

44th *Annual Writers' Festival*

The design of the Writers' Festival seeks to reflect the writing process. This year we sought that process in the movement of Kristin Miller Hopkins' artwork. The writing process is a process. And it is full of movement. Whether that means the revision process of moving paragraphs, or the flowing sound of the words as they're read aloud, writing is never stagnant. It doesn't stop even when the words are published as there will never be one interpretation of our work. What we write comes alive for our readers each time our work is read. The piece is constantly re-interpreted and re-imagined.

Just as Hopkins's images retain their motion on the page, our guest writers are just as dynamic. Their writing flows with energy. We are thrilled to welcome for this year's Writer's Festival, Tracy K. Smith, Chris Abani and Jennifer Bartell. Their work is full of the velocity and development that propel to move and move us in return. For this year's Writer's Festival please enjoy the flow.

Cheryl Wollner, Class of '15

March 26 & 27, 2015





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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 state-wide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Chris Abani, Tracy K. Smith, and Jennifer Bartell '05.

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 \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the Emma May Laney Endowment Fund for Writing, the Margaret Guthrie Trotter Fund, and the Ellen White and William Wyeth Newman Writers' Festival Prize. We wish to thank President Elizabeth Kiss, Vice President for Academic Affairs Kerry Pannell, Eleanor Hutchen '40, and the estate of Margret Trotter for their support. Thanks to Kristin Miller Hopkins (kristinmillerhopkins.com) for the use of her artwork, "Family Trees" and "Family Trees series." Special thanks to Willie Tolliver, chair, and other members of the English department, as well as Whitney Brown '07 and Amanda Lee Williams in the Office of Faculty Services. We also thank the Office of Marketing and Public Relations for their help with design, social media and marketing, and Demetrice Williams for her event planning and management.

Table of Contents

Poetry

How to Grow Up <i>Taylor Boltz</i>	8
The First Time Belva Trayco Spoke to Me <i>Monica Ductan</i>	8
The House on Maysville Road <i>Monica Ductan</i>	8
Corrine <i>Monica Ductan</i>	8
The Sensation of Being Open Season <i>Halden Ingwersen</i>	9
How to Tell a Man You Love Him When You Don't <i>Andrea Rogers</i>	10
I Can Set Myself Right Here and Drown* <i>Andrea Rogers</i>	11
Pinching the Skin at the Ribcage <i>Andrea Rogers</i>	11
crystal mangum's doxology - mar. 2006 <i>Courtney Taylor</i>	12
Phillis Wheatley's Benediction - Dec. 1784 <i>Courtney Taylor</i>	12
Witch's Milk <i>Jessica Temple</i>	12
Four Children Falling <i>Jared White</i>	14

Nonfiction

**The Art of Sitting:
Lessons from Equestrianism** 18
Sarah Boudreau

It's a Girl! 22
Rebeka Garcia

**Somehow, This Was
Significant** 24
Emma Jones

Me vs. Flowers 29
Alison Missler

**Being Robby:
My Life/My Death** 32
Robby Nadler

Drama

**Old Woman Does Talk,
the Youth Does Walk** 58
Shanice Bennerson

Sticking To It 82
Avanti Lemons

rock springs 88
Robby Nadler

Fiction

Bivuoac 40
Elizabeth Biron

Roof Jumping 41
Monica Ductan

Witch Luck 46
Marcela Fuentes

**abecedarian for the colors
of a future childhood** 52
Molly McDaniel

Erasers 54
Alison Missler

the choice 55
Robby Nadler



Poetry



Poetry

How to Grow Up

Taylor Boltz

University of West Georgia

Once, at my friend's birthday party,
I slammed a girl against a wall,
told her to go home, while white haired
women feed their dogs cookies from gelato
cups, and the sky, some untranslated
shade of blue, frescoed half peeled age.
I was five, half a woman already,
like the one on the ceiling of a Spoleto house,
naked and pointing to the door. She stares
like she knows I too am shaped by the quakes
of the city that absorbs the light from the switch.
Like the painter, parallel to the floor,
hovering in-between the knowing blue eyes
of that woman, we're all just cracks from a brush.

The First Time Belva Trayco Spoke to Me

Monica Ductan

Georgia College and State University

Was at the laundry in our neighborhood.
She asked if she could borrow fifty cents.
My fingers shook in my hurry
To give her what she wanted.
She held up the shiny coins, said,
If a man cain't give that, He ain't worth a damn.
She folded denim, holey terry cloth,
Cottons small enough to drape a doll.
For months afterward, I thought of her—
The way her one front tooth overlapped the other.
The sound of her voice—pure Appalachia—
The way her nails snagged my palm
When she took the coins from me.

The House on Maysville Road

Monica Ductan

Georgia College and State University

Flowered dresses hang crooked on wire hangers.
Above them, Grandma's tams—
The orange one, still dotted with confetti
From Fourth of July. I see her necklaces
Hung over the dresser mirror, remember
How she knotted them at her throat.
For a moment, she is behind me in the mirror,
Her back slumped the way mine is beginning to.
I remember the day she was wheeled out,
White sheet over her face, her one grey toenail
Gliding past my nose.

Corrine

Monica Ductan

Georgia College and State University

Evenings we gathered in the kitchen,
Sat in the kerosene heater's fuzzy, orange light.
My chair was always warm from the body
Of a child who sat there before me. My girls
Wore their flour sack dresses, hair braided in lumpy
Cornrows. My boys sat Indian-style,
Listened to their daddy's stories of water moccasins
Climbing the rocks at Hurricane Shoals.

I raised all ten children here in this blue
House, the one shutter now clapping against
A board. The house teemed with herbs in
springtime—
Ginseng, scallion, thyme. I still see
Paisley curtains over the sink, tassels moving silently.

I would like to lie in the crook of my husband's
Elbow again, to hear the house creak under
A sheet of ice. Those nights, I'd tiptoe to the kids'
Rooms, see the tilted faces lift from pillows,
Eyes drooping shut. I once took Annie in my arms,
Her eyes too bright with fever. I coaxed
My nipple into her toothless mouth,
Hoped food from my body could heal her.

The Sensation of Being Open Season

Halden Ingwersen
Agnes Scott College

I.

I'm not allowed to sit by myself.
To be with my friends.
To go out at night.
I'm not allowed to ride my bike.
Not alone.

Surely
those athletic shorts were for your benefit.
Naturally
this skirt was selected with you in mind.
Of course, stranger,
my shirt was worn
specifically
for
you.

II.

"You're so fucking HOT," he told me
I don't know what he's seeing.
Not my eyes.
His pre-motor areas,
the part of the brain that anticipates the use of tools,
is alight.

That night he followed me from one party to
another.
He waited for me outside the bathroom.
Hovered behind us.
It took a friend's threat of a jawbone dislocated to
finally send him home alone.

III.

You weren't even five feet away from me. And it had
been less than a minute.
And like clockwork there he was –
walking up to me like he owned my place.

"It's so hard to find scarves like these!"
"Yes it is," I agreed as I pulled mine from his hands.

He left only when you appeared.
I wasn't as simply netted when taken for the
property of another man.

IV.

November 20, 6:30PM
"So is the girl you been seeing as hot as you?"
November 20, 8:40PM
"Anywho, is Nat a gambler?"
November 26, 7:21PM
"Hey Halden, what's good?"
November 30, 4:45PM
"So you forget how Facebook works?"
December 1, 9:05PM
"Bitch."

V.

When he gave me an unsolicited comment
About his erection
I gave him an unsolicited comment
About eunuchs

I'd like to think I've grown bolder.

How to Tell a Man You Love Him When You Don't

Andrea Rogers
Georgia State University

Write it in a letter followed
by the word "but". Or, tell him
you've never loved a man

like you love him, which is true,
because you don't. At Christmas,
think hard about the right gift,

one that will send the message
that you're searching for: a garden hose,
a frying pan. Something

that says nothing. Because that's
what you're saying with your body
when your mouth stops moving.

It doesn't matter why you don't
love him, or even if you never did.
All that matters is that you don't

let it slip. If he takes you in his arms
and asks what's wrong, think
hard about another kind of gift:

when you answer, look just beyond
his shoulder, or turn your back.
Say nothing which is true.

I Can Set Myself Right Here and Drown*

Andrea Rogers
Georgia State University

Why Mark was living on that boat
half-cocked, docked in the marina,
no one could rightly say, but one
afternoon, a stranger found him
floating. The police didn't stay long;
in the end, the only thing they could
prove was that he was your brother.
He was thirty-three, same as Jesus
when he was crucified, but they found
him floating in, not walking on, water.

He was your brother, who once let us
stay in his apartment. You fell asleep
in the next room, but he and I stayed up,
drinking, smoking, listening to Pearl Jam
on the fraying couch, a 1970s relic
shoved between the thrift store TV
and the red drum set. That night, I got
so shit-faced my mind was set adrift,
and I wondered what every woman
wonders when her lover has a brother.

Of course, I drank too much, underaged,
guzzling PBRs, but I kept on wondering –
so that when he leaned across to grab
his beer, I thought he might kiss me;
I thought, *he moves so ghostly slow,*
as his head and arm floated past,
our bodies can not help but collide.
But just before our lips met, I spilled
our beers. I chalked it up to clumsiness,
and he never knew. And neither did you.

*This poem takes its title from Pearl Jam's "Swallowed Whole."

Pinching the Skin at the Ribcage

Andrea Rogers
Georgia State University

When your father almost died
in that motorcycle crash,
the nurses told him it was
a good thing he was fat.

The doctors told him
that his body saved him, that
if he'd weighed even five pounds
less, he'd be dead.

While his body ate itself
you moved in to feed him,
to bathe a skeleton
with kohl in its mustache.

And as he thinned, you grew
prone to taking his pain pills,
so that when he was better, you'd
almost become him yourself.

You pushed his wheelchair
until November, when you
called, but by then, of course,
I'd stopped answering.

That night you curled your hand
around your glasses, moved to
place them on the table,
but your heart stopped mid-reach.

Here's the part where your father
should have crawled out
of that hall closet where you stash
your coke and saved you. Except

in real life, he limped into the bathroom,
did another line, then slept until
noon, when he found you, stiff,
hand extended toward no one.

crystal mangum's doxology - mar. 2006

Courtney Taylor
Agnes Scott College

he wonders whether to lift the hem or tug the waistband, says your name *lento*, a centipede tongue trailing the roof of mouth, your nails fighting for eyes, shoulders clenched, pressing ears quiet until breasts unintentionally alive. he sends a friend to the backroom for a broomstick. then other boys imagine what's under that soot of skin, molasses? lead? speculate how black navigates not in denim and because none of them have seen a bare Queen without a remote, they have rehearsed your arrival, dissected cantaloupe to practice undoing you handless, without having to care for your wordless Nile cry, this will come before they admit they asked for *whites not niggers*, before you even know where your body has gone.

Phillis Wheatley's Benediction - Dec. 1784

Courtney Taylor
Agnes Scott College

When I finally set
to write my own elegy,

I want my cerebrum streamed through
my nostrils like Cleopatra.

Generations from now brown nobility
will appear west of the Atlantic,

rest braids on bedspreads in
Lorraine Motel, temples to the oval rug

of a Kenyan-white machine,

and when they reach the Boston Harbor,
instead of tea they'll study my head, the

mutated cells that held poetry.

And when the little royalties kick
their fetterless feet out

from the blue dock instinctively
and wonder what I mean by

diabolic dye or

benighted soul I hope
their tour guides explain that

back then Queens
were called niggers. "Lucky for you all,

God lost his mind."

Witch's Milk

Jessica Temple

Georgia State University

My mother was born in the Mohave.
A few days later, her mama found small spots of
blood
blooming in her diaper like brick dust settling.
The doctor explained that this sometimes happens
with babies born in deserts.
Having never seen it in her other daughters,
she thought this was the reason for the blood.
Something to do with the drier air.

Sixty years later, I read about witch's milk,
leaked from a baby boy's breasts,
and find that pseudomenses
results from the mother's hormones
withdrawing from her daughter's bloodstream,
just as hers must have dissipated from mine.
This dearth has nothing to do with the desert.

Four Children Falling

Jared White
Georgia State University

1

At three, my brother is 20 mph too macho,
liberates himself from his seat belt,
pitches ajar the door of the car—
of the two fears children are born with,
he only ever feared loud noise—

he flings out wide his body
and is slapped to the pavement
like burlapped flour concussed to the curb.

2

At five years old, I excel at floating.
So when we arrive at a family vacation condo,

I demand my swim trunks from my mother,
who is upstairs with Mo, my two-year-old sister.
The screened window is stretched open, yawning
subtle bursts of pine into the room.
My mother searches the luggage for my trunks,

and when we hear the screen pop out,
Mom and I are alone. The quiet stillness I see
in my mother for the instant it takes her eyes
to rise to the vacant hole is mutilated
by screams of fractured syllabics.

She disappears from the room,
Leaps down the carpeted stairs and out
of doors to the concrete where Mo is sprawled,
open as a kite.

3

No one at the party watches the toddler:

a ski boat drags kids on a tube, other kids play
tag or kickball up on the grass, the women
gossip about friends and drink around picnic tables,
and the men drink and talk about their farming
and the Mariners while loitering near the grill.

The grill in tree-shade sears marinated meat.
No one watches her body break
through the water, her hair floating
on the surface until she breathes
enough lake. The firemen find her
under the pier.

Like a boat's rope half-hitched to a cleat,

her brown curls have knotted
a grouping of nails. The men tear her hair loose,
present her body, like an offering, to her parents.

The mother sits in the grass without speaking.
The man holds his girl and howls.
The police pry his arms loose, untangle her
dripping curls from his clenched fingers.

4

In a dream, our son falls over a railing
three floors to concrete.

Running after me,
my wife yells *bless him*
with your hands—you'll save him
if you bless him.

I kneel beside him and watch my hands

tremble to his blonde hair
warm with blood. Before I find the words,

I wake, rush out of bed to search every room
of the house, but I don't see him. Outside,
I search below every window and I find my boy
nowhere. When I feel I can no longer look alone,
I wake my wife. She tells me that he fell months ago,
that I should come back to bed with her, that we
can visit him with flowers as soon as the sun rises.





Nonfiction



Nonfiction

The Art of Sitting: Lessons from Equestrianism

Sarah Boudreau
Young Harris College

How to Sit a Spook

She wore rhinestones and hated sunshine.

When you looked at Andrea, you could tell by her eyes if she was in a bad mood or not. Not that she ever had a soft expression, mind you, but when she was mad her eyes narrowed and her weathered face looked like a snake's. She also taught my weekly riding lesson, barking orders from the sidelines of her dark, cavernous indoor arena.

Under her tutelage I rode Arabian horses, fiery desert steeds known for their exotic looks and explosive reactivity. They say horses spook at two things: things that move and things that don't move. Arabians are no exception. At any given moment, if a horse detects anything it perceives as a threat, he will go into panic mode. In a best-case scenario, the horse will shudder a single, jarring movement as he decides *oh my God, I need to have all four feet on the ground at this very moment or I am going to die*. In a worst-case scenario, he bolts as you cling to his neck wondering what you did to deserve such a fate. On some days horses spook more often than others, like on windy days. It is a commonly held belief among equines that wind is the number one killer of horses worldwide.

Like the high-strung horses she trained, Andrea's mood changed daily. On some days, she crooned and encouraged.

"You look so good up there! David, come look at this. This is how you ride western—look at the soft hands, look at how the hip moves with the strides of the horse."

And other days, I was not allowed to ride independently at all; she controlled the horse as she picked apart my riding position.

"Sit UP. Push your shoulders back. Back further. Sit up straight. Stretch down through your heel—no, hands up and tilted in—heel pushing down. Heel down, leg tucked in. Keep your leg on him! Sit up, shoulders back. Move those hips!"

Proper position means a straight back, but I was too terrified of her to tell her about my back problems: my scoliosis and kyphosis means that not only

is my back crooked, but my upper back lacks enough muscle to even walk with my back straight. I could imagine her shrieking at me to stop being so lazy and just work harder. Despite my protests and obvious discomfort, on her bad days she forced me to do mounted strengthening exercises until my muscles screamed and my eyes started to tear up.

Convinced I had done something to evoke Andrea's wrath, I once tried to explain my actions to her, but she interpreted my explanation as an excuse to be lazy. Some days she sung my praises and some days she screamed so loudly the whole state could hear her. So I blamed myself for her outbursts. It was me. It had to be me. Something I had said or something I had done. I tried and tried and tried to win her approval, but anything I said just seemed to make her angrier. My weekly lessons with her started to make me miserable.

Whenever the horse I rode during lessons would spook, the sudden and unpredictable impact sent a shockwave up my spine into the already-sore muscles, resulting in a moment of blinding pain and a day's worth of increased pain. I would brace myself, stabilizing myself with my legs firmly around the horse's sides and tightening my fingers on the reins, getting a firm grip in order to stay in the saddle. My mount would feel the pressure and react again—more scary things!—often tearing the reins from my hands and speeding away, leaving me clinging to his back with all the strength I could muster.

But after over a year of riding horses who panic wildly once a ride, I learned to completely relax and let the horse have his way as he snorted, wild-eyed, trying to figure out whether the water bottle sitting on the railing would eat him or not. Any sort of tension on my part would make the horse more agitated and eventually result in more pain for me. Being relaxed saved me from injury and gave the horse reassurance.

I learned to deal with Andrea in a similar way. Like the horses, I couldn't predict nor control whether or not she would be upset. I did not know what the root of her anger was, but I figured out that it wasn't me. From then on, I dealt with her with a relaxed attitude, polite and easygoing, letting her work her own anger out without trying to intervene.

Since then, I've ridden a lot of spooky horses and met a lot of spooky people, and I've dealt with them the same way: calmly giving them space to work through their worries.

How to Sit the Trot

There two basic ways to ride a horse: like a cowboy herding cattle on the range and like a posh English gentleman touring his country manor. While they share the same goal of effective riding, the methods they use to get there are polar opposites. English riding originated with war horses and foxhunting. An English horse should have an energetic, forward movement and its rider should ride with reins taut, feeling the horse's mouth in the bit to try to contain the forward energy. Western riding, on the other hand, originated from herding cattle for hours a day, so it demands a horse with a slow, powerful gaits to make its rider as comfortable as possible. Because a cowboy would have a rope in one hand, western riders use loose reins and only apply pressure to them as a last resort.

Needless to say, they conflict. And needless to say, it is difficult to ride one horse in a style it is unaccustomed to. And so, when my instructor put me (a western rider) on Gwen (an English horse), Gwen and I were very confused.

"Sit the trot!" my instructor, a kind-faced lady named Bobbie-Jo, called out to my group lesson. Gwen, an energetic and opinionated mare, had already been straining to move forward; I had been pulling hard on the reins to keep her from surging ahead. The others strolled along in comparison to my powerwalking mount. As soon as I loosened my fingers the tiniest amount to ask her to go into the next gait, Gwen took off like a rocket. I bounced on her back as she trotted past the other kids in my lesson, who jogged around quietly. That trot jarred my muscles and shook my bones; I could feel my body shudder with every stride. I ache just thinking about it. Little by little, I could feel the wind get knocked out of me as I pulled the reins taut to try to slow Gwen down. She powered on, trying to pull the reins from my hands so she could go faster.

Her quick, jackhammer gait threw my balance off center, so I clung to the saddle and threw my weight into my stirrups in an attempt to stay stable. This just made the trotting faster (as I released my grip on the reins) and the balancing worse (as I tried to balance on my toes). Again and again, I zoomed by the other riders in my lesson, shouting "Coming up on your left! Sorry!"

I never could get her to slow down. If I didn't wear gloves, Gwen would pull on the reins so hard that my fingers developed blisters from clenching so hard. By the end of my lessons, my legs ached from trying to balance myself on her back as she bounced.

Eventually, I learned to sink my weight into the saddle instead of trying to stand in the stirrups, moving with the horse's stride instead of bracing myself against it. But she would never slow to a comfortable speed, no matter what I tried. Most of my lessons consisted of passing other riders as I went around the arena, apologizing profusely as Gwen's choppy, rapid trot forced me to cut people off. I wanted a slow, relaxed, western-style horse, and Gwen's stampede was the exact opposite.

A few months after I started taking lessons on Gwen, I got the big news: my family was moving again. Again?! And to *Georgia*? That's redneck country, for God's sake. And to make matters worse, we were moving in the middle of the school year, forcing me to take completely different classes. I tearfully said goodbye to my old friends, old school, old barn, and to good ol' Gwen, who I had grown very fond of despite her difficult trot and habit of biting whomever put her saddle on. I left my familiar life behind and embarked on my journey to Georgia.

The first three months of living in Georgia were the worst of my life. Back at my old home, I struggled with depression and social anxiety disorder, but now, ripped from my old life and forced into a strange town where I knew no one, I hit a new low. All day, my brain sluggishly churned along only to race at night. Every morning I struggled to get out of bed. When I got to school, I counted down until I could go home. When I was home, I counted down until I could go to bed. And every night I would lie awake, gripped with anxiety. My brain felt like looking up at a starless night sky, sent into a numbing trance by the open void when then firecrackers explode across your vision, jerking you out of your hypnotized state. Every bright light shocks you like a bolt of lightning, every pop and crackle sends shivers down your spine. The fireworks' staccato rhythm keeps you in a constant state of panic, only to fade into black void again.

My daily cycle continued for months.

Then I started spending my weekends volunteering and riding at a local barn. I rode horses similar to Gwen—all speed when they should be relaxed. My old instructor would be proud of me; on these horses I mastered the skill of comfortably sitting the trot.

In order to be comfortable and balanced as I trotted, I had to work on my seat, the core of riding. I took deep breaths, letting my tensions disappear and imagined myself sinking into the saddle. When my muscles relaxed, I could feel the rhythm of the

Nonfiction

horse's gait, and with careful application of pressure, I could slow everything to a comfortable pace. I fell into a routine at the barn, slowing down horses and slowing down my anxious, hyperactive mind. I learned to be solid in my position in the saddle and only then would I be at ease.

Life, like the trot, was pretty bumpy. I had to grow accustomed to my new school and new town. But through riding I found a sense of peace and a method to help me jump life's hurdles: sit back, be solid in your foundations, and weather the storm.

How to Sit and Steer

It was the summer before my freshman year of college and I convinced myself that it was useless to form relationships with people. If you combine natural introversion with a heaping cup of crippling social anxiety and a dash of teenage angst, you have a recipe for seclusion. I had no friends at school, so I figured that hey, I didn't need them anyway. Friends are dead weight.

It was also the summer I fell in love with the sport of combined driving. I had read a book on the subject and found it interesting, but when my aunt let me steer her carriage pony around for a few minutes, the sport hooked me instantly.

Combined driving is a triathlon for carriage driving, a mix of speed and precision in three parts. One part is dressage, where the driver works within an arena, driving his horses through a pattern of movements graded on precision and grace. The second is a race against the clock with horse and carriage weaving through a series of cones as quickly as possible without knocking anything down. And the third and most anticipated phase is the marathon.

Here, the driver switches out his elegant carriage for a sturdier, rough one. During the marathon, the driver and horse tear through the woods, whirling around obstacles and through ditches in an attempt to make the ideal time. The route for marathons is complex and the turns so sharp that it features something a little different: another person.

Equestrian sports are largely individual ones. A rider (or driver) works with his horse and his horse alone; any other equestrian is just competition, not a teammate. But in the last phase of combined driving, the driver is required to have another person, called a navigator, stand in the back of the carriage. It's the navigator's job to help the driver remember where to go and to lean in through the turns to stabilize the carriage.

I became infatuated with combined driving and read as many books on the subject as I could get my hands on before I left for school. And while away at school... I found myself talking to people for the first time in my life. Perhaps people weren't burdens after all. I found myself gaining acquaintances. Then friends. Then a boyfriend. Then more friends. And then, somehow, life got more enjoyable. Living away from home and trying to work my way through challenging classes made me depend on a support system that I never had before. I had people to talk to, to depend on when just pushing through my problems wasn't enough. Right now, my life is more hectic than it has ever been, but I know I can depend on my friends.

