not mentioned in the ad was the fact that it currently had the smallest parking lot because half of it was under construction and roped off. We had to park at the post office across the street and walk to the automated doors that swished open into shininess and the fragrance of fresh rubber, where everything was lit by a cool pale fluorescence.

A freckled, middle-aged manager with a flat nose, a crew cut, and a name tag that read "Shaun" cried out, "Welcome to the newest grocer in Atlanta, Georgia," and offered us a shopping cart from the row next to where he stood. "Everything's on sale today."

"Thank you," Nick said softly as he accepted a smooth-rolling cart.

We shuffled into the supermarket maze and began to fill its basket with the things we needed. I had to remind Nick about the distance we had walked from the car when he put a one-gallon jug of Hawaiian Punch into the shopping cart. He lifted the container out of the basket, put it back in the shelf, and wandered off, pushing the shiny carriage ahead of him. I stayed in the same aisle looking for his mother's Chicken and Stars soup. Amongst the rows of cylindrical cans I was sidetracked by superlatives like "heartiest" and "beefiest." Jovial Shaun was right: Chicken and



Stars were buy-one-and-get-one-free. I went searching for Nick with two cans in each hand, the sign of an out-of-work actor whose last gig was as the voice of a dying mouse.

That's when I saw the baby sitting in the floral cooler. It could be seen through the frosty overhead luminescence reflected off of the glass doors of a cold-cabinet filled with perishable flowers and plants. The doll seemed a cruel message with its beady brown eyes and long lashes, slouched amongst boxed corsages on a shelf that was face level to any passerby. Several plants sat on the tier above the doll, their bud-speckled tendrils spilling below like mini replicas of the lone rope of hair remaining on Dorothy's head. I stopped in my tracks and expected the plastic baby to blink and coo, but instead there came Cartwheels' voice from it, "*Big life comes in small packages.*"

"It's kind of scary isn't it?" Nick asked from behind me.

"It's taunting me."

"What is?" Then, "Don't be crazy."

But crazy is as crazy does, and after all I did have Cartwheels' vocals reverberating in my head. The munchkin voice was nothing that I had mentioned to the marriage shrink or obstetrician when Nick and I sought advice after the miscarriage, due in part to the schizophrenic implications involved. But there was more than the fear of straight jackets. To some degree I invited the mouse's commentary for the absurd levity that it brought to my crumbling life and also the idea that—as silly as the source may have seemed—the words were coming from a survivor. As long as he could employ those twisted aphorisms, then life really couldn't be that bad. He and I could shrug our shoulders and laugh it all off. Cartwheels' last remark, though, seemed more a taunt than an inside joke.

"You okay, Catface?"

It was then that I blurted out a grocery item neither of us had made note of on the way down to the store: mouse trap for the *rustle-tap*. Nick and I separated again, him reluctantly in search of the pest-control aisle because he continued to dismiss the sounds as stray paper provoked by the fans' circulation. "*Brilliant deduction,*" Cartwheels would say. It's not like I thought of the *rustle-tap* mouse as a manifestation of Cartwheels and he'd be exorcized with a rodent trap—or maybe I did, who knows, who cares; I just decided then that I had to willfully manage something in my life, anything, even if it entailed getting rid of a pesky mouse that kept me up at night.

I went around the entire store once before finding the dairy section for eggs and the mouse's cheese and then twice more searching for Nick, before realizing that it would be easier just to ask directions to pest control. I spotted Nick pouting at the opposite end of the aisle and it was like I was spying him from the wrong end of a telescope. He might as well have been all the way up on the moon, sullenly considering each of the rodent traps he held in his hands. Nick glanced up at me and projected a morose drone across the aisle, "They're guaranteed or your money back. One's for the biggest sized. The other's for the smallest."

\* \* \* \* \*

That night Nick placed the two traps in our bedroom as I sliced cubes of cheese in the kitchen. Dorothy was still in her room and refused to eat her Chicken and Stars. It was nine-o'clock. I placed a waxy, orange cube in the square outline of each trap and then curled into bed. Nick came into the bedroom, turned off the lights, pulled the chain on the fan twice to its fastest speed, settled into bed and said, "She says she's just going to lay in bed from now on so that she can 'rot away comfortably.'" After a few minutes of silence, he said, "She hasn't eaten anything all day."

"She shouldn't be doing this to you."

"She's my mother, though," Nick said, slurring tiredly. "She can do anything she wants."

"And what about a wife?" I felt for a moment that I was onto something profound. "What can she do to effect her husband?"

"I don't know what you mean by that." And then, "I just don't know, Catface."

Soon after that Nick's breathing evened out and fell into rhythm with the rotation of the fans.

How can I describe what was going on in my mind at that moment? I suppose it was Nick's light snore, vulnerable as a child's, that set off my chain reaction of thoughts, a montage of that day's events starting with a steamy Dorothy and ending with a sterilized supermarket. And, somewhere in that shuffle, it registered that I now needed to take care of Nick as much as he had supported me in the past months and I wondered if the woman with a hollow in her middle was capable of such a feat. An image from four months previous—in another lifetime before I miscarried—surfaced as I was falling asleep: an ultrasound of the life that was then still growing in me, although this fuzzy, grey shape wasn't confined to a telemonitor. It floated on its own, and phosphorescent against a black background, a void that may as well have been my womb, the shape expanded as it started to engulf me in gray sleep. Then a *rustle-tap* from the corner of the room roused me and "Good Vibrations" was cued, but the song stopped when I heard the blatant report of a trap, like a needle cutting the grooves on vinyl. I waited a moment for Nick to acknowledge the sound and then I slid quietly out of bed.

I thought Nick slept through the lights when I flipped them on. The smaller trap was under the computer desk and in it struggled a two-inch, gray mouse.

"What is it?" Nick asked. He was standing beside me.

The mouse was caught by its nipplish hind foot, now bent in two where the metal switch had struck. It writhed and flopped trying to escape and let out staccato squeaks that pinched at my heart. The mouse then twisted its front half around and clutched at the trapped limb with two pink paws. It began gnawing at a lower part, near its ankle, of the leg it held, making the incision with frantic motions of its jaws.

"It's chewing off its foot to get loose," Nick said.

And these words came out real naturally: "Everything's going to be alright, Nick."

\* \* \* \* \*

In a perfect story, Nick wouldn't have looked at me incredulously after what I had said. Instead, he asked what I had meant, and behind that question I knew what he really saying was, "No, I don't believe you."

The mouse gave up on chewing at its ankle and managed to run and drag the trap further into the corner under the computer desk, where the rodent sat stunned before it started to gnaw away at its ankle again.

Nick stooped to look at the mouse and said, "It's gruesome and it's sad and it's just going to be another death in this house."

There was another way to show Nick what I had meant. I ran out of the bedroom, throwing on all the lights as I made my way to the condominium's storage closet. Nick was trailing behind yelling for me to stop because he thought I was going to do something rash.

"What are you up to?" He said. "I'm not going to let you kill the thing."

I opened the storage closet and found what I had run for, not the broom or steering-wheel club, like Nick had thought, but Mookie Blaylock's cage. I had to pull it out from under a heap of yellow rain-slickers and old bed sheets. When I turned around, Dorothy was standing next to Nick, her hands pulling the collar of her robe more snugly around her neck.

"Crazy people," she said. "Making all this noise."

But crazy is as crazy does, and after all, you will do what you will do to survive. Everyone's



got their own ways, whether it's a woman with lung cancer who'll manipulate her son so he'll cry her tears for her, or another woman suddenly inspired by life in the smallest things, or a sad man first acquainted with death when his father had a heart attack and his lizard died twice, and in this way learned that all he can do is curl up and wait for the next blow. Mine was a gesture that already seemed to affect Nick. I could see in his eyes that he'd come to understand and that everyone in this house could try again, if they only wanted to.

## Short Fiction by Kelley Frank

### Not Quite Nirvana

Lately I find myself wondering what else must be done and when I will be able to summon the energy to do it. I'm tired all the time, a yawn on my lips and the conversations of friends passing as if through a static-filled radio station. My eyes are dull, languid, a great leap from the customary quickness of my younger years. Now I watch with the air of one resigned to whatever fate inflicts. People pass without comment and friends have faded away by now, losing interest or patience. I don't share deep dark secrets as a rule and too many people find this insulting. It doesn't matter, it's all inconsequential. I have my studies, and beyond them the great void of uncertainty yawning wider with each passing year, each dying semester, edging closer to swallowing me whole.

I am hunched over my computer. Typing, or trying to type. I do that a lot lately, and my back has begun to ache from the work as well as sleeping on an uncomfortable mattress each night this week. I am losing track of the time, but the paper is not due until tomorrow, whatever tomorrow is, and then I will be done for the semester. My plans are not specific, I have no place to be and no desire to go anywhere. My heart is beating too fast, I can feel it in my wrists, and typing would help me ease the sensation and forget it for a while. But I cannot type anything important. I am filling a page without producing anything. My instructor asked in an email if I was having any trouble and I said no, that I was fine. I made the mistake of calling her a few days ago in a fit of hysteria, telling her everything and asking if she would allow me an extended deadline. Nothing to worry about, she'd cooed, of course I'd be fine as long as I did my work. She understood, she said, as though that were possible, as though she'd lived anything similar. I haven't been by the old house in a week, too ashamed to go back, afraid I'll be recognized by a neighbor. I lived there for almost twenty years after all.

"Are you busy?" He asks it openly, has noticed my unmoving eyes, my fingers hovered over the keyboard deceptively eager. It is a man's voice, cock-sure with confidence leaking through his words as they waft down from somewhere above me. I am sitting, and he towers over me. His clothes, what I can see of them without being obvious, are khaki and cotton. Sandals over white socks.

I nod but it is a formality. I am always busy.

"Mind if I sit down?" He is moving before I can respond, disgustingly confident like most men his age around campus. I feel the weight of his gaze. He is watching my face for a reaction, as though I would be flattered by a frat boy gracing me with his presence, deigning to sit with the common folk who actually study for exams and write their own final papers. I'm not sure he'll find anything there, in my face. I've done some searching there myself and aside from the too-wide eyes unwittingly feigning interest the rest is impassive. I see no need to answer him as he's already sitting, invading my space on the small student center couch as though he'd been invited. He smells strange as men do, making my nose itch with his cologne. There is a voice screaming inside my head, scrambling away from him as though he bore the Black Death. Too jittery, I treat him to my most withering gaze. I will myself to stillness. I think of the Buddha sitting beneath his tree awaiting meaning. I think of the maxim, that pain is something to be recognized, that it exists and should be accepted if one seeks to rise above it.

I don't think I can rise above it. But I'm trying.

I think of the Buddha.

“What’s your name?”

A flirtation. I never ask for them yet they find me, men asking inane questions and taking liberties with conversation and couch space. I sigh, looking back at the laptop screen. There is a rather long paragraph but I’m not sure when I wrote it or even what the point is supposed to be. I can’t recall the subject suddenly, my mind drawing an exhausted blank. My hands freeze, trembling. I’m being watched and I can’t remember the subject of my paper. I’m being stared at and I can’t think. The boy is still sitting, probably rather puzzled. Perhaps he sees my shaking hands and thinks himself with his charming good looks and testosterone responsible. Perhaps he is flattered. But he is used to women at least speaking, responding one way or the other out loud and in a manner he can understand. I am even more tired suddenly. He expects me to speak, will need me to speak to get rid of him. I didn’t ask him to come, don’t even know him, but he expects something from me and I have no choice but to comply. He has dragged me from my cozy cotton world of research papers and literature into a place where I must jump when told and respond when spoken to. I don’t chance a glance in his direction, giving him nothing more to misinterpret. I wonder if perhaps I ask for them to come simply by sitting alone. A woman sitting alone. One is the loneliest number. I let my fingers hover over the keyboard willing my mind to function again, to pick up the thread of thought I’d abandoned before. I’d been daydreaming, watching the people pass but without interest, staring at the screen and wondering where my passion for the subject has gone. I stopped being busy and the man came, approached me, drew attention to my inattention and made everything worse. I sit poised to type. You have interrupted me, I tell him without words. You have thrown me off track and I have no time for your foolish prattle.

I do not feel him move. He must be denser than most, to not pick up the subtle hints of behavior and motion. I do not want to speak to him, but he will sit forever otherwise, staring at me and making my mind too numb to function. I resent him, not just the situation but him. He approached me not knowing anything but that I was working, that it is finals week and I am working. My clothes are unwashed, my eyes are red from too much sobbing at night when alone in the hotel room because my house is gone and there is nothing for me now. I washed my face, repeatedly this morning at the bathroom sink, but the day has worn on longer than wanted in classes and at the library doing my research. I want to sleep and never wake.

I am tired, too tired to work but too tired to go back to the hotel and listen to my parents argue. Who was at fault, they wonder. Which one of them will take the blame for our belongings, a whole life’s worth of paperwork and materialism gone into the street as strangers ransacked the place I’d once called home. I’d hid there once, convinced that it was safe and would always be there. I’d sat at the back patio on the furniture my mother had bought when she’d thought we had money enough to spend, when she’d not known that our house was not even our house and the blooming of the cherry tree and the cool joy of a glass of sweet tea was enough to make everything right. The furniture was shattered, the plants long out of sight.

Not my home. No home. Nowhere but a hotel and a slowly dwindling amount of cash. Can’t stay on campus because I have two sisters and a mother who needs me, needs me to be there to help them and there’s not enough money anyway. And my father, denying everything. Those men came and took it all, he said later as we’d moved through the last minute storage bin in search of anything immediately necessary. I had everything I loved, most of my clothes and my big winter coat lined in faux fur, my favorite books and video games, my sister’s computer and important paper files, the ones I could save, it was all in my car. A gypsy homeless suddenly, surrounded by people who’d never been without a home, whose parents probably bought their cars and dorm rooms, their books. My parents had been like that too. My parents had offered.

This boy of a man could speak to me, approach me when I knew I had nothing. If I were honest and told him everything he would be appalled. It was something I hardly believed myself,

that I’d once lived in a posh neighborhood and now, now I had what was in my car. The money was running out and I didn’t know how long I could keep relying on student loans before everything came to a head.

“Can’t you hear me?” He is joking but a mean sort of joking, his pride offended. Of course any woman who does not reply must not have heard him. At one time I might have responded, spoken curtly and demanded he leave me in peace, explained that I am working or offered a silky insult.

“What do you want?” I am tired and my voice is low from lack of use. I have not yet turned to look at him.

“I asked your name. You don’t have to be rude.”

“Fuck off.” The words are calm, carefully spoken and unmistakable. I have no patience left for him, have given too much anyway. He came to interrupt me then accuses me of being rude.

“What did you say?” He is sputtering, but I get no amusement out of it. I haven’t the strength left for such a feeling, The work matters, I have to graduate now and the work is all that matters.

I turn to look at him, let him see I mean business. “Fuck. Off.” His quiet shock and surprise makes me vaguely warm inside, but not happy. It is close, though, the closest in a while. Has it really only been a week?

*Frankenstein.* I was making the point about *Frankenstein*. I turn back to my computer, hands flying again now that I’ve remembered my place. The man still does not move but he no longer matters. I am back in my element, and all that matters is the dynamic between Victor and his creation, the inexorable fate that crawls closer, destroying everything the man holds dear until he is consumed by rage and self-hatred, a desire for revenge met with revenge.

A hand grabs my laptop screen, trying to push it closed despite my fingers. I leave one hand in place, letting him make a fool of himself while with my other I grab his wrist, letting the nails bite his skin as I meet his eyes. He is angry, slighted. I can’t summon the strength to care, hissing the words. “Leave me alone.”

“You’re crazy, bitch. Let go of me.”

“Leave me alone, leave my things alone.” I glance at his hand, the one on the monitor, tanned with short neat fingernails. We are in a public place, but the student center is quiet and empty save for ourselves. Foolish of me, knowing how I attract losers, to come to such a deserted part of campus. It occurs to me that the man might be more dangerous than I’d thought. I have campus security saved in speed dial for just such an emergency.

He does not seem concerned when he lunges toward me, grabbing my wrist and squeezing hard enough to make me wince. I forget how strong men are, how easily they can overpower a woman despite her best intentions. I am not a particularly strong woman. My studies have left me better equipped to talk my way out of a situation than to engage in a physical fight. In my teenaged years I’d been in a few fights, though I’d always held back in the heat of the moment and regretted it later. I was afraid of hurting people mostly. I had no desire to fight despite the amount of times I’d endured physical attack. The man had asked for it though, come to speak and refused my decline. Touched me, and I bristled at the thought, how dare he touch me at all.

My phone was in the pocket of my jeans, but I couldn’t reach it without attracting attention and he’d be expecting me to go for a phone anyway, or mace, since everyone carries one or the other or both nowadays. I had a pen within reach, however, uncapped and sharp. His leg. Khakis were thin. His leg was close, I’d stab him in the leg and buy some time to get to my phone.

But he was already releasing me, shaking his head and rising from the couch as though disappointed. His anger was spent, or perhaps he’d never been angry and it had all been a test. I didn’t put such things past anyone, especially when I knew nothing about them and they approached the way he had, catching me off guard so spectacularly. I track his movement through



narrowed eyes as he takes a few paces, ruffling his short blond hair. He is tanned from too much sun, the quintessential rich boy never aware he is rich, thinking himself only middle class. No one is rich anymore, if you ask them. He shakes his head as if to clear it then turns to regard me with a smile, foppish and lopsided that falls away at my expression. Perhaps he thought I'd be frightened, needing comfort. I don't know, but I recognize the look of a missed opportunity. I am clutching the pen in my right hand like a madwoman, ready to strike if he comes too close.

He seems to realize my intention, backing away from me a little, his Nikes squeaking on the tiled linoleum. I have that effect on people. I make no apologies. He has frightened me, pushed me to violence or the promise of violence. I think of my car loaded with every personal possession I could carry. I don't appreciate being frightened as a rule, but I am less forgiving of it now, if that is possible.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I guess its finals, huh?" He is sheepish, trying to gain my forgiveness. My computer screen is still lowered painfully against my fingers, it is a big computer and rather old, to be honest. I don't bother to remove them, to check the screen for damages – the thought of what damage might be done keeps me focused, the pain in my hand feeds my hate.

"Get away from me." No pretty words, no forgiveness, no bonding over a supposedly silly situation so he can feel justified in his stupidity, and certainly no hysterics. I am not one of his bubbly sorority girls that will pick up the trash he drops for a smile or kind word. I have no need of him. He has forgotten how to deal with someone real. I am a woman of iron, ramrod straight, eyes hot with fury low and smoldering. He sees this and reacts, his eyes shuttering as he realizes I'm one of *those* women who are not impressed by stupidity in the name of fun or ridiculous behavior as flirtation. I find nothing to grin about in his show of masculinity. I find him stupid. Insignificant. I try to convey all of this in my expression, allow him to realize how I hate him. How I hate interruptions.

"Why?" Such a simple question, and one I could never possibly answer to his satisfaction. I imagine in a moment of wild fury telling him, this boy I've only met a moment ago, this boy of wealth here in this part of the state near the university, this boy who can go without need of much study or work, who thinks he can gain the affections of a woman by slamming a computer screen over her typing fingers and grasping painfully at her wrist. I wonder for an instant about him, whether he would understand one whose worldly possessions are packed into her car in the parking lot. Whether he would comprehend the seething anger I feel, and how much I would like to attack him here in the middle of the deserted student center with no witnesses. I'd like him to give me an excuse, to cut him, to hurt him, to make him feel something besides cocky and sure of himself, head swollen with confidence won since high school, since middle school, since he lived at home.

"Because I'll call the police." I have my phone in my hand, flipped open in a flash. I'll do it too. He knows I would. My phone is paid in advance, though likely not for much longer. Father lost our house, didn't tell us about the eviction until the day it happened and the men were through our doors, taking things in boxes, tossing them in the street as though it were an afterthought. Father said things were fine then, that we were safe. I know the phone will not be paid after this month, that I am lucky it works at all. But I can get something good out of it, sending this boy away in handcuffs for sexual assault. His word against mine, and I have the marks on my wrist, red and too large to have been faked. I have evidence.

"And say what? That I tried to talk to you and you wouldn't say anything, sitting like a stuck up bitch?"

"That you tried to shatter my expensive computer, which you will pay for if it is damaged. That you grabbed my wrist, tried to do something lewd, that I suspect you to be drunk." He was

seething, watching in disbelief. Did he truly think he could grab someone's arm, a stranger, squeeze hard enough to make the delicate bones of the wrist grind and slide together, and that it would be forgiven? Did he think he could act the barbarian and I would comply as the beguiling female captive of his heart? And why speak to me anyway, why approach as though I had nothing better to do than reply?

