

Agnes Scott College 50TH Annual
Writers' Festival

April 5th - 11th, 2021

**AGNES
SCOTT**
COLLEGE

WRITERS' FESTIVAL MAGAZINE STAFF:

Isabella Barbuto '21, *Lead Nonfiction Editor, Promotions Team, Poetry Editor, Fiction Editor*

Spencer Hatcher '21, *Lead Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor*

Sophia Ho '21, *Coeditor-in-Chief, Poetry Editor, Playwriting Editor, Promotions Team*

Gracie Johnson '22, *Playwriting Editor, Promotions Team, Nonfiction Editor, Fiction Editor*

Camryn King '22, *Design Team, Poetry Editor, Fiction Editor, Playwriting Editor*

Erin Maley '22, *Design Team, Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor*

Aminah Parris '22, *Lead Poetry Editor, Promotions Team, Fiction Editor*

Delaney Porter '22, *Lead Playwriting Editor, Promotions Team, Poetry Editor, Nonfiction Editor*

Claire Romine '21, *Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor*

Aevum Caelum Saunders '21, *Fiction Editor*

Camyrn Smith '21, *Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor, Playwriting Editor*

Damara Soto '22, *Design Team, Poetry Editor, Fiction Editor, Promotions Team*

Jlynn Whitehead '22, *Coeditor-in-Chief, Nonfiction Editor, Promotions Team*

Selection Committee

Jen Beagin, *Fiction Judge*

Monica Berlin, *Poetry Judge*

Ashley Farmer, *Nonfiction Judge*

Beth Marzoni, *Playwriting Judge*

All works printed in this magazine remain the property of the authors and may be submitted for publication elsewhere.

Send correspondence to Alan Grostephan, English Department, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA 30030, (agrostephan@agnesscott.edu)

© April 2021

For the safety and comfort of our readers, the editors of the Writers' Festival Magazine would like to include the following trigger warnings: references to sexual assault, self harm, abuse, and PTSD.

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS:

Dear Reader,

This year marks not only the 50th anniversary of the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival, but the first time that the event has been held virtually, connecting students and writers all over Georgia. By opening this magazine, you have become part of a tradition that seeks to bring together a variety of writers, students, and lovers of the arts through displays of creativity and talent. Although art is always meant to connect us, we find that this year the uniting aspects of the Writers' Festival are especially important.

The importance of the magazine is that it brings together the connective experiences of all the talented individuals who put their time, effort, and creative energy into the formation of this magazine. Despite the difficulties our world is facing, there is still a meaningful connection that can be achieved through the impressions of literature and writing. What is most important is not the chaos outside our window, but rather the warmth, love, and triumph inside our hearts. We hope this magazine will leave these impressions with you as you read along and discover how writing can make a difference in your community.

– Sophia Ho '21 and Jlynn Whitehead '22

HISTORY:

Building on a long tradition of inviting distinguished writers to campus to read their works, teach, and talk with students, the Writers' Festival began in the spring of 1972 with May Sarton as the headliner. A statewide writing contest for colleges and universities in poetry and fiction was the centerpiece of the event: the finalists' works were published in the festival magazine, and the visiting writers selected the prizewinners in each genre. Readings and workshops with the visiting writers rounded out the program, which was open to the public as well as to the campus community.

Today, the festival maintains these founding traditions along with some new features: creative nonfiction and dramatic writing were added to the contest in the 1990s, an alumna writer is on the program almost every year, and one of the visiting writers gives a one-credit workshop for ASC student writers.

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 Writers' Festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category. The visiting writers for this year's festival are Rita Dove and Jacqueline Goldfinger '00. This event 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 Leocadia I. Zak, Vice President for Academic Affairs Christine Cozzens, Eleanor Hutchen '40, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. Thanks to Eve Barrett for the magazine's cover image. Special thanks to Nicole Stamant, chair, and other members of the English department at Agnes Scott College.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Poetry

repeated chorus by Hannah Warren, University of Georgia-Athens.....	10
Consummation by Delaney Porter, Agnes Scott College.....	10
Residence by Bella Braxton, Agnes Scott College.....	11
Will the New Lawn Be a Meadow by Ceci Webb, University of Georgia-Athens.....	12
Mantra for Tired Merchants by Shreya Pabbaraju, Emory University.....	12
Letter from Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, Burley House, 1913 by Maya Martin, Agnes Scott College.....	13
Geminids by Emma Catherine Perry, University of Georgia-Athens.....	14
Menarche by Laurel Faye, University of West Georgia.....	15
Body Image by Ivy Clarke, Mercer University.....	16
Thanatos, or Something Gentle by Ceci Webb, University of Georgia-Athens.....	17

Fiction

Turn Up the Light by Marisa Manuel, Georgia State University.....	20
Nuisance by Paul Cunningham, University of Georgia-Athens.....	26
The Pioneer by Mike McClelland, University of Georgia-Athens.....	30
An Offering of Fear by Braedon Kelly, Mercer University.....	38
Butterflies by Camryn Smith, Agnes Scott College.....	44
American Encaustic by Emma Dollar, Emory University.....	50
Body Rites by Sara Masters, Agnes Scott College.....	54

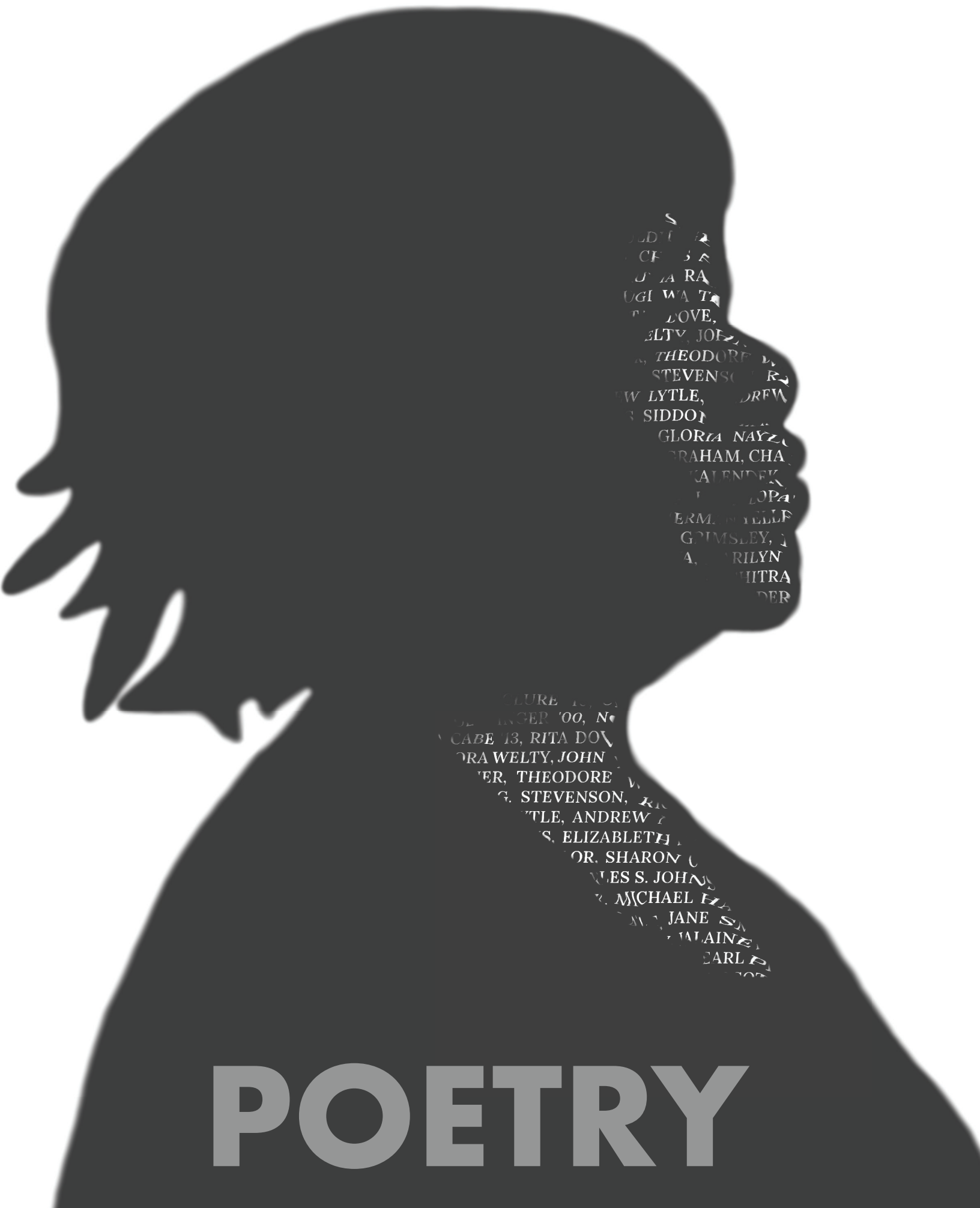
Nonfiction

This Haunted House by Eve Barrett, Agnes Scott College.....	64
Ducks for Ducks by Bella Braxton, Agnes Scott College.....	67
Divine Insomnia by S. Myya Johnson, Agnes Scott College.....	68
Seventeen by Ivy Clarke, Mercer University.....	71
Adrift in Altamont: An Apodioxis by Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia-Athens.....	75
Entheos, Genesthai by Anna Sandy-Elrod, Georgia State University.....	83
[Place Minus Motion] by Zachary Anderson, University of Georgia-Athens.....	88

Playwriting

Blood and Blackberries by H. Wagner, Emory University.....	96
Bones Under the Magnolia Tree by Maya Gelting, Agnes Scott College.....	103
If Memory Serves by Drew Mindell, Emory University.....	106

Honorable Mentions	113
---------------------------------	-----



S
ED
CF
A RA
UGI WA T
LOVE,
ELTY, JOE
THEODORE
STEVENS
W LYTLE, DRFW
S SIDDO
GLORIA NAYZ
GRAHAM, CHA
KALENDEK
LOPA
ERM. SYELLE
GRIMSLEY, J
A, RILYN
HITRA
DER

CLURE
INGER '00, N
CABE '13, RITA DOV
ORA WELTY, JOHN
ER, THEODORE
G. STEVENSON, R
TLE, ANDREW
S, ELIZABLETH
OR. SHARON
JES S. JOHN
MICHAEL H
JANE
MAINE
EARL P

POETRY

Poetry

repeated chorus

Hannah Warren, University of Georgia-Athens

if you split your tongue down the middle
& tied the halves together

if you sliced the floral tattoo from your thigh
& dried it on the kitchen counter

if if if you were anyone
other than who you are right now
would you have shoulder-warm seaspray
or an aversion for yellow?

you don't know when you stopped singing but
you don't remember what your voice sounds like
when you're joyful

when you left god you let your vocal cords
corrode in your throat

what does it say about you
that all the women you know
have violently transformed?

if you ripped the nervous system
from the base of your neck
it would come gently
alive and thriving in your hands
as it creates its own exoskeleton

if you abandoned your firm spine behind you
and scrapped the familiar gothic routine

if you discovered the mouth of the world
the place where it all began
you would still be here

Consummation

Delaney Porter, Agnes Scott College

in the Easter-
yellow-tiled bathroom

of our one room
three month lease

he tells me while
brushing his teeth
about how his grand-
parents honeymooned
here

(converted motel)
(Birmingham Alabama)
(Big City South)
(view of the parking lot)

I think of their
first-time

missionary
and wonder if
it hurt

or if they talked after
about their grandparents' honey-
moon or if they expected
their granddaughters to share
a bed with me

behind one of these re-
painted doors

Residence

Bella Braxton, Agnes Scott College

Every letter in my mailbox is addressed to the previous owner of the house.
Every tree on the property has chosen to branch in high places,
providing no opportunities for even the most industrious of climbers.
My neighbors are building something in their backyard;
it is tall and casts
its shadow stretching over my garden bed.

Before the power outage, I misunderstood the light.
Ice melted and swamped the floor.
Had it been permitted,
the smoke of my fire would have turned these walls grey.
The animals I fear are still smaller and weaker than the ones that sleep in my bed;
mildew grows quietly and knows
it is safe.

We must decide which holidays deserve decoration
and whether to put out the flag on the Fourth.
How much money will we spend on colored lights visible only from the street?

First, we soil the floor
so that we may again sweep and feel pride.
Neighbor children will knock at the door,
expecting candy.

Poetry

Will the New Lawn Be a Meadow

Ceci Webb, University of Georgia-Athens

"Space is only noise if you can see." – Nicolas Jaar

a lake is strung through
with braided wire

fence posts trail placidly
like dead fingers

participating in their own wake

seventeen-year cicadas
stir in the thorn

a wet season's parasite load
and the pack beast stops eating

exposed wires in a root ball
hang from the ceiling

amputated ombre tulips
standing like wrists in water

afraid to speak in the house
that it might answer back

the house stayed lit all night
and the sleeper too

convinced that a stray voice
has just said its name

its thin bone sticks in the ear

every Orpheum in the heartland
starts playing the same movie

a chorus of blueshifted Dorothys
go all technicolor at once

Mantra for Tired Merchants

Shreya Pabbaraju, Emory University

In Kerala, there are no boats,
no palms, drupes, canals or streams –
only those who build and tether
their faith in kettuvallam dreams.

My hands are anchors: I smother
turmeric on sacred snake groves.
Come, Nagaraja. Come, Vishnu—
and station in her craggy coves.

I pray softly, something like this:

*Preserve her dreamers, the tired
hulls and keels that keep them afloat.
Architecture is dead: are we
vessels drifting, worn to devote?*

I catch perch in my net, sell it
to vendors from Haryana.
Frugally, I still sit and eat –
Om Namō Narayanaya.

Letter from Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, Burley House, 1913

Maya Martin, Agnes Scott College

Lysol. Old lint. Sterile doorknobs.

I'll be here, in this corner, licking the smell of madness from my wounds, forever.

I hang immobile, suspended
in air halfway between insanity
and moonlight, listening to the
step-steps of the woman who will
take my dulled pencils away from
me.

I don't tell her I can't eat before I've cleared my stomach of words.

Eat speak nap breathe. What a weight it
is to forgive the pain for slowly
killing you. I reach for my scalp
and feel it smoldering still. The
person who's abused me
slowly, unphysically,
since my twelfth lifetime, gifts me
tulips which promptly
die.

Held by gravity in a field
between remembering and dismembering,
I place my pencils on my tongue
and
bite.

Geminids

Emma Catherine Perry, University of Georgia-Athens

no one's as human
as you are

you know that you are
the most other

how can I compete
with yourself

the world is full of signs
if you are looking for signs

see the sky like a dark
canopy tented

with an ineffable
linchpin

see the sky like a bowl
with the geminids

white seeds plummeting
around the basin

one quick wish
make it good

have you ever felt
the edge

of another's loneliness
looming at you

like an unlooked
-for shore

like an iceberg
in the otherwise

empty empty sea

what is that
vast continent

and how can I

I have

star-gazing
is a trying

is a sending at
some vague coast

and the geminids
like flares

some light to see by

Menarche

Laurel Faye, University of West Georgia

Because I'm bleeding, the intern asks:
When was your last period?
Date it from the first time

you prayed to the last time you meant it.
Answer as only I can: *You won't*
understand, but I was a woman

when I woke and it was right. Imagine
me, real and red in a way no man can
take from me. The speculum in his hands,

against my vulva, my scarred
pelvis, translating. Ask, *What do you*
see? and hear water

churning in the absence, the spur
of forced mountain, of tissue beneath
my gut. His cold hands, unbeliever

of the cicatrix where I was
sewn together. *Nothing*, he says,
and blushes. *Nothing natural.*

The exhale of metal and fingers
an apology

Body Image

Ivy Clarke, Mercer University

Every day my body wears me
and I am worn out by its weight,

by its incessant need to be real.
I am a girl half-seeing and half-seething,

kneading my cheeks, grabbing
fistfuls of my back and trying

desperately to recall the conversion rate
from loose flesh to loose change

as if the currency isn't constructed
on my own feminine destruction.

My mother says that the cost
of beauty is your own divinity,

and there are bruises on my knees
from praying to false gods

on backlit billboards. I want
to offer these hands I've always hated

like flowers to the altar of womanhood
but my average blood stains it with my sin.

Once, I walked past a bush and saw
a flower without a center. I wanted

to believe it had become overwhelmed
by its own infinitude, but the longer

I looked the more it appeared
to be a victim of evisceration.

Once, someone told me that
looking real and being real

are not always one and the same,
and when I look at myself,

I cannot tell where my body ends

and I begin. I can tell you

that the distance between *my* and *this*
when you talk about the body

is measured by how long
you take to write your own name

on a list of definitions for *sacred*.

Thanatos, or Something Gentle

Ceci Webb, University of Georgia-Athens

there's a quiet rage
looped
around my neck—
i've been a cowering
dog, snarling
at impermanence.
at night i
hide under lamplight from the three
knocks on my wall. i cover
my nose to
ward off phantom roses—i pierce
papers with unforgiving
black ink and hope
something stays...

i wanted something
deeper. i could not
let go of unearned
grief, for so
long wanting to sleep myself
into the trees, the bedrock—
i couldn't imagine
living

unrestrained.

but i want to be softer now. i want
to banish
the trembling awe, the chilling
possibilities— i want
to let warmth in
and let truth go. i want to live

untied, foolhardy, unfettered by
the chase of understanding.

i'll grapple hope
and tie a black
ribbon around it. i'll cover
the mirrors, silence
the dog, turn over the shoe
under the bed. i'll pray over
blue mornings, and talk

like the rain.
i can choose love.

i can turn off the light
and wait for
nameless things.



S
JUDITH
CFC 3
U A RA
UGI WA T
LOVE,
ELTY, JOE
THEODORE
STEVENS
W LYTLE, DRFW
S SIDDO
GLORIA NAYZ
GRAHAM, CHA
KALENDEK
LOPA
ERM. SYELLE
GRIMSLEY, J
A, RILYN
HITRA
DER

CLURE 13, O
E INGER '00, N
CABE '13, RITA DOV
ORA WELTY, JOHN
ER, THEODORE
G. STEVENSON, RIC
TTLE, ANDREW
S, ELIZABLETH
OR. SHARON C
MES S. JOHN
MICHAEL H
JANE
MAINE
EARL P

FICTION

Turn Up the Light

Marisa Manuel, Georgia State University

The morning of the zoo break began uneventfully. Most exhibits had been fed and watered, and in the centaurs' case, given their rainbow assortment of pills. The unicorns were napping, the pegasi too, and the sasquatch was attempting to groom itself. And yet, the zoo seemed uncharacteristically empty, for most of the staff members had flown to Atlantis. They were determined to bring back a kraken, and their combined expertise was needed to catch one. Only two keepers were left to care for the animals. Two against nearly a hundred. An unwise decision, perhaps. But the public demanded its cryptids.

The more experienced of the two keepers, Horizon, stepped toward the front gate, looking at the gathering crowd. The zoo still had nearly an hour before opening, but the public always came early. They pushed and shoved, demanding to be first in line, to see the cryptids, take photos, make faces. They were creating a spectacle themselves, and every snap of their phones confirmed it.