It took me until college to realize that everyone needs navigators in their lives. When you're bolting through the woods as if you are driving a stagecoach chased by bandits, ducking from tree branches and trying to steer a hyperactive horse, it's helpful to have someone there to remind you where you're going and to help you lean through the turns when you get there.

How to Sit Nicely

Zipp was a complete asshole. Riding that squatty black horse was a dream, though. Zipp would waltz across the arena with fluid, powerful strides. With an experienced rider and the right cues, he could complete skillful, dance-like movements. But working with him on the ground was hell.

The barn where I started volunteering once I moved to Georgia specializes in therapeutic horseback riding. Special needs kids of all ages and sizes go there to take lessons; they start with therapy exercises on horseback while a volunteer leads their horse and eventually the students work their way up to riding independently. Most of them ride in the therapy stage, led on a plodding horse to work on balance and motor skills.

Zipp's job was to walk along slowly around the arena for an hour at a time while the student worked through physical therapy exercises—and it bored him to no end. After a few months of this simple job, he started to throw his head into whoever led him. And then he started to head butt them in the back. And then he started to nip at them.

It got to the point where, in leadline lessons, the program director and I were the only two people able to handle Zipp. To lead him around, he would have to wear a metal bit in his mouth; his bit had copper rollers in the middle that he could play with

his tongue to keep himself busy. I always carried a riding crop with me so whenever I spotted him, out of the corner of my eye, leaning forward to bite or shove me with his head, I could give Zipp a firm tap on the chest in self-defense.

The kids who rode Zipp by themselves loved him. He was responsive and patient with them when they asked him to turn tight circles or weave in and out of cones, but to lead him around was to ask for injury. Eventually, the program director had to get another horse to replace him and Zipp is even more bored, rarely taken out of the pasture.

In many ways, I am a Zipp. My people skills are often described as “disrespectful” and “lacking.” Social anxiety combined with a blunt personality means that I am so inept in socializing that I have been known to flee stores due to friendly shopkeepers asking me how my day is going. I cannot navigate my way through small talk and when I actually do speak, it is in short, brutally honest sentences that often shut down conversation—not a good combination for dealing with people.

Like Zipp, I feel comfortable talking to people in only a handful of situations.



It's a Girl!

Rebeka Garcia

Berry College

1.

Senior year of high school, we have a big assembly right before prom. Last year, it was about drunk driving. They brought in a wrecked car, left it in the courtyard all day. You could see the deep dent in the hood, where it had “wrapped itself around a tree.” Those brave enough to venture closer swore they could see blood stains on the inside. I didn’t drink then, and I didn’t drive either, so I didn’t care.

I didn’t expect to care much this year, either. We file into the auditorium, and they play the PSA, complete with the ominous soundtrack and stilted dialogue. I don’t pay attention. After, school officials come on stage to drive the point home. “Date rape,” reads the title of their Power Point, followed by a bulleted list of steps girls should take so as to avoid such a fate:

-Make sure you're dressed like a good girl! We all know what happens to a girl in short skirts.

-Make sure no one drugs your drink! But wait, why were you drinking in the first place? Sounds like something a bad kid would do.

-And after you get date raped (because even if you follow all our rules, it's unavoidable) make sure you're careful about what you do next. Are you sure it was a rape? Come on, he knew you wanted it. And think about your parents. Do you really want to see the shame on their faces? And think about all the medical bills! Think of all the unnecessary trouble you'll have to go through, if you tell.

We've all heard this a million times by the twelfth grade, and even though this should matter to me, it doesn't yet. I'm bored. I'd almost rather be in Algebra. Then they address the boys for a second:

-You probably shouldn't rape, because there's a tiny chance you might get caught, and if you do, there's an even smaller chance you'll be in huge trouble. So try your very best to at least consider not sexually assaulting people! But now lets go back to talking about how short your skirt can be before it enters "asking for it" territory.

Even back then, this strikes me as pretty messed up. I don’t know why yet, can’t quite work out what it is that sounds so wrong. I don’t know what the word is for this heat that bubbles in my stomach for days, don’t know what to call the way my skin crawls at the memory.

2.

“I could never date a feminist,” a boyfriend tells me. “I just want a girl who shaves her legs, is that really so much to ask?”

I’m young and eager to please. “God, I know, so gross. I don’t get it at all. I could never be a feminist.”

Even then, the words taste dishonest in my mouth, but for a long time I can convince myself that I’m not a feminist. That I don’t have to be. That all these injustices and inequalities that I can’t stop seeing everywhere are all fine. Not a big deal.

And then I stop being afraid of the word “feminism.” I read up on the subject over the summer. Ten minutes into the first day of my Women’s Studies class, I know I will change my minor to Women’s Studies as soon as possible. I can’t wait to tell everyone about it.

“Oh, so you hate men now?” a friend asks over lunch, when I excitedly share my decision. He’s dead serious.

“Why? What are you going to do with that?” my mom asks, sounding almost upset. I explain. She replies, “I guess I just don’t really see the point of that.”

I stop talking about it.

But I can’t stop thinking about it.

3.

When I’m twelve, my mom is pregnant with my youngest sibling. My parents already have two girls, and my dad gushes often about how he hopes for another daughter. Three baby princesses for him to dote upon? It’s more than he’d ever hoped for.

In public, friends and family grope my mother’s swollen belly and say, “I bet the daddy’s hoping he’ll finally get his son, huh?”

It’s another daughter.

People wonder who will carry on our family name, after all three of us girls are married and have been given away to another man.

4.

I’m browsing the internet to avoid doing homework one night. It’s just the usual mix of weird, possibly funny internet things, then a headline catches my eye.

Virginia Senator Calls Pregnant Women “Hosts”

“Some might refer to them as mothers,” he goes on to say. I don’t read more. I don’t need to. I’ve never been more aware of how little power and control I have over my own body.

I didn't know one word could invite such a deep, cold fear.

5.

After I go to college, my sister gets my old room. She's thirteen at the time. She tells my mom she wants to give her new room a space theme. Dark blue bedding, with silvery trimmings. Glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. A mobile of the solar system hanging by the desk.

"That's for boys," my mom says.

My sister gets a pink, shoe-themed room.

6.

three dead girls
three dead girls
see how they hang
see how they hang
they all ran toward the brightest light
and it cut off their heads with the sharpest lies
have you ever seen such thin bones in your life
as three dead girls
three dead girls

7.

Once upon a time, a very poor woodcutter lived in a tiny hut in the woods. One day, his daughter gave birth to a little baby girl they called Gretel.

Maybe the woodcutter said, "There is not enough food in the house for her."

Maybe the woodcutter's wife said, "This will bring shame to us all."

Maybe the woodcutter's daughter said, "I never wanted this."

So they took Gretel out of the woods, to where the trees turned to asphalt. They left Gretel wrapped in rags at the side of the highway. They did not mark the trail with crumbs as they walked back home, for they did not want to remember.

Hours passed, and ants walked trails over the gingerbread girl's body, picking chocolate and sugar and icing off of her brand new skin. Finally, a witch flying by on her broom spotted Gretel, and took the baby home.

And she lived.

8.

I'm no fun anymore.

I don't laugh at offensive jokes like I used to. Sometimes, I'll even call you out on it. I know people will like me less if I do that, but I'll like me less if I don't.

I cringe at problematic media. Sometimes I won't even watch it.

"Rebeka, you're no fun anymore."

Thank God.

I'm angry all the time, or at the very least, vaguely pissed off.

"No one likes an angry girl."

I care *so much* about everything.

I'm angry all the time.

I've never been happier.

I realize I don't have to laugh at shitty jokes, don't have to play along to be "cool." I learn that the unfriend feature is free, and it works in real life, too. I don't have to hang out with people whose casual commentary makes my skin crawl. I don't even have to be polite to them, if I don't want to.

"Chill, it's just a joke. No need to be such a bitch about it."

But it's never just a joke, and I can't just chill anymore.

I've never been happier.

9.

"You look so pretty!" I tell my youngest sister. She's dressed in her Sunday best.

"No," she says pouting at her belly. "I'm fat."
She's three years old.

10.

Him

Oh, so you hate men now?

Her

No (beat) I just love girls.



Somehow, This Was Significant

Emma Jones
Young Harris College

I. That Time We Were Both Christians

Every few months, Kyle and I meet for coffee and talk about Jesus.

He previously decided to take a gap year after graduation to do missionary work. I can't remember where he is stationed at the time (although I imagine he's told me before), but I do know that the work keeps him out of our Georgia hometown. He stays maybe an hour or two southwards from Ellijay with a group of likeminded peers, bunked within an institution where the Bible Belt is looped too tightly through the khakis of beer bellied preachers.

He says he loves it, though, and feels like he's really helping people. He's passionate about religion the same way he is about music. When he tells me his stories, he is a threshold of breathless exuberance, his belief in God solidified a thousand times over, and his elation makes me smile toothily from my side of the McDonald's booth, my seven-teen-year-old self unaware that, when I try to put this moment on paper three years later, I will forget most of what he said.

What I do remember is that he recommended a book by C.S. Lewis, who, along with writing *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Kyle tells me is a Christian author. This is news to me, so we chatter about that for a blur of time before we both climb into my 2012 *Barcelona Red* Toyota Corolla, leaving his junky Ford in the McDonald's parking lot, and head to my house under the pretense of watching a movie.

Instead, he comes down my throat.

I tell you this only because he mentions earlier, before C.S. Lewis even enters the picture, that he wants to lead a Good Christian Life.

"I spent a lot of time partying in high school." He looks me in the eye as he speaks, which is strange for someone who has a habit of looking anywhere but. "Then I started thinking, y'know, this is not the person I want to be. I love those guys—they're my best friends—but for me to go to church on Sunday with a hangover is kind of..."

"Hypocritical?" I offer, happy to help him see the error of his ways.

"Well, yeah. I guess so."

II. A Slightly Belated Introduction

Kyle and I have lived in the same town and have attended the same school since the second grade, when we sat two desks down from each other in Mrs. Holme's classroom, but we don't bother talking until high school is officially over. Graduation propels us into a foreign part of our lives, the end of which is suddenly indecipherable, and it's easy to latch onto something familiar but not, to tread new territory with recognizable strangers.

Over our first summer as high school graduates, I discover that I enjoy his company; not just because I like the way his stubble feels when we kiss in the backseat of my car, but because of a genuine communicative connection. For a pair of people with ties to two vastly different social circles, we get along well, and the candid ways in which we both express ourselves compliment one another.

"I'm not looking for a serious relationship."

This is established when the backs of my knees are pressed into the bumper of my car, Kyle's hands on my hips. It's a warm night and I can see the flush of his lips under street lamp as he talks.

"I just want that to be clear," he says. "So if you're expecting something else..."

I roll my eyes and giggle. "I'm going to college," I remind him, knowing now that he plans to take a gap year for his missionary work. "And I don't do long distance."

III. Money Matters

I think we're on Talona Mountain.

I say this because the mountain is our "normal spot", located two or three miles down Highway 515 from the Walmart Supercenter. Talona Mountain Road, lying to the right of an apple house, is a curving snake that slithers upwards, coiling around the ragged hills several times before spitting my car onto the summit. A wooden crucifix with metal plating decorates the peak, the words *Christ Is Risen* engraved on the marble plaque beneath it.

The cross apparently used to light up at night, which would explain why it's situated next to an electrical conductor and covered in a string of lights, but it never once illuminates when Kyle and I are there. It sits stoically on top of the mountain, watching the street lamps in the Walmart parking lot below, overshadowed by the shine of the modern world.

With the loss of a guiding light, Talona has since become a popular place for late night canoodling. I

used to hear rumors in my Bible Study classes at the Methodist Church—which I attended with friends although my family is Baptist—about couples losing their virginity on Talona. As a middle schooler, this news is delightfully scandalous; as a high school graduate, the mountain, although I'd never been before Kyle asked to go, feels familiar. Talona is the essence of teenage debauchery, a holy shrine for adolescent rebellion, and the mountain's crucifix makes immorality that much more thrilling.

When the car is parked, Kyle and I usually spend anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of hours talking. Since our meetings are scattered, we usually have some catching up to do before we're comfortable with each other again. I talk about school, usually. I'm always in the middle of an existential crisis about what my major should be, complaining about my lack of interest in most of the courses, or admitting that I don't have as many friends there as I would maybe like to.

Kyle listens, responds, tells me not to worry. He's either in his freshman year of college or he's just enrolled, but he tells me that he's pursuing a business major despite his interest in music.

"There's not much to do with a degree like that," he says after I ask about it, staring out the front windshield. I notice he doesn't look at me as often when he talks about his own inhibitions. "Like, if I can somehow be successful in music—great, I'll take it! But I need *money*."

His parents both work and he's just been accepted into a private university, so I know he is by no means impoverished, but there are times when I'm around him that I realize how privileged I must be.

"I think I'm going to be a teacher," I say with a shrug. This is during a brief phase in which I decide that it's better to help others achieve their goals instead of trying to achieve my own; next semester, I will have already decided that educating young minds is not in the cards for me. Right now, I tell Kyle that, for the first time, I'm comfortable with my major.

"A teacher, huh?" He takes a moment to stomach it, and then something strikes him. "I thought you wanted to write." His brow is furrowed, as if he's trying to remember whether or not I ever said such a thing. I swallow uncomfortably, my gaze flickering to look at my hands, fingers pressed into the fabric of my blue jeans.

"Well," I hedge. I meet his gaze. A wry smile tugs at the corners of my mouth, which I hide by turning to stare out the front windshield. "I need money."

IV. Mood Swings

It is January or February and it's below freezing, but Kyle and I are walking the roundabout that coils around Talona Mountain's cross. We've decided to brave the cold because, after coyly kissing him when he asked to use the Chapstick I'd just applied, I decided that I was more in the mood to tease than I was in *The Mood*.

I don't remember what we were talking about, but I want to say that I was smiling too wide. I assume he'd cracked a joke and I grinned so big that my lips would have split had it not been for the shared peppermint lip balm. I want to say that I said something witty in response, then added a flustered, "Just kidding," in a breathless whisper so that, if it was somehow ill-meaning, he'd know I hadn't intended it to be.

We are on the right side of the cross, the light from street lamps and the Walmart below us illuminating our path. Surrounding the roundabout are thick clusters of trees, packed like matches in a box. The shadow of night bleeds into the emptiness between trunks, so even if there are spaces in the forestry, we can't see past the first row of trees. After the first, there is only muffled darkness.

My nose is numb, but I don't complain about that. I complain about the fact that it's dark and my fingers are cold and that I'm wearing TOMs instead of a more sensible shoe. I can feel him rolling his eyes, can taste the smile beneath his beard, but other than knocking shoulders with him when we step too close, I'm not keyed into the movements of his body, of his face. I step on a rock and stumble, arm shooting out to hook my fingers in the sleeve of his coat.

"You alright?" he asks, and I am still not in *The Mood*, but around his eyes are crow's feet and that is beautiful to me.

"Fine," I say, then let him go.

We take a couple of steps in a staggered rhythm, together but unsynchronized, as if we are in school again, trying to find footing in different groups of people. I am quiet, waiting for Kyle to talk, and Kyle is quiet, maybe searching for something to say. With the same hand I'd grabbed his sleeve with, I reach up to tuck a strand of hair behind my left ear. I take another step, and then freeze for a single, suspended second when something rustles in the trees.

Certainly, there are other moments in my lifetime that I've done something I am not proud of. Consider me at fourteen, for instance: before the first day of my sophomore year in high school, I'd

snuck a boy from the woods into my home after midnight. Our basement triples as a guest room and a third entrance to our house, with two doors leading onto a stone patio near the tool shed in our backyard, and I had left the basement doors unlocked so that he could come inside.

I did not love this boy. That's why, when we were in bed and he slid my panties down my thighs, I told him to stop. He said, "Seriously?" and I said, "Yes," and I got lucky because he let me cover myself and told me it was okay, but I almost lost my virginity to a boy because I knew it would piss off my best friend.

This time, when I fear that something is in the forestry, I freeze for only a breath. With the next, I have wrestled both hands out of my coat pockets and have curled my fingers around Kyle's arm so I can pull him across me, forcing him between myself and the woods. He staggers but stays put, my fingers digging into his arm, and once we both realize that we aren't in danger, he shoots me an incredulous look over his shoulder.

"Oh my God—" I utter, at a complete loss.

"Wow," he says, snorting. "Guess I'm going first."

"I am so sorry," I apologize, somehow managing to sound *confused*. My nose is still cold, but my cheeks are hot enough that my palms warm when I let go of Kyle and press them to my face. My gaze darts to the ground in shame. I *insist* that I can't believe I just did that.

"No, no," Kyle says, and he's laughing, now. I'm still not sure whether or not it was at my expense or at his own. "I just—wow. *Thanks!*"

"Well," I say, nudging his shoulder in an attempt to ease my own humiliation. "Now you know what kind of person I am."

"Now I know!" he crows.

By the time we get back to my car, I'm in the mood to disappear.

V. Yes, He Paid for My Quesadilla

After our high school graduation, I spent the first week of the summer under the assumption that Kyle wanted to have sex with me. When he shoots me a text asking me to dinner, I am *certain* he that he wants to have sex with me, and almost certain that I want the same thing.

I say *almost* because I have managed to hold onto my virginity through high school. This is no amazing feat; this is because I am thus far incapable of maintaining steady relationships with friends, let alone a boyfriend. It is because I'm uncomfortable

with the idea of someone seeing my imperfect body, the stretch marks on my hips, the stomach that protrudes slightly too much for my own liking.

We meet at Mucho's, which is a popular Mexican restaurant in my hometown. It's tucked into an outlet next to the town's movie theater, and only about fifty feet away from a competing Mexican restaurant called El Ray's. Mucho's is dimly lit, with red-orange walls and booths with high backs, crowded into only four different sections. Attached to the restaurant is a bar that I've never been inside of, though I have heard the Spanish music bleeding through the walls.

Kyle and I are seated on the right side of the first section, settled across from each other at the booth. He's cleanly shaved and wearing a blue plaid shirt and dark jeans. Later the same night, when the backs of my knees are pressed into the bumper of my car, I tell him that I like it when he has at least a little bit of stubble. Every time we see each other afterwards, he has a strawberry blonde beard.

I haven't talked to him one-on-one before—at least, not like this. I'm used to there being other people around, ready to jump in if the conversation wanes, but Kyle and I are alone in a booth in a Mexican restaurant, and I order a cheese quesadilla because I don't want to eat too much in front of him.

I'm surprised by the easy flow of the conversation. We talk about school, about music, about our friends and our aspirations. He talks about his church while I twist the cross of my necklace between my fingers, hanging onto every word he says. Somehow, the conversation turns to me; he asks what I want to do.

I shrug.

"Aw, c'mon," he says. "What do you like to do?"

"I mean—I don't know. I like to write," I say, realizing at that moment that I am much more eloquent on paper.

His eyebrows raise interestedly. "Oh, yeah? What do you write?"

I laugh nervously, tearing pieces off of the quesadilla on the plate in front of me. I can't remember if there is a time before this when someone my age didn't brush my passions off as *hobbies*, or even simply brush them off.

"Everything," I say, tilting my head to look at him. "My friend and I have been writing plays recently, but I like to write stories and stuff, too."

"That's cool," he says. This is probably the first time someone has uttered the phrase and has managed to look entirely genuine, but I still find myself wanting to ask if it's stupid—if wanting to

write is farfetched or pointless, if he's going to ask what I'll do for a "real job" in the future.

He doesn't ask any of these things. Instead, he asks about pieces that I've written so far, exchanges ideas, talks to me about the plays I've worked on with my friend. I don't remember his exact words and, as I jot this down on paper, I understand that the exactness of the words doesn't matter, as long as I know they were said.

VI. That Weird Fate Thing

One night, when we're sitting on the tanned leather couch in the garage behind my house, I tell Kyle that I remember him having a crush on me in second grade.

The garage has been recently built and smells like the wood it's made out of. Above the actual garage is a loft that is essentially my father's Man Cave, equipped with a high definition television, a drum set and keyboard, speakers, and a pool table. A couch, an armchair, and two beanbags have been placed before the television to accommodate large groups. In high school, my friends and I would have horror movie nights there often.

Kyle looks up from my kneecaps, which he's been drumming on. My legs are swung over his lap and I'm stretched out across the expanse of the love seat, propped on the armrest. I smile at the confused look he gives me, complete with a furrowed brow and a cocked head.

"I did?" he asks, and I nod.

"Yeah," I say, sitting up to be closer to him. "We used to sit next to each other in Mrs. Holme's class, and one time you told me that you liked me." I grin at the memory of Kyle, chubby and blonde, in a navy teeshirt, slumped over his desk. He's lost weight, now, and gained muscles in his arms and legs, but his eyes are the same color green and hold the same openness. Some people wear their hearts on their sleeve; Kyle wears his in his eyes.

"I don't know what was going on with me at the time," I continue, lowering my gaze to my lap in thought, laughing quietly between words. "I was probably 'dating' the boy that sat across from us—I used to wrap crayons in paper towels and give them to him as gifts—but I told you that I was sorry, and that I didn't like you back." I roll my eyes at myself, teeth still showing. "And then I told you that, maybe, in the future I would return the feelings."

Kyle laughs, squinting. "Are you serious?" he asks. "I don't remember this."

"I'm serious!" I insist. "And I remember what

you said, too."

I pause, studying his face. He's looking at me the same way he did in second grade, curious and hopeful and interested. I elongate the pause by leaning forward and kissing him once, softly on the lips, smiling into the stubble on his face before drawing back to finish the story.

"You asked if—you said, 'So there's still a chance?'" I say, biting down on my lower lip for a moment. I release it. "And I said, 'Yes, there's still a chance.'"

Kyle stares at me for a minute, then lets out a breath, turning to look at the television.

I remember wanting to point out the strangeness of the situation, how it was a cheesy lover's story, the kind shared with future grandchildren, but then I worried that saying that would be incriminating. I worried that I would ruin something perfectly casual by making it sound like it had more meaning than what it did, so I stay quiet and let Kyle breathe out a soft, "Wow, that's crazy," into the silence.

VII. This is Actually a Teen Comedy

"The backseat of this car is tiny," Kyle complains, face only partially illuminated by the lights shining through the window of my *Barcelona Red* Toyota. I'm on his lap, his thighs bracketed by my knees, trying to kiss him and avoid slamming my head against the roof of my car at the same time.

"This is a Sport," I say, referring to the model of the car. "My other one—the gray one—was bigger in the back because it was an LE." I duck down to kiss his neck, aching to dig my teeth into the skin there but forcing myself not to because he's spending the day with his mother and brother tomorrow. "But since it's totaled..." I trail off, breathless because he keeps rucking his hips up and I can feel him through his jeans.

At this point, I don't have much experience with intimacy. This is only the third or fourth time that Kyle and I have met up, and it's difficult for us to go much further than kissing without me putting a stop to it. I think it had something to do with the lingering guilt from almost losing my virginity before I even turned fifteen, but I don't mention this. When Kyle asks if I've ever given someone a hand job, I end up mentioning another boy I dated a couple of years ago, who basically forced my hand down his pants.

"That's shitty," Kyle says, and meets my gaze. "Listen, if you don't want to..."

"I mean—that's not—I *want* to," I say, because

Nonfiction

I actually think I do. I like the idea of temporary bliss and the idea that it happened because of me. “I’m just—nervous, I guess. I’d be nervous. But I want to try.”

As if to prove my point, I swing my leg over his lap so that I’m sitting next to him. My heart is thundering in my ears. “Just—y’know, just talk me through it.”

“Talk you through it,” Kyle repeats, a ghost of a laugh parting his lips.

I nod and when he realizes I’m serious, he undoes his belt. He reassures me that I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to and I say I want to but then I’m too nervous to even look when he pulls it out of the slit in his boxers.

“Is it hot in here to you?” I ask. “It feels hot in here.”

“I mean—” he says, somehow managing to keep annoyance from his tone. “I’m fine.”

“Should we roll down a window?”

Kyle starts laughing. “Uh—I mean, if you *want*.”