He is angry, and it slouches over his plain boyish features, making him something uglier and more the way I imagine he'd appear if reacting to an unexpected pregnancy or the confession of a battered ex-girlfriend. "I didn't do anything!" I'd expected something better, a threat or an argument, not the whine, the high whine of a boy clinging to his mother's skirts and trying to play in the real world. The voice of a child who no longer claims the whole sandbox for his own. He is frustrated. I mark him, memorizing his face so if I see him again I can use this against him, if he puts me in this situation in the future. I have no patience for that sort of foolishness. I have no time for him.

He can no longer watch me. He takes my advice without any more words, shuffling over the tiled floor and out the glass doors. He does not glance back and I watch until the bright of his khakis moves beyond the orange phosphorescent lights and into dark.

I take a sip of cold coffee, turning my attention back to the screen. There is no damage, and I breathe a sigh of relief. It would not have been paid for, of that I was certain though the threat of his precious money being taken made him nervous. My paper is still there, whole and safe and secure. I save what I have written, annoyed that I was so interrupted, then flex my fingers, ready to write again.

The words don't come. I type a few exploratory sentences but nothing comes. I can't think of anything to say. My mind is blank, blanker than it was before as though the rage burned the knowledge from my brain. I am tired. I want to sleep, but the hotel room smells of cat litter from our three pets locked temporarily inside. There will be argument and worry. We need a home, even an apartment though the apartments don't allow pets or charge extra per. We have three cats and I don't want to give up any of them. It is a dilemma.

My clothes are in the car. There is no room to sleep there, and I don't have enough money to waste it on a hotel here so far from my family. My sisters need me, my mother needs me, and I don't trust my father alone. They think he will kill himself, that's what my youngest sister told me, and watching him as he shuffles through the days and nights, working to make sure we have everything, that the beds and refrigerator are safely stowed in a storage bin in case we get a house, in case we find a place to go and need them. My father pulled the microwave, old and never replaced in twenty years of living in that house, from the wall. He was like a bag lady, grabbing anything he could, desperate to hold on to something that reminded him of who he was and where he came from. I can see him driving his car over the edge of a bridge, probably, or an overdose then the last drive, taking out others but not caring, caught up in his own problems and his own pain. That sort of death would please him better than opening his veins or struggling on the end of a rope. He wandered aimlessly as the men swarmed in through all the entrances of our house that day, emptying our home into the street. My father looked so lost, I'd never seen him look so lost. Always confident, saying he could take care of things, claiming with a wink that he was the man and that was his job.

I'd wanted him to rave. I'd wanted him to do anything but mope like a sulky child. I wanted to launch myself at him, but I'd held back as I always do when a fight looms close. The neighbors who had come to help, the pity shining in their eyes, had asked if he was sane. They'd glared at him, picking about like a castaway as the rest of us had worked to salvage what we could. The men who'd evicted us offered to take him out back and beat him with great good old boy sincerity. Mother had nearly assented.

Amazing the things I remember.

I think of the Buddha. Resigning oneself to the existence of suffering is the first step to enlightenment. I am very aware of suffering.

The Buddha, who once had everything but gave it up for Truth. Does it count if someone lost everything for you?

I stand, packing my things together carefully. It would do no good to damage my computer or any of my books. I'll need the money for the textbooks, though in previous semesters I would have kept them for the joy of reading or future reference. I have no such luxury now. I am a woman on the run, moving from place to place. I wonder what the hotel staff will think when they enter the rooms after we've left and smell the odor of used cat litter too long stagnant in an enclosed space and the sweet sickly scent of air freshener, the solid kind, propped on the television in a final desperate attempt to combat the stink, making it worse. I have a nook in my car for the laptop, on top of a stack of novels, carefully wedged between clothes and my sister's desktop monitor, mindful of the easel that is too large but managed to fit anyway. If someone broke in I'd lose everything. I think I would break down in public, something I've thus far managed not to do.

The car seems very far away, but I'm going to head there anyway. I have to get back to the hotel. I can't abandon them, my mother and sisters, not now even though I still have so much work left to do.

## Short Fiction by Laura Norton Raines

### When I'm With You

She and I become *we* as soon as we're together. There's Sarah and there's Dinah but there's also this third person, somebody better and stronger and more beautiful than either of us could be on our own. It's been that way for months, for as long as we've known each other. Since I saw her sitting on the little wall outside of the gym, smoking Camels and swinging her boots against the concrete, and she saw me, hiding behind a propped-open door with my Marlboros and my CD-man. We were avoiding the same people — the cheerleading girls with high ponytails and mean little lips.

They'd been picking on me for weeks and I didn't want to fuck with it anymore. It was a big school and I'd just transferred in October, so I didn't really have anybody there to get my back. They called me "pumpkin head" because of my round face and my orange hair. I spent my gym periods hiding and smoking cigarettes and thinking of the big fat 'F' I was going to get for not participating or dressing out.

Sarah hated those kids as much as I did and, until she met me, was all alone in the face of them. I knew the moment I laid eyes on her that we could be something special. She walked over to me and bummed a light, though she had one of her own. She used it as an excuse to ask me a barrage of questions: what album I was listening to, and where did I get my Devotchkas shirt, and how did I get my hair so bright?

Three hours in and I knew important stuff about her, not just the bullshit you have to learn before you can get to the real deal. I knew that she made herself throw up sometimes and that she gave a guy a handjob in the bathroom last year, only to have him tell the whole school. They wrote "slut" on her locker, which wasn't very original but still hurt her feelings.

I told her that my brother died in a car wreck last year. I told her about how my parents actually got into a fight at Josh's funeral and that I hid in the bathroom so I wouldn't have to see his coffin carried down the aisle. Last year, when I'd begged to go to public school, they'd said no way, but after Josh died it was like nothing mattered. They just enrolled me.

Before Sarah, I didn't talk to anyone. There were a couple of punks and a sprinkling of other cool kids at school, but they were older. Hege High is giant and I got lost so many times, wandering down the halls that all looked that same, near tears because I couldn't find my Geometry class or the right Geology lab.

She showed me shortcuts through the school. She sat with me during lunch, even during second term, when she traded out her study hall so that she could sit with me at one of the narrow tables in the hot, bologna-smelling lunchroom and split a pack of crackers and a Dr. Pepper. Sarah doesn't eat much, and I try to follow her example. Sometimes, when I'm really starving, I imagine the carved-out look of her stomach and trick myself into believing that I'm not all that hungry after all.

People at school call us lesbos and maybe it's true and maybe it's not. All I know is that I can be wild and brave with her. We can crush up Aderall and snort it in the school bathrooms. We can sneak into eighteen-and-up shows, make out with high school rock stars, let their hands go to places that we didn't even know we wanted touched.

Boys our own age aren't scary like they used to be. I can even look at the twenty-something ones, like beautiful Tony, the king of our tiny punk scene, who Sarah's totally in love with. It doesn't matter that we're kids. When Sarah's there, I dare to imagine the what-ifs.



We hang out at the mall but we're not stupid mall punks or anything like that. We go because there's air conditioning and we're not allowed on Tate Street ever since we tried to lift some Plasmatics import LPs from Gate City Noise. You can actually smoke at the mall, believe it or not, so we wander around, puffing on cigarettes. We like to go into Hot Topic and make fun of the goth kids, or maybe to the arcade, where we throw the ski-balls so hard they ricochet and go sailing out into the room.

Sometimes there are cool people at the mall, the type we'd normally see up in Winston-Salem at punk shows. Last week, crust-punk Alex was there with some fresh-cut skin chick we'd never seen before. We like Alex, even though he smells like armpits and is always going on about politics. The thing to know about Alex is that he likes fighting almost as much as he likes speed.

He and the new skinhead girl (I think her name was Marie) bought us Orange Julius drinks and told us about this big fight they got into last week – or rather, a fight they'd jumped into. The white yo-boys – the rich, suburban wanna-be gangster kids — picked a fight with Bob the Skinhead in the Dairy Queen parking lot. The yo-boys kicked Bob's ass, and Alex's too, when he threw himself at the guys holding Bob down. Marie told us that the yo-boys wouldn't listen to reason. They slapped down Bob's little girlfriend Irene when she jumped into the fight and shouted that she and Bob *weren't* Nazis, and it didn't even matter that Irene's Mexican.

Alex showed us his bruised ribs and purpling boot print on his back. Bob, he said, was laid up with two broken arms, a smashed-in face and a lacerated liver. We felt awful. Bob and Irene buy us beer sometimes and give us rides to shows when they feel like it. They're really cool.

Anyway, after Alex told us the story, he asked if we wanted to do some lines of speed.

"You've done it before, right?" he'd asked, looking back and forth between us like he was watching a tennis game. We nodded at the same time, but the truth was that we hadn't. Anyway, we went with Alex and Marie behind the dumpsters outside of Rich's. We stood close enough that I could smell Alex's dirty dreads and feel the pressure of Sarah's shoulders against mine. Alex scraped up neat little brownish lines on the back of a CD case and handed us a cut-off bit of straw so we could snort it. When it was my turn, I snorted up a modest line. It felt as if I'd stuck a lit match in my nostril, and my throat closed up at the chemical taste of the drip. I thought I was going to die.

Sarah could tell I was scared so she held my hand and whispered, "Don't tense up, Dinah, it's just like the Aderall. Just relax." She rubbed my back a little bit and I felt better. I didn't even care that Marie was looking at me like I was the biggest poser of all time. Once Sarah did her lines and I'd settled down some, we decided that we loved meth. It made us feel like we could run forever if we wanted to, and we promised ourselves that we'd do more whenever we got the chance.

Today, like many other days, Sarah and I become *we* on the way to Four Seasons Mall. Her mother knows we go every Saturday afternoon but she still gives us grief. She won't say, "Sarah can't go," because Sarah's dad told her not to *limit* their daughter and he's a child psychiatrist. She has to content herself with making it more trouble than it's worth for Sarah to get there. Sarah's mom won't drive her to the bus stop, so I walk to her house so we can take the bus together.

My mom doesn't ask me where I'm going, not ever. Today, I walk right past her and she doesn't even look up from her stupid *O* magazine. I could be on fire and she wouldn't notice. We don't even eat dinner together anymore. She eats cheese and crackers in the kitchen, along with a glass of wine or four. She says she's to have dinner with my dad, but that's bullshit. She knows as well as I do that dad always works late now, and it's all so depressing that I just stay in my room, picking at a bag of chips and wishing I was old enough to move out.

When I get to Sarah's house, Mrs. Collier is standing in the open door. I guess she saw

me coming up the street and wants to make sure she can give me the maximum amount of shit possible. I stand at the bottom of the stairs, in front of the plaster frogs she thinks are "homey."

"Dinah," she says, with this big dramatic sigh. She looks at me like I'm getting her carpet dirty, even when I'm outside.

I just look at her. What am I going to do, sigh back?

"I am going to allow Sarah to walk with you today, but I think it's important to let you know that I am not completely convinced that this friendship is a wholly positive and beneficial one." She shades her eyes with her bony, veiny hand.

Before I can respond, Sarah shoves her way through the door. Her mom loses her balance a little and thrusts an arm against the frame so she won't fall down.

"Ready to go?" Sarah says, and simultaneously smiles and rolls her eyes at her mother's lameness. The sheer force of Sarah's personality is amazing. It's like she's more *here* than everyone else is. She has these big black eyes and as soon as I look into them I feel a *click* and I know we're *we* again. As soon as we're together we're laughing and stumbling over each other's words, talking at once and often saying the very same thing.

Sarah looks at me, then looks down at her chest, and then lets out this big hearty laugh. I am confused until I realize that we're wearing the same shirt.

Sarah's Mom has recovered herself and is clearing her throat in that special *here comes a lecture* way.

"Now, Sarah . . ."

Sarah groans and grabs my arm, pulling me down the steps and out onto the sidewalk. "Yeah, yeah, no cigarettes, no boys, no fun, we *know*. We'll see you later, Ma." Sarah's mom purses her lips but doesn't say anything else, and soon we're walking together, down her street and towards the bus stop. Sarah lights a cigarette for us to split, and I think about all the trouble we can get into, now that we're together again.

As we're turning onto the corner of Spring Garden, Sarah makes this *oh wow* face, like she's just realized something exciting.

"Hey, do you think Tony will be working?" She lets out a long, dirty wolf whistle. It's one of her trademarks. I've tried it at home, but I can't get it. I end up sending a long stream of spit into the air.

"I hope so." I take a puff off our cigarette and think about this.

The truth is, I kind of do and I kind of don't. We both think Tony's cute. He's North Carolina punk royalty. Last week, we saw a girl on Tate Street wearing a homemade T-shirt that had *I love Tony Keene!* written on it in red marker. Tony is about the coolest guy in Greensboro. He hangs out with everyone from the really fucked-up junkies to the straight-edgers; he can fit in anywhere. It's part of his charm. I start wondering if my fly's done up or whether my stomach's straining against my T-shirt. He makes Sarah nervous, too, but she always wants to visit him.

Tony works at Scillano's, the little pizza place set next to the Chik-Fil-A in the food court. We officially met him at the Citizen Fish show in October, although both of us knew who he was before that. Tony was really cool to us – he smiled and flirted and snuck us beers all night long. Now we visit him at Scillano's where he has to wear a company baseball cap to cover his Mohawk. While the assistant manager sits in the back and cries over his wife leaving him, Tony slips us free slices and tells stories about the clubs we can't get into yet.

"Well, if Tony's working, we'll go hang out with him for a little while," she says, kicking at a crushed Sprite can. She sends it skittering towards me, and I volley it back towards her.

"Whatever you want," I say.

First, we wander around, looking in windows and making faces at the little kids who stare at us for too long. We buy a pack of Juicy-fruit at the Rite Aid and sit down near Frederick's of



Hollywood so we can watch the pervy guys sneak feels of the silky panties.

"Want to switch?" she doesn't wait for an answer; she just reaches in her mouth and snags the big wad of gum. We pass the globs and them pop them in our mouths. Her piece is still and slides easily between my teeth.

"Oooh, look at the bald guy in the jogging pants." I point out a tall, skinny man in a navy tracksuit. He's worked himself into a corner far away from the register, where he's frantically pawing the water-filled bras.

She looks at him but she doesn't seem too interested. I spot another weirdo, one in a bad toupee who's heavy into the thong display, when Sarah grabs my shoulder and pulls me in close.

"Hey, let's go to the bathroom," she says in a low tone, her lips near enough to tickle my ear.

"I got some vodka from my Dad's study."

"I hope you didn't put water back in – remember what happened last time." Over Christmas we'd stolen the Absolut from the freezer. That was before her mom went to AA, so it was out for the taking, and not locked up in her dad's cabinet. We replaced what we took with water. The bottle froze solid and we both got grounded.

"Nah, just rubbing alcohol."

"No way!"

We spit out our gum and stick it to the seat of the bench. Maybe someone like Sarah's mom will sit in it.

In the bathroom, we take little sips off of Sarah's flask and unpack our cosmetic cases and combs. We both wear a lot of make-up, and why not? Why spend 30 minutes putting on stuff just to make it look like you haven't got on any make-up at all?

When I look into the bathroom mirror it's her face I check first. I love her hatchet nose and her surprised black eyebrows and the sharp angles of her cheeks. I wish I could scare people just by curling my lip. She does it perfectly, a one-corner sneer just like Sid Vicious. I suck in my cheeks to see if I can look as hollow as she does, but it's a no go so I borrow her lipstick instead. It's awful purple-black and we look fabulous in it.

"Our hair looks good today," she says, and she's right. Our hair is a mix of blue and green and bleached-out blond – we only had the leftovers of two bottles of Manic Panic (sea green and teal) and had to make do with streaks. We like to pretend that we are punk rock mermaids.

She takes another swig from the flask, then hands it over to me, and I take a pull. It burns like hell but I don't grimace, since she didn't. But I feel a little queasy.

"We should get some Cokes at the food court and mix this in. Then we can walk around with it and no one will know."

"Right-right," she says, and grabs my hand.

"Right-right," I say. I like the sound of it. I say it again.

We walk out of the bathrooms and into the little area where they've put benches and potted plants. There are always old people sitting there. They're not the happy, speed-walk-around-the-mall old people, either. They just look sad. Today there's an old man in dirty brown pants and a button-down white shirt. He has a cane and a cup of coffee and he's staring off into space. I don't think he even notices us, but when we clomp by in our big boots, he looks up. His eyes are pale green.

"Afternoon, girls. You got a pretty sister there," he says, but we're not sure which one of us he's talking to, so we just laugh and walk a little faster.

"Do you want to spit in the fountain first?"

"Nah, the Cokes. That way, we can go see Tony. He's working, I bet."

When she says Tony's name, I feel this little hot pull in my stomach.

She gives me a leery smile and I can smell the faintest whiff of vodka on her breath.

"I bet Tony misses us," she says, and glances in a store window to check her clothes. She pulls at the little kilt she's wearing.

"Do you think we look good enough to go see him?" I try to keep my voice light and airy but I suddenly don't feel so hot. I know I don't look as good as she does.

If she notices my nervousness she doesn't let on.

"The question is, does *he* look good enough to see *us*?"

"Of course not. Does anyone ever?" I almost believe it.

I want her to laugh and nod, but she's not looking at me. She's leaning in closer to the window and scratching at something, maybe a flake of eyeliner that's dislodged itself from her elaborate makeup.

"We missed seeing Tony last time we were here," she says.

"Yeah. We had to pay for our pizza."

"That messed up the whole plan."

"What plan?"

"The Tony Plan. What I've been thinking about . . . didn't I tell you?"

She looks a little too innocent when she says this.

"No, we didn't talk about it."

"Oh, that's weird. Well . . . I mean that I'm going to . . . to go for it, this time."

"Go for what?"

She looks proud and scared at the same time. "For *it*, Dinah. Me and Tony, I mean. Together."

"Wait. *What?*"

"I was going to do it last time but he wasn't here. I bought condoms and everything. I'm tired of just talking about him. Don't you get tired of talking all the time?"

The thing is, I don't. But I don't say anything because I don't know what she wants to hear. Sarah never says stuff like that. Still, liking Tony is for-pretend; he's twenty-three, and is too old and too cool to date fifteen year-olds.

"Do you think he missed us?" she asks, looking at me seriously. I feel a little better because it's back to *us* again.

"Sure he did. Who wouldn't?"

I walk a little closer to her, just to feel the sway of her skirt against mine. *Clump-clump, clump-clump*, the sound of our heels on the fake marble floor. We're our own little army.

In the food court the white yo-boys congregate around the Orange Julius. Their sagged-down pants hang over their boxer shorts and they call each other "Bitch" and "Fool" and blow straw wrappers at the lady running the register at the Wok Express.

"We should go pick a fight with those guys." I say it in my tough voice, the one I only use when we're together.

"Nah. Where's the challenge? Those guys are private school pussies. They'd cry like little bitches and get their daddies to sue us."

Really, we're scared to fight them. We know, for instance, that the redheaded yo-boy that's now drinking a Slushie hit Bob in the face with a brick and sent Bob's blood spraying across the concrete and all over Irene. Even from a distance, I can see that the redhead's knuckles are capped in angry red scabs.

Seeing them must remind Sarah of the fight, too, because we give them wide berth as we walk over to Scillano's.

We see Tony leaning over the warming trays, spritzing the cold slices with oil to make them look more appealing. When he looks up, there we are.

"It's the twins!" He grins and flicks oil off his fingertips, leaving a spatter across the counter.

She and I smile at each other a little bit because we like the nickname. We're standing so close I can feel the pressure of her boot against my own.

"Hey, Tony."

"Hey, Tony."

"You guys hungry?"

"Yes," at the same time and that makes him smile even bigger, so big I can see the tiny retainer that he's wearing in his labret piercing. It looks like a pinprick and I know that she's thinking the same thing I am – *what would it be like to kiss Tony?*

"So, let's see – the twins always get the same thing . . . two veggie Sicilian slices, no olives, Coke, no ice, and cheese sticks with extra dipping sauce. Am I right?"

We nod. Tony looks me straight in the eyes and I look down at my shoes.

"And extra napkins." Sarah leans over the counter so that her breasts are pressed up on her arms and she's making this strange face, with her lips poofed out. I She's trying to be sexy or something. I try to catch her eye so I can make a face at her. We don't throw ourselves at guys; it's not our style. I stare at her hard but she's not paying any attention to me.