Horizon snorted, crossing his arms. "Not open yet!" he told the crowd. A cap-wearing boy flicked him the finger, but no one else in the crowd acknowledged his words. Horizon shook his blond head and stepped away, turning to his coworker, Maribella; she'd been staring at the crowd as well, barely blinking, frozen in place.

Maribella was short, dark-haired, small-mustached. She had a roundness that was holiday-like, and the pink of her cheeks could be from excitement, exhaustion, anything really. Today, Horizon suspected it was from many things, since the work of a dozen staffers condensed into two could take a toll on anyone.

"Every day, the same thing," Horizon said. "You'd think they'd get tired of this, huh?"

Maribella frowned, but she didn't respond. Her lack of words served as disagreement. At least, that's what Horizon suspected, but he'd never really understood his coworker—not in the half year she'd interned at Zuzu's, nor the few weeks she'd

been part of full staff. Certainly not in the awkward hour he'd taken her to lunch. Not on a date, not that he ever thought much on that hour, or much on Maribella, who—

A loud shriek rolled over the zoo, shaking the trees, the ground, everything. Horizon recoiled, and Maribella's frown tightened. The crowd, mostly adults, squealed and giggled, pointed and grinned. They all recognized the shriek: the banshee, grown bored. At least, that's what the keepers said, and the public had no reason to doubt them.

The banshee was in the process of a painful molt, so Horizon knew there was no need to check on it. Its wailing would die down, eventually, because the wailing always died down. But there was still plenty to do before the zoo could open, and the crowd was only growing more anxious. The gates pulsed against their weight. Their shouting grew louder, harsher, impatient.

Animals, Horizon thought, and the thought was far from original.

"You hit up the vamps, Maribella," he said. "I'll busy myself with the mermaids." He wiped his already sweaty palms on his already sweaty shorts. "Sound good? You up for it, yeah?"

Maribella gave a thumbs up. Then, she started toward The Cave. She didn't say goodbye or OK or anything else, and Horizon suspected this was an agreeable sort of silence. He had no way of knowing, so why not assume? Wasn't that the way of understanding women, like her?

With that thought, he was on his way to The Pier, trying to ignore the banshee, who continued to shriek—its molt was caused by Zuzu's lighting, the unfamiliar climate. Nothing could be done to help.

*

The sky was hot and blinding when Maribella reached The Cave; the moment she stepped inside, everything became somehow brighter, like the room contained an extra piece of sun. It was also warmer, but agreeably so, since Maribella's shirt and shorts were thin.

Everyone on staff wore the same material, as it was easy to overheat in the exhibits. But the cryptids preferred it this way, her boss had said. Even the yetis, constantly sleeping.

The vampires, one of the zoo's most illustrious attractions, were housed behind several enforced panels of glass. They weren't the grey-skinned, long fanged creatures of fairy tales. Instead, tiny black bats hung from the ceiling, each held in place by an even tinier, adorable ankle bracelet. They could flutter in place, even screech out a greeting. But they couldn't fly off; they'd never leave.

Oh, how Maribella loved the vampires! And how easy they were to see in the eternal light, because that was the way of the vampire, the truth behind why they avoided being seen in the day—they could only keep human form in utter darkness. Beneath the bright bulbs, they remained as bats, flapping their wings, swiping the glass. Unable to sleep, and unable to change, only able to hiss, and hiss, and hiss.

"Friends, how are you today?" Maribella asked, as she walked closer to the enclosure. She tapped the glass with a chipped red nail, and one of the vampires flew toward her, snapped at the air.

Maribella smiled. "Energetic today, hmm?" She loved that about her friends. If she could, she would stay here and talk to them for the rest of the day. She'd ask them about flying, drinking blood, their dreams.

She'd always dreamed of working at a zoo—Zuzu's, specifically, which had been around several years, since she was a child. Back then, the exhibits had been more like a carnival sideshow. *Step right up and see Big Foot! You'll never believe it, the amazing centaurs!* But as the zoo found more cryptids, bred more hybrids, it took on new life. New walls. New procedures.

One of those procedures was the no-darkness rule. Bats taking the shape of humans would be inhumane, *had* been inhumane, her supervisor said. He never explained why, and she never asked. People who asked questions tended not to stay here long. And Maribella intended to

stay forever.

When she'd heard about the internship all those months earlier, her dreams became attainable—and now, here she was, her dream made real. And here too were the bats, flying in place, happily hissing. Loving Zuzu's.

*

Horizon hated the smell of chum. But he loved the company of mermaids. As he walked toward them, bucket in hand, he continued trying to ignore the banshee. Its exhibit was closer to The Pier than The Cave. Much louder. He could have told Maribella to work with the mermaids and chosen the bats for himself. But enduring the banshee's wails was worth it, more than worth it, if only to hear the mermaids sing.

Already, he could hear them humming, and it hit his stomach, made it tight. He nearly threw himself forward, nearly ran toward The Pier, where a ten foot tall fence would keep him from jumping forward. Each new zookeeper was taught to resist the mermaids' song, and the fence kept all visitors from doing the same. Sure, some of them tried to climb it, some almost succeeded, but a keeper was always there to stop them.

As The Pier came into view, Horizon could clearly see the mermaids, red tails swishing, lips pursed as they warmed up their voices. There were three of them, all females, all inbred to the point of stupidity.

A week earlier, Zuzu's sole merman had died unexpectedly. He'd become stuck on the bottom of the tank, his tail caught in the water filter. And mercreatures—poor, dumb things—were air-breathers, like whales, or dolphins. The merman had suffocated within minutes.

Horizon had been on shift when it happened. Nothing could be done to help.

Now, the mermaids were all alone. Except for Horizon, of course, and he had to assume that was enough—that he was more than enough. Especially for the one with silver eyes.

He never touched the mermaids, of course. That would be obscene. Except, of

course, for the one who wanted it. Who batted her lashes and flapped her tail. The mermaids were half women, as much as they were half fish. And when they came up, gasping for air—how he loved to watch their heads fly backward. Tails sputtering. Mouths opened wide.

The silver-eyed one would tousle her hair and arch her back. He loved that most of all.

Today, she was sitting on a rock at the other end of the cage. Her long hair fell across her breasts, and she ran her fingers through the strands, watching the water fall down her arms. Horizon walked closer; she saw him and froze, then threw both arms into a dive. Quickly, she swam to his side of the fence, then flopped on land, and thrust her lips between the bars.

Horizon grinned. He reached into his feed-sack with one hand and reached for her hair with the other. The other two mermaids watched from across the water.

Horizon often tossed the other two mermaids their food, though he hand-fed Silver, sometimes, as he reached through the rings of the too tall fence. She'd grab his fingers, toy with them, yank them, like she wanted him to join them, needed him, craved him. Because yes, he was enough, even if some people didn't seem to realize. Even if one woman in particular had too much going on at work and preferred the company of bats over humans.

The other staffers had their favorite attractions, sure, but they'd much prefer to talk to one another than to stay with the cryptids. The same was true of Horizon, because as much as he enjoyed the mermaids, they needed him far more than he needed them.

They were beautiful. Their voices, especially. Silver, especially. But they weren't people, not at all. Maribella wasn't a mermaid. Less fish. Less beautiful. But more human, and that was something.

*

Maribella finished feeding the vampires, having only the slightest trouble with one, a Nyctimene Stokyr, who tried to fly through the crack through which she dropped their breakfast.

She thought that was sweet, that it wanted to see her, but she couldn't allow it. She couldn't break any rules.

"Goodbye, friends," she called as she left, closing the door behind her. Again, the vampires hissed their gratitude, and it warmed her heart to know they loved her.

Once out, she made her way back to the front gate, where even more visitors had begun to assemble. The already pulsing chains were starting to bend, and the giggles and squeals crescendoed, becoming shouts.

Above even those shouts, the banshee wailed. It hated the light. Poor, sweet thing. But there was nothing to be done to help it—not at Zuzu's, where the sun was brightest. Besides, the light was good for it, her supervisor said. Good for all of the cryptids.

Horizon soon joined Maribella. He was sweatier than he had been earlier, and he smelled of fish. "Vamps good?" he asked, not making eye contact.

Maribella nodded. She didn't speak.

"No incidents? Anything at all?"

"One nipped at me."

Horizon jumped, likely startled, because Maribella rarely talked around him. He grinned, and she regretted speaking, because his wasn't a respectable grin. Horizon wasn't a respectable man; that's why she'd given him the one date, all those weeks earlier, and nothing since, and nothing to come.

Her interest in Horizon had been purely born of misunderstanding. He worked at the zoo, she'd be working there also, and he must love cryptids the same way, right? She'd quickly learned his own interests were opposite hers, that her love for the zoo's creatures was only rivaled by his disinterest. He worked for his paycheck, for something stable. And—she suspected—for the mermaids.

The zoo's sole merman had died under his care. Her supervisor called it a tragedy.

"You've gotta be more careful with them," Horizon said. "What if one of them got out? One of them bit you?"

Maribella laughed. "They won't," she said. What silly beliefs and superstitions—the same beliefs that said they hated garlic and avoided crosses. Maribella wore one herself; they didn't mind. "What else is left?" she asked, changing the subject. As if voicing approval, the banshee screamed.

"Only the centaurs," Horizon answered. The words came hesitantly, almost like he was trying not to say them. Maribella understood why—running the centaurs was always the hardest, requiring multiple staffers, too much time.

How were they to do it themselves?

She wished the others hadn't all left that morning, though she'd understood their reasoning. Now that the zoo's sole merman was dead, Zuzu's needed a new exhibit, and a kraken could easily fill that role. But there were roles to be filled right now, and she couldn't fill them alone. She certainly couldn't fill them with Horizon—seniority meant nothing to cryptids.

"Ready to do this?" she asked.

"We'll just leave them, run them later."

"We need to now. Their legs need exercise. Those joints can't be cooped up all day."

"They'll be fine. The others get back in—"

"We need to run them," Maribella repeated.

Horizon crossed his arms. His grin was still there, still slimy. "Tell you what," he said with a snort. "If you can get the latch open, you can run them."

Maribella frowned. That wasn't possible. The latch normally required a key and two staff members to open. The bolt was intentionally heavy, too much for one person. A failsafe against the centaurs lifting it themselves.

Horizon pulled out his master keyring—the keys that let him inside all the exhibits: the centaurs', the wailing banshee's, and, even sometimes, the poor, poor mermaids'.

"What do you say?" he asked.

Maribella didn't answer; she grabbed the key.

The Mountain really wasn't a mountain, only a long plain of grass ending in a tiny bump. It was enclosed by a large steel gate, 20 feet high, and the gate itself was kept locked by several large beams. One of these beams ran across a door, and Maribella pushed the key into the slot and turned. The door unlocked, and with a grunt she tried lifting the beam.

Her arms strained. The beam remained.

She repositioned herself, gripped even tighter. Pushed up, all her strength.

Nothing.

One of the centaurs stood nearby, watching. A male, as most of them were, with a dark torso and darker legs. His arms were bulbous, hard as stone. His hair grew in slants, neither side unshaven, unlike the other centaurs, whose marks stood out against the baldness.

The centaur galloped towards her. Its tail swished behind, and now that it was closer, Maribella was certain it had no mark. Most centaurs had one, a horseshoe shaped stab in the side of their head. A necessity, for their own good.

The centaurs were an anxious group. Constantly needing stress management, which could only be provided through surgery. If this one didn't have a mark, it must be new, especially well-behaved. Perhaps inbred toward gentleness, like the mermaids.

Through the gap in the fence, the centaur reached forward. Instinctively, Maribella pulled back her hands. Then, she laughed. What was she thinking? The centaur was friendly. It wouldn't hurt her.

She repositioned her hands on the latch. The centaur reached forward once more. Hands on her own hands as she lifted, raising the beam, higher, higher, until it clicked out of place.

Wasn't that adorable? Maribella thought. The centaur was helping, almost as if it knew of Maribella's love for it and all cryptids. Almost as if it knew she was here to help. Almost as if the centaurs loved her back, almost as if they knew how much she—

Fiction

Crack! The panel swung up, smacking Maribella in the jaw.

Her teeth clanked together, and her head flew back.

She stumbled, trying not to fall.

The gate crashed open, and the centaurs were running.

They ran past her, legs kicking up dirt.

She fell over, fell beneath them.

Their legs trampled over her. Crushing. Crushed.

*

On the opposite side of the zoo, Horizon had returned to the mermaids. There was nothing else to do while he waited. Nothing else he wanted, at least. Their song was especially loud today, nearly as loud as the banshee, or the screaming crowd. He stayed a distance away, remembered his training. He controlled the lock, not the other way.

Silver splashed near the surface, then tried to pull herself up shore. She fell back in the waves, creating bubbles. But then, she resurfaced, and threw back her hair. Horizon walked closer, hand on his keys.

He hadn't been inside the exhibit since the merman. He was sure the other keepers had their ideas about what happened that day, and they were free to have those ideas. But his supervisor had warned him not to go inside again, not to have a repeat of last time. He wasn't sure what his supervisor believed had happened; nothing too bad, or he wouldn't still have his job.

Silver spotted Horizon, froze again. And then, she dove down, started toward him. But instead of resurfacing, the bubbles continued. The other mermaids looked at the bubbles, looked at each other.

Horizon hadn't liked the merman. But, he hadn't tried to kill him. No matter what Maribella or the other keepers thought—it really had been an accident.

He'd been in the exhibit, hand-feeding Silver. The way that he did, sometimes. Fish in

one hand, her hair in the other—her own hands wrapped tightly around his dick. It had been like training a dog, really. But instead of whistling and getting a dog to sit, he handed out a fish, and Silver did the rest. The other two mermaids would watch from afar, unmoving. Too dumb to do anything else.

Usually, the merman would sit there, too. Quiet, eyes barely open. But on that day, something changed. Instead of waiting off to the side, the merman swam over; he'd grabbed Horizon's arm. He'd pulled him off of Silver, and Silver swam off. But, the merman didn't let go, only held on tighter, and started biting.

Horizon had grabbed him by the neck. It had been instinctive. An accident. He'd thrown the merman off him, into the middle of the water, the creature's head smacking artificial land before it sank. Horizon watched the body fall, become dark and distorted, then float back up, chest facing the floor. And yet, his face wasn't down, or even to the side, but tipped toward the sky, eyes wide open.

Horizon grabbed the merman, touched his face, then shook him as if shaking could fix the nothingness in his eyes. But the merman didn't respond, just continued to stare, as the mermaids swam toward them. Silver screamed.

Quickly, Horizon grabbed the merman's arm, dove underwater. The body was heavy, but he pulled it to the enclosure's floor. He wasn't sure what to do, his mind already shrieking, wanting to escape the cries above.

He hadn't intended it. He really hadn't. But, the water filter gurgled beside him. The merman's tail spasmed, inched toward the opening. Still hearing the screaming, Horizon let go, gently pushing the merman toward it.

Horizon popped back up. Silver still cried. She tried to dive down, but he grabbed her, threw her back.

The bubbles had started slow. And then, they'd boiled. Finally, they disappeared altogether, and Horizon left to file his report.

Horizon had cracked the merman's neck, and he had drowned, and Horizon hadn't meant for any of it. But that's not what he told his

supervisor—he mentioned the drowning, and he mentioned the bubbles. The bubbles that boiled, like the bubbles that were boiling now.

Silver was a good swimmer. A great one. There was no possibility that she was stuck, or too tired to swim. And yet, the bubbles continued. She didn't resurface. The bubbles slowed, and then, began popping.

Horizon moved closer. The banshee kept screaming. The other two mermaids hummed as Horizon stared through the gate.

He could unlock it. He could walk in.

The mermaid stayed under. Horizon's chest tightened.

No one else was here. Not his supervisor, not even Maribella. Maybe he could reach forward, go inside—

He took out his keys, put one in the latch.

Thought of the merman. The minutes of bubbles.

Before he could decide, the banshee shrieked louder. Louder than thunder, or a cannon, or anything Horizon had ever heard. He turned toward its cage, and then, he saw it—the centaurs, running toward him. At him.

Horizon dropped his keys. He tried to run, but the centaurs were already upon him. The tallest one picked him up by his uniform and held him high. It threw him skyward, over the fence. With a gasp, he smacked the water on the other side. He bobbed back up and blinked away water. Saw Silver bobbing beside him.

"Silver," he tried to say, but the water choked him, burying the word.

In an instant, her hand was in his hair; the other mermaids swam beside her. They grabbed him as well, one on each arm. And then, they pulled him down, so very far down. They stayed underwater as their own oxygen drained, as Horizon's turned into small bubbles of fear, then into nothing. The mermaids did not resurface, nor did Horizon. The bubbles continued, until they stopped.

A centaur grabbed Horizon's keys. And then, the centaurs ran on.

The banshee continued to wail as the

centaurs arrived, and they flipped through the keys until they found one that fit. With a turn of the lock, the banshee was free. It rolled out of its cage, pulled at its skin.

The centaurs ran through the rest of the zoo, stopping at each exhibit and releasing the animals. They first helped the pegasi, whose wings were clipped, but they could still run, and did run, and were free. The sasquatch was next, and it beat its chest as the centaurs reached for the lock. One lowered his hand, and the sasquatch sniffed. Its mouth curved up, and it let out a joyous shriek as the door flew open.

In this way, the centaurs freed the fairies, two dozen gnomes, a pair of bonded cherubs, even a witch's familiar. Then, the centaur led their kinsmen to the zoo's entrance, where the crowd had grown bigger, louder, impatient, eager to enter, ready to ooh and ahhhh and tap on glass and make a spectacle.

Seeing the creatures, some customers laughed.

What trick is this? What has the zoo prepared for us now? Even their whispers formed a wail. Cryptids, outside of their cages! But soon, they realized the creatures were not merely out of their cages—the creatures were no longer the zoo's. They ran through the crowd, pushed their way through, never biting or scratching, but not caring who screamed or ran, or was unable to run. They escaped, and thus they were free, and they scattered the world. Disappeared in plain sight.

*

Perhaps the centaurs forgot the vampire bats, or maybe they feared their true vampire form, which was not that different from that of the humans. Whatever the reason, the bats remained in The Cave, flapping in place beneath the eternal light. When the other staffers returned, no kraken in tow, they made the room even brighter, even hotter—so hot that the vampires shrieked, withered to ash, but the keepers did nothing, turned up the light.

Nuisance

Paul Cunningham, University of Georgia-Athens

Nuisance was a dry wind, a summer's mosquito hanging on for dear life. Nuisance was a plough loosening earth, a mosquito longing to fill full. Protein, water, ions, gases. Nuisance was life and wastes, another year's calendar, an almanac forecasting violences. Nuisance was a clinging for life. Dear life: was a mosquito filled with the iron of cosmic space, with everything a human could be full of. Nuisance was a hope that no one was watching, a fear of gently breathing bodies. The country air smelled of cows and pigs and shit.

Nuisance was a barefoot mosquito bite, a hoof abscess, a stumbling horse. A hoof. A block of nerves, a hoof of whispers, a weakness in a marble statue, a fracture of gas pockets, a horse gone lame. Nuisance was a country meadow, a farmhouse, a pond at the edge of a cemetery, a red fox forever on a woodland path. Forever on a woodland path. Forever on a woodland path. Nuisance was all of wildlife.