Taking the out, I throw myself over the console and grab the keys from the cup holder, fumbling with them until I manage to push the proper key into the ignition and turn it. The car’s dash lights up, and then I reach over and crack the windows from the main controls on the driver’s side. I hesitate before pulling the key out, replacing it in the cup holder.

“Okay,” I say, returning to my place on Kyle’s right side. “Okay.”

“Are you doing alright?”

“Yes,” I insist. “I just—you know. Need to mentally prepare myself.”

I then proceed to narrate my movements, which prompts Kyle to tell me that he is anything but hard. “Well—sorry,” I reply, completely flustered, and he laughs again and gently wraps his fingers around my wrist and squeezes, reassuring.

“How are you not mad?” I ask, probably more upset with myself.

“You know,” he says, laughing again. “I feel like a lot of guys *would* be mad, but it’s just—like, it’s not like you’re not *trying*.” I hide my face in Kyle’s shoulder. “I just—I don’t know, it’s *funny*.”

“It’s not funny,” I mutter into his shirt.

“It is. It’s just so ridiculous that—I mean, you’re so bad at it!”

He laughs and I want to crawl underneath my car and have him run over me a few times.

“I mean, you’re trying to—” he seems unable to control his chuckles by this point. “Yeah, some guys would be mad, but—but you know what?” he says,

and he’s quiet until I finally pull myself up and look him in the eye, not sure if I want to know what. He grins, though, like he knows there’s something to be proud of, and I might—might—fall a little bit in love with him when he says:

“I think you should write about this.”



Me vs. Flowers

Alison Missler
Young Harris College

1.

It is Thursday and I have 39 unread messages. Not that I don't like the thought of people wanting to get in touch with me, I'm fairly self-absorbed. I sit in class, watching messages slide down my iPhone as I chime into the discussion about Victorian women and how fucked up their social standings are. The thought of prostitution being the most progressive way to control your life is slightly a buzz kill. Really, the thought of any man I didn't want touching me is disgusting, sometimes the thought of even me touching me is disgusting. And then, somehow, my mind links prostitution to the first guy who touched me, he was the typical eleventh grade guy or at least that is what I chalk up his pig-like attributes to. The type of guy who made it publicly known I had no idea shaving was a thing. I can't blame ninth grade me; it was the first time anyone slide their hands past my navel.

I can still remember—laying in the dark—his breathing being the only noise I could focus on. Focus, he didn't seem to have a hard time focusing on his hands minus my lack of landscape (despite the uproar he clamored to his friends). Silly boy, I guess oppression is still a thing, just in different forms. My memory ends and I'm brought back into the conversation of Victorian woman. In the background, to the left of my phone, sits Abby. Her short hair is gelled with something she must have bought from the beauty section of Ingles. She is wearing black suspenders and a thin white shirt, somehow pulling off the whole "mannish brute" idea that Roskin condemned women of his time for. I wonder if it's for a cause—the whole short hair thing. I get causes, they're easy to get behind—I mean ask Florence Nightingale, master at being behind a cause. I felt like I was behind causes, especially since I'm doing such a great job talking about how fucked up the whole Victorian women shit is. Women shit. But I'm sitting in class, calling bullshit on the same idea I am part of, I'm more focused on the messages coming from my so called sisters and some guy's hand down my pants. All the while, to my left sits the bicycle riding, cigarette smoking girl I aspire (or want to think I aspire) to be. 40 messages. This one was real important,

something about wanting to make two batches of crazy daisy (my sorority's signature drink). *And like all we need are 2 things of Berry Rush Punch.* The more I think about being in a sorority, the more I think it's deflowering. *Also I think we need to have a meeting about T-shirts.* Rather than taking my virginity, sisterhood is sliding it's hand down and stealing my independence. *Don't forget to dress up nice for little big reveal.* Ironic, since we consider ourselves to be an independent sisterhood and we are all so consumed by what other's think. I watch Abby, her short hair ahead of me walking to a silent beat as my phone vibrated in my pocket.

2.

When I was little, I wanted to be a flower. I remember looking at my Dad's garden and finding something especially romantic about the sunflowers. They stood, beautiful from afar, but when you got up close their stems were hairy and small black bugs made highways headed to leaves. I remember getting back from eating dinner at Ryan's. It was some middle class buffet restaurant with warm rolls and honey butter. My parents were still together then. We pulled into our gravel drive way. It was always rutted out in the middle, like a small river should be barricading our house from the outside. It didn't matter how much gravel my parents would put in the small gorge, it washed away.

"I wanna be a flower."

"You know what that means Alison?"

"It means I would be a flower."

"It means you would sleep outside, forever." My dad answered the small question Mom had posed me. His voice was something like caramel. He opened up the car door, "Okay, you'll be a flower." I'm not sure I realized what being a flower really meant, childlike innocence. I just thought being outside all the time meant I wouldn't be inside. Inside to listen to my parents argue and throw bulky white phones at each other. The same bulky white phone I would use to call my Dad a few years later when he moved out for a couple of months. They always seemed to lose charge too fast and die before the conversation was really over. Which was quite amazing if you could have seen how big the battery was on them. Charge didn't matter if I was to be a flower, I would use photosynthesis. My Dad pulled out a Marlboro red and my mom shook her head, she didn't smoke.

He stepped out and let me out from the back, the white door creaked open from where an

accident months earlier had left a dent. I stepped out, my jelly shoes sparking in the moonlight, made of cheap plastic. I followed my parents, holding hands except when they had to open the gate which separated outside from our yard. This is the only time I can say I saw my parents' affection towards each other. Maybe that is why I wanted to be a flower so bad, it gave them romance. Like I was some precious petal they had created and it took them replanting me to find their relationship roots. Thinking back, I want to share this moment with my sister, Emiley. I can't remember where she was for this, she seems to infiltrate most of my memories, but not this one. She must have been at a friend's house, probably playing with her build-a-bears and listening to Nsync. Talking about how Ms. Wood was the best 3rd grade teacher and how she was planning on buying a wooden pen at the school store on Monday. I like it though too, that this memory is mine and I'm not competing for my parents' attention in it.

Dad grabbed a shovel from the shed. The same shed he went to when he and Mom disagreed about going to church on Sundays. The same shed I remember finding my first Budweiser can outside of. It smelled of old stale wheat; the odor came so easily out of the open top and the scrunched bottom. My dad broke soil and a small Calvary hill started to form. I think back now, about how many homes I must have uprooted in my want to be planted. All the family of ants—who'd worked for years to create tunnels—ruined. All the worms who had finally broke soil were greeted by a metal hand. Maybe they had worked for years, trying to create a permanent home for their family. Maybe they had spent countless nights clipping coupons, working late shifts, sowing Halloween costumes, just so their families could have their new-soil home. Hopefully they had insurance, or some form of fall back, at least social security because my dad didn't stop digging for them (or their families). Not until the hole was deep enough for me to look into and feel like I could fall. The moon must have been full, there was too much magic for it not to be. Plus, I remember there being a lot of light, despite all the underlying the darkness. I looked down, and I looked up. And then I wrinkled my toes up in my shoes and pictured myself as a sunflower; the small bugs making highways from my hands to my chest.

3.

Mindy was at waffle house when I got my bid to join Alpha Iota. I know exactly where she was at because we had been texting the whole night. She was nervous about the whole idea of joining a sorority and decided that some hash browns would settle her stomach. I had declined the offer to go with her, and I'm not sure why, but looking back I'm glad. I was sitting on my made bed—the comforter perfectly folded, the Tommy Hilfiger flag under my left calf. I was overly giddy when I had gotten that comforter, it was so pink and flowery and everything I would never described myself as in pattern form. But for some reason, I had wanted it to be my college comforter—the center piece of my room. It was on that comforter, watching Ratitou eating whales, when I heard a knock on my dorm door.

Since I shared the room with 7 other girls, I assumed it was for one of them. I hardly ever got visitors minus Mindy, and I knew where she was—waffle house. So I stayed planted on my comforter, thinking about the different sororities I was interested in. My door pushed open, and 10 faces I'd seen hours earlier entered. Then, a girl with ribbons of dark, loose curls spoke to me.

"The sisterhood of Alpha Iota formally extends this bid to you," she said it rehearsed but nervously, which made it seem genuine. I think somewhere between extends and bid I must have gotten off my bed, because I remember holding this envelope. It had my name on it, in black ink letters that looked as if someone had taken time on them. I thought this must be what wedding invitations look like. The faces looked at me, twenty eyes eager to absorb my reaction. I'm not sure what my reaction was but I guess I must have opened what they'd handed me, that seems logical. The letter was simple, tasteful. It had a small print of three flowers that looked drawn. Ironically, that would be the same number of girls that would finish pledging with me. The flowers were raised and I rubbed my fingers over them multiple times before I flipped open the card. It was simple, like the envelope. *Meet at the Gazebo at Mayor's Park at 12:03 if you accept.*

It was chilly out, and about three days before October. I walked, wearing tennis shoes and a faded pink hoodie, to the gazebo. All the flower beds had been changed to mums and the wind seemed to be seeping through my hand holes. I was nervous about getting there too early or worse—late. It was like the first day of high school, when

you're not sure when to arrive. For some reason I think we are programmed to be worried about this timing, like it really makes a difference. I'm not sure if I got there at 12:02 or 12:03, but when I made it to the gazebo, Mindy was sitting there already. She finger laced with 4 other girls, none of which I knew at the time. I sat down, squeezing between Mindy and a girl whose name was Hope (she would depledge a week before we were set to finish) and twined their fingers into mine. I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but it was what needed to happen in order for me to become a "daisy."

4.

Daisy Gould sat outside on the stairs. They were big and made of wooden beams—the same one's that held up the Old Lodge where all the kids were dancing. It was on these steps, a week earlier, where a copper head was almost stepped on. Luckily, that wasn't the case and the snake was relocated. At least that is what we told the campers, I'm pretty sure Kyle (the property keeper with a fantastic ginger handlebar mustache) smashed the thing with a shovel. I walked outside of the lodge party, something campers always looked forward to. It was amazing how an old building could turn into the ultimate club with a few speakers and a playlist put together hours before on Spotify. I had sweated through Rebecca's maroon dress and needed some fresh air when I saw Daisy. Her hair was dark and cut to her shoulders. I walked up and sat down, I didn't know her well, but it was under my job description to make sure she was okay and supervised. Daisy lifted her head and turned towards me, she wiped her nose on her blue hoodie sleeve.

"Too hot in there?" I asked, hoping the conversation would be quick so I could continue my sweat session. She grabbed her hands and looked down at her white converse, which seemed to be more brown than normal.

"It's just too everything in there—I just want to sit outside"

"Then we can sit outside."

So we sat outside, and Daisy told me about why she had found a home outside, on the steps. A week before I was sweating through Rebecca's dress, she had been diagnosed with Lyme disease. Daisy had come to camp in hopes to find out that she had enough strength to do this 211 mile planned hike. She didn't find this out; she had found out that she hardly had enough strength to

walk up the same stairs she was now sitting on and spent most of her energy on trying to stay positive. I guess I had caught her in one of those not trying to stay positive moods which is reasonable since she was and is human. I remember trying to say something, anything to help the situation. I talked to her about the new school she was transferring to in August, and her favorite classes at camp, and somehow the *universe is unfolding as it should*. It didn't help though, she kept crying and I kept doubting myself.

"I was supposed to hike the John Muir trail—I was supposed to be outside forever."

I looked down at my wrist and slipped off my bracelet, a gift from a guy I knew I would never marry. He'd seen me eying the bracelet in a shop in downtown Athens. It was a nice gift, but it didn't matter that he had given it to me. The daisy pressed against a green background clicked off and I handed it to her.

"I wanted to be a flower once too."



Being Robby: My Life/My Death

Robby Nadler
University of Georgia

*Hi Robby,
Hope this email finds you well— and brilliant
and lovely as usual. I was actually hoping we might
have the opportunity to work together on a feature for
Haaretz. I'm planning a project having to do with
names— specifically this weird trend we're noticing
with millennials who are changing/combining/inventing
(usually last) names for themselves in new and
different ways.*

*Wondering if you had any thoughts on the topic, and
if you might like to chime in. Your thoughts?*

Jillian

*(We would of course be able to pay you— the exact
payment TBD based on the type of story.)*

★

I tell everyone to call me Robby despite the fact that it's not my real name. I'm not one of those my-real-name-is-Robert-or-Bob people. Robby bears no resemblance to my real name. The two aren't even part of the same language. A lot of people feel tricked by me when they learn this. I understand that feeling. Being Robby is probably the biggest lie I embody.

But I don't tell people my real name for the same reason that I don't tell people my birthday; instead, I tell them excuses, such as it's near-impossible to pronounce correctly in English... well, that's actually true. The "r" sound in Hebrew doesn't exist in the English language, and most people incorrectly use a French "r" to say it. But even the "r" aside, the rest of the name is not pronounced as it appears to be spelled in English. I tell people it's easier to call me Robby, which it is, and that's what they do.

But a good amount of people will ask me to pronounce it anyways as if I were performing a trick for them. *Roll over Robby! Now say your real name! Good boy!* Maybe there's something exotic about foreign names that I don't process. Maybe people want to hear my accent. I usually oblige them with this request but only after failing to change the topic of conversation. And I know they mean no harm in asking because that's what you do with people: you

ask about their names, their *real names*. But to me there is harm in this simple request.

The truth: I'm twenty-seven, but I've only spent half my life as this Robby figure. The other half is but a ghost whose name when spoken aloud conjures a past I have buried many times in shallow graves lit by a dull night.

★

My other life, my life before Robby, began and ended with the lie of the Orthodox Jew. But to understand this, you first have to go backwards....

The lying predates me: it begins with my mother. It's something I'm convinced I inherited or was at least taught by her before it became a defense mechanism. Some of these lies were inconsequential in that their purpose was only to please ourselves: she was the one who liked to postulate that we're relatives of Bob Dylan. True: her maiden name and his original surname are identical. True: they both have family from Poland. That aside, there's nothing else to anticipate my invitation to his family reunion; that never stopped her from telling us when we were young that we couldn't deny the possibility, the magic. After enough desperation, magic is easy to believe. But a great deal of these lies, though seemingly trivial, had destructive totalities.

Many people don't realize that the Ten Commandments are but the *first* ten of *six-hundred thirteen* commandments. Six-hundred thirteen laws that not only condemn murder and adultery but also forbid eating shellfish and shaving your sideburns below the ridge of your cheek bone. Adherence to these laws is what differentiates the various religiosities of Judaism. To be Orthodox means to ascribe to every commandment to the fullest extent. A rung down the religious ladder is a step to Conservative Judaism, which is defined not by the strict compulsion to practice all six-hundred thirteen but a desire to fulfill as many as you can. Then there's reformed Judaism— the Unitarianism of Judaism if you will— that believes following the commandments is not essential to being Jewish: Judaism is about a person, a history, and god as you define it.

In this light, Orthodox Judaism is the hardest version of Judaism to follow because those hundreds of rules were written in a word pre-automobile, pre-penicillin, pre-indoor-plumbing. But in the way that attending an elite university proffers respect in that surmounted difficulty often is esteemed, in the Jewish world, there too is currency in bearing the

unease of an Orthodox life. And this is because for certain populations of Jews simply being Jewish isn't enough.

Take for instance the way I believe I'm half-Israeli. Though it's true I'm only half-American based upon my parents' origins, Israeli is not technically the other half. It's Polish. My mother was born in Poland in a town she told me the forgettable name of once and only because it was required for a financial aid document for college. She never talked about Poland outside of the context of the Holocaust— though she talked continuously about that. Being able to correlate your family to one of the most horrific attempts to wipe out the Jewish people is but one of many badges of pride a Jewish person can sew onto his/her identity. At age five I began to experience nightmares of Nazis coming to abduct me as a result of what some might argue was a much too early exposure to the gruesomeness of the Holocaust.

However, it's not as if this lie of geographic identity is unprecedented. Shortly after Israel's independence, my mother's family relocated there. For all intents and purposes, Israel is her true home; I do hold an Israeli passport. But the decision to tell people she's Israeli— a decision that negates centuries of her family's history as Polish citizenry— is a political one. While the argument can be made that many Jews rejected their European identities post-Holocaust in reaction to the ease in which their countries turned over Jews to the death camps, there is also the compelling marker that to be an Israeli Jew is the of the highest order. This is similar in America to those select people who can trace their lineages back to Plymouth Rock.

The problem with presenting myself as both Orthodox and Israeli was that it too was steeped in lie. In an act of pure hypocrisy, despite the Conservative lifestyle we maintained at home, my siblings and I were instructed to portray the illusion of being Orthodox publicly and to collude in the complicit shaming of the non-Orthodox around us. You see, names— not just your own name but the names of the entities you categorize your world by— are always matters of importance. We were embedded in a religious community and risked social out-casting if its members knew otherwise. To an outsider, this might not mean much, but to be a Jew exposed is a matter of social excommunication. And in a community where you were expected to have your whole life, from who were your friends to which restaurants you could eat at, determined by the community, an exile was no less than a loss of

the entire world as you knew it.

With such deceit in the name of face-saving for a bunch of religious rules I had no choice but to accept, it came naturally that I didn't tell my parents I was gay for years. I was seven when I first recognized my feelings. I was at a Jewish summer camp, and the male head counselor was a man named Matt Saile. It wasn't sexual, but I dreamed about him. How my entire family would be killed in a car crash except for me. How he would then adopt me, and I would live with him in his apartment. I was too young to know how sex worked, so it didn't occur to me that two men could do more than cohabit. All I knew is that I wanted to be around him.

★

Depending on my mood when I tell the story, the name Robby has different origins. The common tale I offer up is that I was attending an Orthodox Jewish middle school, and in the fifth grade there was a substitute teacher, who wasn't Jewish, for a science class. She read over the roster at the beginning of class but couldn't pronounce my name despite my attempting to teach her several times. She asked if I had a middle name to go by. I told her Darren. The other kids in the class laughed. They never considered I could be a Darren— these were Jewish boys whose sole exposure to Irish culture was the idea that you could pinch a girl on St. Patrick's Day if she weren't wearing green and not get in trouble for it. After class the kids joked about the oddity of my previously unknown name. One of the more clever kids said, *You know, he really looks more like a Robby than a Darren.* Then a different boy agreed with him. Then another. Soon enough, they all thought it was the funniest joke ever devised, and they called me Robby for the rest of the day. I expected the joke to stop being funny the next day or the next few at the latest, but it didn't. They were relentless with the nickname. After a certain point, I resigned the urge to correct them and accepted that I'm Robby.

Another story alleges that I named myself after a friend who overdosed on cocaine at the age of sixteen. He was the first boy I loved. He was my closest friend— though I only thought that because I had few friends to begin with, and in reality he probably didn't care much for me. He used to be a great kid until his parents sent him to an ex-gay therapy camp and came back with a drinking habit. Once he told me they turned on a fire hose and

Nonfiction

sprayed it over him while he slept if they thought he weren't making enough progress, that they would have him watch gay porn while electrodes were attached to his dick, and if he sprung an erection they'd shock him. It's hard to fault a person, much less a kid, for turning to drugs after an experience like that. I was devastated by his death. I remember his parents asked me to dinner, and I went because I felt they were lonely and needed to be parents to any kid for at least one meal. I remember Robby's dad drinking a whole bottle of wine during the dinner, and when he drove me home later, he mentioned how he didn't think it was an accidental overdose. He asked me what I thought; I told him the sky looked as if it could hail. I never heard from his parents again.

There are other versions, but I don't tell them often so I've forgotten most. The truth of the matter is that those stories aren't necessarily lies. There were substitutes who couldn't pronounce my real name. Many people think I look more like a Robby than a Darren. Yes, I had a friend— named Robby—who passed away shortly before I renamed myself.

★

I didn't know Robby isn't your real name— which makes it kind of creepy that I wrote that first e-mail, right?

But because I like creepy, I'd like to ask you if you'd be willing to write a 1,200-word version of this essay for us (assuming it hasn't already been published elsewhere). We could pay you \$250 and would need the final draft by April 6.

Work for you? Hoping we can make this a regular thing.

Jillian

★

When I was four, I remember my mother picking me up from school on a Friday afternoon. As we walked to the car, I asked her who created god. It wasn't a mean question, but that's how I felt it was taken by how she responded. I was curious and genuine in that manner. I simply reasoned that if god made everything then something had to make god. In my head I pictured a genie in some giant lamp rising from a plume of pink smoke and inventing god. It didn't occur to me that something needed to have fashioned the genie first. She told me never to ask that question again; I felt

embarrassed as if it were an obvious answer and I were stupid for not knowing it.

★

Part of realizing you're gay at a young age means developing an obsessive need to please people. The way dogs can sense fear, adults— at least in mind— could sense deceit. They might not know what you were hiding from them, but they knew it was something. And the way this was remedied was to give them no cause to suspect you or at least appease them enough that they left you alone. I was the über polite kid. All my teachers and parents' friends knew me as a respectful— up to a brownnosing point— child. Learning also came easy for me, so in a religion where scholarship is one of the most lauded social pillars, I used my intellect less as a means to pursue knowledge and more as a cover for my failings as a Jew. In a sense, performing well in religious schools because you want to be the rabbi's star pupil and performing well to conceal the fact that you masturbate to the mental image of your rabbi looks a great deal alike.

My mother liked to redirect this instinct of deflection and channel it as natural ability. Of course, it's difficult for me to parse the reality of the past without accusations. Can I concede that, in reality, my mother was a typical Jewish mother in that she bragged about anything she could, even if it weren't true? Of course. I think many mothers use their children's achievements as genuine episodes for bravado. But there came a point when my recognitions became conflated with her entity as a person. Whereas recognition meant very little to me, she latched onto anything she felt would enhance her standing in the community, even if these experiences were explicitly not things her children desired.

It was that neurosis that ruined our family. Aside from maintaining a false depiction of our religious lives, there was tremendous pressure to perform well at everything. It was unacceptable if I received an A- on a test, and I had to join the synagogue's choir, despite the fact I don't sing well, if only because other boys in the community sang in it. My mother would feed me stories about how much I hated those boys and shouldn't let them overshadow me, but I didn't hate them. Sure, they were mean to me at times but in the way boys are often mean to each other at a young age and then move on. We generally left each other alone. Still, she was convinced I was at war with rival Jewish boys and must out-sing,

outperform, and outsmart these enemies of mine that didn't exist outside of her fantasies. As a child, I couldn't see that these actions on her part were the result of a mentally sick woman reconstructing reality as a means to obtain a life she never experienced for herself. No, I simply hated her.

★

Around puberty, yeshiva students move away from stories of Noah and his ark and begin to study the parts of the Old Testament where god explains the great sin of homosexuality. I sat through class after class of rabbi after rabbi ranting about the evils of gay lust as if there weren't a possibility of any students being gay sitting in the desks before him. I was instructed that it was a choice. Though I was not even old enough to be bar-mitzvah, it became clear that in the context of the Orthodox world I needed to choose between my parent's god and something innate. To me, this desire, which bloomed from simple cohabitation with men to wanting to experience the totality of their bodies, was a god I believed in. I wanted to pray in the muscled arms of a man and feel fullness, to taste the love of a personal god on my lips as stubble from his face rubbed against my chin and rug-burned into it as proof of his love for me being real the way I imagine my mother accepted the sun rising every day as proof of god's love for her people. This love: a belief I could be devout in.

★

Sometimes people assume something is wrong when all I'm doing is thinking about what to make for dinner because there's a plaintive stare glued to my face. I forget that I often wear that look as a relic of my childhood the way rubber stretched too far will not reset itself. On my twelfth birthday, I locked myself in the bathroom and drank cleaning fluid. It was the first of three times I would attempt suicide before I was graduated from high school. The details are fuzzy, but I recall coming home from school excited and my mother ruining my celebration in a way only she could by turning my birth into a day about how much I shamed the family a la the various ways I didn't measure up as the perfect Jewish son. I've never celebrated a birthday since. I don't expect to celebrate another birthday, and I make sure of this by telling people fake dates when asked when it is.

★

Thanks so much. A really beautiful piece. I'm running a couple passages past our lawyers and will get back to you as soon as we get the green light.

I'll let you know if there are any other notes from the powers that be. If not, I think we're just about set. Will keep you posted.