"You must be messy," Tony says, and hands her a stack of paper napkins. Sarah throws back her head and laughs like it's the funniest thing she's ever heard.

Tony sets our Cokes down right in front of her. His hand brushes the side of her breast and I can't tell if he does it on purpose or not, but he takes just a little too long to pull back. Sarah takes this moment to grab his hand.

"What's this tattoo all about?" she asks, running her finger over the band logo inked on his wrist. I know good and well that she knows who Social Distortion are. Tony smiles down at the skeletal tattoo and turns his hand over so he's holding hers, too.

"Social D. You know Social D, don't you?"

Sarah just smiles up at him. He rubs his finger across her knuckles, leans down and whispers something in Sarah's ear. Her cheeks go pink. She whispers something back to him, with her hand cupped tight around his ear. He smiles and nods and murmurs. Tony runs a finger down Sarah's cheek, then straightens up and moves back onto his side of the counter. He stretches his ropy arms over his head and I can see the outline of his ribs through his thin T-shirt.

"I'm going to go see if Angelo can watch the counter," he says, and heads into the back. His eyes meet mine as he's turning. He gives me a little wink.

I don't know what to say. Luckily, I don't have a chance to do anything. Sarah's gotten hold of my arm and she's talking ninety miles an hour.

"Ok, Dinah. You're not going to believe this, but Tony likes me, too. And he's *interested*. We're going to go back in the storeroom for a while. Tony's manager won't be back until later and this is our chance," she whispers. Her eyes are so bright that she looks kind of crazy. It takes me a second to realize that she's not talking about the real "we," but of herself and Tony. I never thought of her as being part of any we that didn't include me. My stomach tightens.

"Sure. Whatever. Do you want me to wait around so *we* can walk home together?"

Sarah considers this. "You can if you want. But Tony might drive me home. You can wait and see, I guess."

Sarah's flushed, excited, and smiling. She's not thinking of me at all. There's no room for me in her head or in her life at this moment.

"Whatever." I feel like crying, but I don't want to in front of the yo-boys and the housewives. Sarah awkwardly pats at my shoulder. I guess she can tell I'm upset.

"Hey, Dinah, it's okay. I'm not mad or anything. I just really want to do this. Here, you can have my pizza and all the cheese sticks. They're your favorite. I'll call you when I get home and I'll tell you everything, all right?"

She hands me the tray and I want to tell her that I can't eat, that my stomach is too queasy for the greasy mall food. But my mouth's not working. Sarah gives me the kindest look. I don't think she means for there to be pity in it. Maybe she doesn't even know it's there.

"I'll call if I don't see you," she says, and leans in to give me a hug. "Isn't this exciting? I can't believe it!"

Maybe I smile back. I'm not sure.

She gives me a thumbs-up before she disappears through Scillano's little side door. Angelo, who has taken Tony's place at the counter, leers after them. He doesn't look at me.

I choose a seat near the Freshen's yogurt stand, as far away from Scillano's as I can manage. Sarah's cup of Coke is waxy and beginning to sweat. I take a sip. It goes down hard.

We becomes *me* in the food court of the Four Seasons Mall. I sit, gnaw absently on a cooling, clotted cheese stick and stare down at my slice of pizza. The grease seeping into the crust and is turning it to mush. I hear the people around me, talking and laughing and chewing, and just *living*, and I imagine what tomorrow will be like. *We, we*, the chant that got me through each day and every moment as I sat in my room, waiting for the phone to ring.

The worst part is that I know Sarah isn't feeling this with me. She can't take my pain away. Hell, she's not thinking of *us*, just of *I*, a cold and lonely word without heart. And then there's *me*, the leftovers of a broken equation. I smush the corners of the pizza together, making ridges of red dough. I wait.



## Personal Essay by Mahnaz Nazir

### Relative Values

*'On discovering the richness of...her hometown: it was almost a feeling of having been an orphan who discovers that her parents are alive and living in the most desirable home.'*

- Janet Frame

My mother says I was conceived on a trip to my ancestral village, Chakwal; in the land of the golden skinned people who have more to their lives than books, exams, grades, deadlines, desk jobs, and traffic jams. I am glad I have a connection to it not just by blood but by birth... a kindred connection suppressed in a moment of anger by some elders that needs to be roused again.

Just a winter out of the past when I have known myself. Just one winter that meant so much to me that it never died. Every smell, feeling, touch, thought, and observation from those few months remain -- although I was just four. Four and sleepy when we stepped off the train into the misty cold of the still Chakwal night. The silence was so palpable I could see its contemplating visage in the vaporized breath escaping me. Dogs *aa-oooweed* as I melted into Ma's thigh. An old man carried our luggage inside, to the staccato of his rubber slippers dully slapping the bricked sidewalk and his chapped feet.

Everyone was asleep except for the ancients waiting for their children. My grown-up parents -- children? They passed their hands over our heads in blessing and cracked their knuckles against our temples to ward off the evil eye. The servants served us delicious omelet made in freshly churned butter with onions, tomatoes, and green chilies cooked by the radiation of the electric heater, which I think is just something my child-self imagined. I slept fitfully that night, without my cot, my night-light, my Winnie-the-Pooh book, and my dolls. I had something better to put me to sleep; the incessant conversation of the elders. Just ask a child how comforting that is.

The next day Ma woke me early in preparation for the display. My black velvet frock with the lace collar was violently ironed and donned and my scalp was scratched with hair pulled into a faultless pigtail.

"Why can't I just wear a shalwar kameez like Samina, and Sara?" I asked.

"Your Daddy had this dress especially ordered from the *Mothercare* catalog for you--don't you want your cousins to admire it?" she asked, giving me a quizzical look.

Knowing that silence guaranteed swifter freedom, I sighed conceding to the onslaught. Patent leather booties with frilly socks topped off with a connoisseur's sigh of satisfaction led to the conjunction of the scene.

As my cousins arrived soon after, everything -- the dress, the hair, and the shoes, all remnants of my city life died a quiet death as we ran off to get milk from the cowshed. Running through mysterious, narrow lanes, stepping on soft golden hay and fresh mounds of cow dung that released interesting odors at every gratifying squelch. On the way back I was running so fast that tottering, I smacked into a wall, leading to the end of my shoes. All the dirty water from the bathrooms, kitchens, and clothes-pens would flow out into open sewer canals, gently coursing through the neighborhood into some river. Well, that's where my shoe swept away, as I, shocked out of my senses, walked without it the remainder of the way.

Another portentous event was the discovery of the lavatory; a tiny room high up in a minaret on the third floor. Any one who wanted to 'go' would have to carry the carafe from the ground floor across the house, as it shrieked out your business, in a little sandy room (that wouldn't lock) with

a hole in the ground and two brick footholds on each side. After certain intervals, the sweeper would come to clean up, swinging his bamboo broom, singing a romantic song. It was so normal for everyone; rather like 'going' in the snake infested fields. But my nose just never got used to it.

Life was a big howling lark. During the lazy afternoons, after feeding the crooning pigeons, I would go roof hopping across the neighborhood, as all the houses were built close together; smelling what was being cooked, overhearing insidious rumors. In the process, not only did we learn how Ali and Mariam were hacked to death by her father for having an affair, while later he jumped into the village well committing suicide, we also got delicious treats.

'Oye, look oy! It's Nazir's *daatur* from Karachi!' they would boom gleefully, as I would get lost in a whirlwind of hugs and questions.

'How was the flight--and the food?'

'How is your mother doing? Is her migraine better now? No? Ohho! I will take her to my hakim. He made a miraculous potion for my Mona out of turtle blood and she is perfectly fine now! She just turned fifteen; must get her married soon. Two more years and she will be eighteen and who will accept her then? O God, be merciful!'

'How is your mother's, brother-in-law's, mother's sister doing? Has she recovered from the stroke yet?' And finally, the reason for succumbing voluntarily to this barrage of questions: 'you cannot possibly leave without eating at our house! Let me go and get something,' said they as I would compliantly wait. Soon, we all would be gorging on gastronomic treats--rich sweetmeats that crumbled halfway to our mouths; a fist full each of freshly made crunchy hot jaggery; sour oranges from the first pick of the season, as fuelled anew we terrace-hopped with renewed zeal, shooting saliva covered pips at one another.

In the evenings before dinner I would discover the elders through the cousins. Fat Ma, was my father's aunt. She had the thickest blue eyeglasses tied with an elastic band across her balding, oil drenched, henna streaked hair. Intimidating me with her gleaming, cataract ridden eyes she would reach into my pockets and steal all my mints. 'Heh, heh, heh,' she would laugh through her partially opened mouth, giving me a conspiratorial look as if we were sharing a grand secret. But all I would be aware of were the remnants of her lunch stuck in her dentures, while feeling rather vulnerable and stupid as she stole my candies. Although in return I did get to hold her false teeth and wear her hearing aid, I would hit the cricket bat just a little harder, than was needed, during her so-called leg massage, just to ensure I was fully indemnified.

Uncle Cuckoo's name was rather apt. I once accidentally poked him in an eye with a plastic lizard that left him partially blind; he just smiled through it.

'That son of a donkey would waft benignly through a death sentence if he had to,' said Lali Ma.

Lali Ma was my father's maternal aunt the cranky old, swearing spinster who never got married because of a pock marked face. She was deaf, and blind in one eye, and had the crinkliest face ever; sucking greedily on her cigarette she looked like a shrunken old pirate complete with an eye patch and gold hoops. Dada, my grandfather, had the jiggiest jowls, and Halima Ma was one of his sisters; not related by blood, yet extremely beloved. She was the daughter of one of the seven women who breast-fed Dada when his mother died in childbirth. I found it rather funny. He joked that as our mothers would vouch for our entry into heaven on doomsday, his redemption was guaranteed, one way or the other. How could I not love this mad lot? Even today their eccentricities --- or what I remember of them -- help me understand myself whenever I feel the need to.

Friday was special. After prayers the drawing room would be opened according to protocol for the guests (us) with great ceremony. It was a stuffy, bright pink room with the spectacular floral patterns of the bulky sofas numbing the visual aesthetes. Still in their original covering they



squeaked with every movement. There were huge stuffed peacocks all around; screaming plastic flowers in golden vases; thick, ornate frames of holy verses and pictures, on the walls, with a big glass display filled with toys. A china doll; a monkey with a drum; a red fire engine.

We would have nostalgia sessions here looking through my parents' wedding pictures. I remember one in which my grandmother is lying at my mother's feet on the wedding stage during one of her fainting spells, as my convent educated Ma looks on with disdain as if to say "It's just like her to be taking my attention! Humph!" As Ma had her tea, I noticed there was a fly in her cup. Unsuspectingly, she drank it up.

Often we would go visit neighbors, friends, and families, on foot, since everyone lived nearby. The relationships were a great jumbled mass as everyone was related in some way. It was funny to see a girl being married into her next-door neighbor's house – crying as if she was going abroad.

Of course, every visit guaranteed gifts. Dingly-dangly hair clips that would make me want to vigorously shake my head to and fro, hand-knit sweaters with huge buttons, tangy tamarind candy enjoyed through eyelids squeezed shut, as the mouth contorted in response to the sour bursts. I remember how such a visit initiated my affair with pistachios; the satisfying snap of opening and chewing the crispy, crunchy dried fruit inside. While everyone got up to leave I stayed back, quickly stuffing my woolen cap with the pistachios on the table. At the door they accidentally scattered across the floor with my pride, but instead of embarrassment, I received a whole bag of fresh pistachios, with love.

Sometimes, our visits would be to the homes of the educated elite; lawyers, doctors -the posh families in the village. But that was always boring compared to the color and life I was living among the average rural folks.

A lot of our time was spent in the kitchen –the queendom of the women. They would religiously get up at five and after dressing up, would begin concocting the most elaborate meals for the household amounting to at least thirty people. The children in their crisp, blue school uniforms would squat around the stove on the ground, as their mothers would feed them steaming fried dough dipped in mounds of fresh buttermilk. The men would leave after dawn prayers followed by a heavy breakfast and then—the women would have a gala.

Throwing aside their veils with a flourish amidst the rhythm of klinking bangles, and the light bouncing off their heavy gold earrings, they would gossip, do the laundry, sweep, dust, mop, crush spices, get-clean-feather-cut-mince, and store all the groceries. Sometimes, there would be contests to see who could do the most kitchen work using the least amount of utensils, for that was a mark of good housekeeping. While following one of my aunts on her daily round of chores, one day, I discovered that refrigerators could be used for storing clothes in winters. This was a phenomenal demonstration of lateral thinking in the very soul of Punjab.

Bong was a household favorite, which the women would make from scratch. They would clean the huge bones; rip off all the leather and black hair, putting it on boil. The fact that the entire house would be stinking that day never bothered anyone. Nor did the stray piece of thick black hair from the hapless, mutilated animal's foot that ended up in your mouth. Sometimes, the men would get pigeons from a hunt. Arms would dig into the bloody hillock of deceased meat, and once the cleaning began the entire floor would be smeared in blood and feathers, later used as pillow stuffing.

At mid-day the men would be served food in the fields. Meanwhile, in the house, the draconian old mothers-in-law would be served by their sons' wives, thoroughly enjoying their newfound power, after having served their domestic sentence for years. No wonder every mother wanted to get her son married off, as soon as possible! Before their men folk returned, the women would attend to their toilette, looking so fresh and perky, it seemed as if they had been pampering themselves all day.

Often they would congregate at my mother's sacred dressing table to get lessons on the latest make-up techniques.

'Bhabhi, Pillease do our mac-up,' they would request her, while practicing their spoken English, as Ma happily complied.

On some days a village woman would come with huge bundles of exquisite cloth swaddled on her head, her waist, and around her arms and a haggling rumpus would ensue.

'You witch! Do you think I can't tell pure silk from the fake? Don't try to con me or I will have you jailed in a snap!'

'Humph! My mother is from the grand nabob household; I know what a true Indian sari is supposed to be! Pssh! Remove this cheap trash from my sight!'

'You rich women always do this. I bring the choicest material for you and you pretend it's worthless, cheating me out of my money; *Hai Hai* Lord help me!'

And thus the battle would continue as the women would shout, and spit, enjoying every moment of acting like vain, spoilt princesses catering to their feminine desires, as the cloth seller played along.

The time before dinner -- in fact before every meal--was spent screaming over family feuds. The degree of resentment and hatred, visible in every gripped hand with throbbing veins threatening to burst; in every teary, red eye; in every hand slapping against the chest; in every fist of hair pulled; in every oath sworn over the holy book; in every drenched checkered hanky; in every sigh taken, was an interesting spectacle to watch.

Complaints, complaints, complaints. 'You have stolen my share of the property.' 'You are financing your daughter's dowry with my share of the profits.' 'You are trying to break off my son's engagement with my daughter.' 'Your wife has not been serving me fresh food; I know when I am not wanted anymore—oh God please call me back!' 'You smirked at me yesterday.' 'You rolled your eyes.' 'You have trained your dog to bark at me.' 'Your second wife's sister's maid's daughter told me, you are planning on setting up a factory in the city—where did you get the money, hnh, hnh?'

But with the call for dinner all wars would cease, to be resumed the next day. "Pour sand over your anger," the older ones would say, while thoroughly enjoying the debacle. United they ate and divided they fell. Everyone would sit around a long cloth spread out on the floor, displayed with a grand array of oil-drenched food, slurping, chewing, drinking, and licking away. Protruding tummies, and many burpings later everyone would get up sighing satisfactorily. The amount of blocked arteries in my family was ridiculous.

Dinner would be followed by tea cooked to a sweet, rich, milky delight. This was trailed by a period of quiet meditation, as people lay down on four feet high beds woven with jute, prayed and smoked, thought about the next meal, or what to fight about the next day. A lot of work went into the latter, for no one wanted to be bested. It's strange how I never recall anyone reading a book. If people had nothing to do or think about, they would sleep or just stare at a wall while chafing their feet to keep warm.

Late at night, the old ladies would shuffle off to the snug warmth of their beds in the kitchen, where the grandchildren had already laid claim. Velvet blankets would be dragged over giggling, *khee kheeing* heads, kicking, flailing arms and legs, and sneezing mouths from particles of cotton stuffing trapped in their itching nostrils. The grandmothers would scream and curse their children for thrusting all parental duties on them – but they loved it. It made them feel needed, wanted.

How do I raze this part of me and why? My soul, what I want to breathe, where I want to dream, what my eyes want to see, who I want to know, what I want to experience is all there. It's been there for the past seventeen years, waiting for me to return. Me here, right now, is not who I am –it's not a complete me. I now seek restitution for the biological band severed somewhere on

the way; ironically, *I* am the only way of getting it by changing the course from the centrifugal to the centripetal, into the powdery butterfly madness of the pistils wherein resides the sweet, golden honey of happiness.

The next time you are sitting staring at the walls in the bathroom and a cockroach appears, observe it. It will always, always try to return to its guttural abode through the tiny holes of the steel covering. It will ram its' head against the sharp edges ultimately severing its' head in the process. "Why would it do such a masochistic thing?" I'd wonder. But now I understand; it belonged there and knew it.

Now, I just lift the lid as it scurries off home. Maybe someday someone will do the same for me. Maybe, someday, I will do it for myself.

## Personal Essay by Jennifer Pennington

### Claiming My Grandmothers

#### i. Webs

The boxes are slowly piling up in the foyer as I gradually remove every trace of myself from this apartment. It's starting to feel fractured, you're sure somebody lives here because of the toothbrush in the bathroom, but all the intricacy and bits of personality are gone, the pictures and trinkets that I've been holding on to for a lifetime. I am starting to feel fractured too, stressed out about uprooting myself, about not being able to find anything, about how much there is to do, no matter how much I've already done.

I've been wrapping dishes and cups in pieces of old fabric. One box is already full and a second box is well on its way. The empty cupboards look like gaping holes in my home. For that matter, so do the bare bookshelves and the large blank walls in the living room. I can close the doors to the cupboards, but the only refuge I have from the rest of the apartment is the porch. I need a cigarette anyway.

The only item left on the porch is a little tin ashtray filled with butts and a few wooden matchsticks. I light a cigarette and lean against the railing, watching the smoke billow out from my lungs when I exhale. I should quit, but not today.

In the left corner of my porch, the corner made by the wall and the floor of the porch above me, is a large spider web. There is a slight hole in the pattern, torn by the wind, and the spider is fussing over it. I've been living here for five months, the spider for three. It is a lovely spider, yellow stripes over a black, bulbous body and long legs that look strong despite their being delicately slender. A lovely spider, but I still stay away from the left side of the porch.

When I was eight and spending the summer with my grandparents, Granny had such a spider. Exactly the same kind of spider. It lived outside my window and built a web that eventually covered the window entirely. I tried to break the web once by flinging rocks and tearing it. Wisps of nearly invisible thread became trapped in the breeze and the spider took shelter under the eaves. When Granny found out what I had done, she was angry with me.

"It's just a garden spider. No harm to your or anybody. Leave it alone, it can be there if it wants to." Her reedy voice didn't—neither in its tone nor its inflection—change with her anger, but her body had become granite, hard and unyielding, every move deliberate and controlled as she washed dishes that night.

Still, I begged my grandpa to knock it down and kill it.

"It gives me nightmares! What if it finds a way inside and lays its eggs in my ears while I'm sleeping?"

"If it lays its eggs in your head, at least it will have plenty of room for them all," he would joke.

And I, in eight-year-old disgust, would pout in the living room and claim that I was sleeping on the couch from now on.

But the spider stayed and I found my way back to my bed. And my granny would walk around to the back of the house to check on it, or just to watch it, every now and then.

When fall came (as inevitably it does), the spider disappeared. I realized it was missing, web and all, one morning and was afraid that Granny would think that I had finally succeeded in destroying the web.



"I didn't do it." A plate of pancakes in front of me, untouched.

"Didn't do what?" she asked, turning from the stove, suspicion creeping up her throat.

"I didn't kill the spider. It just left. Or something. But I didn't do it."

"I know." She went back to cooking, two eggs over medium for Grandpa. "It's been gone. It took the web down and is probably dead now." She didn't look at me.

It's odd how you come to appreciate the complexity and strange beauty in spiders and their webs. It's odd how you come to like the way their black bodies reflect the sun so that they are gleaming like new pennies on the porch. How you watch in fascination as their webs get larger and more intricate—this particular type of spider makes wonderful zigzag patterns in the middle of the web (Granny called them zipper spiders because of them). It's odd how, as I'm standing here smoking, I'm thinking how I'm going to miss this spider and how I wish I could take it with me.