Starving, Nuisance went out looking for a rock in a hard place, rushed out nightly to the old farmhouse, this time found overturned garbage cans, an overturned coyote. A coyote of weeping holes, round holes plugged up with round bullets. Round and hard as hours. With a brush of his tail, Nuisance tried to signal, but detected no signs. No signs of life, no coyotes sighing, no weeping muzzles. Only death. Nuisance had a reputation with the farmhouse, a reputation for overturned garbage cans, for spooking coyotes, for his ghostly brush. His brother taught him how to brush, how to hunt. Nuisance stared out at the old farmhouse cemetery, the pond of ducks at the edge of night. His tail dipped and stirred. Only death.

The tail of Nuisance would not stir forever. His brother taught him this. His brother taught him the weight of an egg, the protein of a yolk, taught him how to sly and how to hide. How to cross invisible property lines, how to devour with the sharp of his teeth, the rough of his tongue. The brothers, a unified nuisance, shared the same warm Georgia climate, the same short red bristle.

One name, one night, the cemetery pond went red with Nuisance, red Muscovy wattle swinging from fangs, a brother carrying a meal to a brother. But a sudden summer wind carried a heat, the two barrels of a shotgun's blast. Nuisance barked for his brother and only memories barked back. His tail would stir forever.

A hard rain filled the overturned garbage cans, the overturned lids became heavy with water. Blood disappeared from the mosquitoes and the wings of the mosquitoes collapsed in the rain. Lightning struck and an ancient branch collapsed onto Nuisance, crossed his eyes, blurred his vision. Worms unwound in the underneath and the wet soil absorbed the pain of the fox and the roots of the broken tree drank from the puddle swallowing the fox. The farmhouse shook on the hillside, the farmer shook in the depth of his bed, the farmer's wife dreamed of her husband sinking, their teen-aged son dreamed of unimaginable crimes. The wings of the mosquitoes dreamed of the sky, the broken tree dreamed of Nuisance, and Nuisance dreamed only to fill full.

In the morning, there was Nuisance again. Still pinned beneath the heavy branch, beneath the innocent gaze of a young lamb's chops. By morning, the mosquitoes' wings had dried, went searching for skinny-dippers in the cemetery pond. *Don't you look weak*, the cheeky white lamb bleated. A tiny wooden cross rested against the little lamb's shoulder, a symbol of the meadow, an admirer of Grünewald. A cross across a colorless pane. A white pane of glass and no stain. A white pane to command the difference between light and dark, a candle of screaming white.

Nuisance dreamed of impossible grey light, a gunk of a light that no human could ever know. This grey light caused a gigantic suction inside the fox, an obscene void. An animal-light of angers, a light that sloped into the fox-heart of Nuisance. A criss-cross of rumbling branches. *When did the bark of a fox become a terrorism, when did human become adversary?* Nuisance recalled seeing himself reflected in the cemetery pond, a mirror filled with skinned bodies, clumsy

takings, an image that would not multiply. A future that gaped empty of foxes.

Are you supposed to be a martyr, asked Nuisance, *What is your cause?* The white lamb bleated a sinful song of coordinates, properties, borders. *Baaa, baaa!* The white lamb voweled loyalty to farmer and farm, proudly twirled its cross like a baton. In the distance: a storm-shattered window, a bedsheet twisting from the farmer's son's window. Nuisance sighed beneath the heavy, fallen branch. *Do I bore you? What about my clothing of delight?* The white lamb looked soft and thirsty. Thirsty for morals, for reason, for order. The lamb wanted Nuisance to be jealous of its image, its infinity.

The farmer's son approached with scythe in hand, his distant bedsheet ladder still twisting in the open window, twisting like a sick DNA strand, straining like a boy's eyes strain, his grip tightening, hands evolved for killing, convolved with land and water, the white lamb of all sins ready to self-sacrifice in the blink of an eye. But not one eye blinked! The teenaged boy knew it wasn't the slaughter of a lamb that would wake and wow a father, but the slaughter of a fox. The boy's eyes traveled to the end of his scythe, to the end of the country meadow, to the end of the Savannah river, to the end of the Atlantic, to the end of Nuisance. Then he smiled and he said it aloud to make it more real, *To the end of Nuisance.*

The farmer's son blinked. He blinked with his scythe, he blinked again and again. He blinked until the red fox flowed red. Endless red. The little white lamb recited the Lord's prayer and the farmer's son blinked. The wind blew hard and the farmer's son blinked and the fox did not blink. The wind blew hard and the twisting sheet twisted until it snapped from the window. The wind blew hard and sent streaks of blood across the boy's face, across the boy's scythe.

Severed from the body, the head of the red fox didn't look real anymore. It looked like a Halloween mask, but the eyes still looked. The

round eyes of the red fox looked and looked. The eyes of the boy looked, like the eyes of the red fox looked. The teeth of the red fox still looked sharp and the tongue of the red fox still looked sharp. The farmer's son didn't want to look at those eyes anymore, so he used a spoon. The farmer's son didn't want to look at that tongue anymore, so he used a knife. Most of all, the boy didn't want to look at all that red anymore, so he picked up a hose and washed it all away.

The farmer's son could hardly wait to wear the mask of the red fox. The head was clean now, but it was still a bit soggy. Soft tissue surrounding the red fox neck still wiggled, still somewhat alive. He could hardly wait so he went to his father's shed, went reaching for his father's top-performing gas leaf blower. The son's father loved that leaf blower and the son loved that it gave his father the smell of fathers. Gasoline. He once caught his father blowing the farm's only flag, an American flag. The farmer pointed his leaf blower up at the sky and gusts of wind and gusts of wind made the flag flow so majestically. *What are you doing Pa,* the farmer's son shouted. *What,* shouted the farmer. *I like the way it looks. Blowing in the wind like that.* That's when the boy remembered: the leaf blower was a question, a noise. A constant noise. The leaf blower was a nuisance and a nuisance would surely wake his father on a Sunday morning. He stared into the empty eyeholes of the red fox and waited.

The farmer's son was tired of waiting, tired of waiting for the fur to dry, for the mask not to stick. He reached his hand into the fox, as if it were a puppet, controlled the muzzle, simulated muscle and jaw. Making the sharp fox teeth move with his human hand, smiling with his fingers, looking into the round empty holes of the fox, looking with the round eyes of a living boy. That living boy, that son of a farmer, all sons of a God. That living boy lifted the face of the fox up into the sunlight, the bright rays shot through the eyes and the boy recalled the spoon, his breakfast cereal spoon, his body swelling a history of Saturday morning cartoons, the hunter and the rabbit, the hunter and the rabbit, the Fudd of a gun, the

Fiction

seductiveness of chance, the explosive distance between self and other. A shroud of wilted roses, after. After all.

Inside now, incoming camouflage! The sly hunter stood in front of his Mama's wondrous mirror. Age-spotty, the red fox muzzle tightened around his mouth. Mise en abyme in the aged glass, forever on a woodland path, syncing up with a bank of mirrors, a triptych of foxes. The mask had nearly dried, but the soft gore of the fox still breathed. The boy still breathed. The brush of a tail, the whisper of a meadow. Outfoxed, the boy breathed in the contents of the mirror, drooled like an animal. The shared throat stretched and opened in new ways and the light of the room disappeared the shadow from the fox. Disappeared the boy from the eyeholes. Disappeared the boy from the fox.

Outside again, Nuisance was known as hunt or be hunted, the motion of a diving fawn, knew the upside-down of attack, the unending squash of sweetgum night, entrails and a slender tongue, another spring of instincts, the up-down of shoulder-bulbs along high weeds, pointed ears, arrows to the sky, how those ears clarified the fox, terrified the neighborhood, errors of its ways, the uncontrollable heat of bodies. Nuisance fox to farmer's boot, nuisance fox to passing truck. Outside again, Nuisance steered his human vessel, drifted on the woodland path. A static in the ear, a microphone held to a pelt, a breath brought to a halt. New terrain, a life cut in twain.

Cut in twain, tangled specter. Through a biting—a crushing! Nuisance fox fluxed into something slightly wide, a new and only slightly Nuisance causing a ruckus wherever it went. *Are foxes causing a nuisance in your garden*, read a blood-red font on a pest control website. *Parasite*, it screamed. *Nuisance*, it screamed. *If you are experiencing nuisance, call us*, it whispered. *If you find the language of extermination erotic, call us. If you were wondering if a skeleton might last for millions of years, call us. For balance as perceived by men of old, call us. For the silence of death as revealed by wild extravagance, call us. We are standing by, by any means necessary, at any cost.*

Two and not one, Nuisance would surely be censored. Obscene with a boy's torso, a fox's snout, Nuisance stood no chance alone in the neighborhood grocery store. Hungry, he stared at those packaged forms, longed for those cutlets. Cool, glowing meat. Price-tagged and plastic, reflecting incandescent overhead lighting, Nuisance felt a throbbing in its heart. Onlookers pointed, a small child held a trash bag open, screamed, *Fox, fox!* The boy's shredded soul stirred, felt mouthless. Chased out, Nuisance fled the warmth of the mob and returned to the country meadow, to the farmhouse, to the pond at the edge of the cemetery.

May all creatures be happy. May all beings be free from suffering, sang the white lamb. A clearing in the woods, a kneeling on the grass. Its pure, white fleece glowed in the ominous moon, the non-earth. Its pure, white fleece soaked up the signal of a satellite twisting and retwisting its bodily data across a sky of invisible horizontals, verticals, unimaginable ribbons of information, vertebrating night, vibrating daylight's colors into versicolors, new colors skittled across a screen like zeros, a zero forever giving meaning to both negatives and positives, a zero a nuisance a nuisance state a stage of siege, a many-surfaced taxidermy, the repeated attempts to preserve an original, the original meat, the sound, the way a living tongue can decimate another living tongue—all of it—soaking up an unseen sun, an exhausted sun. Somewhere between ear and err. A clearing in the woods, a kneeling on the grass.

Suffering is a reality, innocence is fiction, said Nuisance, slowly approaching the lamb, the lamb carefully leaning against its tiny wooden cross. *You sound like a Buddhist, not a Christian*, said Nuisance. *Don't all beings deserve happiness*, hammed the little white lamb. *Are you happy*, asked Nuisance. *Are you happy with your vows? Or have you begun doubting your own faith?* The white lamb shook its head, leaned its delicate body against its tiny cross. *No*, cried the lamb. *I am the constant burden of symbols and I will always carry this burden and it is my burden to carry and you*

will always be a nuisance. The lamb knelt and prayed for Nuisance

Just as the fox tore the first limb from the lamb, the deranged farmer's boy woke up inside the fox, woke up at war with his animal. Nuisance was at war with the lamb, just as the boy was at war with his fox. After all, the boy was to grow up to be a farmer, a hunter, a man of the land. Curious phrase, isn't it? *After all.* Something about the pure contemplation of reality, something that gets under one's skin. The boy recalled eighth grade, a science class, a science teacher's projector and the projected image: an elephant grieving, its trunk tossing dirt over a dead elephant. Grief, burial, spectacle. The fox woke up against the boy, gnashed its teeth against the boy, the little white lamb. Lamb, Blake's softly breathing song. Manifesto of the lamb, registration of the environment, the rendering of innocence, the end of humanity. Nuisance devoured innocence.

Protein, water, ions, gases. Nuisance was life and wastes, after all. The boy had become an absence. Like a distant fox, a deceased brother, like a red Muscovy wattle, one life taken to enflame another. A kind of ghostly flesh. A flesh that hangs on for dear life. *And you?* You are here now, a bark between fox and everything else. Yesterday's trumpet blast from the shower has since turned your bathroom cold and red, red as the branches of collapsed eyes. A fading signal. Your mouth, your red-furred muzzle—doesn't know what to say anymore, so your eyes just moan electrocution, porch lamps damning moths, farmland forcing a quiver. In summary, a fox can damage a garden, but so can the rain. So take your two barrels, aim 'em at the rain. Kill the sky, the sun, the moon if you have to! Make a trophy of the night! All that I want, all that I ask for is even the smallest nuisance.

The all of wildlife.

The Pioneer

Mike McClelland, University of Georgia-Athens

My Stonewall godmothers were probably rolling in their graves, but I kind of enjoyed being in the closet. I've been out since birth, and demanded a Snow White cake for my second birthday. I planned my wedding to Chad, our local lifeguard, at four. After that I had plenty of secret boyfriends, but it was always their secret. My job was to stay away from them in public while they pretended to be straight.

And when I married Jake, I was once again the gay one in the relationship. Even though he was technically out. Since Jake was an athlete, had a deeper voice, and buzzed his hair, people assumed he was the "man" in the relationship, which was infuriating. It was worse since we'd broken up, at least among our mutual friends, because his "new wife," Bobby, was also demonstrably gay, so everyone just thought I needed to find a capital M Man to replace the void Jake had left in my life.

So even though NASA hadn't formally asked me to stay in the closet, I didn't realize how much easier it was to be straight. When someone knows you're gay, the conversation almost always turns to sex at some point. Especially when your name is Rider.

During my days on the International Space Station, though, I got to talk about jigsaw puzzles and video games with Yoshida, about how both of our dads did the household cooking with Ramsey, about trail running with De Vroom. Nalley asked me daily about my research, in part because it was his job, but I also got the impression that he was genuinely interested. I realized that I barely ever got to actually talk about my research. Even students just wanted to use my data for their own work or wanted to joke around.

I didn't act any straighter on the ISS, but everyone just seemed to assume I was. And even if my colleagues didn't think I was straight, they treated me like I was straight, which simply meant not talking about it. There was no, "when did you

know you were straight?" or "how did you meet other straight people growing up?"

I didn't have any delusions that the astronauts were simply being especially polite. I mean, all five of my colleagues were nothing if not professional, but they all had biases, some that simply made them human and others that made me dislike them. De Vroom, despite being multiracial himself, had quite a few opinions about African Americans. He asked Ramsey if she'd grown up in the "ghetto," and another time insinuated that she had to have been raised by a single mother. Nalley asked a nonplussed Yoshida what the best kind of rice was, to which she answered dryly, "I try to avoid carbs."

Yev was the most polite of anyone. That's if, by polite, you mean silent. He was not one for small talk or any kind of interpersonal conversation. Yev's idea of conversation was allowing you to spend time in the same Node. Of course, whenever Yev and I ended up alone in a Node together we ended up making out.

We saved most of our kissing for the Cupola. Kissing in space became less and less like Earth kissing as we became more familiar with it, and that in itself was a thrill. We were some of the first to do this. Maybe even the first. Not kissers—surely someone else had kissed in space—but it was possible that we were the first men to make out in space. I thought it unlikely, though to Yev it certainly was, as he "couldn't imagine a homosexual astronaut." I didn't address the fact that I was, indeed, a homosexual astronaut.

On Skype, I could tell that keeping my space voyage to themselves was taking a toll on my family. My mother acted as if having to keep it a secret rendered me unemployed, and then spoke about all the great jobs her friends' children had.

"Meera Chowdhury's son, Vinay, is chief resident at that fancy hospital out in California!" she said one day. "Were you ever a resident sweetie, or did you just go straight into teaching? I can't remember!"

"Do you remember Becky Banff? Didn't

you go to a middle school dance with her? She's an actual cowboy. Can you believe it? She herds cattle in New Zealand! Imagine going all the way to New Zealand!"

I'd made it all the way to outer space so yes, mother, I could imagine Becky Banff the cowgirl—cowperson? wrangler?—getting to New Zealand.

"Maybe when you get back you can do something overseas?" she added, her frizzy red hair bouncing as she worked on her crossword puzzle.

My father, for his part, used this as an opportunity to remind me of just how supportive he'd always been, as if now it was time for me to do something for him in return.

"Remember when I took you to that pride parade when you were thirteen, sweetie?" he asked. "That, for me, was like going into outer space—like being shot into the unknown."

Dad was a fan of metaphors.

My brothers viewed it as if I'd gone back into the closet, which horrified them.

"So are you, like, hiding hiding your sexuality, or are you just not talking about it?" Glenn asked.

"I'm not hiding anything," I snapped. "I'm just not supposed to distract from the mission."

Buzzy thought it was bigger than that.

"They don't want any out astronauts because they want all of that space tourism money. They don't want to risk the Russians and the Arabs and the Republicans backing out because they let gays in space."

"I'm sure it's not that. All of those people still go to New York and it's at least 75% gay," I joked, but Buzzy didn't laugh.

If I was being completely honest, I agreed with them, at least on some level. I hadn't fought my whole life just to start hiding in my early forties. But some of the fight had left me in the divorce. My big gay statement had been gay marriage, and I'd failed at that. So who was I to wave the flag for the gays? Plus, Sally Ride had had to be the best at everything she did to be the first American

woman in space. As far as astronauting went, I'd come as close as you could to falling into the job. I was no pioneer.

My kids liked the secret aspect of it. My daughter, Serena, even made up a secret gesture for us to do at the beginning and end of each Skype session, which was really just us doing the Batusi three times—right, left, right—while staring at the screen. Her twin brother, Roger, was a loner outside of basically being joined to Serena at the hip when they weren't in school, so he said he didn't really have anyone he liked enough to tell. This worried me, but then I remembered being thirteen I hadn't had any friends then, either. Of course I'd been in the closet, and now I was again, which was disconcerting.

My hope was that Jake was struggling to keep it a secret because he was so proud and couldn't believe that he'd let me slip away from him, but in our rare chats—when we'd Skype so that I could confirm that the kids were as "fine" as they said they were—he just told me about any emails or calls from the school and then hung up. From where his eyes fell on the screen, I could tell he spent our calls watching how he looked in the camera instead of looking at me in the International Space Station.

He'd get a few occasional barbs in, like, "the kids' teachers keep asking how they are handling the divorce, and I can't really answer because it's basically the same as it was before. You're working, I'm either home or trying to arrange for someone to drive them around. Thank God for Bobby's flexible schedule."

Bobby's schedule was flexible because he was a *student*. That was the nature of being a student. My schedule was inflexible because I was a fucking *astronaut*. Plus, the only part of Bobby's flexibility Jake cared about was how he could do the splits on top of a cock, I'm sure.

I was more worried about the kids spending so much time with Bobby and Jake and forgetting all about me than I was about the kids themselves. I'd spoken at length with Serena and Roger about going, and the three of us had all decided that what we'd all benefit more from me being an

Fiction

astronaut than we would spending every weekend together playing Smash Brothers until our fingers bled and watching vintage tennis championship matches on YouTube.

The other element that made seeming “straight” pretty easy was that none of us really talked that much. The ISS was a mess for the senses. Though we kept a strict schedule—particularly regarding eating, hydration, exercise, and sleep—we all, for the most part, had our own things to work on. I’d completed my adjustments to the exercise equipment during my first two weeks on the station, and now my responsibilities involved a lot of data processing, which I did in Destiny. Nalley mostly worked in Destiny as well, as did Ramsey, while Yoshida spent the majority of her time in Kibo. De Vroom had Columbus to himself, and Yev hardly ever left Zvezda, except when he went to Tranquility to exercise or met me in the Cupola to make out and rub against each other.

You would think that this meant Ramsey, Nalley, and I would have plenty of time for workplace banter, but as all of us were involved in high stakes missions (financially), we were focused and often not at our designated workstations. Ramsey had been tasked with studying BEAM, which had been sent to the ISS by one of our private partners in 2016 and had been meant to serve as a temporary module. The inflatable BEAM, however, had far exceeded expectations and had turned out to not only be sturdy but also exceptionally durable. This was a boon for tourism, as inflatable, temporary, but still safe modules would allow for third party tourism vendors to send up their own modules to suit the tastes of their billionaire clientele.