By the way, this is fun. You interested in writing for us again?

Jillian

★

During high school I came out to my parents or, rather, they knew after rummaging through some of my e-mails. I should also say it involved me in a police station and my mother coercing an officer into making me confess my sexuality. There was also the time she called my father over to the house. That was when I said I refused to talk about my life in *that* regard, and he yanked me out of a chair by my shirt and dragged me across the house. I grabbed onto a door frame and cried that he was choking me and had to let go of my shirt. I'm not sure if I passed out or if the shirt ripped first, but I remember coming to in my room as my father lifted me by one arm with hideous strength so that he could strike two jabs to my stomach before throwing me headfirst into a wall. I remember waking up on the floor and my father's leg pressing into my ribcage similar to a photo I saw of Ernest Hemmingway posing with an animal he had just killed on safari. I remember my mother watched all this happen and showed no compunction or protest against my father's actions. There are stories to explain these events of violence, but I'm not going to tell you them because memory is a wound that cannot be sewn up. I'll only say the abuse increased and culminated when I begged my mother to accept me, and she spit in my face then slapped me. She said she'd always choose her community over me.

★

I want to say I understand where my mother is coming from, but I don't always believe I do. There was that time over Thanksgiving dinner when she earnestly attempted to justify the killing of all Palestinians, which is, of course, a genocidal statement of the highest degree. But while I never could understand or agree with her rationale, over time I

have empathized with the forces that shaped it. If the vast majority of your family were killed in the Holocaust and then your mother and young sisters at your side relocated to Israel, a country that has been attacked since its conception by so many wars that you remember the decades not by what was in fashion then but by which type of missile the enemy obtained, you too would always be too taut in anxiety to breathe. Consider it a decades-lived bout with PTSD. I know it's out of this fear that my mother's hate for people she perceives as threats culminates. And as someone who only knew a world of fear, even when there weren't genuine threats in front of her, she created villains in order to vanquish them. She earnestly believed she was doing good, that she has always done good.

I don't have a background in psychology, but it seems her hateful interactions with me lay in insecurities— a problem with power and maintaining control over the impossible world she imagined in her mind. If I stepped out of line with that world, I would be punished. I'm sure the neighbors heard the daily commotion, but they never acknowledged it if they did. While the abuse was mainly verbal, there was physical abuse in the form of hitting, which I could've prevented had I hit her back, but I took my father's stance against hitting women; however, I convinced myself at fourteen that pushing my mother to the ground or grabbing a wrist as she tried to land a blow was self-defense and not the same as hitting.

★

It's been a decade since I last attempted suicide. I know there's a lot of psychological research about the importance of dealing with trauma in order for it to leave the body. But I also know the human mind evolved to create repression as a means to discover reasons to live. There's more to this story of how I became Robby— much of it more unsettling than what I've shared— but I don't remember it. Or I pretend I don't. This is because I don't remember I have such a troubled history until I sit down and think about it— say when someone calls me by my real name. And as if my body knows the potential that exists to destroy it with its own hands if I'm ever too conscious of my past, in my mind when I listen to my breath, each exhale sounds like a chant that repeats as a prayer to be allowed to experience tomorrow: *forget, forget, please forget...*

★

It was also during high school that my mother went into cardiac arrest. The doctors said it was rare for her age (forties at the time), but given her diet, inactive lifestyle, and rage that circulated her every breath, I wasn't surprised her heart finally revolted from all the stress.

The call arrived during my last class on a Wednesday in May. It was an English class, and we were learning about metaphysical poetry. Ms. Goler said the attendance office had requested my presence and that I should go with all my belongings. I didn't think much about it until I saw my father and knew something very wrong had to have occurred for him to be standing there— even more so when he sounded sad as he talked about the woman I knew he, too, hated.

We spent the next thirty minutes looking for my brother, who was ditching class. I told him during the car ride to the hospital that if she passed away in those thirty minutes that I'd never forgive him. At the hospital, my mother's religious friends were waiting with my aunt who'd flown in from New York. One of the men approached me, called me by my real name, and said we must to pray— an indirect way of stating they needed a *minivan* and were short a few men— but I kept on walking to the waiting area. I want to make it clear that I didn't cry up to this point. I wasn't stoic, but it was hard for me to feel for this woman who had yelled at me that very morning that I was going to burn in hell.

One-by-one immediate family entered her room where she was treated in the ICU. I was the last to see her. As I rose from a plastic purple chair that smelled like rubbing alcohol, my father explained I didn't have to go in if I didn't want to. But I did. I knew goodbye was important, even if only one-sided.

It's difficult to describe my mother in that room because she didn't look like my mother. Her face and chest were bloodied and bruised from a face-first fall onto the ground. She wasn't breathing on her own; her body writhed and spasmed under the influence of a respirator. She looked like a rag doll a child had taken poor care of, her hair dead from the cheap peroxide she bleached it with in an effort to pretend to be blonde— a synonym for young. To her left were her shoes placed in a Ziploc bag. Leave it to a gay boy to notice his mother's shoes. They were the *ugliest fucking* shoes I've ever seen— a cheap, gold-worn "pleather" with a low-heel that resembled a cross between a ballroom salsa shoe and bathroom slipper. There were holes in them, and they were

dirty. She wore those to work as a professional.

I couldn't help but look down at my own shoes. They were relatively new. A pair of skater shoes that cost sixty-dollars. And in spite of all my hatred for my mother, I couldn't suppress the guilt of standing in those shoes and then looking at what she wore as a sacrifice so that she would have the money to provide for my needs— though I'd later remember my father bought those shoes for me. And for the first and only time that was loss of my mother as I knew her, I cried. I walked over and kissed her on the mouth and said I was sorry. In truth, I know I had less to apologize for than she did, but she was still my mother.

That night I was ravenous and ate a whole pizza for dinner. Nothing ever tasted so good and filling. I slept well even. I was at peace. The only thing that lingered in my mind was my aunt on the way out of my mother's room made a point to show me the dying man in the bed a few curtains over from my mother. We both knew what she meant when she said it was my choice if I wanted to end up like him.

★

Isn't it strange how the job of naming is steeped in the duty of fitting a body—a life—to a word? Thus lies the dueling notion: a name to grow into and a name to inherit. A name of future and a name of past. An individual name and a shared name. A name you keep for yourself and a name you pass on. This simultaneous baggage and responsibility put on a child can be tremendous. Why then, for a generation like mine so keen to shake the yolk of a history they did not ask for— and often do not want— should it be surprising to retitling the convention of giving things their proper voice? A self-declaration that chooses its own introduction to the world on the speaker's terms.

For a name is but a vessel that collects the entity of our lives. For me, my name, my real name, became a cup so large that to drink from it initiated drowning. So I changed my name to something anti-Jewish— Robby is rooted in German. I give false birthdates. I reconstruct my past and lie about much of it. I lie because lying means I don't have to remember what Clorox tastes like.

It's a strange power parents retain over their sons. They choose to circumcise them. They choose their names. I can't reclaim my foreskin, and I'm not sure I'd want to if I could. I do, however, believe in the right to claim your existence as your own. That it's my right to tell or invent my history in the

manner that best lets me live. That it's my right to stand naked in a field and shout into the darkness how much the moon must obey me by any name I choose to be revered by.

★

Hi Robby,

I'm afraid I have bad news. I ran your essay by our lawyers and the powers that be, and they are very concerned about potential libel issues dealing with your parents. It wouldn't be a problem if your piece were published in, say, a literary journal, but because we are a newspaper we have to adhere to different legal standards. Unfortunately, that means we will not be able to publish your essay after all.

That leaves us with two options: I'd be more than happy to pay you a "kill fee," half of the \$250 we'd have paid had your piece been published. Or, if you think you'll be seeking publication elsewhere in the future, we can skip the kill fee and just relinquish our rights to the piece.

Absolutely up to you, and again, I am very sincerely sorry for the bad news. It is a gorgeous piece, but you know how much I love your work.

Let me know how you'd prefer to proceed.

Jillian

★

Then some nights you realize there isn't a hole deep enough to bury a name and the body that comes with it.





Fiction



Fiction

Bivuoac

Elizabeth Biron
Oglethorpe University

She sits in a blue velvet chair upholstered in bronze, perched in a nested swath of crepe de chine and tulle. Her knuckles are white around fine mahogany. She is a flower, waiting in the garden for her lovely head to be plucked from the rest of her. A detachment of budding beauty from the bole.

A mirror is propped in front of her. They lightened her skin earlier, bleached herself out of herself until they liked how she looked. This wedding will not be hers, she accepted that long ago. She is only a minor character in all of it, all the games they play with each other because they've got nothing better to do. To call herself a pawn would be a disservice to the term; she is an observer, not even relevant to the game itself.

Her engagement ring is on the table in front of her, innocuously present. It had become an endless eye. She'd had enough of those, and this was the only one she could close. It looked lighter just sitting there.

The garden estate had been prepared in advance. They'd all decided that she would be married in one of their summer homes, separated from everyone else in the Catskills. It had been a unanimous

decision, and her mother-in-law had hauled her portentous clout around the rest of the week afterwards, in the way that only rich women who've gotten the advantage they wanted can.

The house was going to be theirs, apparently. Another decision made by women who had no business being in her life as they were. It was old and creaky, far settled into its formidable tenure as The Summer House of high society. A pension, a place to escape to with a flock of the finest plumaged gaggle to gabble on about the events of the season. A slab of marble sitting like a block of ice in the sun, cold and hard and shining, propped up on stilts of stone pillars. The grounds around it were cleared of trees and bush, the blast radius of elite living leveling it all to trimmed fields. The rose garden in the back was the pride and joy of the estate, the point of it all; a thing built to be gawked at, much like herself.

In short, it was a place unmoved by time, with the same women with the same problems occupying it eternally. And Carin was going to become one of them. Perhaps not immediately, not in ways she'd notice, but it would happen. That was how they had planned it, and so it would come to pass.

She looks at the bougainvilleas peppering the window outside, as they grow unhindered towards an inevitable pruning. She looks at them, and sympathizes.



Roof Jumping

Monica Ductan

Georgia College and State University

I grew up in Johnstown, a neighborhood that was mostly a series of shotgun houses down by a railroad crossing. Many of the houses were so close together that my friend Leslie and I would jump from the roof of one house to the roof of the next, sometimes squealing and with our skirts flying up. But we had to be careful whose roofs we jumped on. Old Miss Whitlock would call the cops and report you if you set foot on her house. When one of our town's two deputies showed up, they would knock on our parents' doors and sternly tell us to cut it out.

One night during the fall of our last year in high school, Leslie and I sat on the rooftop of the vacant house that stood between our two houses. It seemed that half the neighborhood was sitting out on their porches. Some stared up at the sky (The moon was huge that night, as big as my thumb.) and others grilled hamburgers on the blacktop. The smell of tar from the new roof we sat on was nearly as intoxicating as the view that stretched out beneath us—the neon red café sign blazing through the distant trees, the look of the dark houses in four uneven rows beneath us, and the women sitting on Juana's back porch, sipping from long-necked bottles.

Juana removed herself from the other women and walked toward Leslie and me.

"Come join our party, *preciosa*," Juana called up to me as she angled her head in the direction of the blacktop. Leslie and I climbed down and followed her through the smoke and the scent of charred meat.

"Dance with me," Juana said as she took me by the hand. Someone had turned on their car stereo and a ballad played softly. The words weren't in English, but I felt them anyway, something about lost love. She danced me over toward the farthest end of the blacktop, away from the streetlight and under the canopy of several cedar trees. Juana coaxed my face toward hers and kissed me.

After our blacktop kiss, I started going over to Juana's house three nights a week: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Those were the nights my mama worked late at the café.

"What do y'all do together out there, Katie?" Leslie asked me as we sat on the rooftop one night. She gestured toward Juana's house.

"Just talk," I answered.

I'd heard Leslie make queer jokes about people before, and I didn't want her to make them about Juana and me. Was I gay? It was a question I asked myself all the time in those days. Though I had kissed a few boys and enjoyed it, I had also been attracted to Juana from the first time I met her.

Gold bangle bracelets jingled against Leslie's wrist as she reached up and pushed her hair out of her eyes. Leslie was one of those girls who changed her hair color every month. That night it was pink with long, fringe bangs.

I was dozing off when Leslie said, "She's married, I heard. Has a husband and family over in her country."

I opened my eyes. "Who told you that?" I asked much louder than I had meant to.

Leslie didn't reply. She just looked at me until I turned away.

That same night, I walked over to Juana's house, and as I stepped onto her porch I heard her speaking rapidly in Spanish. I peeked inside the screen door. Juana was standing by the kitchen table in a bright orange tank top that contrasted with her dark brown skin. She was talking on the phone. Several times she switched back and forth between Spanish and English. Her voice came heavily through her throat, like the sound of wind blown through a glass bottle.

"I got to go, *ahora*. I got a *preciosa* who comes to see me tonight." Juana listened for a few seconds and then laughed. "No," she said. "I call them all *preciosa*. No worry about names." I took a couple of steps backward, tried to ease off the porch, but the back of my head bumped her wind chimes and sent them clanging together.

Juana hung up the phone and came to the door. What I had overheard made me uneasy, but when Juana smiled at me, the sight of those bright teeth against her dark skin was almost enough to make me smile back.

We walked toward her bedroom. Cardboard boxes lined the hallway. It always looked as though she had just moved in or was constantly preparing to move.

"I fry some plantains for you," Juana said.

"It's 'fried,'" I corrected her.

"I wish I could speak English just like you," she said to me, and my face grew warm as I smiled at her.

Juana had placed an end table in front of the bed and loaded it down with more than just the plantains. There was rice and peas, fried goat,

Fiction

fried bread and several cans of vitamin milk. I started to salivate.

“Remember the first time I give you Caribbean food and you not like it?” she asked me.

I nodded. “It’s ‘gave’ and ‘you did not like it,’” I said.

She leaned forward as if my little grammar lessons could somehow affect the outcome of her day. Her eyes were trained on me. I noticed that they had heavy lines underneath them, just like my mama’s eyes whenever she worked double shifts at the café. I realized that Juana had a lot in common with Mama. Both were short and sturdy, and they loved to cook, not to mention what Leslie had pointed out to me, which was that Juana was old enough to be my mama.

We sat down on Juana’s bed to eat. The goat was tender, and she had poured a red sauce over it. I dipped a plantain into the sauce, bit into it, and then licked the salt and oil from my fingers. Juana had promised to teach me to cook like her, but we hadn’t gotten around to it.

As we lay together on the bed, she told me about her day, how she was pissed at her boss about something that had happened at work. She sat up in bed, said, “One day I have my own business. I tell people what to do and they do it, and then I buy a big house.”

And suddenly Juana was up, moving all around the room, promising herself things.

As I listened to her, I felt very young because I couldn’t understand Juana’s problems. I didn’t understand her desire to boss people around, and I thought the sizes of the houses in Johnstown were just fine. Why would she need a larger one?

Juana began to tell me about a conversation she’d had on the phone with her sister, and I wondered if her sister was the one she’d been talking to when I overheard her.

“What about your husband?” I asked Juana. “Do you ever talk to him?”

I hadn’t known I was going to ask the question until the words were out of my mouth. Juana narrowed her eyes at me, and I looked away.

“No,” she answered. “We do not talk.”

Juana walked over to the window. She undid the ties and let the curtains fall together. Juana didn’t have air conditioning, and so she kept a box fan in her bedroom window. She switched on the fan. The white curtains blew out into the room. The sheer fabric brushed against her cheek and touched her breasts as she turned to look at me.

“You no have to come visit me if you no want to,”

she said.

“I do want to.”

She came over to the bed and sat Indian-style beside me. I let her take me by the hand. I let her hug and kiss me. I let her touch the places beneath my bra and panties and then peel that underwear off my body.

All that night, even after I walked home and climbed into my own bed, I wondered how the Juana I knew—the one who cooked for me and lay down with me—could think of me the way she had described me on the phone, as being one of many nameless *preciosas*.

Juana was attractive, though I couldn’t say why. She did have beautiful dark skin and a coy smile, but her chin was too narrow, long and pointy, and her head was oddly shaped—big and broad at the base and then narrowed and hollowed out through the cheekbones and chin. I wasn’t sure if she could even be called pretty. She was not delicate-looking or even unusual-looking (except for her head and chin), but whenever I was in a room with her my eyes and hands scarcely left her. Our bodies were never able to sit on opposite sides of the room or even the bed.

I wished I were bold enough to ask Juana about the other *preciosas* she had mentioned that night on the phone. I had noticed other women with Juana many times before, and I had simply thought she was just friends with them. But after overhearing her phone comments, I began to watch Juana more closely. Nearly every weekend, three women—an overweight, light-skinned lady; a tall, thin lady; and a very pretty brown-skinned one—came on foot down North Broad Street and entered through the gate two houses down from where I sat with Leslie on the roof. Juana met them on her porch, liquor bottles in her hands. The sweet scent of their cigars wafted up to Leslie and me along with the sound of their laughter. Sometimes Juana would sit very close to the pretty one, even put her arm around the woman’s shoulders. On those nights I talked and laughed extra loud with Leslie, and I did so in the hope that Juana would look up at me, acknowledge me, invite me down. But she never did.

One night I sat alone on the rooftop, watching Juana with the women. Two of the women left Juana’s porch and strolled through the back gate, but the pretty one remained seated and talked with Juana. After several minutes, Juana kissed the pretty one on the cheek, and then they went inside the house together. I slid down from the roof and made my way toward Juana’s bedroom window. The

window was raised and the box fan sat inside of it, just as I knew it would. The propellers pulled sound to me in a peculiar way. It was as though every movement inside the house was amplified when filtered through the fan. Their heavily accented voices said, "Come here" and "Lay down." The bed creaked. The curtains were drawn, but through a crack about an inch wide, I could see the pretty one's body. She was naked from the waist up. Her breasts were bigger than mine, and her skin was so evenly toned that it seemed to have no flaws. She moved onto the bed, and then she moved out of my line of sight.

The next night was a Friday, and when I walked out to Juana's house and knocked, she didn't answer. I saw her car out front and knew she was there because I could hear voices murmuring inside. I stood on the porch for a while, listening, and when I heard the pretty one's laughter I knocked again. And again. No answer.

When I didn't go to Juana's house the following Monday, Leslie asked, "What's up with y'all? You have a fight?"

Leslie took a puff of her cigarette and then went into an immediate coughing spell. She had recently started to smoke, but couldn't inhale without coughing yet. She offered the cig to me, but I shook my head.

"No fight," I said. "Everything's good."

"She's not home tonight anyway, is she?" Leslie asked.

I looked over at Juana's house and pretended I hadn't already noticed her missing Accord. "Oh yeah," I said to Leslie. "Her car's gone."

"Where'd she go?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"You know y'all had a fight." She smirked at me.

"Maybe I should tell your mama you've started smoking."

"Maybe I should th'ow you off this damn roof."

I started to let loose a long stream of curses at her, but then I saw Juana's car pull through the gate at the back of the neighborhood. She climbed out of the front seat. There was a man with her. He was tall and dark-skinned and wore a white baseball cap.

"Why don't you go down there?" Leslie asked. "You know you want to. You're almost falling off the roof right now."

I relaxed my shoulders and tried to look nonchalantly at Juana and the man.

"I'm gonna go for a walk," I said.

"Mmm-hmm," Leslie said, which sounded to me like, "Yeah, *right*."

I slid off the roof and walked in the opposite direction of Juana's house, strolled toward the basketball court and then walked past Old Miss Whitlock's house. I stopped to break a sprig from her magnolia bush and slid the flower behind my ear.

Leslie had left the rooftop by the time I came to Juana's porch. I hovered by Juana's car and slowly made my way up the porch steps.

The man in the white cap opened the door before I had a chance to knock.

"Hey," I said.

He gave me a half-smile.

"Is Juana inside?"

The sounds of the television drifted out to me. I peeked around him to see inside the house. I didn't see her. I wondered if she'd left.

"Can I come inside?"

Rather than answer, he leaned back inside the house and called her name. I wondered if he spoke English.

I heard Juana answer him in Spanish, and then she appeared behind him. She moved out onto the porch, shooed him back from the threshold and then closed the door gently.

She said, "Katie, stop."

"Stop what?"

Juana put her hand on my shoulder the way my mama did when she needed to explain something to me.

"Stop coming here."

I shook my head. And then my hands started to shake; I put them in the pockets of my jeans.

"I am married," she said. "You know about this for a while now, Katie."

The man came out to the porch. He said something to her in Spanish.

"Is that him? Is that your husband?" I asked her.

There was a hint of understanding in the man's eyes. "Yes," he said, poking his own chest with his finger. "Husband."

I looked from him to Juana, as if I needed confirmation that what he said was true. Juana stared wordlessly at me for a moment, and then she followed him down the porch steps and got into the Accord. They drove away.

As we were on our way to school one morning, Leslie's steps slowed. She said to me, "How come you don't come up to the roof anymore?"

I didn't know how to answer the question without telling Leslie about Juana and me. The truth

Fiction

was that I didn't want to see Juana anymore, and I was afraid I would see her on her porch or watch her drive by in her car if I sat on the roof.

"Look," I said to Leslie, "I'm still your friend. It's just that..."

But she ignored me and ran ahead to catch up to Nina, a girl that lived down the street from us. And when I sat with Leslie during a class assembly that day, she acted as though I wasn't even there. She addressed all her comments to Nina and the other girls who sat near us. In the evenings Nina began to sit with Leslie on the rooftop, and on the nights when Mama was working late they jumped around on top of our house, especially on the spot right above my bed. I believed they jumped so boisterously to taunt me, and that was enough to bring me to frustrated tears.

I was in the kitchen with Mama one morning as she scrambled eggs together in a little mixing bowl. Her elbow jutted out to the side, and her lips were pressed together tightly.

I hadn't eaten scrambled eggs for months. I had begun to prefer them hard-boiled. It bothered me that Mama knew so little about me, and sometimes I blamed myself for not telling her things—*I like my eggs boiled. Your bra strap is showing. I miss Daddy.*

Daddy. He had left us the year before, and I blamed Mama for it. She was always on Daddy's back, telling him to go back to school, get a better job, and a million other things.

Mama squirted cooking spray onto the bottom of a frying pan, turned on the burner, poured the eggs into the pan and turned them over with a long-handled fork. She removed the pan from the heat and brought it over to the table. Her lips were still pressed together tightly. She sat down and watched me carefully for a moment, then said, "Your friend had a stroke yesterday. You should go to the hospital and see her, but maybe wait a few days 'til she's stable."

"What friend?"

"The one from down the street. The Dominican lady or Jamaican lady or wherever she's from."

"Juana?" I asked.

Mama nodded. "Ms. Whitlock told me about it on the phone last night."

Mama watched me for another moment, as if she were expecting me to have some sort of outburst. When I didn't, she raked eggs onto my plate.

"Is she ok?" I asked.

"I don't know. They took her by ambulance yesterday afternoon."

When I walked into the hospital room and saw Juana, one side of her body limp and her face dull and expressionless, I stumbled back, felt my elbow bang against the doorframe.

Juana made some sound like a wounded animal. She repeated the sound, and I realized she was trying to call my name.

"Come in. You can come in," a woman standing beside the bed said to me.

I figured the woman must be Juana's daughter. Ms. Whitlock had said the daughter was moving in with Juana to take care of her. "H-hi," I said quietly to the woman. "I'm Katie, her friend from the neighborhood," I explained. "Are you her daughter?"

"Yes," she said. "My name's Rita. Nice to meet you."

Juana tried to sit up and almost fell from the bed. I helped Rita prop her up against the pillows.

Juana started making sounds again, like she was trying to talk to me. I didn't know what she was saying. She started to drool. Her mouth was twisted, and I realized she could only move one side of it. Finally, she quieted and just lay there and stared at me.

There was a chair beside the bed, and Rita motioned for me to sit down. She pulled up another chair and sat beside me. Rita resembled Juana and looked to be in her early 20s. She wore bright red lipstick and gold hoop earrings. Her hair was cut into a pixie style with bangs that swept sideways across her forehead.