I finish my cigarette and go back inside, the holes in my home once more pressing in on me. IN the kitchen, there is only one more dish-cupboard to go, full of Tupperware and cheap plastic containers I held on to after emptying them of their late-night Chinese delivery. I can't let these things go. They are part of "home." Each item, useless or otherwise, fills a hole.

I stack the plastic bowls and dishes in neat piles inside the box. The lids get stacked all together and placed in the center. The cupboards have all been emptied, so I turn to the kitchen drawers—bottle openers, can openers, spatulas, corks, a seemingly endless variety of spoons, forks, and knives, twist-ties from bread loaves and garbage bags, yellow kitchen gloves, chopsticks, paper napkins from fast-food restaurants—all of these things find their way into the box, surrounding and filling the plastic containers.

When I think of Granny's spider now, I don't think of it as dead. I imagine it walking, legs lifted high as it makes its way over rocks and bits of broken twigs, dragging its web behind it—the whole web—rolled up into a sack and slung over its back, like a hobo or Santa. It isn't an animated idea, a cartoon version of the spider, with a toothsome grin and musical notes surrounding it as it makes its way. Rather, it is a nature documentary with a deep male voice-over:

"As the spider searches for new locations to set up its web, it crosses terrain that to the spider must seem perilous indeed. The spider drags its entire web behind it, collecting debris that it will use to decorate its home, once it has been re-established. Notorious pack rats, every thread the spider has ever woven is still in that web. It is a compilation of the spider's life and is its most precious possession."

## ii. On the Brittleness of Bones

At age seventy-four, Granny fell. In one hand she had a chocolate donut, in the other a light lawn chair—and as she made her way down the not-so-steep hill from the house to the little dock on the lake, her foot slipped in the morning grass. When she hit the ground her right arm failed to catch her and became unnaturally tangled in the lawn chair. High above her salt-and-pepper head, even as she let out a shout of pain that drew the whole family from the house, she held the chocolate donut safe—priorities, after all. So at age seventy-four, my granny broke her arm.

I went with her to the hospital where she insisted on having a hot pink cast and later made each of her nine grandchildren sign it. The emergency room had been sanitized and cleaned to the point of being almost comforting. White walls, white counters, white linoleum floors, white cupboards hiding white cotton balls, white bandages, white swabs on the end of long sticks. And steel, because polished steel can have that wonderfully clean feeling when surrounded by white—little glass jays with steel tops full of tongue depressors and alcohol wipes. A steel sink in the middle of the white counter, a delicately curving faucet that isn't quite beautiful but recognizable from handicap sinks in public restrooms. I've since learned that all emergency rooms strive for

this sterile comfort—it's a room that can be controlled and ordered. These rooms prepare the way for the cool aloofness of a doctor who has seen hundreds of patients and you are just another one.

Our doctor didn't disappoint. Thin and balding, he looked as clean and carefully groomed as the room. Had he stood still in his pristine white coat, he would have melted right into the wall, his shining stethoscope mirroring the lids of the apothecary jars in the florescent lights. His long fingers toyed with a black pen, clicking the top in rapid succession and tapping it against my granny's chart. He took one look at Granny with her deceptively sturdy frame—she had been a farm girl after all—and with the concern of a professional told her to be more careful, that she wasn't ten anymore, that her bones were more brittle.

He used the word brittle to describe my granny's bones.

Brittle.

At the time, all this meant to me was that Granny had to take more supplements, but since then the word brittle has brought more to mind; like dead tree limbs that snap in a strong storm. Imagine the sound those tree limbs make, the loud crack and thud as they hit the ground. You can't be sad when a tree limb breaks, not when it is lifeless and of no use to the tree at all. Once the limb has broken, the tree can grow even stronger. It's a relief to be rid of it, I should imagine.

I can also imagine that my granny's bones sound very similar when they snap—the loud crack and thud as she hit the ground. The difference is that the brittleness in her bones wasn't because they were lifeless. She was still using her limbs, blood pumping up and down the veins in her arms, muscle and bone flipping pancakes and vacuuming the living room.

I had never signed a cast before, or seen how a person's whole face flinches and spasms with every jar and bump of a car. I'd never seen how difficult it is to live with the brittleness of bones. The little chores around the house become monumental tasks—putting on a shirt sends sharp pains through the shoulder and arm.

All your life you're surrounded by the idea that your bones are strong—the essence of your very strength, bone and muscle and blood. But you were wrong.

The bones become the enemy.

## iii. Offering

Oh Granny, entice the birds to come home!

Outside the light is slanted orange and red across the sky and stretched tight in a soft pink band along the horizon. With every bluster of the wind from the north these colors become a rustling shower, sprinkling gently from the branches as the ashes in the fire pit silently rise, ghostlike, on invisible currents, mingling vibrant hues with somber gray. The birds have all disappeared, but the crackle of dried leaves mimics their bustling in the trees.

Inside, everything is still.

It is rare to have the house to myself these days, so I have learned to appreciate the quiet and darkness this affords. In the backyard, out of sight, Granny is building a fire, her arthritic fingers cramping in the cold, but still happy as each breath comes out as a smoky puff. For me, this is a chance to sit at the window for hours, like a cat, and watch the world change, feel it getting colder and quieter, my forehead against the chill glass. The bite in the air causes my thoughts to change color and drop; and for a while they end up in a large pile—one of those perfect piles that took me hours to rake up, only to give into the temptation of leaping into them, enjoying their colors before they are sent to the fire—and then they are burned and forgotten, more will always be there to take their place. Like charcoal ashes on the forehead that easily washed off (yes, Pastor Jim, yes).

These cold days I feel as though my window is the only light, surrounded by the purple fig leave that, like leather, are too tough for Autumn to destroy, only dead Winter knows the trick.



The birds used to sit in the fig tree for hours, eating and chatting with each other, leaving only the splotched leaves and myself behind when they followed the warm air down to Mexico. The lack of chatter (pweet, cou, pweet) makes it all seem so solitary—the Season—and we all seek shelter from it in our families, huddling close and filling the houses with bright paper and bits of ribbon. And after the Season is over these will be thrown into a pile and carted down to Granny's fire pit, where she will burn it, sending the ashes up into the air, following the currents down to Mexico (a ritualistic offering that has lost its meaning).

When I step outside I notice the smell of fire—burning branches and leaves, plastic—coming from every backyard. Like Granny, everyone is humming, or whistling, anything to end the silence, making up songs complete with percussion—pop, crash—as the branches feed the flames. My shoes crunch and crush the dried and shriveled leaves, grinding them into a fine powder as I pass, the wind taking it up and spreading it across the canvas sky (grind the leaf, add some water, grind again, add a berry and look, I've dyed my fingers purple) and pushing me, tugging at my coat and jeans. I do not spread and blend as well as I had hoped, I am not a part of these hues, and I rush towards the fire and the warmth it promises.

And here, like a madwoman, Granny is pacing circles around her fire, poking it with a long stick and talking to it, urging it to grow. She waves to me as I approach, and points to a pile of branches to my left. I select the largest one I can find and drag it over to her. She has taken her gloves and scarf off, her fingers and nostrils smudged black from the smoke and her cheeks bright pink from the exertion.

"Good. Let's break it up and add it to the fire. It should keep burning for a while then." She reaches for the branch and holds it for me while I step on it to break it into three smaller branches. There is a loud crack and splitting noise each time the branch gives way—a very satisfying noise. She places each branch on the fire strategically, forming a tripod with them—some skill she has learned or inherited—and the flames rise up dramatically as if on cue when she calls out to them, "Come on...burn!"

Oh Granny, entice the birds to come home!

#### iv. Grandma Joyce

My grandpa kept her photo up in his office, even after she died and he had remarried. Joyce is a beautiful woman. She is standing on a beach—a vacation to Hawaii—dressed in a red wrap-around dress with white lilies on the front. She is a tall woman, robust and sturdy, not delicate but soft; softly rounded shoulders and large breasts. Her smile invites you closer—come closer—it invites you to smile with her.

I can speculate what it means to be Joyce: long afternoons in her garden (which didn't survive her illness either), humming. It is the one trait that, according to my grandpa, there is no doubt I inherited from her. So I can picture her in her red wrap-around dress with white lilies on the front, her large hands covered in soil as she kneads the earth like dough, humming. What I'm not certain—but I can hear it; it drowns out the crickets and cicadas that hide in the ivy along the wall of the house. It rises above the whistles and calls from any number of birds that swoop down from pine branches to the gray stone birdbath she got for Christmas some ten years ago. It floods the image of Joyce, smearing the edges of her curls and the leaves behind her—like watercolor she blends. And perhaps she looks up from where she is crouched in a bed of irises to where my grandpa sits reading in the sun.

"John, put a hat on! You're starting to look like a tomato!"

And my grandpa nods, and replies, "All right...I'm going..." but doesn't move except to turn the page.

Joyce shakes her head and turns back to her flowers; at least she can take care of them.

In the photo, I can't see Joyce's feet, though I have always imagined them bare. Perhaps it is the way the warm sand feels under her soles that gives her face an animated and youthful appearance. Joyce is forty-five, but she looks as though she is only thirty. Bare feet planted in the sand and her brown curls mussed from rough winds off the ocean, she seems to be in her element—motherly and wild at the same time.

I can speculate what it means to be Joyce: bare-foot and dressed for the opera in her red wrap-around dress with white lilies on the front. She is trying to find some bit of comfort in the sparsely cushioned seat. My grandpa buys season tickets for them every year, but she always acts surprised. In the opera house the music surrounds her and echoes off the walls to wrap around her once again. It does not wash over her, but it clings to her so that when she leaves she takes the music with her. She likes the way the arias saturate her clothes and hair so that no amount of washing will ever remove the notes and cords. My grandpa is next to her in a suit and shining shoes (the same outfit he wears when he takes me to the opera now); he is quietly dozing. When the show is over, she stands and nudges my grandpa.

"John, wake up. Let's go home."

And my grandpa rouses and rises and puts a hand on the small of her back as they navigate the crowd, her generous hips rolling like a boat in calm waters as they make their way down the stairs.

Joyce's photo is framed in cherry. A rich wood with just the right hint of red mixed in with the brown. It is perhaps this choice of wood that makes her eyes seem so bright. Or maybe it is the sun that is setting somewhere over the photographer's left shoulder. Or maybe they just are. Joyce has warm eyes, eyes that have raised children and anticipate grandchildren (though her eyes will never see them). Eyes that look like they have never cried, though I know they must or else they wouldn't be as clear.

I can speculate what it means to be Joyce: laid out in her red wrap-around dress with white lilies on the front. Her eyes are closed and sealed, but if we pry them open, they are still warm and reassuring. Her skin is still warm and tan, cheeks pink from the sun. An organ drones, filling the archways with familiar tunes—what, I'm not certain—but they churn in the doorways and hide in the buttonholes of the men's suits. Flowers surround her and run with the pigment of her skin, but they aren't her flowers and she has no say as to how they are arranged around her. My grandpa waits to the side, my mother holding his hand, her belly round and swollen.

## Personal Essay by Cheryl Stiles

### Wharf Rat

Ever since I was a young child I have had an affinity for animals of all types—winged or furred, taloned or scaled, swimming or burrowing or soaring. Being so solitary, often cloistered in my old house at the end of a dead-end street, I sometimes wonder if I am drawn more to animals than to people.

One April a few years back, I traveled on busy Whitlock Avenue toward the Marietta town square. On the right side of the road, across from Kroger and next to the Jiffy Lube, sat a beautiful calico cat. She sat precisely on the yellow line which marked the edge of the road. Cars sped quickly past, grazing her long fur and blowing her ears back. She didn't move, just seemed to stare ahead. Not normal cat behavior. I made a U-turn, waited for all the oncoming traffic to pass, then pulled into the Jiffy Lube parking lot. As I got out of the car and approached her, I was afraid she'd run directly into the path of an oncoming motorist. She was so beautiful, her distinctly separate patches of black, white, and red tabby woven into a pristine feline tapestry. Her face serene, she was perhaps staring at something unseen by human eyes. Drawing closer, I noticed that her left eye bulged at least an inch out of her skull. She didn't struggle when I picked her up and placed her in the car. I drove to my friend Kathy's house less than a quarter mile away. I borrowed a towel in which to wrap her and called the emergency veterinary clinic. Could I bring her in?

"Yes, bring her right away."

The vet took a single short look.

"Hit by a car. She's going into shock."

"Is there anything you can do?"

"No, I'm afraid she's likely to have brain damage. Even if we try to save her, she will probably die."

I am sorry that I did not stay with her. I was sorry for the cat's anonymous owner who would never know her pet's fate.

Another time, while living in Brunswick along the Georgia coast, I rescued a scraggly, worm-ridden, thin little slip of a kitten from the middle of a road. She was chewing on a leftover chicken bone larger than she was. I rescued a neighbor's pet skunk—terrified, de-scented, and defenseless—trapped beneath my front porch steps and hounded by the neighborhood dogs.

Back at Nelson Street I came home from work one spring afternoon to find that a white longhair sheepdog-like puppy had taken up residence on my porch. Very friendly, obviously starving, most certainly someone's pet. I gave the dog some food and water. The only food on hand was dry cat food. When I placed the food down, the pup ate it ravenously—the entire bowl—in about two bites. He lost four of his baby dog teeth in the process. The teeth settled at the bottom of the bowl like tea leaves at the bottom of a fortune teller's cup. The only divivable message was the fear I had done permanent dental harm to the dog. A quick call to the vet brought assurance that adult teeth would soon emerge.

This dog, so loving and outgoing, was without a collar or tags. I posted "Dog Found" signs in the neighborhood, called the local Humane Society, reported the "found dog" to the county animal control office, and placed an ad in the Marietta and Atlanta newspapers. No response. Meanwhile I named the dog Nelson after the name of my street. He spent part of his days sheltered underneath the house, cool against the red Georgia clay. Trouble was that when he emerged each

afternoon he was a solid white dog with rust-color frosting—as if he'd just gone to the doggie beauty parlor for a touch-up or highlights.

Finally, after getting no response to my efforts to find the owner, I did the next best thing. I found a wonderful home for him with two young boys who love dogs and with a companion dog named Lucky. The family called the dog Max. He's now almost four feet tall, weighs over eighty pounds, and loves to take showers rather than doggie baths.

My whole life is filled with animal rescues. Perhaps rescuing animals is one of my true vocations in this lifetime. This love even applies to insects. I can't stand to kill an insect. Strategically located throughout my house are insect relocation jars, Mason jars for returning creatures such as wasps, spiders, cave crickets, caterpillars, bumblebees, millipedes, and large sugar ants to the great outdoors. They find easy entry into my imperfectly sealed house. Doors, windows, and screens are seldom obstacles. Each spring brings a floral explosion of ladybugs to the interior of the Grandmother house. I like to think they assist in spring-cleaning, naturally feeding on wood mites that are surely devouring the house in a slow fashion.

In the attic squirrels play and run, sometimes calling *my* house their winter home. I worry that they'll chew the electrical wiring or knit it into an elaborate squirrel afghan or perhaps plan a giant squirrel bonfire. Outside the chipmunks feast on sunflower seeds dropped from the birdfeeder. A den of young rabbits has taken up residence underneath the house near the bathroom. At night my new cats smell them through the floorboards. During the day the rabbits dine on white and purple clover blossoms, soft pigweed shoots, and dandelion flowers in the yard.

Some evenings I awaken to a clamorous banging on the front porch. The porch light usually reveals a stunned, oversize opossum rifling through the aluminum cans in the recycle bin. Once he regains his wits, he scampers ungracefully off toward his next snack.

Even the snakes are welcome here. I've seen black snakes, green garden snakes, and a beautiful yellow and red corn snake. While weeding at the back of the house, I unearthed a nest of spry baby copperheads. OK, I thought, perhaps I *should* get rid of them. What to do? My only thought was to pour boiling water on them. I put the kettle on to heat. By the time the kettle whistled, the copperheads slithered underneath the house. They were not bothering anyone anyway, so my attempts to eliminate them were surely half-hearted.

Just last evening, as I arrived home from work and got out of my car, I heard a scratching sound, a sound too loud to be a squirrel or a quiet night bird like an owl. I looked up and saw a startled baby raccoon perched in the crook of a tulip poplar tree. Her face looked beatific, graceful in the luminosity of the Nelson Street moon.

Although I love animals, I do draw the line.

I draw the line at rats.

One morning in late winter four years ago I awoke to my regular morning ritual—running water for a bath, feeding my two cats, and heating water for coffee. The kitchen drawer that held the canned cat food was littered with plastic pellets, small chunks of plastic chewed off the top of a Pounce can. There were many pieces of white plastic but few treats remaining. I knew I had a problem. Probably just a mouse, not alarming, certainly nothing to faze this animal aficionado. The creature's forays were confined to nocturnal searches for food. My geriatric cats were unworried, uninterested, perhaps thinking I'd recently acquired a third, smaller cat—a cat with eccentric habits.

Morning after morning I saw that more food disappeared and not just from a single drawer, but from other locations as well—cereal from kitchen cabinets, candied pecans from the pantry, and wheat crackers from the counter top. Small pieces of dried apple peel littered the floor. With that kind of appetite, and with the creature's ever-increasing bravery, I began to fret. Time to consult with my next-door neighbor Clyde.



“What do you think it can be?”

“Probably a wharf rat.”

“What’s a wharf rat?”

“Well, they’re these oversize rats. They like to chew their way into these old houses in the winter. Claude’s had a problem with them too. One chewed a hole in his kitchen floorboard last winter.”

Originally from Asia, rats are notorious scavengers, carriers of bubonic plague, typhus, and numerous other diseases. They are catalysts for outbreaks of food poisoning and rapacious destroyers of crops and livestock. A wharf rat, sometimes known as a Norway rat or sewer rat, is an oversized rat, almost as large as a squirrel, a dozen or so inches long with an even longer tail. The common variety can weigh more than a pound. Their sheer voracity makes them infamous, for they have the ability to chew through paper, cardboard, plastic, and some metals. Their burrowing habits can undermine the foundations of buildings, block sewer lines, and devastate perfect landscapes. They are also cannibalistic.

“What do you think I should do?”

“Probably poison them. Buy rat poison.”

“No, I don’t want to do that because of the cats. Maybe I’ll just go get some traps at Kmart.”

I just wasn’t convinced though. A real ethical dilemma—should I kill the rat? Most people wouldn’t give it a second thought.

My decision was speeded by a single event. Late that night I got up to go to the bathroom. I pulled the string to the single bare light bulb. Something rough and hairy brushed quickly past my leg and scurried toward the kitchen. The hair on my arms stood up. It was the rat. He’d been getting a drink of water from the toilet, an evening aperitif wharf rat style. He was exploring other rooms of the house. Surely the bedroom would be next.

That was it. It was time. Tomorrow I would buy rat traps. Big rat traps.

Kmart’s hardware section features numerous rat poisons. Poisons to make rats explode, poisons to render rats infertile, poisons to make rats dehydrate. Many traps are also available, small or large, wooden traps with the snapping metal bar, plastic or metal cruelty-free traps, traps covered so that you don’t need to see or touch the animal.

I purchased two large classic Victor traps. Four by eight inches in size, the traps were stamped with a giant red “V.” “V” for vanquish, vaporize, vamoose, vanish, vacate, “V” for the Void. I was determined not to set the traps immediately though. I had an alternative plan. I would give the rat an ultimatum.

Once I successfully caught a dragonfly that had entered my house. Catching a dragonfly without a net is virtually impossible. Impeccably designed flying machines, aerodynamically superior to most humanly engineered craft, capable of flying sixty miles an hour, they have survived for millennia. They kept company with the dinosaurs. What did I do? I talked to the dragonfly. Not that the dragonfly understood English, not that I spoke in audible English, but I was convinced that communication was possible. Rupert Sheldrake, the innovative yet controversial British biologist, espouses the theory of morphic resonance or morphogenic fields. He believes that communication is possible within species, a communication unbound by time, space or language. Perhaps this same communication is available across species. So, in my best toastmaster fashion I explained to the dragonfly that he would surely perish, weaken from his frantic flight, die of dehydration, or mistakenly dive-bomb the halogen floor lamp. So, if the dragonfly would be still long enough to be moved into the glass jar, I would relocate him to the flaming red azalea bushes outside. The dragonfly actually complied, allowing me to gingerly scoop him up, and even more gingerly to place him among the flowers. His wings were purple, green, and iridescent as he flew away specter-like toward the cumulus clouds.