Want a tiki bar in space? We’ll send one up in cargo!

How about a replica of the bridge from the Starship Enterprise? Or the Millennium Falcon?

So Ramsey spent a lot of her time in BEAM, while Nalley, as the official Space Force representative, had been tasked with doing a full audit of the station to come up with an appraisal of how much the US government could charge

our partners for “leasing” ISS space.

As a result, I spend most of my time in Destiny alone.

Unless I was with Yev.

I’d never been involved—if that’s even the word for it—with someone who could be so clearly into me and so clearly not into me, often within the space of a few seconds. He’d drag me to the Cupola just to stare into my eyes, or to trace my space-dry lips with his tongue, which seemed so pink against his pale skin, and then, moments later, he’d ignore me the first six times I’d ask him to move so I could get to the coffee machine.

He’d taken to floating around in his miniscule black shorts at night and I knew it was only a matter of time until I managed to coax him back into my sleeping cabin. What we’d do in there and how was a mystery, but I wanted it and I knew he did, too, at least part of the time. He hadn’t been back in there since my first night in space, when he’d kissed me and put his head on my chest and then told me there was no such thing as a “gay Russian” and refused to answer my questions about whether or not he had a girlfriend or wife or (however unlikely) boyfriend back on Earth.

Since then, I’d remained firmly and happily in denial, even though I heard him say “*Ya lyublyu tebya*” at the end of the Skype call he made every evening. He wore a headset, thank God, so I could imagine his grandmother on the other end, holding his dog (who I’d also imagined, a Borzoi named Valentina) up to the screen to kiss “*Bat’ka*” goodnight.

By my fourth week in space, we’d all pretty much settled in. In typical ISS fashion, everyone was working on pretty much the same thing, but separately, which made dinner conversation a fun mixture of idea exchange and pissing contest.

Yev was doing something with the Russian docking ports, though it was all very secret because there were some slight differences between the adjustments made to the Russian ports and the ones made to the others, whose design had been agreed upon by the ESA,

JAXA, and NASA. Nalley had privately explained to me that Russia, even in areas demanding collaboration, liked to do its own thing. Its space program was still one of the nation's crown jewels and outsourcing anything to another country was out of the question.

As a result, Yev was left doing about twice as much work as the rest of us in addition to serving as the station's representative for all Russian interests. This meant that he was pretty tense most of the time, including the few moments we managed to cobble together to make out in the Cupola.

We were up there one evening after dinner, ostensibly talking about the COLBERT again, though the treadmill didn't need any more attention that we'd already given it.

All he had to do was look at me and say "Come here" in that icy voice and I'd drop everything.

I had my hand down the front of his pants, and he'd looped his left arm around my head to keep us together while we kissed. The rhythm was fun; there was no falling into a space kiss, no simply falling into make-out autopilot. Because of the way each weightless kiss pushed us back from one another, our kisses needed to be a constant, intentional coming together, a swim upstream to each other's mouths.

On some level, I resented how intoxicating Yev's attention was. If he'd been nicer in our everyday lives, his laser focus on me in our more romantic moments would have meant so much less. But to have such an asshole so obviously into me was such a rush.

I moved my hand around in his pants. I just liked having it there, another sign of how into me he was. Then I thought, and not for the first time, that perhaps he was only into me because of the lack of other interested parties. Yoshida and Ramsey were more attractive than me, but if Yev only swung towards men they wouldn't interest him. And even if he were bi, or fluid, neither Yoshida nor Ramsey seemed to be the kind of gal who would sacrifice professional integrity for a fling with a hot cosmonaut.

I, however, was willing to throw it all away. I couldn't think about anything but Yev. I even looked forward to monotonously entering my data into the computer in Destiny so that I could daydream about him. I thought what it would be like to go on a date with him, about how it would be like *Ninotchka*, how he'd Garbo-glare at me throughout our meal together in some hole in the wall until I did something charming and stupid and then he'd laugh and the sun would come up with his smile. I daydreamed about being caught in the rain together, about how his face would look when wet.

One thing I hadn't been prepared for was the lack of weather on the ISS. I missed the rain and I missed the wind, even though I hated wind. I missed clouds crossing the Sun and making shapes on green grass. In my current situation, the Sun was the Earth's golden tear, rolling along the surface and then splashing off every day before falling away, only to return when we'd spun around the Earth one more time.

We kept kissing, my face sore from his stubble, which only made it more visceral, more wonderful. Occasionally, we looked down through the Cupola's central window, like the gods staring down from Mount Olympus. The Earth should have looked small from up here, but instead it appeared huge and important. It all felt so significant.

We passed over a mountain range and Yev stopped kissing me for a moment.

"Is it calling you back yet?" he asked.

"What? Earth?"

"Yes. It's like I told you, I think it wants us back. The longer we're away, the more worried it grows, and it calls for us more."

"I think so," I said, but with his arms around me I couldn't think of being anywhere else. He was so solid, even while we floated there.

"I miss the snow," I said. "I miss fresh air."

He smiled, which rarely looked natural on him.

"I miss the ocean. I miss big sounds," he

Fiction

said, and then he put his hand on my chest, over my heart. "Though I hear one big sound now. Here."

He thumped his hand on my chest along with my heartbeat.

"This is a good big sound. It's enough."

It was so unexpectedly tender. Yev, who barely looked at me for 23 hours of the day, drumming along to my heartbeat. *Listening to my heartbeat.*

Below us, mountains shifted to forest then to desert, and we stayed like that, linked together, until the lights of the station told us it was time to turn down.

*

Yoshida was training to do the first Ironman in space, as the legendary Sunny Williams had done the first marathon and triathlon. I was helping her train and I'd also volunteered to create a series of exercises on the RED, mimicking the way Williams had "swam" in space for her triathlon.

I was having Yoshida do a horizontal shoulder press while doing a squat, which mimicked the breast stroke, when Nalley floated in, looking flustered.

"Rider, can I speak with you in private?" he asked.

I'd shoved my face back up into the controls of the RED, so I just called up, "I trust Yoshida not to betray my secrets, boss."

Outside of my sexuality, which I was tasked with ignoring rather than hiding, I didn't really have any secrets to worry about.

"It's sensitive," Nalley said.

I pushed myself out and up. Nalley turned and went into Leonardo, one of the larger ISS's larger cargo bays.

"I'll be right back," I said to Yoshida, and pulled myself through the doorway and into Leonardo.

Nalley looked super uncomfortable.

"What's up, sir?" I asked.

"I'm just going to cut right to the chase," Nalley said, and a hint of a scarlet blush appeared along the lines of his dark cheekbones.

"Cut away," I said, starting to feel a little nervous. "Is everyone back home okay? My kids?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Sorry. Of course you'd think that with me acting like this. Sorry, this isn't just the sort of thing I'm involved in. I try to stay out of...politics."

"Politics?"

"Rider, you've been 'outed,' for lack of a better word. Not just it being out there that you're gay, but it's on the front of the newspapers, the lead story on CNN, that sort of thing. All of the 'First Openly Gay Astronaut' stories you can imagine."

I kind of felt the blood drain from my face, but it was different in space. Itchy.

"Buck Swinson's shitting himself. The President is livid. Putin called him and reamed him out. They've shut down your NASA email for the moment because you were getting too many media requests."

Oh shit.

"Are my kids okay?" I asked. "Is there like, *paparazzi* after them?"

I felt so fancy. *Paparazzi!* But I worried about the kids.

"They're on a government-funded holiday with your parents."

"My parents? Why not Jake?"

"Well, it was his new...partner...who got this all started, and he's enjoying his 15 minutes of fame."

The word partner seemed as comfortable in his mouth as a *Herbst*, but I gave him a pass, considering he'd spent most of his professional career in or training to be in teeny little metal boxes and talking about thrusters.

"Wait. Bobby? How could he get this 'all started'?"

"Apparently he has a 'web series'"—he used finger quotes to describe this—"which you failed to mention," Nalley said grimly.

"Oh, you mean those YouTube things that like five people watch?"

"This particular post is up to thirty-three million views," Nalley said.

"Holy fuck," I said.

"I'm waiting for a debrief from Swinson, so just chill for now. But it's been all over email for the past bit, so the other folks up here all know, as does mission control. Obviously, everyone is fine with *it*, this is the 21st century of course, but all of the attention is a bit of a distraction, so just give them all some time."

My kids were being harassed, everyone everywhere was suddenly interested in my personal life, and every nude photo of me ever had probably weaseled its way into public discourse by now. Not only would I be the first openly gay astronaut, I'd be the first astronaut whose asshole you could find on Google!

Nalley left me in Leonardo, and after a minute I went and rejoined Yoshida.

"What was that all about?" she asked, still doing shoulder presses.

Oh God, I was going to have to come out. I mean, I had to come out all the time every time I taught a class, every time I mentioned my husband (ex-husband) every time I filled out a form with an emergency contact. Though I actually used my mother as my emergency contact now that Jake and I were broken up. Which was also pretty gay.

"Yoshida, I'm gay," I said, staring at the mess of doohickeys and insulation on the wall.

"No shit, Sherlock," Yoshida said, not even bothering to look up.

"You knew?" I asked.

She simply rolled her eyes and kept pumping.

"Well, everyone in the world apparently knows now. It pissed off the Russians!"

This got her attention.

"Holy shit," she said.

"Yeah," I said, walking over to Tranquility's workstation. "And apparently there's a video."

I went online and Googled the title of Bobby's web series.

The Fairy Stepfather. God, kill me.

The most recent post was called "Don't I Deserve Everything?"

I clicked play, and saw Bobby, his young, pale face wet with tears and snot, his floppy

brown hair tangled.

His voice was high-pitched and whiny. He sounded like he'd been crying, but to be fair he always sounded a little bit like he'd been crying. But his nose was red at the end, his mouth wet. I'd always thought Bobby looked like a used blow-up doll.

"Some people are settling down, some people are settling, and some people refuse to settle for anything less than butterflies," Bobby started dramatically. It sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"That's a quote from one of the greatest fictional characters, Ms. Carrie Bradshaw," Bobby said.

"Oh Christ," Yoshida called up from the RED. "Tell me you're not involved with this person in some way."

"He's my ex-husband's husband," I groaned. "My kids' stepdad?" I always said that like a question, because I usually refused to acknowledge Bobby's existence at all.

"I've always thought of myself as a butterfly. When I finally emerged from my chrysalis, when I reached maturity in my early 20s, my husband Jacob found me, and he refused to settle for anything less than butterflies. We had that quote on our wedding napkins," he said, and tears spilled out and clung to his cheeks like the little pee drops that gather on public toilets.

"They didn't," Yoshida said. She'd stopped her exercises, the video now demanding her full attention.

"I wasn't invited," I said.

Bobby was still talking in the video, of course.

"...Jacob found me and suddenly couldn't settle for anything less than a butterfly. And with him, I got my two kids, and since then I've been living the dream."

My two kids?

My kids were not Bobby's kids. My kids were only ten years younger than Bobby. My kids were *my* kids.

This is why I didn't watch these fucking videos. I usually made Glenn or Buzzy watch

them and summarize them for me in the way that would infuriate me least. And over wine. But they'd never said anything about him claiming ownership of my children.

"But now. NOW. Now, my husband's asshole ex, who abandoned his children for his JOB, is a fucking saint to everyone in my house. And you want to know why? Because he's a goddamned, Sigourney Weaving, Bruce Willising, Tom Hanksing, motherfucking ASTRONAUT."

I hadn't noticed it before, but Bobby was likely drunk.

"And how can you compete with an astronaut? Tonight, I said to Jacob, I said, 'Honey, Rider literally went as far away from his children as he can get, like tens of thousands of miles, but you all keep talking about him like he's Barack Obama. Like he's just the fucking coolest."

"Does he know that we're only like 200 miles up?" Yoshida asked, looking dumbfounded.

"And Jacob YELLED at me. In our MARRIAGE BED. YELLED! He raised his voice!"

Bobby was screaming now, and his face had gotten so close to the camera that I could see the snot pulsing out of his nostril.

"This is getting really Blair Witch," I said to Yoshida.

"I was thinking 'Leave Britney Alone!'" Yoshida said.

Bobby was stage-whispering now as he cried, talking to the screen like he was giving out mantras during a guided meditation.

"So I've got to protect myself. I'm not staying at home tonight. I've told my children where they can find me, so that they know that I wouldn't abandon them, but I also need to teach them how to stand up for themselves."

He was building my moment now, his whispers rising to shouts as he remained in extreme close up.

"I need them to know that, astronaut or movie star or Nobel Prize winner or fucking Kardashian, no man is competition for me in my marriage. I deserve respect. I deserve to be

worshipped. And I," his voice rising to a full screen, his eyes Norma-Desmond-wide, "REFUSE. TO. SETTLE. FOR. ANYTHING. LESS. THAN. BUTTERFLIES."

Yoshida was laughing so hard that she was crying, her tears floating up and off her face, mixing with the droplets of sweat she'd sent into the room before.

"Namaste," Bobby said, and the video ended.

"I have no words," Yoshida said when she'd composed herself a bit. "Are you okay?"

I smiled at her.

"Yes, I think so. I've got to talk to my kids. But, I kind of feel like I've finally won the breakup? Is that awful?"

"It's not awful at all," Yoshida said. "And all you had to do was go to fucking outer space. Get Kulakov to break out those little vodka baggies he has stashed. We'll toast you at dinner. The first openly gay astronaut!"

*

I floated back over to Unity and entered the information I'd gathered from the RED and Yoshida into my workstation. I ran into De Vroom, who awkwardly fist bumped me as we floated.

"I saw a headline that said you put the ASS in NASA," he said. "You're my idol."

I was so happy. I felt even lighter than usual, as if I could just float right out of the ISS into space, like a piece of stardust. I was a pioneer. I was a pioneer just by being myself.

After my data entry, I floated down the passage towards Zvezda. I saw Yev there, fresh from cleaning himself off. He was beautiful, lean and long and cold. I smiled when I saw him, and when his eyes caught mine, I mouthed "Cupola?"

He stared at me for one, two, three seconds, then turned away. He floated towards his sleeping cabin, and I worried from the way he held himself, from the way he sagged even in the zero gravity, that it was over. Even if I was right and he was wrong, it could still be over, just like that.

Yev slowly pulled the curtain back and I waited, waited for him to turn and look, to smile, or wink. Which weren't things he would ever do, but I'd moved from hope to fantasy.

Instead of smiling, winking, or acknowledging me at all, he floated into his sleeping cabin, an unknowable iceberg on this great starry ocean, and pulled the curtain closed behind him.

Then, just as I'd given up the rest of my small hope, his hand emerged from the curtain, tilted upward like an offering. That same hand that he'd held over my heart.

He held his index finger out and then flicked it quickly.

Come here.

THE END

An Offering of Fear

Braedon Kelly, Mercer University

All the people of the village were gathered before the sacred column, awaiting the priest with fear and zealous awe. They stood in anxious silence, listening to the tattoo of the drums roll out from behind the pillar of smoke with steadily rising intensity. Men craned forward, eager to see the coming spectacle while children pressed their faces into their mothers' sides, coughing from the smoke. A strange sound preceded a dampening of the flames, the absence of its gnawing heat leaving their skin cool with sweat. Kenso looked over Marco's shoulder, terrified to see, but too terrified to pull his gaze away. Marco stood resolute, sweat dripping from his nose, a bulwark between his friend and the grim power of their god.

Through the black smoke, the priest strode forth and vaulted atop the ancient stone base of the sacred column. His entire body was painted in the red of the animal sacrifices, caked with the grey of solid smoke. He wore nothing but a red mask and a belt of reeds from which hung several pouches, all stitched with human sinew. Kenso watched the birds fly above the jungle behind the fire, for he did not quite have the strength of will to meet the priest's gaze. Marco looked at the fire out of respect. One does not stare into the eyes behind the red mask lest he offend the mighty powers behind it. The priest reached into one of his pouches and threw a powder onto the bonfire which roared in intensifying force with a wave of heat. Kenso quivered, shifting his body to be further shielded by Marco.

Then the priest spoke. "Lo! The jungle has been thrown back! We have felled the trees for fuel and sacrificed the jungle's wicked beasts. Who gave us the power to do battle with the ferns?"

At the sound of his booming voice, the people rejoiced with delirious frenzy, crying out as one, "The Red God!"

The priest began to dance and leap upon the stone, seemingly unaffected by the slick, red

sheen that covered it. His arms waved wildly through the air, and he shrieked with glee. The people stood below him, shuddering with reverent fear.

"The mighty Red One grants us the two blessings with which we fight the Green. For what do we thank the Red God?"

"Blood and Fire!"

The priest threw more powder into the growing fire. The people in the front tried to shuffle backwards, but they were stopped by those behind them, rooted to the ground.

"FIRE!" The priest screamed. He sprang from the stone, his old age long forgotten, and he danced rabid circles around the sacred column. Kenso felt a shiver race down his spine, and more sweat dripped from his face than the fire warranted. The priest halted and caressed the column, a pillar of human skulls. This year, as with every other, it would grow taller. He called out, "BLOOD!"

Kenso felt Marco's muscled body tense for a moment before he brushed off Kenso's hand and stepped forward. Marco was the offering to the Red God. He strode toward the pillar with perfect posture, and, only then did he meet the priest's gaze. The mouth beneath the mask curved upward with a lurid smile.

*

"But I don't want to die. I'm afraid," Kenso said the day before.

"You're always afraid. Of everything. Frightened when you catch a fish that's too big. Scared that you'll be whisked away and sacrificed when you scrape your knee."

"I'm afraid of the priest."

"That is the Red God within you, Kenso! Remember, fear is his weapon," Marco said to his smaller friend.

"Couldn't we just catch fish and grow corn and... even die without being afraid?"

"Don't let someone else catch you saying that," Marco snapped.

"I won't but—"

"I know, but I also worry that you will

be chosen to die tomorrow. I would be glad to be chosen to serve the Red God with my life's blood. But if you were chosen... I fear that the Red God would be angry."

"That priest is horrible."

"That priest protects us from the Green. He protects us from killing each other. The Red God is order."

"He's not afraid, the priest."

"Of course not. He is chosen by the Red God to serve in life. Since we can't be priests, serving in death is what's best for our people."

For our people, Kenso thought, or the Red God? Or for the priest himself?

*

Kenso's vacant eyes stared at the sacred column, the macabre ritual complete. The priest spoke many words of strength and conquest to the throng of people, but Kenso did not listen. He could think of nothing except for the black hole in his stomach until he noticed that all of the others were staring at him. He thought they looked afraid, so he turned around, but only the empty huts stood behind him. He forced himself to face the priest again.

His hands dripping with red varnish, the priest leaned over the edge of the column's base, his arm outstretched with a clawed finger fixated on Kenso. With his other hand, he held a pool of the red paint.

Kenso took one step forward. Then another. The people cowered out of his path and filled the space behind him, compelling him forward. The priest shouted in a strange tongue, the words slithered up the spines of all who heard it. He stooped down to reach Kenso's face, smearing the blood across it. His eyes then flicked over to the fire. Kenso stepped toward it, arms flung wide, and felt his bare chest blister in the heat.