"Thanks for coming in to sit with her," Rita said, and though her accent was heavy, she seemed more confident in English than Juana did. I wondered if Rita lived here or down on the island.

"A few of her friends from work came by..." Rita's voice caught in her throat. She cupped her hand around the base of her neck, as though she needed to squeeze her next words out: "but they left almost as soon as they saw her."

I wondered which friends had visited. The friends who drank with her on her porch? Had the pretty one come by yet? I wondered where Juana's husband was and why he and the pretty one weren't there.

Rita handed me a home decorating magazine and coaxed me into reading to Juana, explained that her doctor said it was good therapy. I started to read a passage about upholstery, and as I did so my voice shook. Juana lay very still and watched me. As I went on, my voice grew more confident. After a few pages, the sun had gone down and the room was dark but for a stream of lamplight in the corner.

Rita had slipped out, said she'd be back the next day. I stayed with Juana, read to her until she slept.

After Juana came home from the hospital, she and Rita walked around the block every evening. Juana couldn't make it up the hill by my house without leaning on her daughter for support. Every week they walked a little farther, Juana's coordination improved, and she leaned on her daughter less and less.

Eventually Rita went back to the Dominican Republic, and so I looked after Juana. I read to her and took her for walks around the neighborhood. Juana was on a rigorous physical therapy schedule. She did most of her therapy in the hospital in town, and I helped her with other exercises at home. Juana was also on a low sodium low cholesterol diet, and sometimes I helped prepare her meals.

One weekend we made fruit salad together. Juana stood with her back to me as she peered into her refrigerator. I came up behind her and hugged her. It was the first time I'd tried to be intimate with her since the stroke.

She stood there for a moment and then pried my arms from around her.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We should not do that. Not no more."

"I shouldn't hug you?" I asked, not bothering to stop to correct her speech. I hadn't given her a grammar tip at all since the stroke; I was just happy she could speak.

She didn't answer. Instead, she turned back to the fridge, removed a bag of spinach and carried it over to the table.

I went over and stood beside her, picked up a knife and started to slice the strawberries, stabbed the knife into the cutting board louder than I usually would.

With her eyes on me, Juana poured the spinach into the salad bowl.

"This no good for you. You get attach with me," she said.

"Don't talk to me like that. You're attached to me, too. Don't you think you'd miss me if I stopped coming around here?"

I raked the strawberries onto the bed of spinach Juana had prepared, and then I began to squeeze the juice of a lemon into a pitcher of water. Some of the lemon juice spurted out and onto Juana's forearm; she wiped it off with a kitchen towel.

"Where is your husband?" I asked.

It was the question I had been wanting to ask for weeks, but had somehow always lost my nerve.

"He go back home," Juana sighed, and I was certain she was about to snap at me. Instead, her eyes grew teary as she said, "We argue lot of times."

Juana turned from me to go to the stove. She pulled open the oven door and steam burst out. Juana clumsily reached on top of the counter for an oven mitt. When she went to pull out the chicken, the mitt slipped and she burned her hand on the side of the pan. She winced and moved over to the sink to run cool water over her skin. For years to come, whenever I remembered her I saw her like that—forehead drawn in a frown, messy hair, tears pooling in her eyes as the water cooled away whatever burning sensation she felt.

About a week later, I walked out to Juana's house and immediately knew something was wrong. Juana's garden gnome and patio chairs were gone. Though the wind whistled in my ears, no wind chimes clanged on her porch. The potted plants were gone. The porch was completely bare. I sat down on her porch steps, propped my knees under my chin. A passel of crows lit in the pecan tree across the street. Storm clouds rolled overhead. Evening came. Dusk came. Darkness came. I cried.

I heard footsteps on the sidewalk in front of me. When I looked up, Old Miss Whitlock was standing at the bottom of the porch steps.

"She's gone, sugar," she said. "Her daughter came to get her. The Riggins boys from down the street helped load up the moving van."

She should have told me she was leaving. I had spoken to her that very morning, had checked on her to make sure she had breakfast before I left for school.

Miss Whitlock came up the steps toward me, reached down to take me by the hand. Her fingernails were painted bright red, and I wondered how she kept them so neat.

I stood and walked toward home with her.

Leslie and Nina were lying on the roof of the vacant house, laughing up at the stars. Their voices carried down through the valley. Leslie stood and leaped across and onto the roof of her house. Her friend followed.



Witch Luck

Marcela Fuentes

Georgia State University

My Grandma Romy died the first week of October. The night she died, my dad was parked in his recliner working his way through a case of Coors Light and watching ESPN while I did my algebra homework at the dinner table. A lady called—the same one, I just knew it—and all of a sudden he “remembered” he had to go back to the body shop and finish a suburban. Bam, just like that, Lulu, pack a bag, you’re spending the night at Grandma’s.

“Hey,” he said as I was putting up my math book. “Go feed the puppy before we leave.”

“He’s your dog, you do it.”

He pulled on one of his black engineer boots. “Lulu, come on. I have to get ready.”

“No way!” I slammed the bedroom door. Like some new puppy could make up for what happened to my poor old Aussie, Dr. Gonzo. And the puppy my dad brought home—a pit bull with a damp pink nose and a troll face.

“You’re gonna have to start taking care of him,” my dad said when I came back to the living room with an overnight bag. “He’s your dog too.”

I glared at him. “My dog’s dead. Somebody murdered him.”

My dad was such a jerk he couldn’t even look me in the eye. He knew. He just didn’t care.

“Hurry up,” he said, and stomped outside to his truck.

We didn’t speak on the drive, and it was a long one because he won’t go by the river road if he’s with me. We took the Las Cienegas Avenue Expressway. The river road is faster from our house, but that’s where the motorcycle accident happened and my mom got killed.

My dad’s totally superstitious. He thinks he’s cursed with double-sided luck, witch luck. He’s been in five or six wrecks because he drives like a maniac, and yeah, when he was born his real mom threw him in the Rio Grande and he didn’t drown. My Grandpa Chuy fished him out and adopted him.

My dad’s walked away from it all, he says, because of the curse. The accident that killed my mom only broke his wrist. It’s double-sided luck, like I said. He’s the bad luck charm for everybody else. Instead of blaming my mom’s death on the drunk driver that hit them, my dad decided it was his curse. This is why I have no social life.

Grandma’s street is off the exit with the bright green sign **Las Cienegas Trade Bridge 1 / United States Port of Entry / Cd. Bravo, Coahuila, Mex.** She doesn’t live in Mexico, but almost. Grandma’s neighborhood is all stray chickens, tin roofs, and half-streets. It’s a mile from the international bridge, but all the way across town from us. We live on the north side, where the neighborhood is full of speed bumps and SUV-driving border patrol wives.

Grandma waved at us from behind the screen door as the truck pulled into the gravel driveway. My dad waved back, but didn’t get out of the truck. He tried to hug me goodbye, but I jumped out and slammed the truck door on him.

“Have fun working,” I said, quotation marking with my fingers.

“Get in the goddamn house!”

He gunned the engine, kicking up a spray of gravel against my feet. He pulled out of the drive and I saw his taillights flare at the four-way. He wasn’t going to work. He wasn’t going back home. He was headed down town, not even bothering to hide it.

That’s when I decided I’d get rid of the puppy. That same night, while he was out doing God knows what. He’d never know it was me. Let him try and ignore another dead dog.

“What was all that?” Grandma asked when I walked up the steps. She was always at the screen door, watching for when we got there. I don’t know, maybe she waited until the commercial break, or maybe she went to the door as soon as she got off the phone.

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing,” she said.

I slouched into a chair at the kitchen table. “All of a sudden he has to go back to work. Yeah right.”

“Mi’ja,” said Grandma, sounding tired. “Some people think they can hide the sun with their little finger, but they don’t fool anybody. Especially not a smart girl like you.”

She wrapped a potato taco hot off the stove in a paper towel and gave it to me. “That doesn’t mean you have to make a spectacle in my yard.”

“Sorry, Grandma.”

I took a giant bite of the taco so I wouldn’t say, “He’s a liar. You know he is.” I wouldn’t argue with my Grandma, not for anything.

Grandma took the rest of the tortillas off the comal, covered them, and set the bundle on the table. Her fingers were thin and papery. The heavy ring with all her children’s birthstones had slipped

sideways. I reached out and pushed it to rights.

"That one's your dad's," she said, tapping the ruby. I knew it, though. I know them all by heart: aquamarine for Gloria, opal for Raul, sapphire for Yoli, ruby for my dad. There's only Yoli and my dad left, though. Tía Gloria died five years ago and Tío Raul got killed in World War II.

My dad's the baby. He just turned forty. Yoli is already fifty-one, the same age Grandma was when she adopted my dad. That was Grandma's best story: how Grandpa Chuy brought my dad home to her, damp and covered in sorrel horse hair because Grandpa had bundled him up in a saddle blanket.

"Ay, the commercials are finished," Grandma said. "I better go see how the 'novela ends."

"I'll wash the dishes, Grandma," I offered, to make myself feel better.

Later I crouched beside my bedroom door, a bunch of peanut butter crackers stuffed in the pocket of my hoodie, waiting for the clock to strike midnight. Grandma had one of those old-fashioned clocks, the kind that wheezes and grinds when it gears up to mark the hour. At noon and midnight that thing gong-gong-gongs for almost five minutes.

Grandma had been in bed for an hour. I heard her snoring, but still, I needed the cover of that noisy clock. This wasn't like sitting on the back patio at home, talking to my best friend Marina on the cordless while my dad was passed-out in the living room. Grandma felt the floorboards shift when I padded to the bathroom in the dark. She had radar.

The clock started making its midnight racket and I scurried across the living room and jerked the front door open like I was ripping off a Band-Aid. The heavy wood creaked once, but that was all. I scooped up the telephone from its nook beside the door and slipped outside.

I closed the front door as lightly as I could, leaving a sliver of space just wide enough for the phone cord. I pressed my ear to the crack. Nothing but the clock ticking and, audible from her bedroom, my grandma going like a baby buzzsaw.

She was alive at midnight. I heard her.

I hid behind Grandma's bougainvillea bush and paged Ernie, my only friend with a car. He was still at work. He'd been working at the freight yard since midsummer, unloading trucks. Since he'd gotten a job, he didn't have a curfew anymore. As far as I was concerned, that alone was worth lugging boxes around.

I cleared the line and called Phone-In Fairytale, the automated storyteller at the public library. It was

one of the first numbers I had memorized when I was a kid. The tape would run through about an hour's worth of stories before it cut off. I used to listen to it all the time.

These days I called when I wanted to talk to Ernie. It was a good way to occupy the line so the phone wouldn't ring. Sometimes I fell asleep before he called, but tonight, with the wind cold against my neck, the fairytale didn't lull. I was glad when the call-waiting beeped.

"Hey, I'm at my Grandma's tonight."

"Well, don't go to sleep," said Ernie. "I'll call you when I get home. I'm off in twenty minutes."

"Wait, don't hang up."

"I'm in Sal's office," Ernie said, impatient. "I have to get out of here before he comes back."

"Wanna go to the lake?"

Ernie got quiet. I thought he wanted to ask why, but he didn't. "Yeah, okay. Meet me up the block from my house."

"Okay."

"You want anything?"

"No. Like what?"

"I don't know. Never mind." He hung up.

I unplugged the phone and tucked it beneath the bushes. Probably the best thing to do was avoid the street. I could climb the hill behind Grandma's, cut across the front yard of the abandoned Aguirre place, and then come down into the Azteca Courts Park. Ernie's house was just two blocks from there.

Walking through the hillside brush was fucking creepy: a winding deer trail clumped over with thorny catclaw bushes and furtive rustling that I knew wasn't me. I'm not superstitious, but I flat-out ran through the front yard of the Aguirre house. It had a rickety wooden wraparound porch, just the kind of thing where you think nobody's there, but then you glance over your shoulder and something horrible is coming after you.

The house was always up for rent, probably because nobody wanted to live in an old haunted dump. The landlady must have been pretty stubborn though, because there was a fresh For Rent sign staked among the overgrown weeds.

I jumped the irrigation ditch at the bottom of the hill, the cuffs of my hoodie clenched in my fists. On the other side was a park that was mostly asphalt, just a basketball court and a thin border of grass with a merry-go-round on it.

I was almost to the next block, passing a yard where a few men, a little older than my father, were sitting around drinking beer in their undershirts and listening to the Mexican station, when one of them

turned his bloodshot eyes on me.

“Hey, you! Whatcha walkin the streets this time of night? Get your little ass home!”

I ran. The men in the yard laughed. Fucking assholes.

I don’t know why my dad ever left the neighborhood. He would have been right at home with those guys. He said the same thing about girls nowadays. They could be doing anything. Or nothing. He’d say they were out slutting it around, *hulliendo* like little kites freewheeling across the skies.

I sprinted the rest of the way to Ernie’s street. He lived on the last stretch of road before the neighborhood gave way to the marshes along the Rio Grande. I smelled the water first, mossy and stale, and then saw his ’72 Chevelle parked in front of the Dead End sign. He was sitting on the trunk, still in his Yellow Freight uniform, smoking a cigarette.

“We gotta stop at my house first,” I told him. “I need to get something.”

“Are you nuts? Isn’t your dad there?”

“I don’t think so, but I left my journal on the patio.”

“Then he probably already has it.”

“He doesn’t. But I have to get it.”

“Why, who’d you write about?”

“None of your business.”

“It’s me. I know.”

“I know you’re stupid.”

“For real, who’d you write about?”

“Nobody, Ernie! Can we just go?”

“Okay, okay, damn. At least let me change my clothes.” He frowned. “You better wait out here. My mom will flip out if she finds you in the house.”

Ernie came back with damp hair. He was wearing a black Suicidal Tendencies muscle-shirt. Ever since he had gotten the job as a freight loader most of the shirts he bought were tight or didn’t have sleeves. It was kind of hot, but he was such a dumb-ass, always flexing and saying dorky shit like, “Welcome to the gun show.”

“Check it out,” he said. He held up a half-finished bottle of Don Pedro. “Let’s go party.”

“Sounds good,” I said, settling into the seat. “But I’m not gonna drink that. That shit is gross.”

“That’s why they invented Slurpees. For wusses like you.” He dodged my fist and laughed.

The traffic lights on the strip were flashing yellow. It was a Wednesday night and there weren’t many cars on the road, just a cluster of trucks at Denny’s.

I didn’t know what I was going to say to Ernie.

Some things could be told. When my dad found my cache of metal tapes and stomped on them, Ernie said, *Don’t worry, I’ll make you copies* and he put the phone up to the stereo so I could hear what he was taping for me. Some things could be told, in a way. Instead of telling Ernie that someone had killed Dr. Gonzo, my sweet old Aussie, that someone had actually gone into the back yard and shot him in the head and hadn’t even bothered to close the gate afterwards, I said that Gonzy had been hit by a car. Ernie made this awesome pencil portrait of Gonzy, (but he signed it Ernesto Vega so I sprayed it down with Marina’s Aqua-Net and hid it in the back of my trapper-keeper because I’m not going put Ernie’s name anywhere my dad can see) and Marina said *Oh my God, Ernie likes you* and I said, *Shut up*, but it was true.

That’s why Ernie took me across town. I knew he would. It was shitty of me, because if he got caught my dad would beat the piss out of him. I was a fucking dick, because I’d counted on Ernie liking me enough to bring me anyway.

It took thirty minutes to drive to the north side. I live in the new subdivision, where the houses are evenly spaced and identical and behind our street bulldozers are still clearing out the sage. The land behind my house is flat, open desert. That’s where I told Ernie to park.

I got out of the car. The rows of tiny lights on the second international bridge, the one over the lake, twinkled at the western horizon. I would take the puppy there. I would drop it off the bridge. I could see it: the plunging white form of the puppy, disappearing. Just a little splash and then the waters smoothing over, like nothing had ever been there at all.

“Okay,” I said. “If you see the lights come on, haul ass out of here. Seriously.”

“This is fucked up,” said Ernie. “What’s going on?”

“Just do it, okay?”

He shook his head. “Shit.”

I ran to the fence, aware of how easy it was to be seen. The ground was white and dry in the moonlight. I looked back and saw the distinct black shape of the car. But I couldn’t see Ernie, and that was something. I hoped he would really go if the lights went on.

The house was dark. I climbed the fence and landed with a thump on my dad’s freshly-laid Home Depot grass sod. The laundry room was just off the backyard patio. It wasn’t a real room, just a small shed with a low wood lattice for walls. The puppy’s

kennel was in there, next to the dryer.

I was inside the laundry room when I realized the sliding glass door to the patio was open. My dad said Margarita. A woman's name. Margarita, low and sweet and beckoning. The way I imagined, when I ran my finger lightly across his signature, it would sound to say Ernesto.

The puppy was awake. I opened the kennel door and lifted him out. He snuffled my hand as I zipped him inside my hoodie, his little tail whipping hard. I slipped a cracker in his mouth to keep him quiet.

If my dad had come outside, I wouldn't have backed down. Because I knew for sure now. I knew her name. What would he have done, pretended she didn't exist, just like he pretended nothing bad happened to Gonzy, just like he pretended all the bad things he did weren't real? I wanted them to come out so I could see them. So he'd know I knew.

It was his fault Gonzy died. I told him about the man who called the house, that day after school, but he didn't listen. Your dad's dead meat, the man had said and hung up. It made me want to vomit the sandwich I'd been eating. A few days later there was Gonzy with the top of his head blown off, pink and gray brains spattered in the yard.

I yelled right in his face, my stupid, stupid dad, who thought I wouldn't understand why Gonzy got shot. You stupid asshole! You think I don't know why this happened? You think I don't know why some dude is that fucking mad? Of course I knew. Everybody knew, even Grandma who couldn't stay awake through Montel.

My dad was stuffing Gonzy into a black plastic lawn bag, trying to get rid of him. He didn't answer me, just grabbed up the plastic bag and rushed out of the yard.

He didn't come home that night. I talked on the phone all I wanted to Marina, in the middle of the living room even, but I never told her. Not even after.

Because what am I going to say about it? That the next day my dad brought me a new puppy? That he's still fucking some bitch named Margarita, whose husband wants to kill him?

The puppy snuggled against my chest, his muzzle in the hollow of my throat. I clutched him, my whole body trembling. I held it in, held it in until that weepy feeling folded up like a hard fist. Ernie was waiting out there. I wasn't going to be like my dad, all self-absorbed and fucking everyone else over. Not me. This dog was enough.

There were no more voices. I walked into the yard with the puppy tucked into the crook of my elbow and did not look back. Climbing the fence

was hard with only one free hand. I slipped and tore my sleeve, scratched my forearm from the back of my wrist to the elbow. It burned in the cold air. I gave the dog another couple of crackers. My shirt was probably smeared with peanut butter, but I didn't care.

Ernie was sweating. It was shining all over his face. "Jesus, Lulu! What took you so long?"

"Sorry," I whispered. I was. But I still didn't tell him what we were doing.

"What is that?" he asked, staring at the lump in my hoodie.

"Nothing! Let's go."

The car crept between the bulldozers as quiet and slow, but just when we got back to the street, Ernie got nervous and romped on the gas pedal.

"Watch out, watch out!" I yelled, but he hit a speed bump dead-on. The car jumped and landed with a hard, horrible scrape on the asphalt. The puppy started barking like crazy.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a dog, duh. Let's go!"

"You swiped your own dog? That's fucking retarded!" Ernie caught a bad fit of giggling and the car stalled out.

"Hurry up, my dad's home!"

"Shit," he gasped, still laughing. He tore down the street, swerving around the speed bumps at break-neck speed.

At the fork before the highway, he pulled into a 7-Eleven. He bought Cokes instead of Slurpees. Then he crouched beside the car with a flashlight, in the crook of the open door, craning his head to see the undercarriage.

"Well," he said finally, "the oil pan's still there."

He hopped back in the car and smirked at me. "Let's see this dog."

I unzipped my hoodie. The puppy blinked around and then sprang onto the seat, snuffling the stick shift.

Ernie grabbed the puppy's face. It tussled with his forearm, mock-growling and gripping Ernie's wrist with its little teeth. He looked at me over the puppy's stout head. "So, what's the deal with this guy?"

"He has to go."

"Why you trying to get rid of your dog?"

"My dad's an asshole. I don't wanna talk about it."

"Okay." Ernie shrugged. "I bet Sal would buy him. He's been saying he wants a guard dog over at Yellow Freight. Bet we could get two-fifty."

"Sell him?"

"What were *you* gonna do, dump him on

the side of the highway? He's gonna get hit by a car out here."

"So?"

"God damn, Lulu. Are all the Muñozes bastards like that?"

Amazing. Everything looked so different with Ernie staring at me and the florescent light of the 7-Eleven streaming in through the windshield.

"We should go halves on what we get for him."

"Sure," Ernie said. He shook his head. "Hope I never piss you off."

At the lake, Ernie turned down at the end of a caliche road near the railroad bridge. He parked in the brush so the border patrol wouldn't see the car and come hassle us for drinking. I left the puppy sleeping in the back seat.

"You think anybody else would buy him? Somebody that doesn't know my dad?" I couldn't help asking, "What if he runs into Sal or something?"

"Lulu, you just broke into your dad's house while he was home. You wanted to snuff a puppy. Don't puss out on me."

"You're the puss."

We found a big boulder to sit on. Ernie spiked my Coke, which made it taste like it had gone flat. He drank straight from the bottle just to tease me. He was taking little sips though, so I didn't feel that dumb.

The night had a hazy glow. A fingernail moon. Hordes of clear white stars. We were out on the chaparral, which even in late autumn was flush with pale gray cenizo so that the land above the shoreline seemed covered in low-lying silver clouds. The railroad bridge stretched over the water, its humpbacks studded with blue lights. Only the lake was slick and black.

Ernie kept brushing against me by accident on purpose. Why did it have to be like that? Everybody pretending they weren't when they were.

"What are you doing? Do you want to kiss me or something?"

"No," he said. What a liar.

He slid off the boulder saying he needed some music. A few minutes later, Los Fabulosos Cadillacs cranked out of the stereo. He didn't come back.

Whatever. I didn't need him. I just wanted to be here. No bullshit. Nothing but the water slapping on the rocks.

"I'm going in," I yelled, mostly so I could say I'd told him.

I took off my t-shirt and jeans and waded in. Fuck, it was cold. I kicked away from the shore,

scissored my legs hard, arms stretching out and out, pulling myself into the deep black waves.

I'm a good swimmer, mostly because of my dad. He says no kid of his is going to go around not knowing how to handle herself in the water. I can outswim him any day of the week. Not that it's hard to beat a forty-year-old whose only exercise is doing beer-curls every night, but still.

I rolled onto my back and made lazy circles. I had drifted near the middle of the railroad bridge; the blue lights suspended over the water weren't small anymore. The water bumped and swayed. It was good here, outside of everything. No open patio doors. Or girls who drowned dogs. Just the occasional twitchy little splash of leaping bass. Even the music had cut off. I didn't want to go back home. Except the wind was picking up and the waves were getting choppy. I couldn't stay out much longer.

Ernie called my name, his voice far away and distorted. He yelled again, louder—Lulu! Lulu!—and a night bird called back to him, a long, warbling cry like a woman moaning and laughing at the same time. The kind of thing that would freak out my superstitious dad.

Michael Boyd drowned out here, I remembered suddenly. Last February. We went on the same mathlete tournament the weekend before he died. He let me borrow his Walkman on the way home. The next weekend was one of those fake-out winter heat waves you get in south Texas sometimes, 80 degrees and sunny out of nowhere. Michael went boating with his little brother and the brother fell out of the boat. Mike jumped in after him, saved his life. Only he got hypothermia because he couldn't get out in time. Horrible thought to have while treading water in the middle of the night, even if I was an ace at the 200 meter crawl.

If I drowned, my dad would know I took the dog. He'd know I'd seen him with Margarita. But it wouldn't make him regret anything he'd done. He'd probably just decide it was more of his stupid witch-luck curse. But oh, Grandma. It would break her heart if I died as a thief and a boozier. A crinkly feeling swept over me: I mean, that would be a cursed way to die, right?

"Ernie!" I shouted, "I'm here!"