So, it was my experience with a delicate dragonfly that convinced me that I might be able to relocate a wharf rat—through persuasion, not physical coercion. Putting on my metaphysical thinking cap, following the Buddhist path of Dharma, perhaps taking to extreme measure Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence, I sent a silent message throughout the ether.

“OK, OK, wharf rat, the traps will be down on the kitchen floor tonight but I’ll not set them. YOU have 24 hours to leave my house!”

The rat made his initial entry into the house by tunneling next to the drainpipe underneath the sink. His regular paths through the kitchen were readily apparent. He made his customary nocturnal entrances and exits on either side of the old-fashioned metal cabinet that held the sink. A four-inch space separated this cabinet from the range on the left and from the refrigerator on the right. In these narrow spaces the traps lay, unset, that night.

The next morning cat food, orange peels, peanuts, and animal droppings lay strewn on the floor in a peculiar design, a hex-like symbol unique to the artistic repertoire of rats.

The symbol said, “I AM NOT going!”

Apparently wharf rats do not understand attempts at psychic communication or genuine acts of human kindness. Wharf rats understand a single-minded search for food, the sheer narcissistic appeal of their finely chiseled teeth, or the need for an evening cocktail of toilet bowl water.

It was time to set the traps, *really* set the traps.

I learned that the best bait is a generous slab of peanut butter topped with an apple slice. I placed this combo platter on one trap. Just in case this dining selection had little appeal for the rat, I placed a hunk of cheddar cheese, aged and aromatic, on the other trap. The traps lay in the same spots as the previous evening.

I kept the cats with me, moving their litter box and food and water bowls to the living room. I closed the door leading to the bathroom, kitchen, and spare room. We spent a peaceful night, my confidence high that the rat would be dead by morning.

The next morning the traps were completely empty. No food, no rat. The food, every crumb of it, was gone—a virtual wharf rat salad bar. I’d actually set the traps incorrectly. The rat had yet another chance to escape, a reprieve. His departure seemed unlikely now that epicurean delights were on the dinner menu.

That day I took a remedial self-tutorial in trap setting, practicing with bait, then snapping the traps shut with a pencil or ruler poked at the food. The sharp clicking sound of the trap unmistakable, sure death to any small creature venturing toward its efficient metallic embrace. That night the traps were perfectly set.

I found him the next morning. Motionless and cold, his neck broken by the bar, his feet curled embryonically at his sides, his long hairless tail still partly hidden under the stove, the rat lay on his Kmart coffin. The cats and I, his half-hearted mourners. Because rats are such nasty rodents, I donned surgical gloves, picked up the rat—trap and all—and took him outside to the grass near the street’s edge. I released him.

The rat was gone by the time I returned from work—perhaps food for the neighborhood stray cats or the circling red-tail hawk or the occasional passing coyote. Gone to his next karmic incarnation, or maybe to rat heaven or hell. Perhaps from some alternate dimension of space and time, from the gossamer heart of that vibrational ether, across Sheldrake’s mysterious morphic fields, this rat communicated to the others of his species. All are welcome in my house—except wharf rats!

And just in case, I kept the traps.



## Personal Essay by Jayme Walton

### On Hot Dogs

"Hey Papa, where's the yellow backpack?" I yell down the basement stairs to my dad.  
 "All the way at the back of the dining room closet. There's a hook on the right side."  
 "Ok. Thanks."

I'm getting ready to go to the college night baseball game at RFK, a 1960s doughnut-shaped stadium only 20 blocks from the US Capitol and within walking distance of my house. Just as essential as my \$5 upper deck outfield ticket is the yellow backpack packed with bottles of water, binoculars and naked dogs (as the world's largest drive-in, the Varsity would call them) wrapped in tinfoil. That backpack, complete with hot dogs, has been to nearly every baseball game I have whether in Washington or Atlanta, where my dad and I both grew up with the Braves. When Atlanta's leftover Olympic stadium "the Ted" was new (and still followed the no outside food policy), we would eat the hot dogs in the parking lot and hide a bag of peanuts under the binoculars for the game. Now at RFK we just pack them in, and sometime early in the game, usually between the second and third innings, my dad stands up, stretches and says, "Well, I think I'm gonna go fix me a hot dog or two. Want me to do one for you?"

If it's just the two of us at the game, I hold our seats while he goes to raid ketchup, mustard and relish from the "fixin's" table across from the concession stand selling \$4 hot dogs. If there's someone else there to watch our stuff at our seats, we go together. Inevitably, as we garnish our dogs, we lament RFK's lack of onions, and on the way back to our seats and the start of the third inning, we remember the fresh-cut ones that disappeared with the fall of Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.

When you ask for some onions on the side at the sprawling, retro hamburger joint across the interstate from Georgia Tech, you get an eye-stinging wad the size of your fist grabbed out of a bucket and twisted up in wax paper. Born in Atlanta and raised on the Varsity's dogs, rings and pimento cheesesteaks, my dad can't resist a trip to the old drive-in whenever he's in town without my mom. Most times we go straight from the airport, even when he comes in on a 10 AM flight. There's nothing quite like a brunch of two dogs (that means with chili), rings and fries (he gets one, I get the other) and a Coke (of which the last few watered down sips always taste like the waxy paper cup). Mom, however, doesn't appreciate eating a weeks' worth of grease in one meal, or hot dogs in general, come to think of it.

Hot dogs are standard dinner fare when only my dad and I are in the house. It's the only meal we've found that cooks in ten minutes and can be fixed and ready to go to the living room between World News Tonight and the Simpsons. If we're feeling adventurous, we might even heat up some beans. As once Peter, now Elizabeth or Charles signs off, we know exactly what to do.

"Do you want anything from down here?" I ask as I head down the basement stairs to the fridge that only has Diet Coke and beer.

"Sure, grab me a Coke," he says as he goes to the kitchen. "Do you want a bun?" He's been on the low carb thing for a while, so he asks even though I always do.

He sets out an extra plate for me, fills his, and grabs a handful of napkins. I take the Cokes to the couch, change the channel (dumm dum dum da dumm dum da duh duh dum) and put away the ketchup and mustard after I fix my plate. At 7:30, the Simpsons goes off, I collect the plates and take them to the kitchen, and my dad changes the channel to the ball game, already in the second or third inning.

Tonight, while I'm at RFK with a crowd of DC's college interns, Papa will be watching the game alone. Mom might sit with him, but she'll have the paper or a book; her favorite seat doesn't even face the TV. If nothing too exciting is happening, he'll doze off in the seventh inning or so. I'll come in from RFK and wake him up by turning off the 11:00 news. "Hi sweetheart," he'll say as he blinks his eyes open for the walk up the stairs to bed. "Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah, I did," I'll say as I hang the yellow backpack on its hook in the back of the closet, "our seats were kinda stuck behind the scoreboard, but Johnson's homer in the sixth was only two sections over."

"That was some shot, wasn't it?" He'll ask through a yawn from the top of the stairs, then lose his sleepy train of thought in the effort it takes to remember. "Well, goodnight sweetie," he'll say as he comes back to reality with a tired start, "I'm glad you had fun. Oh, don't forget, I have tickets for next week. Thursday and Friday, I think. The Braves are in town."

## One-Act Play by Kristin Hall

### Booth A Play in Ten Minutes

#### CHARACTERS:

**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR/STAGE**

**MANAGER (ADSM)**

**LIGHTING TECHNICIAN (LIGHTS)**

**SOUND TECHNICIAN (SOUND)**

*SETTING: The sound booth at the top of a theater, during the production of a play. A table holding a lighting board, with seats for LIGHTS and ADSM behind it; also sound equipment, with a seat for SOUND beside it.*

*AT RISE: House lights are still up. The three actors enter and take their seats.*

#### ADSM

House lights to half...go.

*(LIGHTS makes a motion as if punching a button on a light board—this is the same motion she will make when ADSM says “go” for each lighting cue, unless the cue is noted as SOUND’s. The house lights drop to half.)*

House lights fade....go.

*(House lights fade out.)*

All right, here we go. Can everyone hear me?

#### LIGHTS

Yep.

#### SOUND

Loud and clear.

#### ADSM

Good. Ready cue one?

#### LIGHTS

Cue one ready.

#### ADSM

Cue one...go.

#### LIGHTS

And so it begins.

#### ADSM

Ready cue two?

#### SOUND:

Cue two ready.

#### LIGHTS

Cue two ready.

#### ADSM

*(turning to LIGHTS)*

No, it’s just a sound cue.

#### LIGHTS

What? Oh, right. The theme music. I always forget this one.

#### ADSM

Cue two...go.

#### LIGHTS

*(bobs head)*

I love the Hero’s theme music.

#### ADSM

Ready cue three?

#### LIGHTS

That’s the best part about being a hero—you get your own theme music.

*(ADSM clears her throat. LIGHTS turns to SOUND)*

Don’t you think so?

*(ADSM clears her throat violently)*

What?

#### ADSM

You have to say, “Cue three ready.”

#### SOUND

Why do we have to say the cues are ready?

#### LIGHTS

Good question. Why *do* we have to say the cues are ready?

#### ADSM

Because that’s just the way this works.

#### LIGHTS

But you know I’m ready. I’m here. I’m at the lighting board, with nothing else to do. I’m always ready.

#### ADSM

Really?

#### LIGHTS

Of course!

#### ADSM

Then go.

#### LIGHTS

What?

#### ADSM:

GO

*(She nods urgently toward lighting board.)*

#### LIGHTS

Oh! Dammit.

*(She and SOUND both press their buttons)*

#### ADSM

You better start paying attention.

#### LIGHTS

Sorry. *(She looks up and over the table, through “window.”)* Hope he wasn’t standing there for too long.

#### SOUND

Kinda funny, when that happens. You get to watch them sweat.

#### LIGHTS

*(laughing)*

Yeah, in weird positions sometimes.

#### SOUND

It’s good for them. Reminds them that we’re up here.

#### ADSM

The actors are almost in place. Ready cue four?

#### SOUND

I’m still not saying the cues are ready. It’s stupid.

#### LIGHTS

If she’s not saying it, I’m not saying it.

#### ADSM

*(in extreme frustration)*

Fine then! Just go!

#### LIGHTS

What?

#### ADS

GO!

#### LIGHTS

Oh! Dammit.

#### ADSM

*(takes a deep breath)*

I’m pretty sure that’s it for a while. Luckily.

#### LIGHTS

Good, I can watch. I love this scene.

*(All three lean over the table and watch for a beat.)*

She’s so talented. And pretty.

#### SOUND

She’s screwing the director.

#### LIGHTS

What?!

#### SOUND

She’s screwing the director.

#### LIGHTS

Do you know her?

#### SOUND

Never met her.

#### LIGHTS

Then how you know she’s screwing the director?

#### SOUND

Because that’s just the way this works. *(LIGHTS stares at her in confusion)* Look, she has the lead role, doesn’t she?

*(She shrugs. LIGHTS puzzles over this for a moment more, then shrugs also. LIGHTS and SOUND continue to watch.)*

#### LIGHTS

They look so tiny.

#### SOUND

We’re pretty far away up here.

#### ADSM

Ready cue five.

#### LIGHTS

Makes them hard to hear sometimes.

#### ADSM

Cue five...

#### LIGHTS

Which is disappointing. I always miss half the emotional scenes.

#### ADSM

...go.

*(SOUND presses her button.)*

Ready cue six.

#### LIGHTS

Already?

#### ADSM

Cue six...go.

#### LIGHTS:

We’re just flying through this, aren’t we?



**SOUND**  
Scenes go by fast up here.

**ADSM**  
Ready cue seven.

**LIGHTS**  
I've heard they go by fast down there, too.

**ADSM:**  
Cue seven....  
(*They wait in silence.*)

**LIGHTS**  
*leaning over and whispering to ADSM*  
What's happening?

**ADSM**  
I'm not sure. I'm waiting to hear something from backstage.

**LIGHTS**  
Aren't they ready?

**ADSM**  
I don't think so.

**SOUND**  
Turn up the lights and see.

**LIGHTS**  
I can't!

**SOUND**  
Why not?

**LIGHTS**  
Because she didn't say go!

**ADSM**  
Go.

**LIGHTS**  
(*confused, turns to ADSM*)  
Wait, really?

**ADSM**  
Yes! GO!

**LIGHTS**  
Oh!  
(*ADSM glares as LIGHTS presses her button*)

**ADSM**  
Pay attention.

**LIGHTS**  
I'm sorry.  
(*She looks down through the window again*)  
Ooh, I love this scene too!

**ADSM**  
Pay attention.

**LIGHTS**  
I am, I am. I just get so wrapped up in it, you know? I can really relate.

(*She watches for a moment, then turns to SOUND*)  
Don't you want to watch?

**SOUND**  
Not really.

**LIGHTS**  
Why not?

**ADSM**  
Perhaps because she realizes that if she watches, she'll miss her cues.

**SOUND**  
(*with a snort*)  
Wasn't thinking that exactly.

**LIGHTS:**  
Then why not?

**SOUND**  
It's like staring at a TV with the volume muted. I just don't see the point.

**LIGHTS**  
But you can tell what's going on by their body language. Look at her.  
(*SOUND gives in and looks.*)

**SOUND:**  
She looks like a chicken.

**LIGHTS**  
What??

**SOUND**  
Or some other kind of bird, flapping her arms around like that. I hate it when actors do that. They think they're Italian or something.

**LIGHTS**  
She's distressed!

**SOUND**  
She's a chicken.

**LIGHTS**  
But it's so emotional! And now the Hero can come and...how can you be so unsympathetic?

**SOUND**  
I don't often sympathize with Italian chickens.

**LIGHTS**  
But...I mean...don't you feel like you just *know* the characters in this scene?

**SOUND**  
(*with a shrug*)  
What's it about?

**LIGHTS**  
What??

**SOUND**  
What's the scene about?

**LIGHTS**  
You can't be serious.  
(*SOUND shrugs yet again*)  
You don't know what this scene's about?

**SOUND**  
I just said I didn't.

**LIGHTS**  
Do you know what the *play's* about?

**SOUND**  
Nope.

**ADSM**  
Ready cue seven.

**LIGHTS**  
(*furious*)  
Don't you *care*?!

**ADSM**  
Cue seven...

**SOUND**  
Not really. Why should I?

**LIGHTS**  
Because it's important!

**ADSM**  
...go.

**SOUND**  
What's so important about it? These plays are all the same.

**LIGHTS**  
How can you say that? That's like saying *people* are all the same.

**SOUND**  
But those aren't real people.

**LIGHTS**  
That doesn't matter! They're still people. It's still a story.

**ADSM**  
Ready cue eight.

**LIGHTS**  
You have to believe in the stories.

**ADSM**  
Cue eight....go.

**LIGHTS**  
(*quietly*)  
I mean, if you don't believe in the stories...then what's the point of all this?

**SOUND**  
Look, I don't know what the point is. I don't

even know if there is one. But you see this button?  
(*She points at her button.*)

**LIGHTS**  
Sure. I have one of those, too.

**SOUND**  
I press it. That's what I do. That's my contribution. (*She swells with pride.*) And it's a great contribution, too. I have an extraordinary amount of power.

**LIGHTS**  
(*with a snort*)  
You just press a button. When the play asks you to.

**SOUND**  
No. I just press *this* button when the play asks me to. However, if I move to this tapedeck over here...  
(*She moves to another part of the "sound equipment."*)

**ADSM**  
(*worried*)  
What's she doing?

**SOUND**  
(*pressing the different button*)  
Voila!

**ADSM**  
(*panicked*)  
What the hell was that?!

**LIGHTS**  
What did you just do?!

**SOUND**  
I made a contribution outside of the norm.

**ADSM**  
Was that a cow mooing?!

**SOUND**  
Yes.

**ADSM**  
But this scene takes place inside a house! A cow can't moo inside a house!

**SOUND**  
One just did.

**ADSM**  
Oh my god.

**SOUND**  
(*looking through the window and laughing*)  
I can't wait to see their faces.

**LIGHTS:**

You can't do that!

**SOUND**

Why not?

**LIGHTS**

*(bewildered and frustrated)*

Because she didn't say "Go!" You can't press the button unless she says "Go!"

**ADSM**

Ready cue nine.

**SOUND**

Why not?

**ADSM**

Cue nine...

**LIGHTS**

Because...

**ADSM**

...go.

**LIGHTS**

Because that's just the way this works!

**ADSM**

Go!

**LIGHTS:**

*(turning to ADSM)*

What?!

**ADSM**

GO!!!

**LIGHTS**

Oh! Dammit.

**ADSM**

That's great. That's just fantastic. A character turns the lamp off and then five seconds later the light onstage finally gets around to changing.

**LIGHTS**

Sorry.

**SOUND**

Maybe they'll think it's an experimental play. Asking the question: why does the light have to change when an actor turns a lamp off?

**ADSM**

Because that's just the way this works! *(She shakes her head.)* This is turning into a disaster.

**SOUND**

At least it's interesting.

**ADSM**

*(glaring at SOUND)*

Ready cue ten.

**LIGHTS**

Is this the love scene?

**SOUND**

Why does it matter? I've told you, they're not real people. It's fiction.

**ADSM**

Cue ten...

*(LIGHTS starts to speak but then changes her mind when ADSM glares at her)*

...go.

**LIGHTS**

It is the love scene!

*(She turns to SOUND defiantly.)*

And it doesn't matter if they're not real people. It's still a love scene. You're still supposed to want the lovers to be together in the end.

**SOUND**

Why?

**LIGHTS**

Because it's love! And love has to work out!

**SOUND**

It does work out. That's what I've been trying to tell you. The Hero and his lover are always together in the last scene, even if they're dead. These plays are all the same.

**ADSM**

Ready cue eleven...

*(She turns to glare at SOUND)*

And it better be crickets.

**SOUND**

Bor-ing.

**ADSM**

*(through clenched teeth)*

The lovers are meeting at midnight. The sound cue calls for crickets.

**SOUND**

All right, all right.

**ADSM:**

Thank you. Cue eleven...go. Now we can breathe for a few pages.

*(She sinks back into her seat while the other two watch through the window.)*

**SOUND:**

*(whispering conspiratorially to LIGHTS)*

Now's your chance.

**LIGHTS**

What?

**SOUND:**

Now's your chance.

**LIGHTS**

For what?

**SOUND**

Use your power. Do something to enhance the play.

**LIGHTS**

I can't!

**SOUND**

Why not?

**LIGHTS**

Because she didn't say "go."

**SOUND**

*(frustrated)*

*I'm saying go. Go!*

**LIGHTS**

Okay!...What should I do?

**SOUND**

Umm...they're about to kiss.

*(LIGHTS thinks for a moment, then smiles and opens the window.)*

They're kissing!

*(LIGHTS nods and leans forward. Slowly, hesitantly, she starts making orgasmic moaning noises.)*

**ADSM**

What?!!

*(SOUND motions for her to be quiet, pointing to the open window. ADSM sinks back, defeated and seething. LIGHTS ducks and starts to giggle.)*

**LIGHTS**

Did you see that? Everybody looked up!

*(She and SOUND both make noises together, then duck afterward, giggling.)*

**SOUND**

It's about time they remembered that we're here. They always forget about us.

**LIGHTS**

Look at the actors trying to stay in character!

**ADSM**

*(in a furious whisper)*

Close the window!

*(LIGHTS looks at SOUND for support.)*

Go!

*(LIGHTS reluctantly closes the window.)*

Now get ready for cue twelve.

**LIGHTS**

*(ashamed)*

Cue twelve ready.

*(SOUND looks at her in horror.)*

**SOUND**

Traitor.

**LIGHTS**

Sorry.

**ADSM**

Cue twelve...go. Okay, both of you. This is the last scene. This is the big finale when all of the audience's questions are answered, so it's important. And there are lots of quick cues. You've already ruined the production, but so help me God if you mess up this scene....

**LIGHTS**

Wow, the play's over already?

**ADSM**

Yes.

**LIGHTS**

How did it go by so fast?!

**ADSM**

It's only a ten-minute play, remember? ANYWAY, seeing as how this is a hard scene you both better pay attention. Understand?

**LIGHTS:**

Yes.

*(ADSM glares at SOUND.)*

**SOUND:**

Sure.

**ADSM**

Thank you. Ready cue thirteen?

**LIGHTS**

Cue thirteen ready.

**ADSM**

Good. Cue thirteen...go.

*(They watch in silence for a beat.)*

Ready cue fourteen?

*(She looks at SOUND, who doesn't respond. She glares.)*

**SOUND:**

*(rolling her eyes)*

Cue fourteen ready.

**ADSM**

*(smiling in relief)*

Cue fourteen...go.



**LIGHTS**

I never can believe it's over.