"Will you serve the Red God? Will you herald his power?"

Kenso heard himself say, "Yes."

*

Kenso followed the priest of the Red

God past the fire as the drums took up their tattoo again, leaving the crowd behind. The priest walked with a straight back, always facing directly forward. Their path, lined with reddened rocks, curved left, winding its way up the hill the village rested beneath. Halfway up its height, the pair reached the end of the path at the only stone building in the village, a strange, black dome.

Not even the most foolish boys in the village ventured near the temple or its path, but they had all seen its guard from below. He stood before the doorway of the temple every day, in the torrential rains of the wet season and the choking droughts of the dry season. They whispered that he never slept, never ate, unless someone tried to enter the temple. Then he could satiate his hunger. The guard was a brutish figure, wearing a black loincloth and a red wooden helm that hid his face. His only weapon was a plain grey-shafted, obsidian-tipped spear. Kenso could not help but shrink against the opposite side of the doorway as he followed the priest into the temple.

Inside, he was startled to find two more of the guards, attired as their companion outside, sitting at a stone table with plates of venison. They nodded towards the priest and again towards Kenso. The priest gestured towards the pair.

"These are the deacons. They ensure that we are not bothered by the peasants or the beasts of the Green. They serve the Red God. They obey."

At this, the two guards lifted their helms, revealing faces disfigured by ritual scarring, but Kenso was more startled by their eyes. They were a solid, shining black like the obsidian blade of the priest's ritual dagger, and just as sharp, just as hard.

"Ah, yes. They will obey you too, even as you obey me. Were I to give the word, they would leap to their feet and kill each other. Such is the power of the Red God and his faithful." The priest waited for a few moments before he shouted, "Do you understand me, boy?!"

Kenso jumped. "Yes... yes, master."

"You will answer when I speak to you, but you shall not speak otherwise, unless it is to issue a task to the deacons that serve the Red God. Do you understand your purpose here?"

"I am to be your servant?"

"You have answered my question with a question," the priest snapped. "The Red One grants us surety. You will be my acolyte." The priest looked at Kenso's body as a man might inspect a cut of fish at the market. "Come. You must bind yourself to the service of the Red God."

The priest walked through one of the three doorways that led further into the temple. Kenso glanced back at the deacons who still stared at him before he slipped into the hallway with the priest. Like the room before, the hallway was well lit by torches. Darkness had no place in the house of the god of blood and fire, Kenso reasoned. Beyond the priest, the next room poured forth a bright red glow of light and heat.

The priest removed his mask and set it upon a display of skulls at the entrance of the massive chamber. The room held a ledge large enough for the priest and the apprentice to stand comfortably, and the rest of the room held a massive pit filled with a great fire. Another deacon stood on another ledge at the opposite end of the room, feeding twisted hunks of wood into the flames which sent smoke billowing out a covered hole in the roof.

Kenso glanced up at the priest's face as the priest chanted a prayer. Despite the red stains on his skin and the scars on his chest, the priest's face was quite plain, marked only by heavy wrinkles, but this revelation made Kenso uncomfortable. It would have been more fitting in his mind if the priest had borne the scars that the deacons did.

The priest delicately lifted an obsidian knife from a shelf, holding it by only the tip and the pommel with the points of each of his middle fingers. He offered it to Kenso.

"You must give your life to the Red God, but for you it shall be a living sacrifice. Marco paid with his death. You shall pay with service throughout your life. Cast your blood into the fire."

Kenso reached out, afraid that he would incite the priest's anger if he showed hesitation.

The priest spoke again, leaning forward with his mouth hanging slightly open. "Your blood." His eyebrows rose expectantly.

Kenso's trembling hand closed on the knife's smooth handle. In the brief instant in which both he and the priest held the knife, they locked eyes. Kenso felt the priest's own trembling through the knife, and he beheld a dreadful hunger in the priest's eyes. He took one shuffling step towards the edge, leaning forward to peer into the flaming logs below. It would be a horrible fall to a horrid death. Kenso raised his left arm over the fire with the knife quivering over his left outstretched palm. There, he froze.

The priest suddenly let out a shriek like the flying beasts of the jungle. Of what emotion it was born, Kenso could not say. Raw power, twisted glee or thirst, likely. Startled into action, Kenso dragged the knife's edge across his palm with a scream of his own. Time slowed. The priest watched each red drop fall with his eyes wide open, making him appear even more skeletal than when he had worn the mask. Kenso saw Marco's face in the flames.

Who will protect me now if not my brother? Kenso wondered. Not this priest.

He turned and thrust the knife towards the priest, eager to be rid of it, but the priest stared at the wound on Kenso's hand with open lust. His eyes met those of the deacon across the fire. He had watched. He was as guilty of the mutilation as the priest. Then Kenso wondered. The priest had said that they would obey him as well. In the room filled with the thick heat of the fire, Kenso felt chilled.

*

The pair were walking down the path to the village for the first time since Kenso had entered the temple. The priest wore his mask again, but now he also wore a skirt of red-dyed reeds. Kenso wore a red robe with long sleeves that he had found the day after his induction next to the reed mat where he slept. He wore no mask, but his scalp bore red

marks from the priest's shaving stone.

Once the pair entered the cleared space of the village, the priest strode down the center of the street, and Kenso followed behind. The people dropped to their knees, heads pressed into the dirt, as the priest passed them, humming a prayer. Upon reaching the sacred column, the priest interlocked his fingers behind him and leaned back to gaze up at the new head atop the column. Kenso shifted his feet and looked back towards the hut that his friend had lived in. He imagined Marco's mother weeping upon the reed mat inside with nothing over which to mourn except the head on the pillar. The bodies of the sacrificed were not returned to the family, but Kenso had not seen it in the temple either. He knew better than to ask the priest. As he thought that, he glanced back to the priest whose dark eyes were fixated on Kenso's.

"A worthy sacrifice. Look."

Kenso looked up and then back at his sandals.

The priest smirked. "Come. We have much to do. The Red God demands."

On their way back down the street, the people again kneeled to him. One man was hurrying from the opposite direction, a basketful of fish in his arms and his eyes marveling in the luck of his hefty catch. The priest did not change his course, continuing as though the fisherman was not there. By the time the fisherman noticed the kneeling of the people around him, he was nearly upon the priest. With a gasp, he abandoned his basket and dropped to his knees. The slimy fish spilled out from the basket when it hit the ground, and they flew into the priest's legs.

The priest froze. The fisherman whimpered for mercy. The priest laughed a hollow sound and leapt in the air. Then he came down like a hurricane, his fists raining thunder upon the man's back. Up and down he went again and again, but the fisherman moved only down. The man screamed and cried, but all of the onlookers were silent.

They must follow the laws, Kenso knew. The priest appeased the Red God, without

whom the villagers would be defeated by the ever-creeping jungle. Without the Red God, there would be no lifeblood in their veins. To offend the priest was to insult the god, Kenso thought, but still... the priest's display of brutality was unsettling. Kenso had seen him up close. He had seen the look in the priest's eyes. Violence thrilled the priest of the Red God.

Finally, the priest slowed before standing up, his shoulders heaving with panting breaths, gazing down upon the ruined form of the fisherman.

"Take him away!"

The kneeling people sprang to their feet and hauled the man's body off towards the river. The priest adjusted his reed skirt and continued on his way back to the temple.

Kenso wondered, what exactly did they fear? The god or the priest?

Kenso's eyes met those of an old woman struggling back to her feet. She collapsed back to the ground, pressing her forehead into the dirt at Kenso's feet.

Or maybe anyone in the red, he thought. He felt guilty at how he felt about her reaction. Strong. Untouchable. Then the priest snapped at him, and he was afraid again.

When they arrived, the priest gestured to the deacons sitting at the table in the entry room who stood quickly and left soundlessly. Some of the torches need to be replaced, for the room had grown dim, mostly illuminated by the bloodred sky of the setting sun. Kenso had grown accustomed to the dry, smoky air of the temple's halls, but now the sticky air of the jungle slithered in through the door, past the sweating deacon outside.

The priest sat on one of the blackened log stools and nodded towards the other. Then he began to eat the berries that the deacons had left on the table, shoveling them into his mouth with awful squelching noises. Their crimson juice splattered onto the table. Kenso sat so that he was leaning slightly away from the priest.

"Eat. I chose you to live, so your starving serves the Red One no purpose." He watched Kenso tentatively eat a few berries. "I will tell

you of our purpose. You must know how to act as an acolyte of the Red One. Forget your old, lowly ways. You walk with the spirit of Blood and Fire."

"How should I do so, master?"

"The people fear us. You fear me still."

"This is the power of the Red God?"

"Yes and no. When you were a man, no one feared you. I saw your eyes. Marco was bold, but you feared a change in the wind, the deep shade of a jungle pathway, the fires of the Red One. You may speak. We are conversing. You must ask questions to understand."

"Why did you choose me to live? Why not choose Marco to serve in life?"

"I chose you because you know fear. Fear is most important. It is the greatest weapon of the Red God. When the peasants in the village fear me, they obey our god. When you fear me, you will obey me. You will listen so that you will learn. Marco could have been a deacon, but he did not understand fear enough to be an acolyte."

"So... you want to frighten the people in the village? I think we would follow the Red God without fear. He protects us."

"No. The people in the village are only useful because they have beating hearts. Yes, alone, they are meaningless. But, as long as they worship the Red God, they have purpose. Fear forces them to follow."

Kenso thought about the priest's speech at the sacrifice of Marco. "But the Red God 'gives us the power to fight the Green.' Would they not worship because he gives us life?"

"No. Fear. Fear is the way of the Red God... That is enough for today." The priest resumed his consumption of the red berries.

Kenso watched him and pondered. The priest certainly had power, but why would the Red God oppress his own people? How much of the priest's fearmongering was commanded by the Red One, though? Kenso had seen him. The priest desired to be feared. He desired to harm people.

That was the priest, not the god.

The priest stood and spoke before leaving

the room, "Serve the Red God, and the people will fear you too."

Kenso was afraid.

*

The next day, the priest summoned Kenso back to the chamber of the bonfire. The shelves were covered in jars of various powders and the priest's red mask.

"We have more work for the Red God today." The priest reached into one of the jars and tossed the powder into the fire which had been allowed to shrink and cool when not in use for a ritual. The powder sizzled in the flames, and black smoke poured thickly into the chamber, filling it as it was too heavy to rise through the vent quickly. Kenso choked until a wave of heat burst through the smoke, sending it into the sky. The flames roared higher as the priest cast more of a different powder into them.

"You will make another offering! Blood into the Fire!"

Kenso looked at and rubbed the bandage on his left hand.

"Not yours. You must leave behind your life in the village."

One of the deacons was walking backwards into the chamber on their side, dragging something heavy behind him. The deacon turned upon passing the doorway, dragging a headless corpse with him. Kenso was glad for the Red God's fire, for the smoke was too thick to carry the smell of the rot. The deacon threw the body at Kenso's feet and left the room. A deacon, the same or another, Kenso could not tell, appeared on the ledge at the opposite side of the chamber.

The priest simply stood watching Kenso who forced himself to look at the body again. He saw the broad shoulders and the muscled chest, caked in dark, dried blood.

He knew.

The body was Marco's.

Kenso stood still for several minutes before he looked at the priest again. The priest smiled viciously and pointed his clawed finger at the body.

"Into the fire. Leave that filth behind you."

When Kenso would not respond, the priest leapt forward and shrieked into his face, spittle covering the acolyte's face. Still, Kenso would not touch the body.

"How dare you disobey me?! I am the priest of the Red One. My words are his commands."

The priest struck the acolyte. Kenso's face was a twisted visage of misery, as pitiful as the priest's mask was dreadful.

"Do you not want to serve the Red God?"

"I can't. I won't," he whispered. "Throw me in the fire yourself. I do not want to serve."

The priest clawed Kenso's chest. Again. The claws left deep red gashes across Kenso's skin. Kenso stepped backwards and stumbled over the body. The priest grabbed his upper arms and heaved, but Kenso was afraid to die. His words were bolder than his fear.

The priest and the acolyte locked arms, struggling at the edge, over the blazing fire below. In the priest's eyes, Kenso saw the rage of fire and the hunger for blood. Kenso knew that his own eyes must be showing his panic, his fear. To be a priest of the Red God was to be feared and obeyed. Kenso dreaded the consequences of refusing the Red God's priest. Would he be tormented after death?

Then, he understood. He was afraid of always being afraid.

The two wrestled back and forth. Finally, a body fell screaming down into the flames. The new priest of the Red God stood over the edge, panting, inhaling the heat of the fire. Then, he walked over and took up the mask, affixing it to his face. He stood over Marco's body for a moment and thanked him for his sacrifice before he shoved it into the fire as well. The deacon stood at attention across the flame.

Kenso walked back through the hallways and outside to gaze upon his village below. Now they would fear him. Now he was untouchable. Having become fear itself, Kenso was no longer afraid.

Butterflies

Camryn Smith, Agnes Scott College

The butterflies began to show, began to be remembered, just as you were disappearing from me. I imagine that you were somehow developing in my mind without me ever knowing it, until you were a whole thing without a face, but I could somehow see you. You, a tall man with curly dark brown hair, leaning against the counter of some future kitchen I have yet to see. You'd be wearing a vest with dark brown slacks and Oxfords. I could tell that you were polite and kind, because I wanted you to be. So, I thought I would go find you in this more reachable world. Because of the number of people that might exist, you must be out there, even if it is just a fragment of you within some other person. Otherwise, there would be no purpose to you being here, in my head, perched on a recliner, reading a book, memorizing quotes to read to me when time is at its softest.

I downloaded my first dating app in the middle of the night when I was desperate to look for you. There were only three pictures of myself and I could not help but wonder if you were more real than I even was; because there didn't seem to be much grounding me in this reality. But, there were those three pictures, moments in which I remembered to capture space, my existence. Among them, only one where a person could see my eyes in the distance. Those pictures, they were of some girl who I hadn't quite acquainted myself with yet. She seemed nice, pretty enough, and she had such a big smile. I smiled at myself in the mirror. It seemed smaller than in the pictures and I wondered if that had something to do with the camera lenses that seem to alter reality. Attempts at describing myself in the bio were a near failure, as all I knew of myself was of my quietness and a tendency to disappear, though I'm right there, standing, however it may be in an empty space replaced by thoughts. My mind, adrift in some alternate reality. Instead, I described the girl in the pictures, with that smile, with eyes closed against the sun despite sunglasses on her face.

She seemed as though she loved life, was wholly in love with it and she'd go anywhere as long as someone came along. A girl of adventure and whispers of wonder. She was not quiet when she was in love, with the flowers picked for her, or the ideas of the universe and world that bounced in her head, beating against her skull to come out. She was not quiet. In fact, talking is all she wanted to do, and swing. If she ever found a swing, she would go upon it and pump her legs until the tip of her nose was facing the sky. She was a girl alive. And I almost put that line in there, because it is one you'd appreciate. You'd ask, *If she is a girl alive, then who are you?*

Swiping was the hardest part. It seemed that each man who appeared on my screen looked the same. They all were the same in a way, as they just weren't you. I'd take a chance on some man who had that curly hair, or glasses because it made me think of you. If they at all mentioned a love of poetry, or reading, I'd take a chance. And it went like that until the feed started over and I saw the same faces as I began with. Hours had passed, and my eyes were burning from staring at my screen. I had a few matches waiting in anticipation - or maybe I thought they were because that seemed to be what you would do, wait in anticipation. You would see that girl and be curious about the swings, the books she read, and the universes she made up in her head. I saw the matches and they all looked the same, despite their various bios, hair colors, and skin colors, and whatever else differentiates people as uniquely their own. I started a conversation with one who I thought was most you. After sending a picture of this person to my friend, she sent back a question mark, saying how this man could not possibly be my type. No, he doesn't look like you, but I can feel he would have his feet propped up on a rainstorm of a Sunday with a mug of tea in his hand. Chamomile, as if he'd need more than the lulling sounds of rain and thunder to put him to sleep. He'd fight sleep and in the midst of yawns he'd talk about Sartre or Orwell or why the universe is so dark and not set alight by the

surrounding stars and that beautiful sun. That's all he might say, the sun.

Hey there! How are you?

good. wbu

Good.

What is something you're obsessed with?

i play call of duty a lot

I'm obsessed with how we are never really touching anything. We think we might be sitting atop of our beds or chairs, but we are really floating upon the clouds of electrons, never quite touching, but repelling one another. It means that, in a way, we are flying. People are always wanting to fly and have no idea how they do.

I've always thought that. How we would be falling through everything if that weren't the case.

What are you afraid of?

Sometimes, I think I am a cruel person. The way I leave these people, who perhaps had the best intentions, as texts on a thrown away screen. Sometimes, I think I am a ghost. The way I only find purchase in reality when it is through pixels and electric signals. But even there I disappear, pretending I had never existed. I think about those people, wondering if I had caused some sort of

pain in my disappearing act. It is just so clear when they are not you. And I would go to sleep with the heaviness of chamomile tea coating my throat. All the while wondering where you are.

The first butterfly came after I deleted the app, giving up on my search for you through pixels. I can only think that I had seen a butterfly that next day. It would not be honest if I suggest that I really saw it, consuming its image, colors, and its very existence. But I do remember seeing the shadow of a butterfly on the deck as I was lying out staring up to the sky. I was thinking of you and where I might find you in the world. I thought of bookstores and the library, walks alone in the park, or readings. I reconciled with the thought that I would not find you through the phone, because you just might not own one, and how you would say that you would send me a letter, and I'd write my address down on the corner of an empty page of my notebook that I carry with me all the time. I would anticipate that letter because how exhilarating, how slow and calm the development of a relationship through letters. I would want to throw away my own phone, seeing how foolish it would be to have it when I would have you and these letters. The first letter would come, flying in only a few days after our meeting, as if the moment you got home you began to write it, or perhaps even in my presence as we spoke of the male gaze in horror movies. The butterfly, the shadow must have stayed during these thoughts, pumping its wings in hopes to retrieve my attention.

I can't remember ever seeing a butterfly before then or at least not for quite some time. They weren't ever something that I would seek out, as something was always strange about them. I could never distract myself with the beauty of their colorful wings, but instead I held a focus on their snaking veins through their wings, their sticking thread legs and eyes filled with a hundred more eyes. You must know, butterflies are attracted to blood. Their wings are perhaps meant to be as alluring as

the light at the end of an anglerfish. They tout pleasantness only to hide from us their deviance. Butterflies, they sent chills through me when I was younger, and I must have shelved their existence elsewhere in my head, so that I might never have to consider them again. Though I imagine now that those veins are mere secrets that keep their wings together and they kiss blood like how we might wrap our mouths around pricked fingers or kiss the top of flesh colored band-aids.