A spear of light cut across the water, narrow, but bright enough to guide me. Headlights. They seemed very far.

It was a hard swim back. The waves were rough. I fought them and they tossed me and I fought some more. I kept my eyes on the headlight beam. Not far, not far. I'd been stupid to panic instead of pacing

myself. I was getting tired. Shit, I was tired. Worse, I was getting cold for real. It hurt to lift my arms and rake them through the water. But I could see Ernie in the spaces between the waves, a black shape running along the beach.

I reached the shallows, lungs burning, barely able to keep my legs moving. There was the rocky shoreline and the car in the acacia bushes, high-beams blazing. And Ernie in the water, splashing towards me.

"Jesus! Are you crazy? It's fucking freezing!"

The lake bottom was right under us; he was standing, but I kept slipping because I wasn't tall enough to catch my footing. He grabbed my forearms and hauled me up.

"I'm fine," I said, coughing. "For real."

I wasn't though. When he dragged me to the shore, my legs were so rubbery and cold I could hardly walk. Ernie followed me to the car. I sank into the passenger seat, still trying to catch my breath. He leaned across me and fished a denim jacket out of the back seat. "Here, stupid, get under that."

I curled up beneath it, but it was like trying to warm up under a piece of cardboard. At least the heater worked.

Ernie stalked around the beach, picking up my clothes. He brought them in a wadded up ball. He turned his face away the whole time he was near me. All I saw was the hard line of his jaw. He said, "Hurry up. I want to go home."

I lay there limp in the bucket seat. Ernie dropped his pack of cigarettes on the ground, cursing because they were wet. I didn't know before how easy it was to be a Grade-A asshole. Other people were probably born good. Not me.

"Ernie, I'm sorry. C'mon, man. At least sit with me."

"Whatever."

But after a few minutes he got in the car. He popped the seats back and I put my bare feet on the dashboard, letting the warm air dry them.

"Ready to go?" he asked. He was still mad.

"Can we listen to something else?"

"I guess." He took out the box of tapes he kept stashed under the driver's seat. "What'dya wanna hear?"

"I don't know," I said. "Let me see."

I lifted myself across the bucket seats, and settled myself in his lap. He tensed a little bit, but he didn't say anything. I took the box of tapes.

"What about this one?"

He shifted beneath me, so that I was leaning

into him, cradled, my face against the hollow of his throat, his hand light on my hip. I felt his breath against my forehead.

"Yeah, okay."

It surprised me how, up close, he was so much bigger than me. I fit into the crook of the arm he'd set along the window, between me and the cold glass, and he could still stick the tape in the deck without even jostling me, no problem.

"You could've drowned," he said, frowning.

"I wasn't in there that long," I said, and kissed him. It was clumsy, a fast peck on the side of his mouth, but that was all the green light Ernie needed.

That feeling when you're warming up, that feeling when you've been so cold your body is half-dead, and when it's finally coming back to you, the whole thing is buzzing like a million bees live inside your skin. You're still trembling and chattering and it almost hurts to touch anything because you're still frozen stiff, only the inside of you is hot and molten, and that feeling is spreading to the rest of you, that's why everything is tingling, because, little by little, it's killing all the cold. That's the feeling I had when Ernie gathered me up and kissed me.

That's all ashes now. This is what my heart knows: somewhere under the same bit of sky, my grandma woke from a nightmare of me drowning and, quick as quick, bargained her silver cord for mine.



abecedarian for the colors of a future childhood

Molly McDaniel
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amber

you will go into your mother's room. she will not be watching you. in the corner of her dresser drawer is an old velvet bag filled with small smooth stones, a white box with a crescent of amber in the center like anemic blood on snow, six sticks of black legs caught in a perpetual flailing.

black

for five years, you will use this crayon to fill in the all flowers in your coloring books. no one will ask you why.

cerulean

when you are ten, you will fly to california, will hold pretzels under your tongue until the salt numbs your mouth, pretend you know why your sister is not speaking. when you open the window shade, the morning has just begun, the slants of sun so bright they are almost clear, a wide ripple of sky so soft its bits of dust stick in your throat. this will be the happiest moment of your life. admit it.

denim

it is what you will wear until your parents make you switch to private school, to twill pants that scratch your ankles, polos buttoned up to your neck. during mass, you will watch the chunks of snow spit against mary's glass cheek, her folded hands, and remember running in cutoff jeans during summer. the grind of gravel in your knees.

eggplant

fried in a heavy oil, topped with marinara and cheese. the deep purple skins wet in the sink. once you become a vegetarian, this is the only dish your grandmother will know how to make for you.

fern

no one will take care of your backyard for years. the long plants will grow and wind together, the smell of licorice earth and sweet leaves hovering in the air, your bare feet stained green from the ground.

gray

you will not believe eyes can be this color until your sister looks into your own, her blues so muted that they have blended to stone in the terrible turn of an inevitable myth.

honeydew

when you are twelve, at your father's company picnic, he will hand you a knife and an ice cream scoop, telling you to slice the summer fruit. the flesh is pale green and sweet, the seeds so wet and cold you rip them out in bare handfuls, press the tangled webs of juice to your neck like ice.

ivory

your mother will promise you her wedding dress before you even ask. in the photo albums it is a striking white, crisp as the skin of a rose, but when you lift up the lid to its box it will have faded to something less than smoke. you will not know how to tell her.

jade

you will go back to your mother's room. back to the velvet bag. your fingers catch on a thin black rope, a glossy disc of green stone, jewelry that you will hook over your neck. it is too wide to be a bracelet and too small to be a real necklace, the cool jade settling into the thin skin over the hollow of your throat. you will swallow.

khaki

when the dryer finally breaks, you will iron every pair of pants your father owns by hand. your mother helps you, watches fox news while you watch her small hands as they go back over your corners and pleats, fingers paler and softer than your own.

lilac

your best friend has a field of wild lilac at her house, out past the heifers and cornstalks, where you will sit and twist stems together to make fragile purple crowns. after your mother drives you home, you will drape yours over a pile of books in your desk drawer, will forget about this drawer until two months later—the flowers brittle and brown, already crumbled.

malachite

there will be a beaded bracelet in the velvet bag. each sphere a tiny marble, housing an entire universe of green. the shadow encapsulates them when you hold them up to the light.

navy

this will be the color of your mother's mouth, the tint of her smoke in the night.

olive

your father will buy glass jars of olives by the boxful from costco, pluck them from the shiny brine with his fingers, let the ones left over gather dust in the pantry. for as long as you remember, the jars will be the only things there, the ovals of green-and-red flesh trapped like tiny christmas bells.

pink

this will be the color of your lips when you are thirteen, sparkles winking at you under the buzzing bathroom light. the color of nailbeds, of unhinged skin, of bloodstained underwear washed over and over. a kiss you will not ask for.

quartz

in the corner of the velvet bag, there is a hunk of quartz, a frosted glass mountain with tips of icy trees. its light fractures onto your mother's walls in jagged rainbows. you will read the small card taped to its smooth base: *for a happy life*.

rust

it will be the color of your fingertips when you wake up from the dreams, the taste of metal ringing through your mouth. will be the color of aging.

silver

all you will remember of summer at your grandmother's house are old cloths, back bent down, fingers moving in circles over and over, her voice vibrating in your left ear. by the end of the week, the sets of silverware will gleam against the concrete countertops.

teal

your sister's laugh will match the ocean you swim in together, glitter paths splitting between you, your feet crushing wet sand, hair a pair of salt-seeped threads that drift into your mouths. the shell she presses up to your ear roars straight to your bones.

ultramarine

this will be the color behind your eyes when you wake up crying, cloaked in the deep blue-black sea of sheets, for the first and final time aware of all the places in your body you will never reach.

violet

this will be your first fight. you will only remember a blow to the jaw, the staggering light in a corner of your eye, the icepack cooling until the pain goes numb. it will be the center of a record that spins on repeat; a bruise growing flush against the back of your knee.

white

for five years you will never see this part of your fingernails, your hand always in your mouth, and no one will ask you why.

xanthic

this will be the shade of your sister's skin, your grandmother's teeth, the shadow of nicotine cloud.

yellow

there is a picture in the book on your sister's shelf where tiny stars shine like cold melted butter. you will pull the tab at the edge of the page and watch as the night splits apart, the bright sun bursting like an unshelled fruit into the bare-boned autumn morning.

zinnwaldite

you will stay in your mother's room. you will not leave. keep your eyes in the bag, keep pulling out jewelry, keep closing your hands. the stones are red, blue, orange, green—there are no other words. the jagged one, the one you clench in your palm until a scar line of teeth burns into your skin, is a gray that's almost gold. do not let go. do not let go.



Erasers

Alison Missler
Young Harris College

My boyfriend lost one of his red Chacos last night. I'm pretty sure it must have happened somewhere after the cheesecake, and before the lake swim—I can't be sure though. Honestly, last night was the most uncomfortable drunk I've been in a while. It was the kind of uncomfortable that you get in the third grade, when the boy you (and all of your third grade friends—whose last names you can't remember) have been obsessing over asks to borrow a pencil. Of course you're excited and eager—you know you have a pencil, so you reach in your desk, pull out your pencil box with marker scribbles all over it and you see *it* laying there. *It* is the only pencil you have. *It* is the ridiculous Valentine's Day one, with the giant heart eraser that doesn't work worth shit. You're mortified and he is staring at you with his shaggy hair and same style tennis shoes he's worn since you first met him swinging in the first grade. All you can think in your prepubescent mind is he's going to know you've been passing notes about him. That secretly, you pretended that when your teacher—let's call her Mrs. Wood—gave you the eraser it was from him, a token of his love. Naturally, he doesn't pick up on it—I guess some things don't change between third grade and twenty five—and he takes the pencil and walks to the sharpener and you—you are still mortified. The whole time you keep thinking how bad you want that shit eraser to scrub yourself out of the setting, but remember it's a shit eraser so natural that can't happen. That's the type of uncomfortable drunk I was last night, like someone had gone into my pencil box.

Really though, the only box that was broken into was by me, and it was a \$15.34 box of cheap white wine. I instantly regretted that decision this morning when I woke up with the worst hangover I've had

since college. You would think that with age you would learn your limits, but that wasn't the case last night. I had this whole plan for last night, really I was going to do all of it so well. I had been planning it the whole summer—which I had spent apart from Logan. He went out west to help set up a new store, he works for Half Moon Outfitters and they finally were expanding. I guess that was how I justified him spending the summer apart from me; it was good for his career, which in turn, would be good for us. I spent my fourth summer at camp—twenty seven hours away from him and fifty feet away from nine year old girls. I loved camp, don't get me wrong, but hearing about his elk sightings and cliff jumping made me itch for adventure. So—like a typical pintrester—I began planning the most spectacular day for when he came back. I just didn't plan on getting that drunk. Maybe I was too excited, when he pulled up in the address I had told him over the phone. I mean—it had been what—three months of letter writing and longing, and then he was just here. I swear I could smell his Irish Fresh soap through the front door.

Just like that, he was here again, and we were on this perfect planned day. I made those paper flowers and spritzed the pillows with my perfume and bought his soap for the morning after shower (which now I'm positive he'll want to take). God, it was so real—I mean it still is real. He is sleeping right now, his lone chaco resting on the carpet, solo style. Just why did I get so drunk? I felt it coming, like my stomach was boiling apple sauce. I should have stopped kissing him, but his mouth was so warm and steady and I just thought it would pass. It didn't. Now I'm looking through my suitcase, trying to find clean pair of underwear, wishing I would reach in and find that stupid heart eraser I gave away in the third grade to some boy with both his shoes.



the choice

Robby Nadler

University of Georgia

Rivka called Phillip on his University of Tennessee graduate student housing landline and announced that she was leaving his father. This was the week her son had come out to them. The week Mordecai, already in his fifties, then turned to his wife at the dinner table, got on one knee, and begged her to let him have a son with a woman—another woman who was young enough to give him such a son so that his family legacy would not die with Phillip. She said no and packed her things. His tears were genuine, and he pleaded for her to stay and understand his needs. But Rivka could not give Mordecai another son and would not let another woman do so while she carried his name. When she called her only child and told him these things, then asked if she could move in, Phillip was not in a position to say no to his mother nor ask how long she planned to stay. After all, she had chosen him instead of his father. Mordecai drove her to the airport, and they kissed goodbye with the same curiosity and fear of the first kiss they ever shared.

For Rivka, it was not terrible having a gay son or living in Knoxville. Phillip gave her the only bedroom in the apartment and slept on a sofa in the living room. His friends found it charming that he took in his mother. They would invite her out with them for drinks at a jazz bar that played no jazz. This gay thing was new to her, but it involved going to lectures on the campus and stopping into art galleries she did not know you were allowed to walk into if you were not going to buy something. And these things—things she never did with Mordecai—she enjoyed. In fact, it was these memories and not the burden of being her age with no money and

imposing on her son that stayed with her as the thing with no name, then the long name of Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease, took a little more of what it could from her mind day after day.

By the end, she could not remember how long she had lived with Phillip. She did not remember if he had ever found love or finished his doctorate and left Tennessee. She did not remember Mordecai remarrying a secretary in his office and one day did not even remember Mordecai. In her last moment of awareness, she could tell she was in a tub full of warm water. Then arms moving between her legs to make sure she was clean everywhere. Those same arms lifting her from the water as if she were a baby. They let her down gently in a soft bed and swaddled her in thick blankets. She did not comprehend anything except for the ideas of softness and warmth enveloping her. And though she could not understand the impulse, there was some part buried in her even she could not communicate with anymore that felt she had chosen correctly.





Drama



Drama

Old Woman Does Talk, the Youth Does Walk

Shanice Bennerson
Agnes Scott College

List of Characters

Dorothy: A young, twenty-six years old woman. Her speech is marked by a higher education but is prone to colloquial slang. Edith's daughter.

Edith Jacobs: A fifty-five-year-old woman who spends too much time daydreaming. A perpetual liar and braggart.

Mother Jacobs: A seventy-six-year-old matriarch who is dying from leukemia. She is especially sharp-tongued. Mother of Edith and Janelle.

Janelle Hewlett: A well to do forty-six-year-old who lacks tact. Edith's younger sister.

Scene

Christiansted, St. Croix, USVI, in Estate Princess on Mother Jacobs's front porch. The concrete is painted yellow and white and the porch is plainly furnished. A rocking chair is placed near the screen door, which has a cord phone attached to the wall adjacent to it for easy access. A folding table with two rickety, sun burnt chairs to the right of the rocking chair. Potted plants are scattered about.

Time

Present day on a late spring day.

SETTING: The porch on a late afternoon during late spring.

MOTHER JACOB's rocking chair is placed near to the screen door, which has a cord phone attached to the wall adjacent to it for easy access. A folding table with two rickety, sun burnt chairs to the right of the rocking chair.

AT RISE: EDITH, a small miserly looking woman in a simple house dress and brown slippers, is sitting at the table, sorting through stacks of papers and envelopes intently. She sighs periodically and moves the papers from one stack to the other in a slow, mechanical fashion. MOTHER JACOBS is sitting in her rocking chair with a thin blanket draped over her legs. Her thin frame is frail but her posture is assertive, like a mongoose on the hunt. She is eyeing the back of EDITH's head, obviously upset. EDITH doesn't notice the glare. MOTHER JACOBS reaches for the phone and makes a call.

MOTHER JACOBS

(talking on the phone)

Afternoon, Maebell. How are you? Good to hear it. I holdin' on, my dear. T'ain much that could kill your friend and you know my work here on this Earth t'ain done. You hear my grandchild back on St. Croix?

(sucks her teeth after a pause)

Yes, yes, don' sound so proud! We's experiencing a mass excedus from this country and it is shame. Shame on every last Virgin Islander who born here and pick up and does leave from this community.

(EDITH raises her head from her papers, listening to MOTHER JACOBS.)

MOTHER JACOBS (Cont'd.)

What a ting! Maebell, you and I's an endangered species. We born here, raise here, work here and goddammit I goin' dead here! Me naw know wha' wrong with these children we bruck our backs for.

(knodding earnestly to something Maebell says)

You right, you right. Too much violence and poverty for these children to want to stay here. That's what Dorothy does tell me all the time. "But Granny, America is so much safer for me and the school is great". Well that's fine and dandy but what that got to do with the price of cheese in China? Bring your skills back here! All a we need a doctor and a lawyer, even a baseball player in these here Virgin Islands but no, they want to go live up state-side with they culture-less attitude and cold-a-rass winter.

(DOROTHY enters through the screen door wearing a simple, yellow dress that stops right above her knees. She is sifting through her purse as she walks past MOTHER JACOBS.)

MOTHER JACOBS

(into the phone)

Lemme call you back.

(hangs up the phone, to DOROTHY)

Child for Yansy, where the rest of your cloth?

DOROTHY

(looking down)

What are you talking about, Granny? What I have on is fine.

MOTHER JACOBS

Is everything in that suitcase skimpy? How you does breathe in America? Through your neck?

DOROTHY

(too loud)

Look here, Granny! You are going to stop talking to me like you got stones between your ears. I bought these clothes with my own money and on my own time. Just 'cause the clothes I got on aren't hand stitched by you doesn't mean that they aren't appropriate. Besides, this is not 1940!

EDITH

(without looking up from her stack of papers)

Stop all that hollering, Dorothy.

Drama

DOROTHY

Mommy, is my dress inappropriate? Please say no so craze-o can leave me be.

EDITH

(examining the dress with approval)

It is very pretty! You could've bought your mother one.

MOTHER JACOBS

(laughing)

You couldn't get half your ass in that dress!

DOROTHY

(trying to hold in her giggles)

Granny, don't be mean!

EDITH

(angrily)

All I is saying is you walking 'round town looking all pretty and your poor mother is looking like a pluck chicken!

DOROTHY

You don't need another thing else!

EDITH

Watch yourself, nuh? When last I ask you for something?

DOROTHY

(sarcastically)

I don't know...let me think: I sent you drapes for the living room, pots for Thanksgiving, vitamins for Granny, filters for the pipes when they broke last fall, and I even sent a whole computer I bought on Black Friday! I might as well ship the mall here.

EDITH

You does make me sound like a leech.

MOTHER JACOBS

You are. A leech, a succubus, a parasite, a freeloader--

EDITH

Shut up!

(to DOROTHY)

I got my own money saved up for a ticket, honey. Maybe I could come shop myself if it is such a hassle?

DOROTHY

(annoyed by her persistence)

I said I would think about it. I got to leave now before the pharmacy closes. Granny needs her morphine.

(DOROTHY exits.)

EDITH

Woe is a mother cursed with an insolent child. Mommy, Janelle is going to be here in a few minutes. Before she gets here, what did the people from AARP say?

*(MOTHER JACOBS is sleeping in her rocking chair.
EDITH shakes her head at her and turns back to her papers.)*

EDITH

Figures after all the fussing she gone fall sleep.

*(JANELLE enters and takes a seat across from EDITH.
JANELEE looks young for her age with a false, agreeable air
about her. She is professionally dressed. She rests her
briefcase by her feet, talking feverishly.)*

JANELLE

Good afternoon. Sorry I late. Jeremy's volleyball practice ran late and I had to make sure he had something in he belly before he and he brother them start bawling bout they hungry. I don't know why God give me boy children and not a girl child likes Dorothy.

(looking around)

Where is she?

EDITH

She left to go to the pharmacy before it close. Why?

JANELLE

All a we gah be here to talk.

EDITH

We just talkin' 'bout this month's bills. It seems like they never stop! You know this woman didn't even bother to call the AARP people? And watch, all she does do now is sleep and make a ruckus in my house. The nerve!

*(JANELLE frowns at her sister and looks over at her
mother in the chair. MOTHER JACOBS still appears to
be sleeping.)*

JANELLE

(between clenched teeth)

I really wish you would hush up your mouth. You livin' in Mommy house. You ought to be grateful she didn't let your ass stay in Grove with the robbers and rapists after Dorothy graduate college.

EDITH

I is grateful. I does cook and clean up after she in her old age. Just like the Bible say.

JANELLE

(resigned)

That's not the conversation I wanted to have with you today.

Drama

EDITH

(sliding the bills towards JANELLE)

Psh. T'ain realize you could have conversations.

JANELLE

(pushes them back)

These bills are the least of our problems.

EDITH

What else could be worse than owing money you don't gah?

JANELLE

(soberly)

Mommy's MRI's and blood samples came back yesterday and the doctors said the treatment is no longer working. They told me we may as well start planning for a funeral and make sure to reserve a plot. Guaranteeing a spot on island is hard with all these murders every other week.

EDITH

(pressing her lips together)

Oh gosh, the devil busy, eh? All this house and not a soul to keep it.

(JANELLE gives her a scandalized look.)

EDITH

Janelle, you can keep it. You can sell it or you and Larry and the boys can move here if you want but I t'ain staying here long after Mommy pass. I goin' go be with my daughter.

JANELLE

(rising from her chair)

I don't believe you--

(DOROTHY enters. JANELLE readjusts herself in her seat, agitated.)

DOROTHY

Aunty! How are you? I didn't know you were coming over today.

(DOROTHY walks over and shakes MOTHER JACOBS awake.)

DOROTHY

Granny, wake up now and take your medication.

MOTHER JACOBS

(angrily)

Oh gosh, woman! More horse pills and more chemicals in my body! It don' make no difference cause I goin' dead soon.

(She takes the pills anyway.)

DOROTHY

Don't say things like that! We don't know—

EDITH

But she's right. Janelle just told me the doctors said she don't got much time left.

DOROTHY

(rounding on EDITH)

How can you say that so calmly?

MOTHER JACOBS

All she care about is she-self. I done sit here and listen to she already auctioning off my property, her worthless ass.

EDITH

You's a devilish woman! nly demons does hear in they sleep.

MOTHER JACOBS

If I's a demon, you's a demon's child.

EDITH

(ignoring the remark)

Dorothy, baby, Mommy is grieving in her own way. I don't want to live in a dead woman's house. Too many memories and too much space for an old woman like me. It is best that I be with my child in a safe place so when the Lord send Gabriel for Mommy, I will leave to Atlanta to stay with you.

JANELLE

(losing her composure)

What kind of talk is this? I just tell you we must start planning funeral and you talking 'bout trip? You must be crazy!

DOROTHY

(seething)

Any discussion about moving is out of the question.

MOTHER JACOBS

(unusually sweet)

Why don't you ladies keep my house and live in it together? There is still room to build a few extra rooms; Edith and Dorothy can share a bathroom.

JANELLE

You must be joking! The foundation of the house is crumbling and you forget I married? Me and Larry just finish paying off the house we just built.

EDITH

(dreamily)

The perfect house is waiting in Atlanta for me. Complete with a Jacuzzi and a winding driveway.

DOROTHY

I live in a condo!

(exhausted)

It's small but it is my own place.

Drama

EDITH

Baby, you should just buy a house. You don't plan on moving from the city, right?

*(EDITH calmly wraps her arm around DOROTHY's shoulder—
DOROTHY's discomfort is ignored.)*

DOROTHY

Do you know how much a house cost in Atlanta?

EDITH

It can't be more than what it cost to build up Mommy house?

MOTHER JACOBS

You don't seem to even know the price of toilet paper the way you does just buy up shit.

DOROTHY

Tis so, Granny. She don't even remember how much I paying Emory to go school.

*(DOROTHY begins to pace erratically. Her speech
becomes informal.)*

DOROTHY

Thousands of dollars to get an education and all you askin' is what I can send you in the mail. Hours I spendin' in a post office instead of a library, trying to be a doctor, a somebody! But no, you's my mother so I does help you 'cause this island t'ain no place for a woman your age. But you know what?

EDITH

What?

DOROTOHY

You t'ain pay a dime for me to finish college! Not a tuition pay. Not a single room and board receipt signed!

EDITH

You untruth! I remember signing the papers the day you move in.

DOROTHY

Sign and pay is two different things! You sign as my guardian but not a cent come from your bank account.

EDITH

Don't lie on your mother so!

DOROTHY

If ever a lie come from my mouth, it was never that! But hear this: I should leave you here in a dead woman's house just 'cause.

MOTHER JACOBS

(acidly)

I t'ain dead yet you know!