**SOUND**

Why not?

**LIGHTS**

It just goes by too fast

**SOUND**

Not really. I mean, how much meaning can you get out of a ten-minute play?

**ADSM**

Pay attention! Ready cues fifteen *and* sixteen.

**LIGHTS**

Cue fifteen ready.

(*She turns to SOUND*)

I guess you're right.

**SOUND**

(nodding)

Cue sixteen ready.

**ADSM**

Cue fifteen...go. Cue sixteen...go.

**LIGHTS**

Look at that. Soft light for the lovers. I love how beautiful that effect looks.

(*SOUND shrugs*)

Don't you want to look?

**SOUND**

Nah. I never pay attention to that stuff.

**LIGHTS**

(thoughtfully)

Maybe that's our *real* job. To pay attention.

**ADSM**

Ready cue seventeen?

**LIGHTS**

Cue seventeen ready.

**SOUND**

No, our job is to press buttons. Paying attention is the *audience's* job.

**ADSM**

Cue seventeen...

**LIGHTS**

Maybe.

**ADSM:**

...go.

**LIGHTS**

(*after a pause*)

I wonder if they've gotten anything out of this.

**SOUND**

Who?

**LIGHTS:**

The audience. I mean, it was only ten minutes.

I wonder if they've gotten anything out of it.

**SOUND**

Why wouldn't they?

**ADSM**

Last one, guys. Ready cue eighteen?

**LIGHTS**

Cue eighteen ready.

(*She turns back to SOUND*)

I don't know. But what if they thought it was pointless? What if they didn't get it?

**ADSM**

Cue eighteen...

**SOUND**

(*sarcastically*)

Well, the end is supposed to answer all their questions.

**ADSM**

...go.

**BLACKOUT.**

**One-Act Play by K. Ryne Harris****RUPERT  
A Ten Minute Play****CHARACTERS:**

**ELLEN:** *A young woman in her late twenties who has been hurt a few times in the past. She is*

*wary of romance, but quite torn about her feelings for ERIC.*

**ERIC:** *A charming, romantic man in his early thirties.*

**TIME:** *The present. Evening.*

**SETTING:** *The porch outside ELLEN'S house. The director may either put a door in the middle of the stage or allow the actors to imply a door. To the left of the door is a bench one may find on a porch.*

**AT RISE:** *Lights up on ELLEN, center stage, dressed in a shawl and a nice black dress kissing ERIC who is in a nice shirt and slacks. Both are quite involved in the kiss and reluctant to break it.*

**ELLEN**

I had a great night.

**ERIC**

I did too.

(*He leans in and kisses her again. She breaks away and wanders, smiling, backwards to the door.*)

**ELLEN**

Goodnight.

**ERIC**

Goodnight.

(*There is a long pause as both wait for the other to do something.*)

**ELLEN**

(*laughs quietly*)

You're still here.

**ERIC**

(*looks around as if to check*)

I am.

**ELLEN**

Do you plan on leaving?

**ERIC**

Do you plan on going inside?

**ELLEN**

You're having a go at me.

**ERIC:**

Maybe.

(*ERIC grins at her, his hands in his pockets, rocking back and forth on his feet.*)

**ELLEN:**

Do you want to come inside?

**ERIC**

Well, now that you mention it.

**ELLEN**

Have a cup of coffee--

**ERIC**

I'd love to.

**ELLEN**

... Or something?

**ERIC**

Coffee. It'll keep us awake enough to think of something.

(*ELLEN turns as if to open the door behind her and ERIC comes up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She unwraps his arms and takes his hand instead.*)

**ELLEN**

Just watch out for the cat when you come in. (*ERIC immediately backs off and turns away from the door, obviously ill at ease.*)

**ERIC**

Whoa. You know, it's a nice night. Why don't we walk to my place?

**ELLEN**

We just got here. What's wrong with my place?

**ERIC**

Nothing. Nothing. I just, you know, it's so nice.

**ELLEN**

Are you allergic to cats?

**ERIC**

No-- yes. Yes I am. I'm allergic to cats. Very allergic.

**ELLEN***(smirks)*

I'm glad I'm dating a terrible liar. It'll let me know when things have gone sour.

**ERIC**

I just don't like cats.

**ELLEN**

You don't like cats?

**ERIC**

No. They shed and the claws; don't like them.

**ELLEN**

Oh, Sniffles is good. If you don't mind her, she won't mind you.

*(ERIC laughs)*

Why are you laughing?

**ERIC**

You named your cat 'Sniffles'?

**ELLEN**

Yeah?

**ERIC**

Nothing. It's... cute.

**ELLEN**

Are you coming in or not?

**ERIC**

Uh... not. Not.

*(ELLEN is irritated by his response and ERIC is disappointed.)***ELLEN**

Fine.

**ERIC**

Goodnight, then.

**ELLEN**

Goodnight.

*(ELLEN turns to the door and ERIC starts to walk off, muttering to himself "I'm so stupid," etc. ELLEN suddenly turns around and calls after ERIC.)***ELLEN**

Wait, Eric!

**ERIC**

Yeah?

**ELLEN**

We can have coffee out here.

**ERIC**

Sounds great.

*(ERIC returns to ELLEN and sits on the bench. She sits next to him, conscious of the keeping a respectable distance.)***ELLEN**

You have a fear of cats?

**ERIC**

It's not a fear of cats.

**ELLEN**

Felinephobia?

**ERIC**

It's not a fear of cats.

**ELLEN**

This is just one of your jokes, isn't it? You're not really afraid of cats.

**ERIC**

It's not-- you're not listening to me. It's not a fear of cats.

**ELLEN**

Then what is it?

**ERIC**

It's... an intense dislike of cats.

**ELLEN**

Like a fear?

**ERIC**

No. More like a stigma, or something. My grandma; she moved into our house when I was five. Grandpa died and Mom thought she ought to be with us from then on, but she didn't really want to leave. And she had this cat. Rupert. And it was the nastiest cat.

**ELLEN**Oh. *(pause)* I'm sorry. *(pause)* You hate all cats because of that one?**ERIC**

More or less. I just feel sick around them.

Only my grandma could hold that cat. Her arthritis got so bad that she used to supervise me giving the thing a bath.

**ELLEN**

She did not.

**ERIC:**She did. This cat looked like a wet rat and my hands would look like the shower scene from 'Psycho'. She'd hand me a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and coo to the cat that was wrapped up in my towel.**ELLEN***(laughs)*

I tried to give Sniffles a bath once. She turned into the anti-Christ. The howling in the house sounded like an air-raid siren. The neighbors called to ask if I was okay.

**ERIC**Now you're exaggerating.**ELLEN**

I am not. She's a sweet cat. She just hates a real bath.

**ERIC**

What? Sandpaper tongues don't get you clean?

*(ERIC jokingly grabs ELLEN's wrist and licks it. ELLEN laughs and tries to pull away, but she ends up smacking him in the face instead. He lets go and rubs his nose.)***ELLEN**

Eric! You brought that on yourself.

**ERIC**So what is it a guy has to do to get your attention, huh? I can drape myself across your lap just like a good cat. Purr a little. *(He falls across her lap and purrs a little.)***ELLEN***(amused)*

All right, get off.

*(ERIC rolls onto his back and relaxes completely, smiling with content.)***ELLEN**

Eric.

*(he bats at her hair)*

Eric!

*(ELLEN, in a huff of feigned annoyance, scratches under ERIC's chin.)***ERIC**

This is nice. I could see a cat getting used to this.

**ELLEN**

Just wait until I start feeding you dry cat food. You'll change your tune.

**ERIC**

I dunno. If that's the only drawback...

*(There is a long silence as they look at each other. ELLEN, suddenly aware of the quiet starts a little.)***ELLEN**

Why'd your grandmother move in with you guys if she didn't want to in the first place?

**ERIC:** Well, so long as she had Rupert, she'd be happy anywhere.**ELLEN**

Rupert?

**ERIC**

The cat.

**ELLEN**

Oh, Rupert. And that's all it took?

**ERIC**

I guess. What is it with you ladies and cats?

**ELLEN**

They're sweet. They just love you.

**ERIC**

Dogs love you too.

**ELLEN**

Cats have a better love.

**ERIC**

Guys have a better love too.

**ELLEN**

Cats don't stand you up or admit they're gay.

**ERIC**

You dated a gay guy?

**ELLEN***(tries to make light of an uncomfortable subject, and doesn't quite succeed)*

Admitted it while he was making me breakfast after he spent the night.

**ERIC**Whoa. *(pause)* At least he made you breakfast.**ELLEN**

And did the dishes.

**ERIC**

Nice.

**ELLEN**

But cats don't do that.

**ERIC**

Don't do the dishes?

**ELLEN**

Yeah, that. And don't tell you you're not everything they were looking for in the morning.

**ERIC**

I'm sure you're lovely in the morning.

**ELLEN**

Not that you'll ever know. If you want to take



me, you take all of me.

**ERIC**

Well, if you insist.

*(ERIC begins to wrap his arms around her to draw her down for a kiss.)*

**ELLEN**

And that includes the cat.

*(ERIC stops and holds her for a moment before he lets her go.)*

**ERIC**

Oh. You make this seduction thing hard.

**ELLEN**

*(cross)*

Maybe you ought to give me a little more credit than just seduction. Call me old-fashioned, but I'm looking for more than just a one-night stand.

**ERIC**

Which is why I've been out with you five times.

*(ELLEN gets up and starts for the door; while ERIC sits up and immediately becomes sincerely apologetic.)*

**ERIC**

No, wait. Ellen. It was a joke. I'm sorry. Sit down.

**ELLEN**

What is it you're really looking for?

**ERIC**

I don't know. With you, I don't know.

*(ELLEN rolls her eyes and turns around.)*

**ERIC**

No. I mean that as a good thing. Or maybe it's a bad thing. I don't know. It's not really important right now, is it?

**ELLEN**

What if things changed?

**ERIC**

Then I'll deal with them when they change.

Let's just sit and talk right now, okay?

**ELLEN**

About what?

**ERIC**

Jesus. We've been talking all night. I think we can find something to talk about. Rupert.

**ELLEN**

The cat?

**ERIC**

Yeah, the cat. Sit down? I won't lay across your lap anymore.

*(ELLEN hesitates, then sits back down, this time with an obvious distance between herself and ERIC.)*

**ERIC**

Rupert has this habit of sitting on the back of the sofa. He hated everyone except Grandma, but Grandma didn't like the sofa, so she'd sit in the chair next to the sofa. The two of them would sit all day in our living room, taking up all the places to sit.

**ELLEN**

*(skeptical)*

You couldn't sit on the other end of the sofa?

**ERIC**

That cat would swipe and hiss at you until you left. I gave Rupert enough baths to know better than bother him.

**ELLEN**

Sounds like a real asshole.

**ERIC**

That'd be a pretty good description of him.

**ELLEN**

*(pause)*

Your grandma doesn't sound like a treat herself.

**ERIC**

No, no. Grandma was fine. She was just lonely, you know? *(pause)* She didn't need us, so I think she resented us for acting like she did. Don't get me wrong, she was sweet. For my birthday one year, she gave me my grandpa's collection of medals from the war. She just felt cooped up.

**ELLEN**

I guess I can understand that.

**ERIC**

Yeah. She saved up all of her checks from the state and when I was seventeen, she announced she was taking a cruise. Whatever money was left over, she was giving me for college-- for looking after Rupert.

**ELLEN**

You were left alone with the cat?

**ERIC**

I was left alone with Rupert.

**ELLEN**

I like your grandma.

**ERIC**

Hey. I haven't insulted you yet.

**ELLEN**

I'm a justice-loving girl. So, did you and Rupert have fun?

**ERIC**

*(sarcastic)*

It was peachy. Mom said that Grandma wasn't around to complain, so we put him out in the garage.

**ELLEN**

Isn't that dangerous?

**ERIC**

Our garage didn't have a lot in it. We kept the car in the driveway to make sure we didn't fry the cat.

**ELLEN**

That's horrible.

**ERIC**

It's true. The kids next door had an outdoor cat. It crawled up into the bottom of the car one day, their dad turned on the engine and that thing was toast.

**ELLEN**

I'm not so sure I want you anywhere near my cat.

**ERIC**

My point is that we didn't want that to happen. We took great pains to make sure that cat would be alive when Grandma got back.

**ELLEN**

And was it?

**ERIC**

No, not quite.

**ELLEN**

You see? What'd you do?

**ERIC**

Nothing! The cat was old. Cats die when they're old.

**ELLEN**

You kept it in the garage!

**ERIC**

Cats have survived worse.

**ELLEN**

How'd you tell your grandma about it?

**ERIC**

We couldn't. She was on a cruise and she didn't give us a number to call.

**ELLEN**

Her cat died and you couldn't call?

**ERIC**

That's pretty much how it happened.

**ELLEN**

*(crosses her arms and sighs a little bitterly):* I guess you guys were pretty happy to get rid of it.

**ERIC**

Well, no. Not really.

**ELLEN**

But you hated it.

**ERIC**

I did. It was just sad to watch it go.

*(ELLEN looks at ERIC expectantly. He goes on, a little uncomfortably.)*

**ERIC**

I put its food down one night and it didn't come out and start hissing at me. It was lying in this bucket of golf balls I collected at the driving range. It was purring. I never heard that cat purr. I got down next to the cat and it started to get that nasty look, then just lay back down and purred.

**ELLEN**

Was it sick?

**ERIC**

I think it was just old. I reached out to pet him and he actually leaned his head against my hand. When I scratched under his chin, he put his head in my palm and closed his eyes and stopped purring.

*(There is a long pause.)*

**ELLEN**

And?

**ERIC**

And, that's it. He died.

**ELLEN**

Like that?

**ERIC**

Like that.

*(ELLEN looks down at her hands and rubs her fingers together nervously. ERIC looks at his feet.)*

**ELLEN**

Let me see your hands.

**ERIC**

Why?

**ELLEN**

Just because.

*(ERIC hands over his hands and ELLEN begins tracing little lines on them.)***ERIC**

What are you doing?

**ELLEN**You can see little scars on your hands. Just little white ones *(holds his hands in hers)*. What'd your grandma do when she got home?**ERIC**

She asked if we buried Rupert and when we pointed out the spot in the garden, she nodded and said 'these things happen'.

**ELLEN**

That's all? I'd have thought she'd be upset.

**ERIC**

She might have been. She had a stroke six months later and insisted on being moved to an assisted living place. I think she was happier there. She got to live in her own little room and played bridge with a group of ladies who do the crazy red hats, purple dresses thing.

**ELLEN***(laughs)*

I always swore I'd do that when I was older.

**ERIC**

Either that or be a crazy cat lady?

**ELLEN**

They're probably not that far off from each other.

*(She smiles softly and gently rubs her thumb against his hand.)***ERIC**

If you're still looking for scars, the biggest one is actually this one.

*(He points to the underside of his chin. She traces that with her finger.)***ELLEN**

How'd you get that?

**ERIC**

Rupert hooked me when I was picking him out of the tub. Grandma actually treated that one because I couldn't see it. I told people I got it playing football with the kids next door.

*(ELLEN inspects it again, then kisses it gently.)***ERIC**

What was that for?

*(ELLEN stands up, ERIC's hands still in hers.)***ELLEN**

Do you want to come in?

**ERIC***(nervous)*

Your cat?

**ELLEN**

For coffee, or something? She won't hurt you.

**ERIC**

She's never given you a good swipe?

**ELLEN**

Once. Right there

*(points to a spot on her wrist)*.

When I tried to give her that fateful bath. The coffee sounds perfect right now.

**ERIC***(hesitates)*

It's still a nice night.

**ELLEN**

It's getting cold

*(draws him up by his hands)*.

Come inside.

*THE END***One-Act Play by Mahnaz Nazir****The Life of Maina: an ABCD (American Born Confused Desi)  
A Film Script****CHARACTERS:****MAINA:** An American Born Confused Desi.**ASIYA & ZAHID:** Maina's parents.**NUR & NAVIN:** Maina's younger brothers.**MOLLY & JESSICA:** Maina's friends**SANDY:** Jessica's mother.**JOSH:** Maina's boyfriend.**RAYID:** Maina's younger paternal uncle.**LAILA:** Rayid's wife.**ALI:** Rayid's older son.**SAADI:** Rayid's younger son.**ZAINAB:** Rayid's older daughter.**MARIA:** Rayid's younger daughter.**ARSI:** Maina's older paternal uncle.**LEA:** Arsi's wife.**MAYA:** Arsi's daughter.**AUN:** Arsi's son.**BEBE-JI:** Maina's paternal grandmother.**BIANCA:** The Zahids' neighbor**MIA:** Bianca's daughter and Maina's classmate**FADE IN:****EXT. YMCA SWIMMING POOL, ATLANTA – DAY***(FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD MAINA MALIK is a plain looking Pakistani girl with big eyes and long pigtails. Standing by the pool, she forlornly observes the other CHILDREN splashing in the water and then turns imploringly to her mother, ASIYA. Asiya is about thirty-five, short, and portly. She has hip length hair haphazardly drawn up in a bun and is conservatively dressed in loose pants and a baggy collared shirt. When Maina looks at her, she holds out a full-length bathing suit like a scuba diving outfit. Maina looks at it with a pained expression and walks off.)**(EXT. URBAN STREET, ATLANTA – DAY: Asiya is driving Maina to the neighborhood Blockbuster.)**(INT. ASIYA'S CAR – DAY: Maina is an attractive SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD now. Her hair is dyed a hot shade of burgundy, and she is wearing a nose-stud, with immaculately applied make-up and manicured hands. She appears more self-assured now, and older than her years, with a look of dissatisfaction in her eyes. She is listening to a local rap station with offensive lyrics when Asiya switches to a desi station.)**MAINA (rudely): You can't do that, Ma! (As she extends her arm to switch the station, they both get into a ridiculous wrist-slapping fight.) (INT. DESI RESTAURANT – NIGHT: Asiya and her husband ZAHID ecstatically eye the food brought by the WAITER. Zahid is about forty-five and balding, with a droopy moustache. Maina and her brothers, NUR and NAVIN, look disgusted while lethargically slouching over the table. Nur is twelve and cherubic, with floppy hair; he hero-worships NAVIN, who is fourteen and tanned with spiked hair. They protest as their parents force food on their plates.)***NAVIN**

Baa, don't, I don't want it!

**NUR***Nahin khana, Maaa!***MAINA***(irritably)*

What're you guys doing? I hate this stuff, you're wasting it! Using their fingers, Zahid and Asiya eat their food with relish. Running out of rice Zahid eyes Maina's plate.



**MAINA**

*(pushing the plate towards him)*

Take it.

*(INT. PIZZA PARLOR - NIGHT. Asiya and Zahid observe their children dig into a pizza.)*

*(INT. ASIYA'S CAR - DAY. Asiya is taking Maina and her friends JESSICA, AMY, and MOLLY to the school football game. The girls have bright and glittery team cheers painted across their arms and cheeks. Jessica is fixing Amy's hair as Maina and Molly giggle over a text message. Asiya is on her cell phone.)*

**ASIYA**

Haan, tell her she can collect her shoes tomorrow--

**MOLLY**

*(hitting Maina's arm)*

Hey, show me! It's Josh, isn't it?

**MAINA**

Sshh!

**JESSICA**

He is so flirting with you, Maina!

**ASIYA**

Maina! *(in Urdu)* What is all this hee-hawing about? I am listening to everything so watch it!

You know I have my ways of finding things out and I better not hear you name circulating the desi gossip circle, understand?

*(EXT. FOOTBALL STADIUM - DAY. As Asiya stops the car outside the stadium, Maina spots JOSH and smiles at him. He is about sixteen, tall, and lean with eye-brow piercings and a bandana covering his blond hair. The girls step out, passing sly looks at Maina. Asiya holds her daughter back, tugging at the baggy shirt that she knows Maina would never wear.)*

**ASIYA**

Do I look like an idiot to you, Maina? Take it off, right now.

*(Maina inserts both arms inside her shirt. She takes off and hands over a skimpy tank top with team cheers painted on it, like the ones her friends are wearing. As Asiya throws it in the back, Maina exits slamming the door.)*

*(EXT. ZAHID'S HOUSE - DAY. It's a perfect summer day. The family is dressed in traditional Pakistani garb for the religious eid*

*festival. Zahid is setting up the camera for a family picture in their perfectly manicured garden with their flashy new car visible in the background. Asiya is fretting about getting everything right for the picture.)*

**ASIYA**

I told you both to wear your sandals. Zahid, why don't you ever say anything to them? Go change and get your prayer caps. Zahid, did you go for the sacrifice to the grounds? Zahid, are you listening or not?