I found myself searching for you at an author's event held at my library that following weekend. There was hardly a crowd, and most of them were older people, plus a younger boy who seemed to be there for his mother, who was presenting. A woman who was likely in her forties sat next to me in this event. She held out her hand, which was soft and warm. She seemed to be someone who smiled a lot as crow's feet reached from her eyes and the edges of her lips. From her, I smelled the scent of jasmine and wondered what scent people might smell from me. My favorite is rose, lemons, and vanilla. But my perfume smelled like the woods, a mask for the girl in those pictures, the one with the too big smile. The woman began to talk to me, somehow interested in my uninteresting life. She asked me what I liked to read, and I was intrigued because there is a world of an answer. I obliged her, and brought the conversation to Min Jin Lee, Han Kang, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mikhail Lermontov. She frowned, looking at me carefully as if she were trying to capture my image and with each attempt it slipped from her. She seemed to not want to forget this moment, admitting that she didn't read such things at my age. It was in that moment, as I was considering how beautiful the honesty of this woman was, that I forgot about you. When the event ended, I wanted to apologize to you and clarify that I did in fact come for you. On the walk home, I was not scared of the dark, for I was walking with you and we were quiet. I love the silences between us, this simple existing.

There was a dinner in the following weeks where I thought I had found you. My friend, who was so displeased by my findings through online dating, decided to set me up with a friend of a friend. There was an unmatched excitement, a fear that sent tremors through my body. I was not so much interested in the dinner as I was in the conversation that I hoped we would have. He was an interesting man, one who seemed to love to laugh as he never stopped smiling from the moment we met at the restaurant. There seemed to be a laugh at the top of his throat with every word he said, waiting to come out. Now that I think about it, I don't think it was normal to have been so absorbed in what was going on everywhere else during that dinner. See, I could tell you about the woman who sat at the table beside us as he was telling me about his job. His eyes held onto mine while also taking in my black dress and tight curled hair. He looked upon me, the candles in the middle of the table somehow leaning more towards me, illuminating what couldn't be captured in the pictures. I remember wanting to blow the candles out. And I still remember where he worked. In truth, I cannot remember his exact words in describing his work. But I do remember that woman, who had bright red lipstick on her lips and sleeping eyes. They were open, and painted pink, but she seemed to be dozing in her conversation with an older man that might have been her father. I attempted to lean in and decipher what they were saying, but the low hum of the restaurant held too many vibrations to understand their words. She flipped her long brown hair over her shoulder every moment as though it was a tick. It looked as though she did not want to be there, and I could relate to that, as the humming of the man in front of me brought my attention back to him.

"What are you obsessed with?" I asked him and he stopped smiling, which was a first. I wondered if his cheeks hurt from being in that trance for so long. I was hopeful at his response as he scraped his fingers through his goatee, looking off into the lights with glowing eyes. He put his finger in the air, raising his eyebrows and

the corner of his mouth like he developed the grandest idea.

"Handkerchiefs." I would be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued and so I beckoned him to continue with his answer. "We should bring back handkerchiefs because it is the most romantic gesture a man could do." I asked him why and he considered this, but then answered that it was what women needed, more men with handkerchiefs. I imagine that you would have given an answer somehow knowing the whole history of handkerchiefs and how you were in love with the stitching as if each piece of fabric held its own individual story. You would be picturing the ghost hands that threaded the decals and stitching. He didn't ask me in return what I was obsessed with and moved on to talk about the various ways in which one folds a handkerchief. I feigned interest, watching the girl and her father get up and leave, their table neat with the plates piled together and glasses placed on top of one another. When we left, I mimicked them, but Mr. Handkerchief said that these people must earn their paycheck.

I was almost free of him when we got into the parking lot, but he was going on about how great of a time he had. I thought that that was quite the lie, as I did not give him much ammunition to have fun for the night. Then he thought it would be wise to come close, allowing me to spot a dry tear out of the corner of his eye that somehow made me even more disgusted by him. Butterflies are attracted to tears too, and sweat. When he put his face against mine, I let him, holding down the food in my stomach, concluding unequivocally that there would be no second date. As I made my way to the car, I happened upon the woman who was sitting beside us, and she gave a tired wave and I waved back. On the side of her leg that was hidden under the table before, there was the tattoo of a small butterfly stretched out. But I must have ignored it because I did not remember seeing it until the next time I saw one, and thought how entrancing the number three was.

My friend invited me to a pride parade a few months later, after further failings in my search for you. I resolved myself to the fact that for a while, you might have to exist in my head. I didn't tell anyone about you, even as my friend held a brush to my cheeks, painting colors with glitter within them. I couldn't quite grasp her excitement as she rolled socks up to her shins with those same colors. She even toppled her boyfriend to the ground, sat on top of him, and painted the colors on his cheeks as well. Your image began to scream at me then. Though I still could not see your face, I saw those colors on your cheeks. I saw how you would carry me on your shoulders, and we would march, taking in those colors and the joy. We would laugh, but all the while I would wonder where the bravery comes from. The bravery to wear those colors and bear an authenticity unmatched by these mask wielders.

But on this day, it was my friend being carried by her world, and I hovered in the crowd, being carried by strangers. Maybe you were there, but it would not have mattered as a woman wearing a bathing suit and roller blades flew towards me, floating. She held in her hand pinwheels and butterflies. I smiled at the distraction as she lifted them, beckoning me to take one of the colorful objects. I reached for the pinwheel, always amazed at how they spun, creating more colors in the wind. She must have mistaken my reaching, as she passed me a yellow butterfly with an attachment that made the wings flap. I held the stick in my hands and moved the contraption up and down as the woman raced to the next person. I remember looking for her in the crowd again, considering where she came from and where she went. I hadn't taken the time to capture her face, only what she was wearing and how she held those butterflies and pinwheels of varying colors. The butterfly looked at me with small rolling eyes and a cartoon smile. My stomach turned, processing the food I had eaten that mixed with the alcohol I consumed. I found myself sitting on the curb, breathing careful breaths so to control the turning in my stomach.

Somehow my colorlessness was spotted from the crowd, as a presence seated itself beside me, a warmth. I opened my eyes to a girl who had an impossible smile, her face painted in those colors. She frowned at the thing in my hand and I lifted it to her face, maneuvering the contraption so the butterfly wings moved up and down. She laughed and asked if I'd be okay. I nodded and I don't remember you coming to mind.

"What is something you're obsessed with?" I asked. She had not told me her name, but that seemed unimportant as I fished for some story, something to ground me in this present. She looked back, nose pointed to the sky, and smiled.

"The color blue," she said. I looked at her, wondering what she meant. Her face appeared to me, clear, memorable as her words came out, "I mean, look at the sky and the ocean. Like, from space. We see the earth is mostly blue because of the ocean. But the blue from the ocean is a reflection from the sky. Doesn't that just mean that from space, we're looking at the sky? And I just think that it's beautiful. Someone saw the sky, saw the ocean, which is just a reflection of the sky, and decided to put it in everything. And naturally, it's in the rainbows made of rain, in the flowers, and in life, and even in our eyes. I don't know, I just love the color blue." She took her water bottle and poured some water in her cupped hand. She then maneuvered her hand in a way that allowed the sky to reflect in the water. "See?" I nodded in simple wonder, watching a cloud appear in her hand. The water fell out of her crevices and she playfully flicked her fingers in my direction, so that the sky was dripping from my face. "What about you?"

"I'm obsessed with how we are never really touching anything..." I said. Sometimes, when I speak, I am afraid that I am saying too much. And in the middle of a thought, I will stop, wanting to take back my words as I perceive the sudden disinterest of my thoughts from the listener. But her eyes settled on mine and I couldn't maintain contact as I lost attention to the pains in my stomach, focusing on where my eyes were landing. I finished my spiel

and she put her hand on top of my head.

"So, I'm not really touching you," I nodded, flapping the butterfly's wings as my hands forgot what they were intended to do. She looked up as a man approached her, lifting her arms and standing into his embrace. The girl with the sky in her hands took a disposed marker and scrawled her number on my hand, explaining that she was new to the city, and needed some friends. I would never call her though I wanted to, but I took the butterfly that day, now sitting yellow wings open, taped to my mirror, and I took the memory of how beautiful blue is.

Now there is you and there is me and we are going on a final walk together months later. I hadn't forgotten you but have resolved something about you within myself. As we are walking, I have to confess something. I have to confess how I cannot see your face, a creation, an imagined essence of perfection. I can only see those curls and those moments, like now when we are walking or reading together. I can picture the things that you would say and the things that you love, like vanilla scented candles and matches that fill the table with ash. I must confess that I've never wanted you to touch me. I never considered how you might hold my hand or how there might come a time where we would breathe the same breath. With you, there are no butterflies. Not even in their simplest form, stamped against that woman's leg, in her memory, in the beauty of the color blue. Those butterflies, not thoughts to be held in the head, but excitements which have found their way into my heart and my stomach. Before, I had never seen them, or felt them, or held them, the butterflies. But now they are bursting from my being. At night, I do not go to sleep by the blue light of my phone. At night, I dream of the butterflies. They stick to the windows of my eyes. They make their way into my mind and I draw out pictures, imaginary lands of them. Me, floating away on them. I seek them, and I see them touch me, their eyes so close to mine, their bodies on top of my own, their licking of my blood as their wings beat in time with the beat of my heart. I think

about how butterflies have always existed, but I never saw them because they never really had any meaning, but now I'm remembering them because blue is such a beautiful color and butterfly wings are thin with secrets. And so, we must stop now. Stop walking so I may ask you a question.

"What is something you are obsessed with?" You turn to me, faceless, far away. You never meant to look upon me. The butterflies come as you open your lips. They push themselves out of your not-there mouth and cover your face. I find myself afraid of them, afraid of how they cover you, seeming to consume a wholeness of you that I did not memorize yet. But as they flap their wings, as the words fall from your lips, from their butterfly wings, there is a familiarity and I know what you will say. I know that after you say it, you will somehow be gone from me even though it was always my hands meant to write those letters. Still, I want to cover that butterfly winged mouth of yours, so you do not dare say the words, but you're already saying them, as if in apology, as if having been programmed. I snatch at you as if I might miss you, my hands falling through the heartbeats, the butterflies, everything.

I'm obsessed with how we are never really touching.

America Encaustic

Emma Dollar, Emory University

Matt thought the air smelled something like Vietnam—it hung around his neck in thick, heavy ropes, choked with smoke and hot breath and what could've been gunpowder but was probably just firecrackers, he reminded himself. Ahead of him, Johnson snaked through the dancers, winding his body into the spaces between wayward elbows and knees. Matt's shoulders excavated holes in the crowd, bludgeoning through people with an apologetic, "excuse me" and "I'm sorry." Most of them were too blissed out to care. Their bodies pulsed to some deeply universal beat, even though the stage was still empty of any musicians. The arms of the crowd stretched into the roiling, smoky red air of the arena like branches extending into the jungle canopy, mosquitoes buzzing around his exposed skin, boots thick with mud and blood—

"Matt," Johnson yelled. "Hey, bud, you good?"

"Uh, yeah," he said, shaking himself back into the club. Johnson clapped him on the back and grinned, the scar on his cheek stretching his lips gruesomely high in the lowlight. It was something he'd had to get used to since he got back from Vietnam, his friend's new skin—the last time he'd seen Johnson, it was summer in Vegas and they were spending their nights lavishly in casinos and bars and clubs. Then it was winter in boot camp and his parents sent a letter detailing a certain incident between Johnson and the federal officers who had come to collect him for his draft sentence. His friend would never make it to Vietnam after that.

Instead, Johnson made it into the world of rock 'n' roll. He liked to describe it to Matt as beginning with a particularly good night with particularly potent beer, sleazy motels, and lots and lots of hot chicks. That was where he found a guy who introduced himself as Jim Johannesen, and they drank and slept and fucked their way halfway across America before Johnson realized that they were on a music tour.

He crashed back into Vegas in March of 1973, where a newly war-christened Matt was sitting in a bar that sold the particularly potent beer that started his friend's three-year crusade across the States. Now they stood in an arena waiting for Jim Johannesen's band to fill the smoke with a promise of a "new-fucking-life, man," as Johnson had described it. Matt sighed and wished he was back in his apartment, maybe curled up with Jane, where the air was cool and quiet and didn't remind him so much of the inside of his tent camped on the borders of Phuoc Long right before the bombs went off.

Johnson was talking again, his voice almost lost in the sound from the crowd. "You wouldn't fuckin' believe it, man," he said, gesturing wildly with the beer in his hand. "Chicks like you would not believe. And they don't even care if you're not in the band, if you're backstage that's good enough for them."

"Yeah, and Jane would love that," Matt answered, knocking back his own beer.

Johnson gave him a dubious look and said, "Yeah, like you didn't already fuck a dozen hot Asian chicks when you were in Vietnam."

The band mounted the stage, their faces blurring together in a composed whiteness so that Matt couldn't tell one from another, or even from the famed Jim Johannesen. The opening notes crashed down louder than he expected. The cymbals tore the stadium into a war zone, the arms of the jungle swaying and toppling into the mass of black, heaving bodies. He saw her fall first, bullet holes ripped through her chest, arms, legs, chest. One of them must have hit something vital because she didn't get back up again. "Traitor," someone whispered in his ear. "Pick a side, Private Wang."

Matt must've fucked a dozen chicks, Johnson said, he must've gotten lonely at night with only his hands for company. But no, the war wasn't like that. Matt's platoon was in An Loc for a week before the orders came to storm the surrounding villages for hidden members of the Viet Cong. The privates were supposed to stay in camp, but the other young, angry men in his

squad pushed and writhed against the borders, itching for something to kill besides their endless time. Matt stayed in his tent and wrote letters to Jane and his family and Johnson, because his boundaries were much stricter than the rest. American and Asian were the dividing labels in Vietnam, and it didn't matter that he was both. It didn't matter when they said "Asian" that he was Chinese, because every person with distinct non-white features was under suspicion no matter where they were from. It didn't matter that twenty-four years ago, his parents had fled to the United States to escape the communist regimes they were now fighting against. What mattered was how many steps he took outside the camp to piss and who he spoke to in the villages and how many bullets he put in them when he killed them.

The first time Matt saw the girl, they were doing recon three days before the invasion. She watched from the doorway of one of the houses as soldiers slunk through the jungle growth around her, radios beeping and whistling in between the chirping of birds in the trees. The other people in the village moved along tensely, avoiding the soldiers with every muscle in their bodies, but she caught his eyes and held them. He could read the silent question on her lips—*why are you with them?* Matt had returned to his tent and that night he tried to think of Jane, but the girl that came to mind had harder features and tanned skin and bored into his soul with her eyes. He tried not to think at all.

Matt saw her twice more after that. She squatted in the vines draped around their camp and whistled at him one night when he stepped outside for mealtime. He had five minutes before the others would notice he was missing. "My name is Minh," she told him, her English thick and heavy. She told him more about how her brother had joined the Viet Cong but they hadn't seen him in years, how none of her village had seen any of the enemy at all. "Do not come for us," she begged. "What have we done to you?"

Traitor, Matt had thought to himself as he held her hand, *traitor*; but she was really the one he was betraying when he whispered,

"I'll try to stop them."

The order came the next day, and the cymbals onstage crashed, and the soldiers tore the village apart. The privates, vengeful and drooling for heroics, screamed for the residents to give up the traitors and shot them if they didn't respond fast enough. Matt looked for Minh, but it seemed as though she had run. Until he walked into a house, looked to his left, and saw her underneath a soldier, dwarfed by his large hands that covered her mouth so she couldn't scream and his large legs which pinned her to the ground as he tore into her. Her white dress was pushed up to her stomach, caked with mud and blood, her arms splayed out in defeat like she was laid out on a cross. Matt thought of Jane, the softness of her skin against his, how he always brushed her hair back behind her ear when he first pushed into her. A slow, sick feeling spread between his legs and up into his stomach, filling his mouth with bile as he stared at the broken girl on the ground, her long black hair loose around her face. As he watched, she turned her head slightly, and her dulled brown eyes asked him, "Why are you with *them*?" The soldier looked up at him and sneered, "What're you looking at?"

And Matt had turned away, because they would've shot him too if they had the chance. Traitor. The gunshot went off ten minutes later, and even though there were hundreds of bullets popping around him, Matt could tell that that was the one that killed her.

The club was writhing with sound. What had once invisibly possessed the crowd now controlled them like marionettes, flinging their bodies in waves with the music. "Like nothing you've ever heard before, right?" Johnson called over to Matt, his eyes smoky and red in the light. Without any response, he nodded to himself and said, "Yeah, motherfucking genius, that's right."

"I need to get out of here," Matt yelled at him, the pulses of sound from the stage moving his heart in time with the band. He was afraid that if they stopped playing, his heart would stop too. The air stuck to his skin and held him in

place in the crowd. "Johnson! Please!"

Johnson dragged Matt out into the open air gasping and coughing, falling to his hands and knees on the asphalt outside. His friend stood to the side as Matt vomited onto the ground, bile burning at his throat and roiling in his stomach. When it seemed like he had finished, Johnson walked back up to him and patted him on the back. "You good, buddy?"

Matt wiped at his mouth and heaved out an exhausted sigh. "I'm fine."

"Good enough to go back in there?"

Johnson asked hopefully, his eyes falling when Matt shook his head urgently. "All right, okay. What was it? The alcohol? Did you take something? What happened?"

"N-nothing—I just," Matt paused, swallowing the memory of the girl's eyes. He gripped the crucifix around his neck. He had gotten it at a street market in Saigon. The craftsman had carved the figure on the cross into the shape of a woman instead of a man, her white dress blowing in some invisible wind, her head drooped against her chest in defeat. He remembered trading the man his parents' silver crucifix for the new one and hanging it around his neck.

"We can go backstage," Johnson offered. "Jimmy'll be done in forty."

Matt nodded, breathing in and out like they'd taught him in the hospital after his first panic attack. Johnson beamed and helped him up, chattering about how now they could really enjoy the fun, and there was a particular blonde groupie who had been flirting with him the past few days—

"Will they have beer?" Matt interrupted him.

Johnson smiled. The puckered, shiny skin of his scars carved his face into fragments under the lights of the arena. "They'll have much more than beer."

Much more than beer could mean anything to two boys who grew up on the Las Vegas strip. After school, they would go to Matt's parents' restaurant and study until Johnson coerced Matt's

mom into letting them free. They would stand in the lines for clubs while Matt bit his nails down to their beds from anxiety and Johnson soaked in the neon lights, cozying up to girls wearing sequins and chatting up the bouncers until they were first in line every night. There were powders and pills and smoke and alcohol of every color. His best friend was always about loosening up; his parents were always about studying. "This restaurant won't become the family business," they would shout at him every time he came home less than sober. So he found Jane, and he applied to Stanford, and his dad had a heart attack. Then none of it mattered at all when he stayed home from college and the letter arrived in the mail that said, *We're coming for you.*

The backstage of the club pulsed with sound. "We're gonna wait in the band's dressing room," Johnson told Matt as they walked in, nodding to the security guard.

"I have to be at work tomorrow by nine," Matt reminded him as they entered a room hazy with smoke. A girl wearing glitter and little else walked up to them, sashaying to the thrum of music from the concert. "You're new," she purred.

"I, uh, have a fiancée," Matt said awkwardly.

Johnson hit him in the arm, laughing. "That's not how you fucking do it, man!" He put his arm around the girl and whispered, "I'm single, baby."

"I hit you last week," she said dismissively, and wandered back into the smoke. Matt laughed, slapping his friend in the shoulder. "So that's how you do it?" He asked.

"Shove off," Johnson mumbled. "Let's go get the good stuff."