DOROTHY

(annoyed)

You know what I meant, Granny. I have to live my life eventually.

MOTHER JACOBS

You actin' like life only exist in Atlanta.

DOROTHY

That's not what I meant.

EDITH

Then what are you trying to say? Jackie and Rudy already left after their children graduate college.

JANELLE

(tired of EDITH's lies)

Jackie husband dead last year and she is handicapped. She couldn't live here when all her children either dead or away. Otis wasn't 'bout to leave his mother here.

EDITH

Like Dorothy leaving me here to dead.

JANELLE

T'ain a ting wrong with you, Edith, but there is something wrong with your damn head. You expect people to take care of you. Rudy been had that house in Maryland since '06. She was waiting for her youngest to get through elementary before she move.

EDITH

(whimpering)

Oh sister, is that really what you think of me? I, who help raise you when Daddy leave went Vietnam?

MOTHER JACOBS

Don' use my husband to get your way!

JANELLE

You actin' like Mommy t'ain wuk to keep you and me fed and clean and educated.

MOTHER JACOBS

(attempting to get up)

Dorothy, go geh my belt...I gonna buss Edith ass.

DOROTHY

(as if talking to a child)

Keep still! Granny, you can't even walk properly...let alone beat anyone.

JANELLE

Please keep still, Mommy. You raising my blood pressure.

Drama

(MOTHER JACOBS stays seated, pouting.)

JANELLE

Edith, you got a lot of things twisted up in your head.

EDITH

I did help take care of you while Daddy was gone! Don' sit there and lie on me.

JANELLE

Oh, everybody but you is a liar.

EDITH

(matter-of-fact)

Why yes!

MOTHER JACOBS

You does make dog sick and cat vomit, your slack ass.

EDITH

That's exactly why I t'ain staying here. Everything here goin' remind me of your hate-harboring self.

DOROTHY

You t'ain goin' a place! You deaf, mehson...

EDITH

Now you disrespecting me! ow rude children does get once they feel they grown.

DOROTHY

I would say sorry but I t'ain sorry!

EDITH

(vehemently)

You ought to be! pendin' all my days takin' you from this practice to the other. Steel band, majorette, Girl Scouts, what weren't you in? make sure you was good enough for any college to take you and now you actin' ungrateful? h, the devil is really busy today!

(MOTHER JACOBS begins to laugh so hard sending her into a coughing fit. JANELLE goes into the house and brings back a glass of water)

JANELLE

Stop all that grumbling, Edith.

DOROTHY

You goin' kill her sooner than need be.

(speaking slowly)

Mommy, you did a lot for me, like any mother should but my gosh...your memory must be short. You took me to those things because every woman that was about anything had kids in those organizations.

MOTHER JACOBS

(wheezing)

Tis true.

JANELLE

(to MOTHER JACOBS)

Don't talk so much. Let Dorothy handle her crazed mother.

DOROTHY

(to EDITH)

You sat there and cart me across St. Croix chatting with this body and the next body while I sweat in the sun. No "I'm so proud," just "that's my daughter, ya know"

EDITH

Everyone shows pride in different ways.

DOROTHY

Pride is a sin.

EDITH

My time was spent with you and on you. I wanted you to get the recognition you deserved.

JANELLE

What recognition? What ever happen to making sure she got into college?

DOROTHY

(almost to herself)

The devil is making my job easy today...

EDITH

Most children on this island don' make it to college.

JANELLE

What you meant to say is "not every parent can say they child went college."

EDITH

I did what any responsible mother would have done.

DOROTHY

What about Daddy? ou making it sound like you raise me on your own.

EDITH

Yansy tis a broke Rastaman. All he do is show up and walk around like he was the best father of the millennium.

DOROTHY

He was to me! e t'ain have much money but he was there.

MOTHER JACOBS

Money this, money that! You t'ain pay for much neither, Edith. Last time I check, tis me and Janelle and Yansy pool money together for this child to have uniform for all them damn clubs you kept signing she up for. All show and no work.

Drama

DOROTHY

If they were the people paying for me then why did you make a fuss when I needed sneakers for the parade senior year?

EDITH

(angry)

Cause they wanted you to wear white sneakers! Expensive white sneakers! What was so wrong with the sneakers you had?

JANELLE

Didn't they have holes in them?

(DOROTHY nods sarcastically.)

EDITH You would have been alright. You was on a float anyway.

JANELLE

And you would be on the side of the road, walking the route makin' sure all man and woman see your child playing steel pan.

(imitating EDITH)

"Yes, that's she! The pretty one on deh left. She goin' be in the Adult parade tomorrow with St. Croix majorette. She talented, just like her Mommy."

(DOROTHY laughs despite herself.)

DOROTHY

Is that how she sounds, Auntie?

MOTHER JACOBS

If I knew Janelle could act so, I would've put her in theatre years ago! Gold, Oscar worthy, Emmy nominated, a--

EDITH

Hush! I do not sound like that.

MOTHER JACOBS

Hush me one more time and I will chop you in your throat.

*(DOROTHY, EDITH, and JANELLE flinch.
They all remember being hit by MOTHER JACOBS.)*

MOTHER JACOBS

Edith, I guess I never could beat lying out of you. God don't like liars, beggars and thieves and you about to be all three. Tis the whole family come together to raise that child. Don't act like she owe you anything except respect.

EDITH

It is not a sin to be proud of my only child.

(MOTHER JACOBS laughs bitterly.)

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EDITH

You did so much for everybody but me. Janelle went college and you even help cousin Evan move to Miami! What happen to me?

MOTHER JACOBS

Don't blame me for your own failures. I do enough for you and your sister.

JANELLE

Why you so damn jealous? I went to University of Florida on a softball scholarship. Mommy barely pay for my tuition! All she do was make sure I was comfortable, which is more than you did for Dorothy. When we took her to Emory, you was too busy browsing the campus to even make sure the child had sheets on her bed.

(DOROTHY sits in the folding chair and begins rubbing her temple.)

EDITH

I was making sure the place was safe.

JANELLE

You woulda know that if you had went on the college tour!

EDITH

I had to work.

JANELLE

So did I and I work for the government! I think Dr. Ricketts would have let you have a few days off.

MOTHER JACOBS

Why you arguing with this ass? You forget this one here is lazy! Even a log got more sense than she!

EDITH

I got sense!

DOROTHY

It can't be much when you want to live with me when you don't know a damn thing about living in the States. You live here on St. Croix your whole life! Only been on a plane twice!

EDITH

That is cause I been broke my whole life. Living in Grove Place does not produce plane tickets.

JANELLE

Grove t'ain got a thing to do with you traveling.

EDITH

Yes it does.

DOROTHY

I raise up in Grove, Mommy, and look at me. I done well.

Drama

JANELLE

Your mother want someone to watch her feel sorry for herself.

EDITH

(angry)

I don't need pity! I want ayo to realize that it cause Mommy t'ain do for me like she do for you, Janelle.

MOTHER JACOBS

You had a chance when UVI open years ago but you catch yourself being fresh. T'ain me that decide to have a baby and never go back college.

JANELLE

Exactly. We all sit down and was goin' help you go back school and you never get up off your ass to go back! Didn't even bother to get vocational training or join the military.

EDITH

What I going military for? Daddy dead cause of that poison in Vietnam.

DOROTHY

You could have done anything instead of crying broke. My whole childhood you crying broke. I get a job in high school and you still working for Ricketts, crying broke. I gone college and you still crying broke!

EDITH

If your father had just do the right thing, we wouldn't have been alright.

(MOTHER JACOBS glares at EDITH and motions for her to shut up.)

JANELLE

What you making that fuss for, Mommy?

MOTHER JACOBS

I was trying to swat a mosquito.

DOROTHY

Daddy was always around. He is a fisherman, Mommy. And you two never married.

EDITH

And for good reason.

DOROTHY

Cause he was a broke fisherman?

JANELLE

(in a bored voice)

No, because your mother tried to cut his girlfriend.

DOROTHY

(shocked)

When this happen?

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JANELLE

When she was pregnant with you. She show up on Yansy door telling he that the baby was his child and the girl pop outside carrying on like a drunk chicken. You remember the girl name Nina, the one that use to braid your hair, Dorothy. The girl say she tired of Edith following Yansy 'round bout a baby. Oh, what a scene it was when Edith buss her a slap and pull a knife on her!

EDITH

She was trying to get in the way of my child and her daddy.

DOROTHY

Why would it matter about the girl if you two never married?

EDITH

She wanted to say you weren't Yansy's child.

MOTHER JACOBS

(looking towards the heavens)

God, don't like ugly...

EDITH

Nina sure was ugly. One big eye and a mole...ick.

DOROTHY

Mommy, why didn't you get a blood test if you were sure--

EDITH

Too much drama! Yansy is your daddy and he knew it so why bother with all that!

DOROTHY

(ironically)

A blood test is more drama than you assaulting a woman and trespassing on Daddy's property?

(EDITH throws her hands up in the air and starts to exit.)

JANELLE

Where are you going? We still have to handle Mommy stuff!

EDITH

I gone see if Mr. Edwards gah any bush tea left for sale. Later!

(EDITH exits.)

MOTHER JACOBS

(sucking her teeth)

Her rass leave her purse here. She t'ain goin' for not a thing. We still gah tea in the cabinet.

DOROTHY

Why would she just leave like that?

MOTHER JACOBS

You t'ain figure out she bassady?

Drama

DOROTHY

I know that! She did not answer my question though...and I think you can, Granny.

MOTHER JACOBS

(high pitched)

Who me? Not I. I don't know a ting, my dear chile.

DOROTHY

Yes. You do.

(DOROTHY drags a folding chair over and sits directly in front of MOTHER JACOBS.)

DOROTHY

You is a nosy ole bat who knows everything to know about anyone on this island. You know who marry who, who gah children for this body or the next, you know who been elected for office since the end of World War II, which boat left the harbor this morning, and which plane took off this afternoon so there is no way in hell you don't know every last thing about your own children!

JANELLE

(nodding in agreement)

Mommy got the largest bitch network the world has ever seen!

MOTHER JACOBS

I am simply being a responsible citizen.

DOROTHY

Yeah right.

JANELLE

Why won't you just say what you know, Mommy? I love my sister but this is getting ridiculous now!

MOTHER JACOBS

That is between Dorothy and her mother. I have done everything I can do for my child. You know...

(She talks as if she is telling a story, rocking in her chair slowly and gazing out at nothing in particular.)

MOTHER JACOBS

When I had Edith, me and Walter try to raise she up to be a woman who could contribute to this country. We a prideful people, us islanders, who try our very best to be self-sufficient. Me and Walter never beg a soul to feed she and when Janelle was born, thankfully, Edith was old enough to help when Walter leave for Vietnam but Edith come up to be a bitter child. I watch her squander every opportunity this small island could squeeze out yet she never gave a damn thing back. All I ever wanted was for this family to be worth something. Not just loafin' 'bout and scrapping by.

JANELLE

Mommy...I am doing okay.

MOTHER JACOBS

Okay...just okay? You t'ain been listening. You suppose to give back and raise up this community. But you and your husband just make children and don' bother to see who they friends is and who they for or why that even matters. And this one granddaughter I gah just t'ain coming back...would rather watch the island sink!

DOROTHY

I said no such thing. I just don't want to live here. There is nothing left for me here. The same people that have been working the same jobs for forty years aren't retiring. The houses are so expensive that only executives of Sony and Virgin Mobile can afford them. The Arabs own every last gas station! What am I really going to do?

MOTHER JACOBS

You can at least try to change all that.

DOROTHY

What have you really done to change anything except participate in the local gossip?

MOTHER JACOBS

You too briss. I do my best in this community.

JANELLE

Enough of your talk, old woman! You know something we don't know and you're gonna tell us before we put you in the ground.

MOTHER JACOBS

It would do more harm than good coming from me. Tis for Edith and Dorothy to sort out why they does carry on so. Besides, Janelle, you know her better than most people.

DOROTHY

Yes, Auntie, you do! So spill the beans.

JANELLE

I already tell you. You mother and your father didn't marry 'cause Edith was actin' on crazy! What man you know goin' rest he head at night next to a woman that does walk 'round threatening to cut people.

DOROTHY

Grandpa did.

JANELLE

Besides Daddy. Yansy t'ain foolish. He take care of you the best he know how and continue living with Nina until Nina went back St. Lucia with her family. I figure he realize she was only trying to marry he to get US citizenship and was goin' send for her family after they marry. They had love each other though.

DOROTHY

Daddy isn't into institutions.

Drama

JANELLE

Me naw know what your father problem is. All his spiritual talk. "Jah this, praise the almighty that." Full of horse shit if you ask me. If he had do right, he would've marry Nina if had love her like he say, regardless of her reasons.

DOROTHY

But what does Mommy have to do with this?

JANELLE

More than you think she does. Nina never did like Edith. She say she was too fast, which was true. Your mother think herself sweet and was taking man left and right. Don't look shock, Dorothy! Your mother think herself holy now but she t'ain know a damn thing 'bout church or even what Jesus look like.

DOROTHY

So...Daddy may not be my daddy?

JANELLE

Maybe not. It doesn't change the fact he help raise you but I know that at the time my sister was sleeping with he, George in Whim, Jeffery that work Charles Howard, Kevin who run for senate last year, and--

DOROTHY

Lord Harry the Judge, you can stop now!

JANELLE

Sorry, sorry. I got caught up in who was who.

MOTHER JACOBS

Kevin is news to me. He teeth buck. I would never let his mouth near me.

DOROTHY

Granny!

MOTHER JACOBS

How you think you get here? Through osmosis?

JANELLE

Do even know what osmosis is, Mommy?

MOTHER JACOBS

I t'ain that stupid...I saw it on the TV last night.

DOROTHY

(amused)

What is it then?

MOTHER JACOBS

(proudly)

It is when water passes through a memory-brain.

JANELLE

You mean a membrane, Mommy?

MOTHER JACOBS

Same damn thing.

DOROTHY

(holding her head in her hands, laughter forgotten)

Jesus...I don't know what to think.

MOTHER JACOBS

All that money we spend on college and you t'ain figure out how to think yet?

JANELLE

I think she means she's confused, Mommy.

MOTHER JACOBS

Then say that then! Don't vex me so.

DOROTHY

All my life she has been making me feel like Daddy was a good for nothing and in fact she probably isn't even sure if he is my father. I mean, I love Daddy! He was always there for me.

JANELLE

Exactly why I say he's your father.

DOROTHY

But what did she mean when she said "if only your father did what he was suppose to do"?

MOTHER JACOBS

You know exactly what she meant. Stop acting stupid. You aren't stupid. That's why you should come home and run for governor.

(DOROTHY glares at MOTHER JACOBS. DOROTHY moves toward MOTHER JACOBS with her arms outstretched as if she is about to shake her violently. Before DOROTHY reaches her, EDITH enters.)

JANELLE

Just who we wanted to speak to! It was getting a little boring without you, sister.

EDITH

Mr. Edwards didn't have none left so I ended up talking to his wife for a while. They going state-side to sell at the Miami Carnival.

DOROTHY

So what? So you want to be in ting and go too, is that what you're saying?

EDITH

No. I am merely making an observation.

DOROTHY

Well, I have an hypothesis for you.

EDITH

And what may that be?

Drama

DOROTHY

You have no idea who my father is but you are sure that Yansy Pickering is not my biological father.

EDITH

(to JANELLE and MOTHER JACOBS)

What lies you been spewing to my child!

JANELLE

(Scooby-doo voice)

I don't know, Shaggy.

MOTHER JACOBS

The dead don't talk remember.

EDITH

You t'ain dead yet!

MOTHER JACOBS

Aww, she does know I am still alive. Thank you, Gabriel, for not taking me so soon.

EDITH

Answer me! What lies you been spewing!

DOROTHY

Don't accuse them of lies when you are the queen of lies!

EDITH

Lies, you say? It wasn't a lie that it was me that was struggle to feed you after Hugo smash our first house down. Tis me that clothe your scrawny rass when you needed it and bathe you after you catch dengue fever! Me, not your daddy who you love so damn much.

DOROTHY

That's cause he t'ain a liar!

JANELLE

Or a beggar.

MOTHER JACOBS

Or a thief.

EDITH

Whose side are you on anyway, Janelle?

JANELLE

My niece since you is so ready to bury our mother.

EDITH

(groaning)

Why are you treating your mother so bad, Dorothy, all I ever do was love you! Oh Lord in heaven, send me--

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MOTHER JACOBS

Shut all that noise up! I dying over here! Don't send me to heaven any early than I need to.

EDITH

But she is--

MOTHER JACOBS

Deserving of the truth. Stop lying to the damn child. She don't owe you a ting, Edith, but you owe her the truth.

EDITH

What truth are you talking about?

(MOTHER JACOBS gives EDITH a look that could kill a thousand men.)

MOTHER JACOBS

Open the mouth God give you or I goin' tell her what you should have told her years ago.

JANELLE

I done tell her all about your whoring. Your ship is already sinking.

EDITH

All a that you tell my child?

(JANELLE looks EDITH boldly in the eye, nodding comically.)

EDITH

Okay. Um...well, you see when I was in school there was this guest professor from Florida. His name was Paul Watkins. He was so tall and handsome! Young too. I think he came cause the government said it would pay off his loans but that wasn't important to me. He was young and he wasn't from here. So I chat him up and show him the island. Eventually, we end up together, in secret of course. He didn't want to lose his job and without the job he woulda lose me. What good is he if he can't take me out, right? But this dude geh me pregnant and tell me it t'ain his! What kinda fraught...then he take off. Left after the semester done. But me and Yansy had been together a few times when Nina had piss him off so it was easy to say the baby was his so...I did what I had to do!

DOROTHY

That is total bullshit, Mommy. Absolute bull-sized shit.

JANELLE

It is pretty clever but I agree...that is shady as hell Edith.

DOROTHY

You drove a wedge in Daddy's relationship, harrass him for two decades just cause this Paul fellow didn't want nothing to do with you? You could have raised me alone like every other woman out there. Are you serious right now?

Drama

MOTHER JACOBS

You better take this truth while you can get it, Dorothy. This is the most truth she speak in 15 years!

DOROTHY

And you expect me to deal with you and take care of you when you had zero intention of telling me this?

EDITH

How was I suppose to tell you? Answer me that, Dorothy!

DOROTHY

Hmm, I don't know. It would go a little like this.

(DOROTHY goes to JANELLE and takes her hand while staring meaningfully into her eyes.)

DOROTHY

Baby, ah know you is just a little girl but Mommy got something to say. I made a lot of bad choices when I was younger and...

(sniffing)

Your daddy isn't your real daddy.

EDITH

(playing along)

Oh no, Mommy! T'ain true! T'ain true!

DOROTHY

Oh yes, tis true. I so sorry but your papi is some man I had no business fucking and he gone back to Timbuktu where he probably geh married and live happily ever after.

EDITH

(crying)

That is unfair! He could've taken me with him.

DOROTHY

(aggravated)

You does walk round with a permanent "I.O.U" slap cross your forehead.

EDITH

All I does expect is for people to keep they promises!

DOROTHY

You barely knew the man. Besides, how are you so sure I is his child when you was fucking Tom, Dick and Harry?

EDITH

I suspected but I knew once you was born. You gah his cooly curls and his eyes.

DOROTHY

Mommy, that could be any Creole person on St. Croix! I so sick of you...

EDITH

Don't treat me like this...you're my baby...my only child.

DOROTHY

You right. And I don't owe you shit. I am leaving you here to sort out your own mess.

EDITH

Yansy is a good man. You two always got along so well and he loves you.

DOROTHY

Yes. Daddy is great but you two fighting all the damn time is something I could have lived without. He always treated me different than all his other children because every time he try to do something for me, you had to make a case of the ass!

EDITH

But--

DOROTHY

Listen...don't call me unless you are starving, bleeding, or dying.

EDITH

Baby, don' be so. Let we talk bout this.

DOROTHY

I mean it. I am going to leave on the next available flight to Atlanta. I got the rest of my life to live without your constant lies.

EDITH

Baby, you can't do this to me.

(EDITH tries to hug DOROTHY. DOROTHY steps away from her. EDITH, blubbering, exits into the house.)

MOTHER JACOBS

What a tale to tell the King! You hurt the poor woman's feelings.

DOROTHY

(flopping down in a chair)

As if you actually care. You been waiting to see her put in her place.

MOTHER JACOBS

Yes but that is your mother...despite how much of a pain in my ass she is.

DOROTHY

Mother she may be but my death sentence she is not.

MOTHER JACOBS

You're upset but you should try and understand her.

DOROTHY

(sniped)

Understand? You knew but didn't say a naw word!

Drama

MOTHER JACOBS

I had no real proof but only a guilty woman does act on so.

DOROTHY

Oh well, I gone from here.

(to JANELLE)

Auntie, can I stay with you until I can find a ticket?

JANELLE

Sure honey. You sure you want to do this?

DOROTHY

What, you feel bad for she too?

JANELLE

Not necessarily but you don't have to be gone forever.

DOROTHY

I won't be gone forever. I need to build my life for myself then I will be back.

JANELLE

(sadly)

If you say so. I will go home and clean up the guest room for you. Do you need me to come back for you?

DOROTHY

Yeah. I will call you when I am done packing.

(JANELLE exits.)

MOTHER JACOBS

Are you really going to leave me here to dead?

DOROTHY

(in a small voice)

You may be a crazed ole bat but you're still my grandmother.

MOTHER JACOBS

When you going to leave?

DOROTHY

Probably next Wednesday. I will stay long enough to talk over things with Auntie.

MOTHER JACOBS

Talk over what?

DOROTHY

Your funeral and end of life care. The funeral director's son and I are close so he may be able to hold your plot for as long as you hold on.

MOTHER JACOBS

Hold on...I have lived a long time.

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DOROTHY

Dying is a part of life, Granny.

MOTHER JACOBS

Why you telling me? It feels like my only friend is Maebell. Where has the time gone?

DOROTHY

Forward. You want me to send for Maebell to come see you tomorrow?

MOTHER JACOBS

(smiling)

Yes, that would be nice.

DOROTHY

I will make sure Janelle comes by more often to check on you since I won't be here.

MOTHER JACOBS

Thank you, honey.

DOROTHY

(shocked)

Did you just say thank you?

MOTHER JACOBS

Don' act shock.

DOROTHY

(smiling)

You seem tired. You eat?

MOTHER JACOBS

(yawning)

I ate. I wonder if heaven has salt fish and ducana.

DOROTHY

(laughing)

It wouldn't be very nice without good ole Crucian food, eh?

(MOTHER JACOBS fell asleep for real this time, snoring softly in the rocking chair. DOROTHY smiles at her sleeping figure, wondering how much time she had left.)

DOROTHY

(kisses her on the forehead)

I will see to it that I can help make this a better place. I got to go pack.

(DOROTHY exits into the house.)

CURTAIN.

Sticking To It

Avanti Lemons
Agnes Scott College

SCENE 1

Time: Around 7:30 PM on a Tuesday night in March

Place: Fred's apartment in East Atlanta. It is in a small complex with around twelve other people. Inside Fred has tacky and vintage furniture similar to what you would see in a 70 year old woman's house. There are few pictures on the wall of his family. No television. NO computer. The focal point is his refrigerator that is covered end to end with magnets of all shapes, sizes and colors.

At Rise: Fred has just come home from work and just bought a new magnet and is trying to find a place to put a new magnet that he has bought on his refrigerator but is having a hard time due to the possibilities of all of the magnets falling on the floor.

Enter Fred, setting down his keys, bags and suit jacket.

FRED:

I really cannot believe that I've done this. I mean honestly, what am I going to do with myself? *(looks at audience)* I just came home with another magnet. But I mean, I couldn't pass it up. It was beautiful. All bright and red and shiny – like a brand new red Porsche. Heaven knows if only I could afford a red Porsche. Everything in this city is ridiculous. I'm paying \$30 for apple juice. I could be buying groceries, but then I'd have to open the refrigerator and the magnets will fall. I mean, where am I ever going to put this? I've counted 1,496 magnets this morning. Where will this go? One more magnet and that icebox is on the floor. Loud crash, loud crash, oh no, oh no. Happy place. Happy place. Now I'm hungry. Magnet! I meant PB & J. Want jelly . . . refrigerator . . . magnets . . . falling . . . oh no, oh no. Happy place. Happy pla-a-a-ce. I know, a nap will do me well. I can think. *(Fred lies down on the middle of the floor.)*

End SCENE 1

SCENE 2

Time: 9:30 PM on the same Tuesday night, after Fred's nervous breakdown about where he is going to put the new shiny magnet.