**ZAHID**

*(distractedly)*

Uh, I gave the money to the Moulvi to make arrangements.

*(The boys run in. Asiya sighs.)*

**ASIYA**

Zahid, I told you to take the boys to sacrifice the animals this year!

**MAINA**

Stop screaming, Ma.

**ASIYA**

And, Aishwariya Rai, will you do me the favor of looking a little modest? Your grandmother will be seeing this photo; do you want my nose chopped off in front of the entire clan! God knows they need just one more excuse to criticize me.

*(She spits on the corner of her tissue to dull some of Maina's eye makeup.)*

**MAINA**

*(pushing Asiya away)*

Get off, Ma, this is gross!

*(The boys return.)*

**ASIYA**

*(softly)*

You look beautiful *(ruffling the boys' hair)*, and you monkeys look as dashing as your father when he had hair.

*(Asiya groups the children together. Reciting prayers she begins waving cash around them to give to charity.)*

**MAINA**

*(impatiently)*

Ma, do you have to do this every time we take a frikkin picture?

**ASIYA**

You are too innocent to understand the working

of the envious eye, Maina. I don't trust my in-laws one bit. Last night I saw Lea in my dreams, doing all kinds of black magic on my family! Oh God, be merciful!

**ZAHID**

*(clapping his hands)*

Okay, the camera is set! Come on!

*(They form a group as Zahid snatches the caps from the boys' hands and places them on their heads. Just as Asiya hastily lowers Maina's veil across her chest and hugs her, the camera flashes.)*

*(DISSOLVE TO: INT. RAYID'S LIVING ROOM, PAKISTAN - NIGHT. In Pakistan, Zahid's family, comprised of his mother and two older brothers with their families, has congregated at his eldest brother Rayid's house for eid celebrations. RAYID is a dignified man of fifty-five, and a retired army officer. His wife, LAILA, is forty, amicable, and conservatively dressed with a long veil draping her. His older son, ALI, is eighteen and good-looking in a careless way, and his younger son, SAADI, is five and adorable. Rayid's older daughter ZAINAB is twenty-two, pretty and sensible-looking, while the younger, MARIA, is seventeen, with a naughty glint in her eyes. Both are dressed in pretty, yet traditionally modest attires. ARSI is a short bald man in his fifties with a jolly demeanor. His family oozes wealth and sophistication. His wife, LEA, is forty, tall and thin, with beautiful features. His daughter, MAYA, is eighteen. Both she and Lea are dressed in slightly daring designer outfits, with sleeveless shirts and pants with long slits. Arsi's son, AUN, who is Maya's twin, has rugged handsome looks and is dressed sharply. BEBE-JI is eighty-five and has a very delicate build. She wears a hearing aid and thick black-rimmed glasses, and is very confident and opinionated. Everyone is looking at the Zahids' picture on the computer.)*

**MARIA**

*(clasping her hands)*

Oh! They all look so perfect!

**ARSI**

*(slapping Rayid's back)*

It's amazing how the kid's have grown!

**BEBE-JI**

*(getting misty eyed)*

May God protect them from the evil eye. See, how my son has maintained his values even in America? She looks pointedly at Lea and Maya in their bold attires.

**RAYID**

*(hugging Bebe-ji)*

You'll be visiting Zahid soon, Bebe-ji, cheer up!

*(DISSOLVE TO: EXT. ZAHID'S HOUSE - DAY. Maina shrugs her arm and stalks off just as BIANCA, their Hispanic neighbor, walks over from her car. She is in her thirties, with a golden tan, short hair, and an athletic figure.)*

**ASIY**

*(to Zahid)*

Here comes your favorite.

*(She hugs both of them.)*

**BIANCA**

Happy Eid, you both! Should I be expecting some of your famous rice pudding and biryani today?

**ASIYA**

Maina took some pudding over in the morning; you must have been out. As for the biryani, Zahid's mother is coming over next week so I'm postponing all cooking till then. You should come and have some when she's here!

**BIANCA**

I'll just have to do that! Gotta rush to the bank now, but we have a date for next week then? See ya!

*(While taking the camera down, Zahid has been sneaking peaks at Bianca. He stops when Asiya shoves him roughly.)*

**ASIYA**

Shame never even touched you when it passed by, did it?

**ZAHID**

*(looking confused)*

Huh?

*(INT. ZAHID'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT. Asiya is hurriedly brushing her hair while Zahid is watching an Indian soap. The boys are playing video games.)*

**ASIYA**

Zahid, for god's sake, will you see if the

children are ready? We are getting late for the eid party! I told Saima we all would be there by seven, and it's already six-fifty! I work day and night like a servant for you all and when it's time to do something for me, everyone backs out! Oh God, what have I done to deserve this; why don't I die so that your hearts can be cooled? Nur, check if Madam is ready! *(Nur doesn't budge. Smacking his head, Asiya walks towards Maina's room.)*  
*(INT. MAINA'S ROOM – NIGHT. The room is decorated with stuffed toys, posters, and fairy lights. It has a computer, T.V, and sound system. Maina hasn't changed for the party yet; instead, she is pinning posters on her walls. Asiya BANGS on her door. Maina ignores her while putting up a rather explicit poster.)*

**ASIYA**  
*(O.S.)* Maina, open your door, do you hear me? *(Maina unlocks it and returns to her work. Asiya barges in, looking livid, with her long hair flying wildly around her.)*

**ASIYA**  
*(angrily)*  
 Why aren't you ready yet? I'm asking you something, answer me! You treat me like trash, not your mother!  
*(Ignoring Asiya's theatrics, Maina continues putting up posters. As the content of the poster register in Asiya's mind, she violently begins tearing all of them down.)*

**MAINA**  
 Are you crazy? Get out! Get out!

**ASIYA**  
 Crazy? Get out? Shame on you! How dare you use that kind of language with me! Are these filthy posters so important? I am not Jessica's mother who will let her kids keep her on a leash, like a dog, you hear? Now get ready before I drag you out like this!

**MAINA**  
*(under her breath)*  
 Bitch.

**ASIYA**  
*(shocked)*  
 What did you say? What did you say!  
*(She slaps Maina sharply and then backs*

*off, looking confused and hurt. Asiya lunges towards her cell phone on her side table.)*

**ASIYA**  
*(waving the phone)*  
 I am taking this away. It's the influence of your trashy friends that's spoiling you! But I am warning you; I will deal with all your Mollys and Jessicas--let them come to the house now, I will see to them! You better straighten up, Maina, or this attitude will land you in great trouble.

*(She walks out, slamming the door.)*

**MAINA**  
 You can't do that!  
*(Asiya opens the door again.)*

**ASIYA**  
 Yes I can, Maina, don't underestimate me. I have given you too much liberty for your own good. Your grandmother is coming this week and when I come back, I better see your room without these obscenities, understand?  
*(As the door closes, Maina throws a C.D case at it.)*

*(INT. JESSICA'S ROOM – DAY. Maina and Molly are at Jessica's house. Her room is decorated in "Legally Blond" mode. Molly is surfing the net on Jessica's pink Mac as Maina creates a beautiful henna tattoo on Jessica's back.)*

**MAINA**  
 Hm--should I do a butterfly?

**JESSICA**  
 Yeah sure--but Maina, didn't you tell her she can't do that? The woman clearly has no respect for your space. You should just tell her off once and for all. I remember, my mom once tried to "discipline" me that way and I threatened to call the police on her.

**MOLLY**  
 I don't know how you take it, girl. Like, if my parents just barged into my room, I would give them serious hell. They wouldn't do it anyway, so ugh--I don't know how you deal.

**MAINA**  
 I don't know myself; she just flips completely at times. We don't get each other at all.

**JESSICA**  
 So, Maina, what about Josh? Has he said

anything, yet?  
**MOLLY**  
*(sighing dramatically)*

He is so fine!  
**MAINA**  
 Well, Ma has my phone so we haven't really talked much.

**JESSICA**  
 Oh yeah, that sucks. I mean, how will you survive without it?

**MAINA**  
 Oh, she does it all the time and I get it back soon enough. But--but--he did ask me to the prom after P.E today!  
*(The girls squeal and hug each other while jumping around.)*

**JESSICA**  
 Will you tell your parents?

**MAINA**  
*(laughing)*  
 Are you crazy? They'll kill me!

**JESSICA**  
 Why don't you get dressed at my house--

**MOLLY**  
 Yeah, and Josh could pick you up from here!

**MAINA**  
 Are you sure? That'll be fab, thanks!

**JESSICA**  
*(turning the CD player on)*  
 Time for a little victory booty!  
*(The girls do a little choreographed dance to Pink's "Trouble.")*

*(INT. ZAHID'S LIVING ROOM - DAY. Asiya is preparing for Bebe-ji's arrival that night. Zahid is watching Indian (bollywood) dances on television while lazily folding the laundry. The boys are lying drugged on the couch, drinking soda and looking dirty and sweaty from playing outside. Asiya isn't very good at multitasking and the family isn't helping. She shoves the boys' feet off the table she has just cleaned, grabs their sodas, and pushes them roughly towards the hall.)*

**MAINA**  
 Chi! You both better be clean and ready in ten minutes! Look at you--*(in Urdu)*--filthy sweepers! *(in English)* And, Zahid, please take them to the barber's today, the boys are

looking like wild goats. Are you listening? What will your mother say?

**ZAHID**  
 Un-huh.  
*(Asiya doesn't have time to get into an argument.)*

**ASIYA**  
*(hollering)*  
 Navin, remind your father to take you both to the barber's okay? Navin-- *(in Urdu)*--did you hear me or not? Everyone has cotton stuffed in their ears!

*(INT. ZAHID'S DOORWAY – NIGHT. Zahid ushers the boys out and waits for Asiya. She steps forward to call Maina and trips on her veil.)*

**ASIYA**  
*(softly)*  
 I will burn these shalwar kameezes! *(loudly)*  
 Maina, we are getting late for the airport, beta! Bebe-ji's flight should arrive any minute now!

**MAINA**  
*(O.S.)* I'm not going!

**ASIYA**  
 What do you mean, you aren't going?  
*(Asiya begins walking towards the stairs to go to Maina's room but Zahid stops her.)*

**ZAHID**  
 There's no time for this now! Let's go, we'll just lock the house; come on!  
*(The two walk out, locking the door behind them.)*

*(INT. ATLANTA AIRPORT, BAGGAGE CLAIM – NIGHT. Asiya and Zahid are looking for Bebe-ji. They spot her near the baggage claim belt, conservatively dressed in a white, two-legged skirt or gharara with a veil covering her head. Her head is constantly turning to a YOUNG COUPLE standing next to her. The WOMAN, dressed in a short summer dress, is pretending to ignore her partner's advances.)*

**WOMAN**  
*(gently pushing him)*  
 Pete, seriously that's not funny. Don't try to get too smooth with me--  
*(To everyone's horror, Bebe-ji begins slapping the man.)*



**BEBE-JI**

What are you doing--(in Urdu)--you low-lying ass!

(She pokes the woman's arm and pulls at her spaghetti strap.)

**BEBE-JI**

And you, don't you have any shame? Parade around like this and this is what will happen! (in Urdu) Pretending to be all good and pure! (Asiya and Zahid run over just in time to apologize to the couple and control the situation.)

**ZAHID**

We are really sorry! Please excuse my mother; she is new here.

**BEBE-JI**

What new shew? (in Urdu) I have traveled the world! Teach the black man some manners! (Asiya is utterly embarrassed. The boys stand at a distance and observe the scenario open-mouthed. The couple begins edging away as Bebe-ji's attention is diverted to Zahid.)

**MAN**

(muttering)

Damn Indians-- Bebe-ji throws her shoe at him.

**BEBE-JI**

I am a Pakistani, you-- (in Urdu)--mother f\*\*\*\*\*!

**ZAHID**

Bebe-ji!

(Asiya retrieves the shoe. Bebe-ji finally takes note of the family and walks over with outstretched arms.)

**BEBE-JI**

(teary-eyed)

Chanda, how are you? Six years of being away from my blood; I don't know how God gave me the patience to bear it! (Looking around.)

Where are the children?

**ASIYA**

Nur, Navin, come here, say salaam to Bebe-ji. (The boys look petrified. They nervously approach Bebe-ji who hugs and kisses them ferociously.)

**ASIYA**

Maina was ill, so we left her at home but she has been talking about you non-stop.

(INT. MAINA'S ROOM - NIGHT. Asiya pokes her head into Maina's room, which looks rather bare now.)

**ASIYA**

(whispering)

Maina, Bebe-ji is here. Change quickly into the shalwar kameez Momo Aunty sent and come help me in the kitchen. (Threatening.) I don't want any attitude from you today, understand, or no prom shrom.

(INT. ZAHID'S KITCHEN - NIGHT. Asiya is preparing food, which is SIZZLING on the stove.)

**ZAHID**

(O.S.) And how is little Zainab? Rayid was telling me she is getting married soon.

**ASIYA**

Yes, Bebe-ji, how are the kids? They must be all grown-up now!

(Asiya is watching the entrance to ensure Bebe-ji doesn't come in. Meanwhile, she is furiously hiding packets of pre-cooked desi food that she is heating up for dinner.)

**BEBE-JI**

(O.S.) They are fine and shooting up fast. (Going off in a reverie) Just seems like yesterday when they were clambering around me to hear ghost stories. Zainab's wedding might be arranged with Mr. Khan's son. Remember him, our next-door neighbor?

**ZAHID**

(O.S.) Oh yes. A very respectable man, from what I recall.

(Asiya rolls her eyes.)

(INT. ZAHID'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT. The boys are silently observing Bebe-ji while the adults talk. Maina walks in, fully made up with her veil trailing behind ungracefully.)

**MAINA**

(mumbling)

Hi.

**ZAHID**

Is this how you greet your Bebe, Maina? Say salaam and hug her, honey.

**MAINA**

(mumbling)

Assalam-o-Alaikum.

(Bebe-ji hugs Maina and cracks her knuckles

against her temples to ward off the evil eye. Her excessive patting spoils Maina's hairstyle.)

**BEBE-JI**

Masha-Allah! Masha-Allah! Is this my little Maina? You look just like your mother when she became a bride! (Patting the sofa.) Come, sit by me. Are you better now?

**MAINA**

Huh? Uh--I'm fine--I guess.

**ASIYA**

(O.S) Maina, is that you?

**MAINA**

I have to go help Ma in the kitchen.

**BEBE-JI**

(patting Maina's hand)

Why don't you rest; I'll go help Asiya.

(Asiya pokes her head into the living room.)

**ASIYA**

No Bebe-ji, please relax, you must be so tired. I'm almost done and Maina can help me finish off.

**BEBE-JI**

Okay, beta, go on then. God knows how your poor mother manages without any servants. (Sighing) What kind of a life is this--cleaning toilets and dishes all day long? Not even a driver!

(Maina leaves for the kitchen.)

(INT. ZAHID'S KITCHEN - NIGHT. Asiya is heating the nan bread. After Maina has ladled the microwavable food into proper dishes, Asiya carefully pours a generous layer of steaming butter over the food.)

**MAINA**

Eeeww, what are you doing, Ma?

**ASIYA**

Shh, Maina, you don't know. It's an eastern tradition to honor guests by serving them the richest food--otherwise they'd be insulted.

**MAINA**

Yeah sure, honor and anoint them in oils when they're dead with clogged arteries and cholesterol.

(INT. ZAHID'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT.

The family is having dinner at the dining table.)

**BEBE-JI**

You have your mother's flavor in your hands,

Asiya. I always knew I picked the right bride to serve my son. God knows the poor boy needs all the care he can get. (Petting him) Look at how weak he has become.

(Asiya glares at Zahid.)

**BEBE-JI**

(pointing at the bread)

Asiya, how did you make the nan? Do you have a tandoor in the house?

**ASIYA**

Uh--actually, we get pre-cooked bread; it's very convenient. (Giggling nervously) All I have to do is sprinkle some water in the wok and it's ready!

(Bebe-ji looks at her in disbelief.)

**BEBE-JI**

Out of the packet and fresh? Beti, it will make the family ill and knowing how sensitive Zahid's digestive system is, you should be extra careful.

(Nur and Navin giggle.)

**BEBE-JI**

If I had ever served stale food to your father-in-law, he would have taken another wife! Even today we have fresh food at every mealtime. But then Maria and Zainab are such a big blessing. (Loking at Maina) Doesn't Maina help with the cooking?

**MAINA**

(sharply)

What? No, I hate cooking.

(Asiya and Zahid exchange wary looks.)

**ASIYA**

Bebe-ji, I haven't taught her to cook properly yet as she is still young. But she bakes very well and makes wonderful cheesecake!

**NUR**

Yeah, right out of the box.

(The children giggle into their plates.)

**BEBE-JI**

Well, it's about time you taught her, Asiya. She is of marriageable age now and you can't expect her to find a good match without the proper skills.

(The boys continue giggling as Maina becomes stony-faced.)

**BEBE-JI**

And another thing, Asiya, you shouldn't allow

her to wear so much make-up and jewelry. Look at her, she looks married already. In our family these things are reserved for brides. Before that they should be simple and fresh like a wild rose bud before it blooms.

*(Maina looks incensed. Nur guffaws.)*

**NAVIN**

Woo hoo! Wild rose?

**MAINA**

Shut up, you creeps. Ma, I have to go do my homework now.

*(Smacking her brothers' heads, Maina leaves the room.)*

*(INT. ZAHID & ASIYA'S BEDROOM*

*- NIGHT. After dinner Zahid and Asiya are talking in their bed.)*

**ASIYA**

Don't you think Bebe-ji was being too critical of Maina today? She's only seventeen. First, she must complete her education; there will be plenty of time to learn domestic things later.

**ZAHID**

Too critical of you or her? Anyhow, I agree with her. Zainab and Maria are studying too, aren't they? I think you should start Maina's training soon--after you've learnt some skills first.

**ASIYA**

*(sarcastically)*

So she gets stuck with a bum like you? And by the way, you should be thanking me for doing all your chores while your mother's here. Serve her son--hnh!

*(Zahid chuckles. Asiya turns off the lights.)*

*(INT. ZAHID'S ENTRANCE HALL - DAY.*

*Zahid and Asiya are leaving for work.)*

**ZAHID**

Bebe-ji, the kids should be back from school by two and we'll return by five. Be sure to get plenty of rest as it's going to be a jam-packed vacation for you!

**ASIYA**

Yes, and please make yourself comfortable, it's your house! Take care.

**BEBE-JI**

I will, don't worry about me. Go on!

*(INT. ZAHID'S LIVING ROOM - DAY. Bebe-ji observes the cars pull out from the driveway*

*before beginning her inspection of the house.)*

*(INT. ZAHID'S KITCHEN - DAY. Bebe-ji raids the entire kitchen.)*

**BEBE-JI**

*(in Urdu)*

Yuck! What shoddy housekeeping! *(in English)* So much filth. Tsk!

*(As she opens a shelf, all the plastic containers tumble over her.)*

**BEBE-JI**

Hai Allah!

*(Bebe-ji crouches on the floor to organize them but stops, re-shelving them haphazardly. She doesn't want to leave telltale signs for Asiya.)*

*(INT. ZAHID & ASIYA'S BEDROOM - DAY.*

*Bebe-ji inspects the closet and drawers.*

*Discovering an intimate picture of Zahid and Asiya, she covers her mouth with her veil in embarrassment.)*

*(INT. ZAHID'S HALLWAY - DAY. Bebe-*

*ji opens and quickly closes the boys' room, gagging on the bad smell of dirty socks and unmentionable things.)*

*(INT. MAINA'S ROOM - DAY. Bebe-ji*

*raids Maina's drawers and closet and is scandalized to see her skimpy clothes and pictures of scantily clad men and women on the panels. Wide-eyed, she skims through her stack of Seventeen, Cosmopolitan, and Teen magazines.)*

**BEBE-JI**

*(raising her hands)*

God, forgive my sinful eyes!

*(EXT. STONE MOUNTAIN - DAY. The Zahids are sightseeing with Bebe-ji.)*

*(INT. CNN CENTER - DUSK. The family is taking a tour of the CNN center.)*

*(EXT. LAKE LANIER - DAY. Bebe-ji is sitting in a folding chair with a huge straw hat on her head. Zahid, Asiya, and the children are splashing around in the water.)*

*(EXT. VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS - DUSK.*

*Asiya, Maina, and Bebe-ji are window-shopping in a commercial strip. Bebe-ji is distracted by scantily clad women and men jogging with their dogs.)*

*(INT. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART - NIGHT.*

*Maina and Bebe-ji are observing an abstract*

*painting.)*

**BEBE-JI**

*(poking Maina with her cane)*

How much is it?