People lounged or maybe just collapsed on couches around the room, their pupils blown out with ecstasy. Johnson clapped a few on the back, murmuring greetings to the ones he recognized while Matt followed him. One man splayed out over the carpet, his hair slicked to his temples with sweat. Matt squinted at him, the haze in the room nearly obscuring the features he'd seen photographed on the cover of *Rolling*

Stone just the week before. Jim Johannesen laid on the ground, drool drying on his chin, eyes half open and staring at the ceiling. A naked girl draped over him, equally as high, but no one in the room seemed to care. For a moment Matt wondered who was on stage rasping out riffs on a guitar right now, but Johnson kept moving through the room as if that was a question he should already know the answer to. One of the guys handed his friend something small and glowing, which Johnson puffed like a cigarette. He rocked back and gave Matt a long, slow smile.

"Finish this," he said, offering him the joint. "It's the best shit around. I smoked pounds of it while I was in the hospital."

Matt breathed in a long, slow drag, the clarity in his head feeling slightly more swamy and disjointed than usual. He'd smoked weed before the war, but it was different now. There was more he could forget when he was high. He relaxed his shoulders and smoked the rest of the joint, listening to the crashing sounds of the concert smooth away into the background. Johnson laughed and handed him another, his hands moving with unnatural liquidity in the dark room. "That's the stuff," he said. "Wanna go to the bar?"

Matt nodded. He wasn't sure whose lighter he was holding or how it ended up in his hand, but he lit the joint and smoked it slowly, savoring the high as they walked. The girl standing by the bar had dark hair that fell down her back in gleaming waves, her skin tanned and smooth in the lowlight of the band room. As they approached, she turned to look at them, and her eyes caught Matt's breath halfway down his throat.

"You wanna fuck?" The dead girl asked him, her eyes the same shade of deep brown that they'd been in the haze of the jungle. Minh smiled, nothing like the smile of broken teeth and bloody lips that had been forced to the ground by the soldier's hands. She reached out and brushed against his arm, and he took her hand.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

"Nothing to be sorry for," Minh said,

moving their joined hands towards the skin exposed by her slippery dress. "Don't you want this?"

Matt nodded, his mouth dry, his mind blurred between realities. There was movement, and different rooms, and darkness, and then the heat of her body on top of his, and lips and breasts and skin soft enough to be satin. Her body stretched and spread over him like the girl on the crucifix, her white dress lifted and pulled away by the same invisible wind. She could've been anyone in the shadows, but for those moments she was his, and he pushed her hair behind her ear.

The air was heavy and hot and dark in his tent back in An Loc the day after the massacre. Somewhere a few paces away the other soldiers laughed and told stories together, but Vietnam itself was quiet in its mourning. Matt listened to the mountains whisper around him. They had a woman's voice.

"We're leaving on a bus for San Diego tomorrow morning," the girl whispered in his ear, her voice low and sultry. "Want to come with?"

Matt didn't say anything in response; instead, he closed his eyes and sank into his skin. By tomorrow morning this would all be gone.

Body Rites

Sara Masters, Agnes Scott College

1.

Tuesday morning, an hour before I have to show up at work, I wake up in a coffin.

2.

It's dark. Not the claustrophobic kind, but the kind that expands my surroundings, swallows me, leaves me grasping at phantom shapes in an attempt to orient myself. Leaves me stranded in space: starless, cold, loveless.

Somewhere, a deep, echoing distance away, light writhes like a deep sea fish. Pale blue and bitterly neon, it twists on itself again and again, an aching mobius strip that curls somewhere between my eyes and my brain. It sears itself there, resolves into a familiar form.

My alarm blinks, reading 6:30 A.M. An hour after the time I usually wake up.

My alarm blinks, reading 6:32 A.M. I read the numbers, process them. An hour before I have to be at work. I'm going to be late. Bile climbs up my throat, and only the terror gagging me keeps me from throwing up all over myself.

Filled with a desperate fire, I leap out of bed, or try to. Walls meet my twisting, and my hands scrabble around me. The formless darkness resolves itself into unfinished wood, splinters catching my frantic fingers.

Wood above my head, brushing against my nose in a rough caress.

Wood below my feet, solid against my jackrabbiting kicks.

Wood against my barely bent knee as I buck against the confined space.

I'm not afraid of being trapped, of being in close quarters. I can't afford to be, with the size of my apartment, but here, pressing against tight, unforgiving walls, terror crushes me.

The heartbeat pounding through my bones is a stifled scream saying, *'I'll be late, I'll be late, I'll be late.'*

3.

With my infrequent employment, I tend to have a lot of time to myself. I spend most of it at the local library, on the internet. It almost feels like I'm a kid again, only possessed by a looming anxiety that makes my hands tremble on keyboards.

To further compound the reflection of my childhood, I also spend most of the time scrolling through WikiHow, trawling through articles explaining how to wear velvet dresses, or how to make cats like you.

When I was seven, my parents were freshly divorced. I had to stay at my grandparents' home in the Ozarks for the summer. My mother was looking for new love and always in the habit of hiding the messier aspects of herself, be it her credit card debt or her massive collection of porcelain figurines. Of course, the messy side of her also included me.

At the time, my grandfather was still healthy enough to move under his own power, and spent most of his day hunting in the woods, or perching his stand with a bottle of wine. Grandmother religiously monitored her beehives, firm in her belief that bee stings could cure anything from joint pains to depressive episodes. Both of them were enjoying their childfree, retired lives, and while they weren't upset about my presence, they weren't particularly interested in it either.

For that entire summer, my grandfather walked me to the town's local library, a single room building with scored wood floors and large windows, whose frame's peeling white paint littered the top of the bookshelves. Most days the librarian didn't turn on the AC or the lights, instead, opting to shove the windows open and let the breeze do the rest.

When we got there, my grandfather would say to me, "Remember Marnie, don't leave until I come back for you. Stay, you hear me, girl? Stay."

I mostly ignored the dismal children's

section, with its crumb-filled books and their worn-soft corners. After all, I was seven years old now, and my mother had assured me time and time again that it made perfect sense for me to be independent at this age.

Instead, I spent my time perusing the impressive collection of "How To" books. By the end of the summer, I learned how to fold seven basic origami figures, how to create rudimentary stained glass, how to succeed at an interview, and even how to pick up girls.

Now, at a bored and disaffected twenty-seven, I reverted to that state.

Two weeks ago, just before the temp agency found me another job, I read about being buried alive.

4.

I'm tumbling through the air.

Ocean waves below me, heartbreakingly blue. I hit them like I'm falling in love, and they shatter, a broken mirror cradling me. Into them, I sink, and moon jellies drift off my body, bubbling up to the surface.

Striking the water with me and sinking, sinking, sinking: a desktop computer, sheets of printer paper weeping ink, a framed picture whose faces blur with static. A suit, and the man in it. A briefcase form which paper clips scatter into flower petals.

Around us, the dark ocean rises.

5.

Morning damp dirt clings to my face. It drops off in clumps, trailing down in a lover's caress. All around, graves are washed in pink light. Upon a hill in the distance is a gazebo, its shadow crawling across the ground towards me.

I sigh, and grab the small headstone marking the plot I'm in. My nails are bloodied, ragged from clawing through the earth. With a final tug, I drag myself out of the grave. My suit is filthy, but my boss comes in late anyways, so I'd be able to shake myself free of the dregs of

the grave before he saw them. Besides, it was better to walk in covered in grave dirt than lose my job for the sake of a shower.

The grassy hill rolls like an ocean, grave paths rushing tides. They tug at me, pale grey dust foaming underfoot, bubbling around my ankles. If I look back, I know I'll see it whirlpooling into the grave I left, trying to suck me back in.

I push past it.

If I idled around in life, I'd never afford a grave in death.

This early in the morning the gate is locked, but after digging myself out of a grave it's a simple effort to leap over it.

Dawn's milky light soaks everything in an oceanic blue, casting pale shadows in a lattice work across the streets. The noise of the cars that pass is muffled and liquidy, their forms wavering.

The few people on the street waver too. Timid forms, dripping in their suits and ties just like me. Rippling across the buildings, the clouds' shadows pass like ships far above.

Drifting to the square, I sacrifice myself to the gaping mouth of the MARTA station.

6.

Secretarial work isn't hard. I've long since numbed myself to the horror of phone calls, and paperwork and scheduling are simple tasks that I perform with enough gusto that the rest of the permanent workers know me as someone reliable.

"Hey Marnie, do you know why there's dirt in the- Oh!" Angelina's eyes hit like a breaker. I can feel her gaze sweeping across my dusted off but still subtly dirty suit, my greasy face, my battered hands sorting papers. When her eyes pull away, it feels like something of me drags away as well.

"I tripped on my way to the MARTA station," I say, with a stiff grin that makes Angelina wince.

"Headfirst into a pile of compost?" Her wince rallies itself into a smile that makes my skin feel loose.

"No."

"O-Oh. Okay, well, I'll just go and clean--"

Fiction

"I'll do it." I jump up from behind my desk. The papers I've been sorting have greasy smudges from my fingers. This is a good excuse to escape her conversation, clean my hands, and fix the mess I've made before it can get to Jason, my boss.

Small sores open up on the palms of my hands while I'm scrubbing them, gnawing themselves open like hungry mouths. They leak a clearish pus that smells like a dumpster during the dead summer heat. Sickly and rotten. Reaching up to grab the first aid kit above the sink, I make eye contact with my reflection. More of those blisters litter her hairline, and she grimaces.

As a temp worker, I have no health insurance. My mother kicked me off of hers as soon as she could. If I squint at them, they look like pimples. Perfectly normal. Perfectly ignorable.

7.

The cheap wood of my desk pulps in the ocean. Its shards swirl around me, tangled in currents. The papers I marked with my greasy fingers swirl up from below, pasting themselves to my arms and legs. They tighten, and their pressure unnerves me.

Fearfully, I cast my gaze downward. In the depths of the ocean, I see stars, the white of teeth, grinning up at me.

Space, cold and loveless, is down there. The space I escape. The space that's hunting me.

I sink further, and know the brutal, heartless mouth waits for my return.

8.

My window is blocked by another apartment building, and the diffused morning light turns the air to water, shadows melting down the walls to pool in my shower stall. It won't take much before they fill the shallow basin and devour the toilet that sits within. "Saving space," my landlord said when she helped me move in, "is the highest form of art."

My face watches me as I watch the shadows. The Marnie in the mirror is greasy, cheeks puffy and bloated, under-eye bags a foul greenish-red. Her hands are covered in bandages concealing unhealed blisters. She looks like stagnant water, filled to the brim with rot, waiting to be swept away.

We stare blankly at each other. Her eyes are exhausted, too tired to look miserable, but too miserable to seem anything but. I shut them, heaving a sigh that drags my whole body down to rest against the sink. My forehead squeaks against the porcelain.

Eyes unfocused, the white sink swirls in my vision, blurring to a plain of snow, a cloudy sky, a blood-splattered wall.

My knee slams into the sink as I jump up, sending the whole thing shaking uneasily against it's grout.

In the mirror, my nose drips red, bubbling foam. Each exhale sends it leaking further down my face, and I lurch forward to keep it from getting on my shirt. Unsuccessfully, of course. Blood sinks into my shirt, low on my stomach.

It'll be a terrible idea to go to work soaked in my own blood. I need to change.

My phone reads 6:59AM. Half an hour to get to work.

I look down, reassess the situation. With how low the blood is, it'll be easily covered by a suit jacket. After the wretched sight I made the day before yesterday, I know I'm on thin ice. Being late would be the straw that breaks the camel's back. Just the idea of getting fired, having to clean up my desk, sling my paycheck, is enough to make my decision for me.

The blood on my shirt sticks to my stomach as I leave my apartment.

9.

My boss' name is Jason. I've never cared enough to guess his age, but he's balding badly enough that half the mail he gets is about various kinds of hair supplements, and he sometimes stares at clients who have particularly nice heads of hair

like he wants to hold them down and shave them.

That's better than how he treats us workers. If anyone eavesdropping heard the way he speaks to us, they'll think we're a cross between belligerent middle schoolers and dogs. He speaks to us like he's afraid of giving us the impression that he thinks we're human.

Jason's not the worst boss I've ever had.

He didn't notice my suit situation, after all, though that may be because he's more interested in us coming in on time, so that the "time" he's invested in us is repaid in full.

I think my coworkers might disagree with me, at the moment. I can see Jason's arms, his emphatic pointing, through the frosted glass office door. Marcus got called in earlier over something I'm too busy to be interested in. Something to do with the archaic filing cabinets. Jason's distant anger is all white noise to me, so I let wash in through one ear and out the other.

The phone rings. I pick it up, and type up an appointment.

The phone rings. I pick it up, and hum agreeably to the complaints of some client or another.

The phone rings. I pick it up and choke down a sigh at the telemarketer's voice.

The phone rings. I pick it up.

The phone rings.

The phone—

Jason's door opens, and his eyes narrow at Marcus, whose broad shoulders are hunched.

"Words are wind, Marcus. Show me you care," Jason says, he pauses, and looks over at me and my hand, still holding the silent phone to my ear. "And you, Marnie. You look like you crawled out of a sewage treatment facility. Clean up your act."

I nod obediently. His gaze on the crown of my head is oceanic in its pressure.

10.

I stink of rotting seaweed. More of those blisters showed up and burst, leaving me greasy and radiating a foul smell. Combined with the

worsening bloating I feel swollen and disgusting.

Something had to be done, or I'd—

"Do you, like, have something against showering? Is this, like, a political thing? Or are you just naturally rank." a man around my age says to me from where he stands, holding onto one of the ceiling bars. He's in board shorts and a loose Eagles t-shirt. A Dad rock guy. His face blurs and glitters like a tidal pool, colors and lights spinning dizzily together.

I shake my head mutely, and turn back to the window, curling in on myself. My prey instincts tell me engaging with this man will just delay my arrival at work, ruin my mood for the day.

I tune him out for the rest of the ride with a garbled podcast whose words spin like maple seeds through my ears. Still, he's turned my awareness to an actual problem.

For the first time in a long time, people notice me on the MARTA. Even being covered in gravedirt hadn't been enough to draw attention, but now side-eyes brushed by like curious fish. People move away from where I sit, head resting against the window. Their noses wrinkle and disgusted expressions cast themselves my way, some subtle, others less so.

This needs to be solved. In a tight knit working environment thinking someone is gross is enough to ostracize them, and I could not afford that. Not with rent coming so soon.

*

I run into CVS. The cashier glances up at me and then just as quickly looks away. The first body-spray I see is watermelon scented, in a tall bottle that advertises that it's two times more long lasting than the previous formula. It's on sale, fifty-percent off.

I'm in the bathroom before I realize, frantically peeling the plastic cap off with bandaged fingers.

The first squirt, in my haste, goes straight into my face. I blink through burning eyes and angle it downward, spraying it again and again.

If someone comes into the office, notices

how I smell, notices how wrecked I look, notices something, anything off with me...

I'm drowning in air, pressure throttling me as surely as a noose. In my blacking vision I see eager stars grinning at me.

When I come back to myself, I'm pressed against the bathroom door. A full body shake brings me to the surface, and I pull my shirt collar to my nose and take a whiff.

I gag, violently.

The watermelon is artificial and cloying, and underneath it is a black, insidious rot. One smell is much worse than the other. Firmly, I unscrew the cap of the body spray and dump it down the back of my shirt.

11.

I know what death looks like.

The first corpse I saw was my grandfather. I went to his home in the Ozarks again when I was sixteen. My mother had a new boyfriend who hated teenagers and she wanted me out of the way so she could play with him for a while. After nine years, my grandfather wasn't the same man he used to be. A bad fall destroyed his leg and left him unable to walk for extended periods of time.

Once he was stationary, it was all downhill from there.

The man I met at sixteen was bitterly angry when his memories didn't swallow him whole. He complained constantly, saying that his pension should've covered the surgery, that he did more for that company than they ever did for him, that he just wanted one more day to hunt and then they could take him.

I nodded along, never knowing what to say to a man who never seemed to know what to say to me.

A month after I got there, I woke up in the middle of the night. The sky was pierced by stars in a way the city sky never is, and they cast a shivering white light over the woods whose edges sidled up to my grandmother's beehives. Slinking between the hives was a dark figure. I assumed

it was my grandmother, checking in on her bees as she tended to do, and forced myself back to sleep, afraid of the revealing light of the stars.

The next morning, my grandfather was gone. My grandmother organized a search party, and left me to the house. Distantly certain, I went to the backyard. One of the "How To" books I read recently was about tracking, and it didn't take much to pick out my grandfather's staggering footprints. I followed them into the woods and found his body.

He was sprawled on the ground, limbs twisted like a doll's. I blinked dumbly down at him, then looked up to the tree, where his old hunting stand was. Even fresh, the stillness of his body and the dark, wet, curling scent of rot gave him away.

It's that scent, that insidious scent, that I'll never forget.

12.

Thick, ropes twist over my lap, spilling out from my shirt, darkening my skirt with some kind of milky liquid. My skin peels around them, clinging in thick ragged strips. It's stretched apart from the inside-out, pale, bloodless, ghostly as a deep sea fish.

The lack of blood is the only thing keeping me from screaming. That, and the reaction of my coworkers. My intestines wiggle accusatively in my lap as I shuffle in my seat.

My stomach's been swollen the past several days, but even in my darkest dreams I never imagined that it'd be one lunch away from bursting.

I gather them up gingerly in my suit jacket, pressing it close, and then peak into Angelina's office.

"Hi, Angelina. You have a sewing kit right? One of my buttons came off," I say. She nods, and grabs it from her drawer, then shuts the drawer gently.

"Here." Angelina hesitates, taking a breath and diving back in. "Hey, Marnie, are you doing okay?"

I laugh, and it sends my intestines writhing against my chest.

"Yes, I'm doing just fine." I accept the sewing kit, and make a break for it. The feeling of my intestines tugging from the outside-in is like someone pulling on a piercing. No pain, just an unsettling weight where there should be no awareness.

The unisex bathroom door slams shut behind me, and just to be certain I wedge the trashcan under the handle. With that done, I release them from my jacket.

They spill to the ground like vines, dripping from my shirt, which I hastily unbutton. They're the tentacles of a jellyfish, and I giggle hysterically at the image of me, floating above pedestrians' heads, my internal organs brushing by them, stinging them, dragging them up to me.

My stomach's rupture is a largely straight line, though the edges are frayed like fabric. Still no blood.

Sitting on the floor, I take deep breaths. I need to fix this before my break is over. Lying on my back, I try to stuff my intestines back inside, but they fight. Having a taste of fresh air, they have no desire to return to me. It's a lost cause, one I have no interest in saving, so I grab the sewing scissors from the kit. Spooling out my intestines, I eye where they return to my body.

The first cut is hard. The scissors squeak fitfully against them, and I have to saw in order to make it through, but once the skin is broken it becomes a matter of angling the scissors properly. One slice follows another, and my intestines part from each other.

They fall to the floor, spilling brackish, black liquid that reeks of death. I can see it now. Someone comes into the bathroom once I leave and find the floor covered in filth. The vision chills me, makes my skin shiver loosely against muscles, and I shove the end of them in the toilet.

Once it's situated, cutting the other end is simple enough, as if placing it alongside its sibling to drain.