Place: Fred's kitchen where he has fallen asleep.

At Rise: *(Enter Refrigerator, named Selena, (actress with sign on that says Refrigerator.) Refrigerator is expressing her feelings about the events that she has just witnessed. Fred is sleeping loud enough so his snoring can be heard.)*

REFRIGERATOR:

Another day has gone by since Fred looked inside me. I believe it has been 283 days exactly. All he ever does is walk by or he'll stand in front of me for hours at a time staring, like he's . . . some sort of lost puppy . . . or something. Occasionally I may be touched, but only when one of his fingers accidentally drops into one of the dips between magnets.

FRED: *(loudly snores.)*

REFRIGERATOR:

I *(pause)* want to be more than a place for Fred to keep his magnets. I want to hold food inside of me. I need a reason to be opened. I need to have a reason to make ice again. I want to be disturbed in the wee hours of the night and aimlessly stared into and have Fred finally decide to get some water from the tap. I want to be a refrigerator. I deserve more. *(voice begins to crack on the last sentence)*
(changes into a more serious tone)

I will get more.

FRED: *(loudly snores)*

REFRIGERATOR:

It's usually hard to think with his snoring. I mean, he sounds like gravel in a blender. Ugh! *(balls her fists in rage)* I will go to him. Tonight in a dream. And he is going to break out of this fear. I cannot continue to support the magnets. But, they are beautiful to look at. *(sighs)*. No, focus.

End SCENE 2

SCENE 3

Time: Midnight

Place: Visibly, Fred's kitchen, however this scene actually takes place inside of Fred's dreams.

At Rise: Selena, Fred's refrigerator persona is taking a stand against Fred and confronting him about his magnet problem. Fred continues to sleep on the kitchen floor unaware of his surroundings.

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred. *(nice, softly toward Fred)*

FRED: *(moves a little)*

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred *(louder w/more force. Sounding mildly agitated.)*

FRED: *(Stretches his body, yawns, obnoxiously loudly, but continues to sleep.)*

REFRIGERATOR:

(Kicks Fred in the shin.) Fred!

Drama

FRED:

Ah! Oh! Eech! Ah! Gah! (*yelling as he is holding his shin*)

REFRIGERATOR:

Get up!

FRED:

Who said that? (*looking around*) (*Wakes up, runs into Refrig. Feels around*) What the?

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred!

FRED:

(*grabs onto Refrig: shoulders*) Who's there? (*panics*) What am I holding? giver the ??

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, it's me.

FRED:

(*starts to rub on Refrig, attempting to figure out what it is.*) Who's you?

REFRIGERATOR:

(*grabs his hand*) Fred, listen to me!

FRED:

Listen top who? Who am I listening to?

REFRIGERATOR:

Me, Fred. Selena. I've got a bone to pick with you.

FRED:

Selena? I've never known someone known as Selena and can we please turn on some lights?

REFRIGERATOR:

(*lifts up her hand and tilts her head back*) Let there be light! (*Light appears*)

FRED:

(*freaks out*) What the? How? You? Did? (*spazzes*) magnet? What? How? Oh my goodness. I'm so confused! How did you do that?

REFRIGERATOR:

Nice to know that you can put together a complete sentence.

FRED:

Thank you.

REFRIGERATOR:

Anytime. — Now, Fred, I've come to you for a reason.

FRED:

But I still don't know who you are.

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REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, it's me. We've been together for the last 4 ½ years?! I stand between the wall and the stove.

FRED:

I . . . don't follow *(scratches his head)*

REFRIGERATOR:

I put up with supporting 1897 magnets.

FRED:

The only thing that really comes to mind is a refrigerator. And that's out of the question.

REFRIGERATOR:

It's not crazy, Fred. I am Selena, a human manifestation of your refrigerator.

FRED:

That's impossible. I must be dreaming. *(looking around, pinching himself)*

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, I'm afraid that this is all too real.

FRED:

Real?

REFRIGERATOR:

Yes, Fred. Real. Real like Deal or no Deal.

FRED:

(stares at Refrig.) W-Why did you come here?

REFRIGERATOR:

I have come to deliver you from your magnet collection. It's taking over your life.

FRED:

You're nothing but a refrigerator. What do you know?

REFRIGERATOR:

I know that you hate loud noises and that's why you don't buy food to put inside of me because you are afraid that all the magnets may fall off of my surface. *(pauses)* I know that you spend a lot of money on eating out because you are afraid to open me and that's keeping you from paying bills, and that the light bill is 12 months past due. And that you are constantly worrying and buying more magnets and I know that this cannot continue. *(puts her arm on Fred's shoulder)*

FRED:

You know all of that?

REFRIGERATOR:

And more. Fred, I'm worried about you. About us. I may be just a refrigerator but I can tell when something's wrong. You need help.

Drama

FRED:

I don't need help. I can control myself.

REFRIGERATOR:

No, you can't. Fred, if this continues the lights will go out and I'll be in darkness. Please, don't put me back into darkness.

FRED:

Selana, I-I would never do that to you. *(Fred looks at Selena with empathy)*

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, yes, you would. You'll let them go out.

FRED:

You'll drop my magnets.

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, I won't just as long as you keep mindful about how many magnet you keep on me.

FRED:

I like magnets.

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, seriously. Focus Stay with me. I want to help you.

FRED:

Magnet! *(spazzes)*

REFRIGERATOR:

But you have to let me help you. We can't keep living like this. Something has got to change.

FRED:

Magnet! *(slapped by Refrig)*

REFRIGERATOR:

Are you listening? You have a problem. You have a fear of loud noises and your addiction to magnets needs to be fixed. Don't you have someone you can talk to? Any friend or family?

FRED:

No. I'm lonely. Lonely.

REFRIGERATOR:

But you can't keep buying magnets because you are alone.

FRED:

Why not?

REFRIGERATOR:

Uh, because it's weird. *(Sarcastically)*

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FRED:

But I like my magnets. They're pretty (*touches his heart*)

REFRIGERATOR:

It's okay to like magnets, but they shouldn't be taking over your life. You need a life outside of them.

FRED: (*starts hyperventilating*)

REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, are you okay?

FRED:

Yes, Selena. I finally see the light. Thank you. I- I understand. I can be more than my magnet collection.

REFRIGERATOR:

Yes you can.

FRED:

Yes I can.

REFRIGERATOR:

Now, Fred. My time is almost up here. But I need you to promise me something.

FRED:

What?

REFRIGERATOR:

I trust you that you've had some sort of sudden crazy new birth, and that you've changed. Repeat after me: I, Fred

FRED:

I, Fred.

REFRIGERATOR:

Am making a promise to a refrigerator named Selena.

FRED:

Am making a promise to a refrigerator named Selena.

REFRIGERATOR:

I will be mindful about the number of magnets I put on her at a time.

FRED:

I will be mindful about the number of magnets I put on her at a time.

REFRIGERATOR:

And get a life outside of this collection.

FRED:

And get a life outside of this collection.

Drama

Do you promise? REFRIGERATOR:

I promise. FRED:

Pinky swear? REFRIGERATOR:

Pinky swear (*they pinky swear*) FRED:

Ankle shake? REFRIGERATOR:

Ankle shake (*they ankle shake*) FRED:

Okay, I'm leaving. Goodbye, Fred. REFRIGERATOR:

Wait! FRED:

What? REFRIGERATOR:

Should we kiss? FRED:

No REFRIGERATOR:

But, you're so pretty. FRED:

I know. Now go, Fred. And remember, I'll be watching. REFRIGERATOR:

End SCENE 3

SCENE 4

Time: Early evening the next day.

Place: Fred's kitchen. The magnets on his refrigerator have decreased by around one hundred. He is making progress.

At Rise: Fred is sitting at his kitchen table thinking about the previous events of his day. Selena, the refrigerator, comes barging into the kitchen because Fred has backed out on his promises.

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REFRIGERATOR:

Fred, you promised!

FRED:

Promised what?

REFRIGERATOR:

Last night you promised that you'd get help. I saw you last night. You bought new magnets!

FRED:

I did not!

REFRIGERATOR:

I watched you. You got chocolate sauce on it, and you washed it in the kitchen sink.

FRED:

Yeah, you probably saw that. It *(pauses)* kind of did happen.

REFRIGERATOR:

And because you broke it. I'm gonna eat you.

FRED:

Eat me? *(confusedly)*

REFRIGERATOR:

Yes. *(Selena wraps her arms around Fred viscously shaking him and making violent chewing noises. Fred falls to the ground. He has been eaten. Selena burps and wipes her mouth)* Mmm Tasty! *(To the audience)* See, he should have stuck to his promise. ---
Now does anyone care for a magnet?

CURTAIN

rock springs

Robby Nadler

University of Georgia

Cast of Characters

BOY: An adult and also his eight-year-old self. Also voices his adopted brother, who is twelve..

WOMAN: Adopts BOY. Is made out of china.

SCENE: Memory's car..

TIME: Present.

Scene 1

Blackout.

BOY

I didn't always have a mother. In fact, for most of my life I didn't. The people who were my parents— my real parents— I was too young to remember them. My first memories are all from the orphanage. A purple windup dinosaur toy I played with on a carpet. Trampling across a lawn barefoot and not knowing the sudden pain was the result of a bee sting. (Beat) But I did have a mother once.

Stage lights up. BOY sits next to WOMAN in a car.

BOY (cont'd)

She was beautiful. (*Long pause*). Do you remember what you first said to me when we met?

WOMAN

(Not to BOY; WOMAN never addresses BOY, only audience.)

Hey there candle.

BOY

That's right. You called me candle. I didn't know what you meant by it. Despite how odd it was, it made so much sense coming from your lips. You in your long white gloves. That blue dress— not like a sky blue or a navy blue. Blue like every song Billie Holiday ever sang wound up on a spool. And sunglasses. After all these years, the thing I remember best about you were those white-rimmed glasses that took over your face as if you were wearing another larger set of eyes. I knew what sunglasses were, but I'd never seen anyone wear them. And here you were wearing them inside!

WOMAN

Joseph! Come here.

BOY

(In JOSEPH's voice)

Hi, I'm Joseph, and I'm looking for a little brother. Do you want to play?

And he led me to the backyard— away from you. But I wanted to stay. To ask you how do you eat a hot dog in gloves like those. But I didn't because I knew if I had any chance of you taking me home it was through Joseph. So I followed. And when we played cowboys and Indians, I volunteered to be the Indian because no one wants to be the Indian. Of course I "lost."

(In JOSEPH's voice)

Don't take it too hard buddy. You played really well for being six.

(To Audience, where JOSEPH "is")

But I'm not six. I'm eight.

(In JOSEPH's voice)

Eight, huh? You're kind of a runt for eight. When I said I wanted a little brother I didn't mean it that way.

(Looking at WOMAN)

I looked up into your sunglasses and saw my reflection: please don't leave me here. I'll do everything he wants me to do. I'll sleep on the bottom bunk. I'll organize his comics every week. I'll set the table every night if you just tell him I'd make a good brother.

WOMAN

Honey, but what do you think of him? Don't you think he'd be a good addition to our family?

BOY

You put one gloved hand under my chin to tilt my face up as if you were going to kiss me. A smile. A secret it's already been decided.

(In JOSEPH's voice)

I guess he's all right for eight.

Mrs. McGillicutty packed all my things while I sat on my bed watching. She said I was going to a good family, that I should consider myself very lucky. Oh how I did! I looked down at the bed that wouldn't be mine anymore after that day to avoid watching her cry. It seemed like the polite thing to do. When she was done, she kissed me on the cheek and told me "You were a quiet one. I always miss the quiet ones most."

Blackout.

Scene 2

Still blackout. Sounds of a car's engine turning blast into the theater over what could be the faint sound of crying or laughter.

BOY

(Perhaps desperate, impossibly sad)

I promise I tried to be quiet about it. I just wanted it to be over... and... and... if I did cry, I promise I didn't know I was doing it. I didn't know my voice traveled all the way downstairs to the living room. Couldn't hear your footsteps as knocking over my sobs with Joseph on top of me.

Drama

Stage lights up. BOY and WOMAN still sit in car.

WOMAN
(Stupid with shock)

Oh.

Long pause.

BOY
For that handful of months, there had been so much noise in that house. Good noise. The muffled sound of baseball impacting a mitt. The crunch of teeth breaking down pretzels and chips.

Then the creak of a door opening followed by poisoned silence. We all moved through the house unable to look at each other, unable to exchange in the most basic of pleasantries. It was the silence of animals in a forest who dare each other to make the first move after a gunshot.

Finally, one week later at the dinner table you set your napkin down after a spoonful of soup.

WOMAN
I have enrolled you, Joseph, in summer camp. It's next to a lake in Minnesota. I have a brochure upstairs. Very lovely. Lots of sports. The children all look very happy in the brochure. You'll leave on Monday.

BOY
(In JOSEPH's voice)
Monday? But Harold's birthday party is next Thursday! He's taking us all out fishing on his dad's boat.

WOMAN
I'm sorry Joseph, but the plane ticket has already been booked. Your father has already canceled his meetings to escort you.

BOY
(In JOSEPH's voice)
I'm flying? Dad's not driving me?

WOMAN
I'm afraid not my dear. You see, your brother and I are going on a little adventure of our own this summer to find the best grilled cheese sandwich in America. Of course, we'll need to the car...

BOY
(Interrupting, in JOSEPH's voice)
Grilled cheese? Hah! You hear that dad? We're going to be flying!

JOSEPH spits plane noises mixed with explosions and guns shooting.

WOMAN
Joseph, please! We are still having family dinner.

The 43rd Annual Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival

BOY

(In JOSEPH's voice)

Sorry mom.

WOMAN

(Strange emphasis)

You're forgiven.

BOY

You mean we're going to drive around the country together? Like a vacation? Just you and me?

WOMAN

That's right. Just you and me.

BOY

I was so happy I had completely forgotten how I'd even ended up in that mess.

Blackout.

Scene 3

Still blackout. A rotary telephone rings.

WOMAN

I understand that this is taking longer than expected, but it's not that easy. *(pause)* So rent a car Jack! *(beat)* The principle? Are you seriously trying to lecture me about the principle here? Let's not forget that this was your idea. *(pause)* I don't care. *(beat)* I don't care Jack! This isn't as easy as you're making it out to be. *(pause)* I said I don't know. *(pause)*. If I had to guess, I'd say maybe three days. Just give me three more days. *(pause)* I promise. No more stops.

Stage lights up. BOY and WOMAN still in car.

BOY

Mom....

WOMAN

Sweetie? What are you doing here? I thought I told you to go swim in the pool.

BOY

I went, but a man from the hotel said I can't be there without an adult. Can I stay here with you and watch TV?

WOMAN

Mommy's not feeling well right now. She needs some rest.

BOY

I promise I won't make noise.

WOMAN

Tell you what. Here's five dollars. How about you go buy mommy a TaB, and you can order whatever you like from the menu.

Drama

BOY

No Grilled cheese?

WOMAN

Not if you don't want one.

BOY

Won't that break the rules?

WOMAN

(Sleepily)

No more rules. We're heading home.

BOY

I'm going to order a burger!

WOMAN

That's great. Hurry up now. *(long pause)* Yeah, he's gone now....

BOY

For over two months she and I drove from town to town looking for grilled cheese sandwiches. Diners. Restaurants. One time at a hotel in Memphis she went into the kitchen to talk to the chef after the waiter said they didn't serve them. The sandwich was pretty good, considering.

Our routine never wavered. We'd drive into a new town, stay at the first place that flashed neon vacancy, and wander around in search for a grilled cheese. Breakfast, lunch, dinner. It didn't matter the meal. You could order something with it. Fries. A malt. Pie. But always a grilled cheese.

We were in Cleveland when I noticed a rack of pamphlets advertising the local attractions. I said it's not a real vacation if you spend all day eating sandwiches and swimming in a pool by yourself. She agreed, and she took me to see the James A. Garfield Monument and Lake View Cemetery. We bought a camera. I had never had someone take my photo before. I said that at the end of the trip I could put all the photos in an album and bring it to the first day of school, so when the teacher asked about what I did for my summer vacation, I could show the whole class.

WOMAN

That's a grand idea.

Blackout.

Scene 4

The car's ignition dies. Stage lights up. BOY and WOMAN sit in the car staring out into the distance. BOY, slowly, begins to cry.

BOY

No... Please don't do this. Please.

WOMAN

I'm sorry, but it's time. All your stuff is in the trunk. I promise I packed everything.

BOY

I don't care about my stuff. I don't want to go. There's nothing here. I'll run after you as soon I get out.

WOMAN

The house is just a mile up the road. The highway is about ten miles behind us. You're smart. You know the house is your best bet.

BOY

At least drive me to the house. Why won't you drive me to the house?

WOMAN

You know I can't do that. I can't... these people know you're coming, but they don't know me. I'd like to leave it like that.

BOY

Please don't. I tried so hard! Didn't I behave this whole time?

WOMAN

Of course you did. You were a swell kid the whole time.

BOY

Didn't you have fun with me?

WOMAN

Sometimes.

BOY

Sometimes? Is that why you're leaving me? Because if that's it I can try harder! I'll show you. We can go wherever you want.

WOMAN

Oh it wasn't about the fun. You couldn't have done anything differently. We were always going to end up here.

BOY

But I tried so hard! Please.

WOMAN

Did you?

BOY

In Frankfurt. When I was taking pictures of you, I accidentally opened the camera... and there was no film in it.

WOMAN

Why didn't you say anything then?

BOY

Because I thought it was a game... or maybe I could change your mind if I just did what you wanted. Please don't make me get out of the car.

Drama

WOMAN

You're too young to understand... maybe you won't ever understand why I have to do this.

BOY

I promise I didn't want him to do it to me!

WOMAN

Shhhhh... I know, I know.

BOY

I promise I won't ever tell! I'll do all the dishes every night and vacuum and get all As and anything you want. Please!

WOMAN

It's not about you. It's about him.

BOY

But I'm your son too.

WOMAN

That's real sweet of you to say... *(pause)* but you're not.

BOY begins a low, contained cry for a bit.

WOMAN (cont'd)

It's time now.

BOY

Will I ever see you again?

WOMAN

I don't think so. It's best to forget us. To forget me. I promise you'll be safer here.

BOY

I feel safe with you.

WOMAN

One day... maybe... I don't know. I just don't know.

Blackout. Sound of the car's door and trunk both opening and closing, then the car's ignition. A dim light drops on BOY's face, and he looks very old.

BOY

All these years later I rack my brain trying to figure out if I could have changed her mind. What if I had screamed for a policeman in one of the cities? What if I had picked up the phone in that stranger's house she dropped me off at to call Mrs. McGillicutty when everyone else was asleep?

I ate over a hundred grilled cheese sandwiches on that trip, and by now I've eaten thousands more. Sautéed onions with pepper Jack on jalapeño bread. Basil and tomatoes with mozzarella on focaccia. Once I even ate grilled cheese for dessert consisting of apples covered in caramel with mascarpone served on cinnamon raisin bread. All nice sandwiches but not the best.

Sometimes I think I should have at least told her that that diner in Rock Springs did in fact make the best grilled cheese sandwich I've ever eaten. Nothing fancy—two pieces of sourdough perfectly encasing just the right amount of cheddar. Simplicity done to perfection. You know, a small thing she could carry of me for the rest of her life. Instead, I stepped out of the car without a word and watched the sun bounce off the windshield, her face illuminated like a significant thing. Those big sunglasses making her look even more striking than that first day I saw her.

I stood in that spot watching the dust from her car carry her to the highway. Stood there maybe an hour. I didn't think she'd come back, but there wasn't anything else to do. I waited and waited until it no longer made any sense to wait, then walked up the long driveway to that farmhouse that would become just one of many more beds I would have during my childhood. I thought it then as my clean shoes dirtied themselves in the dust, and I still think today. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

CURTAIN



44th Annual Writers' Festival Finalists

Shanice Bennerson is an aspiring author, playwright, and screenwriter. She was born and raised on the island of St. Croix, US Virgin Islands with her five older brothers and two sisters. She moved to Atlanta at age ten where she used her unique perspective to create unique stories of fiction filled with diverse characters. In her wildest dreams, she has reached infamy while she lives with a cat in her California home admiring her published novel series.

Elizabeth Biron is a senior English major with a Creative Writing minor at Oglethorpe University. She loves to travel and has studied abroad at New College at Oxford University with emphasis on stream-of-consciousness literature as well as trans-continental generational narratives. She reads *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind and *House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende every year. She wants to specialize in Modernist Literature when she continues her education. PG Tips is her favorite kind of tea, and bottled is her favorite kind of wine.

Taylor Boltz is a soon-to-be-graduate in English from the University of West Georgia. She was the Editor-in-Chief of the literary magazine on campus, *The Eclectic*, and realized she loves bossing people around. She's participated twice in her school's study abroad to Spoleto, Italy for creative writing and will be finishing her foreign language requirement during study abroad this summer in Oldenburg, Germany.

Monic Ductan is an MFA candidate in fiction at Georgia College. Her recent work has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *San Pedro River Review* and *Prime Number Magazine*. She is a 2015 Best New Poets nominee. In spring 2013, Monic was named runner-up for the Diana Woods Memorial Award in nonfiction sponsored by *Lunch Ticket Magazine*.

Marcela Fuentes is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her stories have been published in the *Indiana Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Blackbird*, and other literary journals. Recent work has been included in *Best of the Web*, *New Stories from the Southwest*, and is forthcoming in *Flash Fiction International* by W.W. Norton. She has been offered fellowships by the Vermont Studio Center and by Georgia State University, where she is the Virginia Spencer Carr Fellow in Creative Writing.

Rebeka Garcia is a creative writing student at Berry College in Rome, GA. Her poetry, fiction, and non-fiction work appears in various local publications. When she is not working on her writing, Rebeka can be found talking about InDesign, dogs, and feminism.

Halden Ingwersen is a Junior History major at Agnes Scott College. In addition to writing, she enjoys confusing strangers and stockpiling coca-cola in preparation for the apocalypse. The latter would be going better if she would stop drinking all of it.

Avanti Lemons was born and raised in Atlanta, GA, and so hails from Grady High School. They are currently a student at Agnes Scott College, and are interested in a career in education. They refuse to categorize themselves as to what type of artist they are. They enjoy all forms of creative self expression from writing to visual art to music, however writing is their favorite. They say that writing allows them to say what their voice cannot. Their ultimate goals for the future are to be able to use their creative abilities to make a difference in the community, and eventually the world.

A senior at Young Harris College, **Alison Missler** is pursuing a degree in English with a focus on both literature and creative writing. She hopes to continue her education once graduating. Alison first found her passion for writing when she received a journal from an uncle. When not spending time in the classroom, she enjoys the outdoors and being lazy with her cat.

Robby Nadler is a doctoral student at the University of Georgia in Athens, where he and his partner live.

Courtney Taylor hails from a small town in Southeast Wisconsin and is an English-Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College. She served as the editor-in-chief of NANDI, the college's literary magazine for students of color and currently works on diversity initiatives in Agnes Scott's Student Government Association. Her poetry aims to resurrect lost narratives in history and address the politics of gender dynamics and racial identity in the U.S. She will be pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in poetry this fall.

Jessica Temple earned her BA from the University of Alabama and her MA from Mississippi State University. She is currently a PhD candidate in poetry at Georgia State University, where she works for the syndicated poetry college radio show *melodically challenged* and reads for *Five Points*. Her work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *Aesthetica*, *Blast Furnace*, *Canyon Voices*, *Negative Capability Press's Georgia poetry anthology*, *Loose Change Magazine*, *Red Clay Review*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, and *decomp magazinE*. Her chapbook, *Seamless and Other Legends*, is available from Finishing Line Press.