**MAINA**

*(referring to a pamphlet)*

Sixty-thousand dollars.

**BEBE-JI**

*(muttering)*

I could draw better than that.

*(INT. COKE MUSEUM - DAY. Bebe-ji begins*

*slapping the COKE MASCOT when he hugs her for a picture.)*

**BEBE-JI**

*(in Urdu)*

Get away, you shameless son of an owl!

*(INT. MALL OF GEORGIA - NIGHT. Bebe-ji goads Maina away from the skimpy display of Victoria's Secret towards the Disney Store next door.)*

**BEBE-JI**

Ah! *(in Urdu)* Now which doll should I get you?

*(Maina gives her a stunned look.)*

*(INT. ZAHID'S CAR - NIGHT. Bebe-ji is fast asleep and snoring loudly in her seat.*

*Nur and Navin closely observe her wide-open mouth as Asiya tries to hold them back.)*

**NAVIN**

Wow, she has a beard.

**ZAHID**

*(in a warning tone)*

Navin--

*(INT. BEBE-JI'S ROOM - DAY. Bebe-ji is praying when Asiya enters.)*

**ASIYA**

Bebe-ji, I'm taking Maina to my shop today and we'll be a little late coming back. The boys will get home at around two as usual so please get some rest before that.

*(Bebe-ji nods her head. Turning her rosary beads, she blows her prayers over Asiya.)*

*(INT. ASIYA'S CAR - DAY. Parked outside Jessica's house, Asiya drills Maina.)*

**ASIYA**

Maina, now remember what we have talked about okay? Okay?

**MAINA**

*(looking bored)*

Yes Ma--

**ASIYA**

I haven't told your father or Bebe-ji about the prom; I trust you so you better not mess up. No drinking, no drugs, no dancing, and minimal contact with boys, understand? Now go and have fun.

*(Maina nods her head in despair and steps out of the car.)*

*(EXT. JESSICA'S HOUSE - DAY. Carrying her clothes and bags, Maina walks to the front door.)*

*(INT. JESSICA'S ROOM - DAY. Maina,*

*Jessica, Molly, and Amy begin their*

*preparations amidst loud music.)*

*(INT. JESSICA'S ROOM - NIGHT. The girls are putting the last touches to their make-up when Jessica's mother calls out.)*

**SANDY**

*(O.S.; loudly)*

Jessica honey, would you please tell Maina that her date's here.

**AMY**

*(slyly)*

Your date!

**MOLLY**

I'm so excited for you!

**JESSICA**

Go on now and have fun! We'll meet you at the school, once our dates arrive.

*(They all hug. Maina walks out and they congregate at the window.)*

*(EXT. JESSICA'S HOUSE - NIGHT. When Maina steps out Josh hands her a bouquet and escorts her to the car.)*

*(INT. WILSON HIGH SCHOOL GYM*

*- NIGHT. The gym is decorated for the prom. It is dimly lit with candles and flaming torches*

*with STUDENTS dancing to loud live music. Maina and Josh are dancing up a storm on the dance floor. The song ends to a round of applause.)*

**MAINA**

I want to sit down for a while, I'm beat!

**JOSH**

Yeah, good idea, why don't you get a drink or



something while I go meet the guys.

**MAINA**

Um--okay.

*(As Josh leaves, Jessica and Molly run to Maina.)*

**MOLLY**

*(shaking her)*

Cool off, girl, you both are making the rest of us look bad!

*(The three saunter towards the refreshments. Maina observes Josh drinking and goofing around with his FRIENDS.)*

**JESSICA**

Uh-oh, I think I tore my stocking. *(Turning around.)* Can you see it, Maina?

*(Maina is distracted by the sight of Josh and his friends surreptitiously mixing their drinks with something in a brown paper bag.)*

**MAINA**

Huh? Oh don't worry, it's fine.

*(INT. WILSON HIGH SCHOOL GYM*

*- LATER. Josh walks towards Maina who is observing the dancers on the floor. He is flushed and looks unkempt sans coat and tie and with his sleeves rolled up.)*

**JOSH**

*(taking her hand)*

Hey, someone looks ready to hit the floor!

**MAINA**

*(smiling)*

Yeah, let's go.

*(During the dance, Josh starts getting very intimate. At first, Maina responds but she soon becomes uncomfortable. Josh is falling all over her.)*

**MAINA**

Josh, can I have some space. *(putting out her arm)* Josh, please. *(hesitantly)* Are you drunk?

**JOSH**

No--no--I'm fine. *(chuckling)* Tim just got a little something to loosen us up. He's one crazy guy!

*(Maina isn't satisfied but she lets him come closer again to resume their dance. But soon Josh is leaning on Maina again, caressing her crudely. She pushes him away.)*

**JOSH**

Hey!

**MAINA**

Josh, you're smelling and acting like a total pig! It's our first date and you're already slobbering all over me, it's disgusting!

*(The dance floor comes to a standstill. Josh totters back; he is clearly drunk and reacts defensively to Maina's reproof and the staring crowd.)*

**JOSH**

*(slurring)*

Don't act like such a princess! You were the one dying to go out with me! *(making a sad face)* I was only doing the Indian outcast a favor!

*(Maina observes him in stunned silence. A CHAPERONE walks over. Josh trips over an electric cord and falls on him.)*

**CHAPERONE**

Okay people what's happening here?

*(grasping Josh's elbow)* Young man, if you'll please come with me--

**JOSH**

*(resisting):* No wait--and you're the stinky desi stinking up the entire f\*\*\*\*\* country with your stinky b.o and stinky food, you Indian bitch!

*(Maina lunges at him clawing at his face.)*

**MAINA**

*(screaming)*

You pathetic, self-absorbed, ignorant piece of drunken shit! You don't even know I'm Pakistani!

**CHAPERONE**

That's enough, now come on!

*(The chaperone begins dragging Josh out. Molly and Jessica try to control Maina.)*

*(EXT. WILSON HIGH SCHOOL - NIGHT.*

*Lifelessly waving to her friends, Maina gets in Asiya's car.)*

*(INT. ASIYA'S CAR - NIGHT. Asiya is waiting at the red light.)*

**ASIYA**

How was the party?

**MAINA**

*(staring out the window)*

Fine.

*(Asiya grabs Maina's head and begins sniffing her hair to check for the smell of cigarettes or weed.)*

**ASIYA**

Open your mouth.

*(Rolling her eyes, Maina obeys. Asiya smells her breath for alcohol.)*

**ASIYA**

Mm--Chinese!

**MAINA**

*(pointing at the green light)*

Can we go home now?

*(INT. ZAHID'S KITCHEN - DAY. Asiya is organizing her purse when the doorbell rings.)*

**ASIYA**

Nur, get the door, beta!

*(Nur runs to open the door. Soon, he returns carrying empty dishes followed by Bianca carrying her son PETER.)*

**ASIYA**

Hi, Bianca! How're you? Aww, look at, little Mr. Baldie-waldie!

*(Bianca laughs as Asiya coos over Peter.)*

**ASIYA**

I'm sorry but I have to run, the shop opens in ten minutes and I don't know how I'll get there in time!

**BIANCA**

Oh, sure, I won't stay; just came to return your dishes. Thanks for the biryani, it was delicious! *(sympathetically)* How is Maina doing?

**ASIYA**

*(distractedly)*

She's fine, how's Mia? *(dragging her by the arm)* Oh, and before you leave, come meet my mother-in-law.

*(INT. ZAHID'S LIVING ROOM - DAY. Bebe-ji is watching the news when Asiya and Bianca walk in.)*

**ASIYA**

Bebe-ji, this is Bianca, our neighbor I was telling you about. We've known each other for years and her daughter Mia is even in the same class as Maina!

*(Bebe-ji pats Bianca's head and takes the baby.)*

**BIANCA**

Hi, it's so nice to finally meet you!

**BEBE-JI**

Same here, I thought my children had no friends. Sit, I'll make some tea for you.

**ASIYA**

Great! I have to leave now but you both enjoy yourselves!

*(Asiya rushes out.)*

*(INT. ZAHID'S LIVING ROOM - LATER. The table is strewn with teacups and serving plates.)*

**BIANCA**

*(holding her forehead)*

Lord, look at the time! I must go and make lunch before the kids get home. *(looking concerned)* But before I leave--how's Maina doing? Mia told me about the fight with her boyfriend at the prom last night; she must be very upset.

**BEBE-JI**

Prom?

**BIANCA**

*(nodding her head)*

Yes, um, it's like an end-of-the-year school party.

**BEBE-JI**

*(impatiently waving her hand)*

No,no, Maina was at the shop with Asiya yesterday.

**BIANCA**

*(taking the baby)*

But I saw her pictures on Mia's camera --she looked beautiful!

**BEBE-JI**

*(firmly)*

No, it must be someone else. Asiya told me and also, Maina doesn't have a boyfriend shoy-friend; all this dating business is not allowed in our culture.

**BIANCA**

*(looking baffled)*

Oh, uh, right, um, oh God. I'm sorry, you're right, it must be someone else. Phew! I must run now, but it was really nice meeting you!

Do come over for tea sometime.

*(Bebe-ji doesn't respond.)*

*(INT. ZAHID'S WORKSHOP - DAY. Zahid*

is supervising a SEAMSTRESS when he receives a call on his cell phone.)

**ZAHID**

Hullo? Bebe-ji? Assalaam-o-Alaikum! Is everything okay? (pauses) Yes, Asiya is at the other shop. (pauses) Yes, of course but what's wrong? (nodding his head) Okay, we'll be there in twenty minutes. (walking towards the entrance) Sam, I have to go home; just take care of the shop for the day.

(INT. BEBE-JI'S ROOM – DAY. Asiya and Zahid rush in and hug Bebe-ji. She is sitting still on her bed.)

**ZAHID**

(holding her face)

Ma, what's wrong?

**ASIYA**

(holding her hand)

Bebe-ji, are you okay? Should I call the doctor? Please say something!

**BEBE-JI**

Zahid, ask your wife where she took Maina yesterday.

(Perplexed, Zahid looks at Asiya.)

**ASIYA**

(looking down)

It was prom night. Bebe-ji, it's just a school party and the students get together to have some fun; it's nothing bad, believe me.

**ZAHID**

Ma, please don't worry about it.

**BEBE-JI**

But you lied to me, Asiya; why should I trust you now? (crying) She is going to lead my son and my grandchildren straight to hell-- (Asiya smirks, closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.)

**ASIYA**

Okay, I am sorry I lied but it was important to Maina. This is her life now and I don't want her to be an outcast here. She has her rules and I know I can trust her.

**BEBE-JI**

So, Zahid, you are fine with your daughter running around creating sizzling fireworks with a boyfriend?

**ASIYA**

(impatiently)

Maina doesn't have a boyfriend.

**BEBE-JI**

Why don't you ask Bianca? Mia told her that Maina had a fight at the prom with her boyfriend. And honestly, Asiya, observing how you are raising my son's family, I wasn't surprised to hear that. ASIYA: You're taking Bianca's word over mine? Bebe-ji, this is my family and I know how I need to raise it and keep it happy. Look, I make mistakes like everyone else but that hardly deserves the catastrophic response elicited from you!

**BEBE-JI**

You think I am a drama-queen? I will show you proof; follow me.

(Bebe-ji rushes out of the room.)

(INT. MAINA'S ROOM – DAY. Bebe-ji slams open the door and walks towards the closet with Asiya and Zahid following her. She waves her hand at the promiscuous pictures on the closet door and begins

throwing out Maina's skimpy clothes on her bed. Then, she fans out the stack of magazines on the floor.)

**BEBE-JI**

(touching her ears)

Toba, toba--look at this! "S-E-X Tips," "Hot Dating Spots," "Practice French Kissing with Your Pillow!" Is this how you were raised, Asiya? This is not our culture and these are not our values! In a few years the children will wave ta-ta, bye-bye, leaving for college in the flashy cars you will buy them, never to return. And when you both are old they will dump you in old homes--is that the life you want?

**ZAHID**

Bebe-ji, it's not that bad. I will talk to Maina myself. (waving at the room) This is normal for teenagers today and we just want the children to blend in as regular people.

**BEBE-JI**

I cannot see my son's family being destroyed this way! My heart refuses to accept it. I have thought about it all afternoon, Zahid--send Maina to Pakistan with me, just for a summer. I will train her in her values, her morals, and traditions!

**ASIYA**

(looking at Zahid)

But Maina will be doing her college search over the summer, she cannot afford to go right now!

**ZAHID**

Relax, we haven't decided anything yet.

(Maina walks into the room.)

**MAINA**

(surprised)

What's going on here? Why're you guys in my room?

(Bebe-Ji walks out in a huff with Zahid following her. Staring at Maina, Asiya closes the door and makes her sit on the bed.)

**ASIYA**

(arms crossed)

Maina, what happened at the prom?

**MAINA**

(warily)

What do you mean? Nothing.

**ASIYA**

Don't lie to me. You thought you could fool me and get away with it? I know you had a date.

(Maina looks up sharply.)

**MAINA**

(defensively)

No, I didn't, Ma.

(Asiya grabs Maina's bag and retrieves her cell phone from it. As she begins flicking through her messages, Maina tries to snatch it away.)

**MAINA**

You can't do that, give it back!

(Trying to get the phone, Maina tears Asiya's sleeve. Asiya angrily pushes her on the bed.)

**ASIYA**

(chanting)

"Can't wait to see you at the game. Love, Josh." "You looked so hot tonight! Kisses, J." "Chinese or pizza? J." "Your mom almost saw us today! The J'ster." (looking at Maina) "Ready for the prom?"

(Asiya slumps down on the floor and begins crying.)

**ASIYA**

You have failed me, Maina. You are a liar and have made me one in front of my husband

and Bebe-ji. When you were born and I held you for the first time, I promised to give you the best--everything your heart ever desired. I vowed to give you the comforts I never had. When your father refused to work I joined the airlines serving people like a maid, serving perverted creeps, cleaning up after them just for you. Then, I gave it up for you so that you would find a nice desi husband without the shame of being an air-hostess's daughter haunting you. Now, your father and I fix people's shoes and clothes to give you everything and this is how we are thanked? I will never trust you again, Maina, never. (pausing) You are returning to Pakistan with your Bebe-ji for the summer and will stay there and get married if you don't improve. You can just forget about college right now. (Sighing, Asiya gets up to leave. Maina rushes to the door.)

**MAINA**

(frantically)

I'm sorry, Ma, please don't do this! I had the worst time yesterday! I promise, I won't do it again! Look--I--I don't know why I did it. I've just missed having you around, first during your flights and now you're always at the shop! I did it for attention I guess--take me for counseling! I want to make up and I want us to be friends!

**ASIYA**

(looking disgusted)

Maina, I have always, always been there for you, don't give me this bullshit. Look at you, you're even using the excuses of this culture--I've created a manipulative little monster, haven't I? But now I am going to do something about it. I will not lose you, Maina.

(Asiya walks out. Maina bites her nails and throws her cell phone at the door.)

**MAINA**

You can't do that!

(EXT. ZAHID'S DRIVEWAY - DAY. Asiya and Bebe-ji are sitting in the car. Zahid and the boys are loading the suitcases. Maina walks out wearing dark shades and capris with a tiny tank top.)

(INT. ZAHID'S VAN – DAY. Maina gets in.



*Bebe-ji observes her attire, reproachfully.)*

**ASIYA**

*(holding her forehead)*

Maina, trust me, you are not going to be comfortable wearing this in Pakistan. Please go and change.

*(Maina ignores her. Bebe-ji pats Asiya's hand. Zahid and the boys get in to drive to the airport.)*

*(INT. ZAHID'S VAN – LATER. Asiya tries to hold Maina's hand but she jerks it off. Nur and Navin who are sitting at the back begin singing a Pakistani national song with terrible accents.)*

**NUR & NAVIN**

*(together)*

*Dil Dil Pakistan, Jan Jan Pakistan! (zealously thumping their chests) Dil Dil Pakistan, Jan Jan Pakistan!*

*(Maina whips around and begins clawing at them, pulling at their hair, and beating them with her bag.)*

**MAINA**

Shut the hell up, you f\*\*\*\*\* assholes! I swear, I'll kill you both!

*(The boys scream loudly as Asiya and Bebe-ji attempt to control the situation.)*

*(INT. ATLANTA AIRPORT, DEPARTURE LOUNGE - DAY. Asiya is crying profusely. She attempts to hug Maina who remains unresponsive. Zahid pats her on the head. Looking down, Maina walks off towards the gates.)*

**ASIYA**

*(sobbing)*

Bebe-ji, please take care of her--

**ZAHID**

Ma, be patient. She'll learn; just give her time and--

**BEBE-JI**

Don't worry; I'm her grandmother, not her enemy. Maina is going home and she will be fine. It's for her good.

*(Asiya and Zahid nod their heads. Bebe-ji hugs them and walks towards the gates.)*

*(EXT. KARACHI AIRPORT, PAKISTAN - DAY. Bebe-ji and Maina walk out the airport. Both Rayid and Arsi are there to receive them with*

*their families.)*

**BEBE-JI**

*(pointing to them)*

Look beta, they all are here to welcome you!

*(Maina is too distraught by the excessive heat, humidity, and noise to share in Bebe-ji's excitement.)*

**BEBE-JI**

Don't worry; I didn't tell them anything about why you were coming to Pakistan. Just pretend that you are here for the holidays.

**MAINA**

*(wryly)*

Great. Thanks.

*(On reaching the exit they are thronged by the family. Everyone hugs Bebe-ji and Maina.)*

**ARSI**

Welcome! Welcome!

*(Ali and Aun take over the luggage trolleys.)*

**MAINA**

Hi--

**RAYID**

How are you beta? We're so glad that you could come!

**LAILA**

*(hugging Maina)*

Jan, you must be exhausted! Please, Rayid, get us seated in the car first; all the talking can be done at home.

**LEA**

*(delicately patting her nose)*

Yes, I can't stand this heat!

*(Everyone begins walking towards the cars through a huge throng of PEOPLE. Maina is terribly self-conscious and disturbed by the GENERAL PUBLIC staring at her: the MEN with lecherous gazes and the WOMEN disapprovingly as she is stands out in her western clothes. Aun is surreptitiously checking Maina out. Suddenly, he sees a TEENAGE BOY pinch Maina's bottom.*

*Screaming loudly, Maina whips around completely dis-oriented. Her limp hair is plastered across her sweating face with the shades falling off her nose. Leaving the trolley, Aun rushes to flog the boy.)*

**AUN**

*(in Urdu) Oye, dog, low-lying bastard! Why*

don't you go f\*\*\* your mothers and sisters at home! Messing around with my women huh?!  
*(The young man is screaming with pain. Maina's aunts and cousins surround her while Rayid and Arsi join Aun in the thrashing. A huge throng congregates around them to enjoy the free show. Soon, Ali comes forward to end the fight. The men hand the perpetrator over to a policeman standing nearby and resume escorting the women to the cars as if this is nothing out of the ordinary for them.)*

THE END

## CONTRIBUTORS

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Mahnaz Nazir is a senior English Literature and Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College.

Elizabeth Ott is a junior English Literature and History major at Agnes Scott College. She hails from Alabama where she first kindled her burning love for formal verse and irreverence. She gets her inspiration from faux domesticity and Victorian novels. She whistles.

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and composition.

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Cheryl Stiles is a librarian at Kennesaw State University and a doctoral student in English at Georgia State University. Her work has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Storysouth*, *Slant*, *Pedestal Magazine*, and *Plainsongs*. "Wharf Rat" is from her book-length manuscript of essays, *On Nelson Street*.

A transplant from Andrews, Texas, Kimberly Wallace is a senior at Agnes Scott College and will graduate in May 2006 with a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing. This is her second year as an Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival poetry finalist.

Jayne Walton was born in Oklahoma and raised in Georgia and currently lives in Washington, DC. She is a junior English Literature and Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College. She is a Math minor and member of the softball and soccer teams.

Federica Zanet Wilhelm was born in Italy. She moved to the States in 2002, started Berry College in 2003, began writing poetry in English in 2004, and in 2005 won second and third prize for poetry at the *Women Writer's Conference Student Contest*.



## WRITERS' FESTIVAL GUESTS

- 1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery  
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1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin  
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen  
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson  
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen  
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen  
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen  
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen  
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen  
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen  
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz  
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson  
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz  
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker  
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