I sit, and watch the rotting liquid remnants of my internal organs gurgle into the toilet. My

stomach feels hollow, and it's not from their absence.

These sights, these wretched smells. They're familiar. I know what death looks like. I know what death smells like. And that smell is stuck with me. A heavy smell, one that creeps along the ground.

The smell of death is the pressure of the bottom of the ocean.

The intestines I cut from myself without a wince. The intestines festering within me, bloating me, the rot that leaves me covered in blisters and grease as my body devours itself.

Someone knocks on the door.

"Marnie? You alright in there?"

"No." My voice is dull, unironically lifeless. "I think I'm going to head home for the day."

"Oh. Uh. Okay. Come out when you're ready." Their footsteps fade. I pull out the pin box from the sewing kit, and hold the edges of my stomach together. A running line of blue and red hearts seals it shut. Angelina's industrial strength denim thread, apparently the best for making sure those buttons stay on tight, will serve to hold it, hold me, together.

Each pull of the needle tugs waxy flesh closer together. I tie off the thread like the "How To" books taught me, wash the needles in the sink, and then shut my shirt. Hiding the evidence.

The intestines, largely drained now, I gather back up in my jacket. I cradle them close, like a child seeking comfort, but they're cold. Angelina's sewing kit I drop off at my desk, and once that's done I run out the back door.

The dumpster's lid is already unlocked, and my bundle tumbles in, intestines unfurling from it as they wave goodbye.

13.

The MARTA is as good a coffin as any. Certainly it's more sturdy than the one I climbed out of ten days ago. I tuck myself into the back, far from anyone's sight. I don't want them to see me, see the black, wretched stain of death

spreading across my shirt. Across my face.

The sounds of the other passengers come to me from across as distance as wide as the ocean. I've been treading water for days now, trying to keep my head up for fear of what lies below, but like the rope of an anchor my intestines twine their way around me and drag me under. Face to face with a dead, mocking truth.

Killed by exhaustion and animated by fear. It's funny.

In the yellowed plastic of the MARTA window, my reflection looks back at me grimly. She's a corpse, as worn and faded in death as she was in life. I know, looking at her, that I wasn't buried for the sake of someone's twisted amusement.

*

I'm stalling in the gazebo at the cemetery. I can feel my grave pulling me, and it's the tug of a current. The gaze of a noose. Not insistent, because it knows I'll follow it anyways.

I want to follow it. I want to rest. God, how I want to rest. But I stand still, and around me the air prickles to attention like a storm.

My phone rings and I pick it up. I'm certain this is what I've been waiting for.

"Hello, Marnie King speaking."

"Where are you," Characteristically of my boss, it isn't a question. I look around. The gazebo stretches above me, peeling white paint ground to sand beneath my feet. A man walks his dog down the cemetery's path. A couple of teens smoke weed in a nearby copse of trees.

"I'm around." When I say that, waves of air pull back from me, receding like the ocean before a tsunami, all grave anticipation pulled to a tight center. The pines are tugged along with it, shotgun crackling as they break, and gravel swirls eagerly to the hungry horizon.

"Clearly you aren't, since I don't see anyone at your desk. Marcus said you left at lunch and haven't come back."

"I'm not really—" I look down at my stomach. Around my feet the currents drag tighter. "I'm not really in a state to be at work."

"You dying? Unless I see a doctor's note, I want you back at work ASAP."

I can't help but laugh at that. No, I'm not dying. I never even noticed I died in the first place.

"Glad to see the functioning of my workplace is funny to you, King."

I open my mouth to respond. I want to deny finding humor in this situation, because I don't, because I care about things running smoothly or I wouldn't be here, waiting to pick up the phone, trying to remember where my grave is. I want to make excuses, but the retreating air snatches them away.

As Jason always says, words are wind.

All that bubbles from my throat in their place is another snorting, ragged laugh.

"Seriously? I thought you, of all the clowns I hired, understood the sacrifices it takes to make a company run, but it seems you're just as much of a joke as the rest." While he speaks, the retreating ocean rushes to eat me. The sea water, brackish as my blood, transformed from air into the dark churning of cold, bitter water floods back. The predicted tsunami's gaping mouth. Shattered wood glints within, white like stars, like teeth, gnashing and hungry. "Run back to that temp agency I dragged you out of. And don't bother coming back for your shit." Jason hangs up without letting me speak. Not that it would matter.

The wave hits. It breaks into me, and I into it. Water constricts, snake-tightening around my empty torso. Like the grasp of a desperate man, a starving child, it drags me, clings close. Pressure curls too-tight on all sides, the closest thing I've had to a hug in years. My phone frees itself from my hand and spins into lonely depths.

The gazebo shreds into paper, phone book pages scattering into snowstorm. Suspended within it I see names, names, worthless names. My name, repeating over and over and over.

"Marnie King," says the storm, "1989-2018."

And I nod, because it's true.

Water crumples and spins like a top. Like

a drain, a breath released, spiralling down and away. The water is gone. Soaked, I'm standing before my empty grave.

"Marnie King," says the headstone, "1989-2018." In the grave, a fresh coffin. Plain, unadorned. Pine, white like teeth. Like stars. I tuck myself into the grave, and let the waves of dark, endless earth swallow me whole.



S
JED
CF 3
U A RA
UGI WA T
LOVE,
ELTY, JOE
THEODORE
STEVENS
W LYTLE, DREW
SIDDON
GLORIA NAYZ
GRAHAM, CHA
KALENDEK
LOPA
ERM. YELLE
GIMSLEY, J
A, RILYN
HITRA
DER

CLURE
INGER '00, N
CABE '13, RITA DO
ORA WELTY, JOHN
ER, THEODORE
G. STEVENSON, R
TLE, ANDREW
S. ELIZABLETH
OR. SHARON C
NES S. JOHN
MICHAEL H
JANE S
MAINE
EARL P

NONFICTION

This Haunted House

Eve Barrett, Agnes Scott College

"I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster, she thought, and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside."

— Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

I do not feel safe in my own home.

Not for any really valid or sensible reason. I mean, it's suburban perfection—cookie-cutter houses in a safe and beautiful neighborhood that's one long main road down from the town. The neighbors are nice in that smile and nod at you while walking their dog and holding their preschooler's hand type of way, and the elderly couple that lives to the right are a picture-perfect cutout of Ellie and Carl from *UP* (thankfully without the tear-jerking beginning montage).

I do not feel safe in my own house because when the lights go out and it's late at night, the shadows seem to stretch out from every sharp corner, gleefully reaching to meet you where you are, no matter where you are, and—once it has found you—the darkness opens its wide mouth to swallow you whole.

In my own room, which is where I feel least safe, there is a hallway with no door that connects my bedroom to bathroom. A corridor that gets longer the more the sun leaves the sky, a corridor that I stare into every night—mouth dry, heart beating ten beats too fast, eyes hazy but wide, watching the darkness that watches me back, that threatens to spill over the space from inside the hallway to me. I have to face it directly, almost always directly, because, in my mind, if I turn away from it for a second, just for the quickest of moments, that is when they'll get me.

Who are they?

Simply ghosts of my own making.

I sit staring paralyzed at this simple hallway that leads from my bedroom to my bathroom and I fear.

It doesn't make any sense—I am well aware of that. I am more than a little embarrassed

to say that I am a 21-year-old who still needs her nightlight to get any semblance of a good night's sleep.

So, it would be more sensible to say that I do not feel safe in my own home because my own mind makes it so.

I suppose I should not feel so bad about this. After all, most of us tend to experience this primal fear of darkness.

We are taught from a young age to be afraid of the dark, we are conditioned by evolution to be wary of what lurks in shadows. We associate light with comfort and peace. We tie light and white together. White means purity. White means good. The inky black that surrounds darkness is cause of anxiety. Black the absence of color. Black the absence of humanity.

But when morning comes and the sun inevitably rises to cast long shadows out, and I step outside to its brilliant light, surrounded on all sides by a sea of white...

Am I really any safer?

I feel most black when I am surrounded on all sides by a sea of white.

I feel most black when I am most afraid.

House exists as first witness.

Just as our bodies keep the score of trauma and injustice and every little bad thing inherited, our homes watch and listen and are weathered down by every echoed scream, every door slammed. The damage done to our bodies and our homes are reflective of each other and made more apparent by how much one tries to disguise it and cover it up with pretty things. Often these are the worst ghosts, our past selves as memories that linger underneath floorboards.

Built by slaves, the Carnton mansion stands tall to this day. The plantation was used as



a field hospital for the Confederate army and the house's parlor was fashioned into an operating room. When you walk in, the walls are lined with vintage wallpaper and white faces in every room, as the portraits of the McGavock family stare down at you. The wooden floors that creak even when you are standing still are stained with blood from long gone soldiers. Northwest off the home lies row after row of Confederate bodies laid to rest in the McGavock Confederate Cemetery.

These were not the details that made an impression on my young memory. Instead, I became engrossed with the story of one of the McGavock children who had been playing by the stairs on the second floor. From what I remember, the child had not looked, taken a step too wide and fell from the railing, hitting the first floor. Like the soldiers that came after him, his blood had seeped on carpet and into hardwood floor underneath, staining the wood permanently.

Imagine: little black girl surrounded in a sea of white by Confederate memorabilia and ghosts and standing over a reflection of her own possible mortality. The child's death was more impactful than the soldiers because he had been even younger than she. I remember thinking at the time if I would stain like that when I'd go on. I remember, and I say this because memories are malleable and changed by time and state of mind, being comforted at the fact that the house

wouldn't let him go even when everything else did.

I remember in another two story house, in which my own family lived, my sister in all her anger made worse by teenage years would, after any small inconvenience, slam her door so hard that the doorknob would always crash and dance off her room's wall. When she wasn't satisfied with that, she would slam her fist into that same part of wall where doorknob had just bruised. Eventually, wall gave way to big gaping hole that matched the size of her anger.

When we had to move and sell the home, the hole was, of course, the first thing repaired, but it still took several years to sell the actual house. Maybe it is because potential buyers could feel the anger that lingered and remained. Even when covered up, there are a thousand ways that a space can warp from the simple fact of your existence¹.



¹ "What else does it mean? It means that metaphors abound; that space exists in four dimensions; that if you return somewhere often enough it becomes infused with your energy; that the past never leaves us; that there's always atmosphere to consider; that you can wound air as cleanly as you can wound flesh."

- Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*

Nonfiction

In my own home these are the ghosts that are chained to me and mine. These are the bodies that drag after me from the collective experience of being a black woman and I remember²:

Medgar Evers, 37

Assassinated by Klansman. Shot in the back exiting his car. He made it to his front door before collapsing.

Ahmaud Arbery, 25

Murdered by ex-cop and his son. Hunted down while jogging in his own neighborhood.

Breonna Taylor, 26

Murdered by police. Shot eight times in her own apartment.

Atatiana Jefferson, 28

Murdered by police. Shot through the window of her own home.

Marcella Threatt French, 18

Murdered by her own husband in her own home.
My great-grandmother.

Every house has a graveyard. Every house has a ghost. This is where we bury our dead—inside our homes, inside ourselves.

2 Incredibly grateful to Evelina Barzdaite, this segment and the information given was retrieved from and heavily inspired by a graphic she created: https://www.instagram.com/p/CBRA5qfF_7S/?igshid=1wx0g8odmisl

Ducks for Ducks

Bella Braxton, Agnes Scott College

We wanted fish to bite our hooks. Only the fish. We did not want mammals, amphibians, marsupials, reptiles, or poultry of any sort to latch onto our fishing lines. If you had asked us why, we might have said, 'Well, that's why it's called fishing.' and we would have been right—it was called fishing, and the fish were the goal. We would, of course, pry out the hook, wash the blood from our hands, and throw them right back in after. Then we would, of course, press cheap white bread over the hook between our index fingers and thumbs, make sure the shiny silver was all covered up and throw the line right back in.

The fish's eyes did not look like ours. We would hold them in our hands as their tails thrashed madly. They would gaze unblinkingly in a way that was foreign to us. "This one is so pretty, look at it." The fish calmed, and we tilted it back and forth in the sunlight. "Look." My brother and my sister would smile. There was the opening and closing of the mouth, as if it were afraid to speak. We would wipe away its blood, as if lovingly, as if we had not ourselves obscured that silver hook in a more agreeable whiteness.

To be more explicit than is probably necessary, we did not hate the fish. We'd have said that we liked them. Yes, of course, we sent the hooks down to catch them, pulled them up as they flailed, wiped their blood on our beach towels, and looked fondly in their eyes. "That's why it's called fishing," we might have said, had you asked us. Fishing, we would have tried to articulate, was an appropriate interaction between fish and humans. There was the riding of horses, the milking of cows, the eating of pigs, the petting of dogs, the teaching of children, the planting of seeds, the mowing of grass, the picking of flowers, and, yes, of course, the fishing of fish. What we did involved flailing bodies and blood, but we did not call it violence, because this was called fishing.

We liked watching the ducks. The fish, from our perspective, were like shadows

underwater, but the ducks were floating, sunlit, and very real. When one of the ducks dipped its head into the water and bit my hook, I screamed—there is no such thing as ducking. No one ducks for ducks. Ducking equipment is not sold in any store. Nobody goes ducking with friends on the weekend. People do not hang ironic 'gone ducking' signs on doors. No bumper sticker on any car has ever told me that its driver would rather be ducking. This does not happen in books or movies. You could not find this in a dictionary. It goes unmentioned in the lyrics of country songs.

My parents and grandparents came yelling. The duck's wings went around in passionate circles. Feathers came loose, fell, and floated away on the water. My grandfather held the duck's head steady and pulled the hook out. They said to me, "You need to be more careful. You could have really hurt that duck, you know. It could have died."

Of course, if we'd been ducking, they would have smiled at the duck's feathers flying all over. They'd have taken a picture of me, smiling, and my duck. They would say "All right, throw it back now," but as it happened, we were not ducking. We were fishing, and when I asked if the duck would be okay they said, "You'd better hope it will," and when they walked away I felt like something was missing. That night we ate dinner. We may have had fish. We may have eaten a duck, one that we did not see or hear dying. Do we care about ducks? We'd have told you we did. We did not cover our eyes, nor did we look further than we needed to.

Divine Insomnia

S. Myya Johnson, Agnes Scott College

Sometimes, late at night, when my body is restless, I leave my dorm building in the dark to go for a walk. I try not to walk far. When I have manic days that end in my eyes carving designs into the ceiling as my fingernails draw blood from my upper arms in an attempt to remember that I am, in fact, still human, I leave my dorm building in the dark to walk blindly until the sun rises.

Even before my diagnosis, I would walk like this only while the moon was high, down from the campus student center to the CVS downtown across from the liquor store. I would sit on the bench across the street and watch the lights change colors, blinking in and out like dying stars. Nights like those, I would wander and let myself melt into someone else: a person who doesn't have bipolar disorder, a person with a destination ahead of them, a person-sized star pointing to what could be north.

Some nights I am a god, if only to get the mania out; a god who has abandoned her creations and worshippers to hide away where she will never be found. And then, the horrible thought shoots into my head: the best way to abandon people who love me is to walk far enough away to do exactly that, and then dance in the empty streets with a seemingly endless joy until the lights come on. How many bus stops have I passed? How many train stations? That intersection near the train tracks looks like the perfect place to shout and whoop and sing, doesn't it? What time is it? Aren't people leaving for work soon?

The darkness tastes different from these kinds of walks, but then again, everything does on walks like these. Every inhale of the night carries a new flavor. On most divine nights, it's new smoke from a pack of Marlboro Reds taken by seducing the cashier at my local Exon. On those divine nights, once the smoke dances into the rings of my hair, I walk with long languid drags to a place to sit and create nothing again.

A god can sit and stare at nothing for hours, creating every freckle of dust the night carries under the orange streetlamp, weaving them together with red thread pulled from her lungs. Marlboro Reds don't taste like ambrosia, but they do comfort me. With godhood comes shaky hands that often have trouble opening the damn pack and a continuous rush of disconnected thoughts. A passing thought glides underneath the ridiculously bright haze of the mania: death would just be a release from godhood, and at the end of everything, why would I want to see Jesus looking like a coward? I'm good at creating nothing that matters, unless the dust freckles make the streetlamps orange after all. Please, let me be good at something for once.

On the walk when I bought menthols instead of Reds, I stopped in a shabby, low-lit parking lot and sat on a raised section of the pavement that divided one building from the other. The gravel crunched under my sandals, and the cement was cold against my ass as my dress rode up to sit. The minty taste in the smoke was supposed to be comforting. It wasn't; my hands were still shaking.

The white headlights of a car wiped my mind. It pulled into the parking lot in small jerks, and an oily man, mid-thirties maybe, rolled his passenger window down and leaned over to speak over the hum of his engine.

"Need a ride?"

His car was warm. He didn't make me put my cigarette out.

I would have thanked him if he hadn't kept driving past the campus. He ignored me when I continuously repeated that he missed my stop. I dropped my lighter at the stoplight but stayed quiet. Where was my god now? Where was I?

The destination was the dark parking lot of an elementary school. The glare of the headlights reflected off the cheerful sign; we weren't as far from the school as I thought. I clicked out my seatbelt and tried to find an exit without moving too much.

The oily man unbuckled his seatbelt, too. And then his hand went to the belt buckle of his jeans. He shifted toward the driver's door pocket off to the side and pulled out a wad of one dollar bills as thick as both of my wrists tied together. He tried to push the money into my hands.

"What is this for?" I asked stupidly.

He tried to push the wad of cash into my hands again with one hand, and made a motion with the other hand, up and down and up and down near his oily mouth, his tongue pressing into the inside of his oily cheek. That hand then went to unbuckle his belt.

"I'm sorry." I told him. I was holding the money gingerly. "I really have to go home."

I set the money in the cupholder and reached for my door handle. He picked up the money and tried to give it to me again, this time trying to shove it into my free hand.

I got the door open. I made a sprint for the sidewalk across the street and weaved my way onto a road back to the school. I don't remember everything he yelled at me, though. I just remember being grateful to the divinity that ruled my divinity as my worn leather sandals smacked the pavement.

In the winter, during these walks, my dream destination is behind the dumpster of the Kroger quite a walk from the campus; I hate the cold, and frostbite is a bitch, but it would be harder to find me. Who would think to look for a college student's frozen body behind a Kroger dumpster? Rapid-fire thoughts bring up the clear sound of my mother's laughter and then her face and the smell of woodsmoke on her clothes when she would come back from burning leaves in the yard. Guilt chases after that thought, and on those kinds of walks, I turn around and walk back to campus, or sometimes to the train station with a wet and sloppy phone call to my mom.

Some nights, when I walk, I am a princess of a faraway land, a land of faeries and dreams so bright I don't want to see anything else. The middle of the asphalt road becomes the cobblestone outside of my palace. The cars, simply horses

and carriages in the right place at the right time. There are too many trees if I decide to walk in the direction of the community garden, so they all become houses and buildings with my loyal subjects all made to be ignored. There aren't any real memories attached to this kind of mania for me, simply because nothing is truly real. All that exists is my kingdom, and this is all that will exist until I wake to the sunlight again.

Most nights, however, I am simply my mother's daughter; I am just myself in my favorite red sweatpants I haven't washed in two days and my sweatshirt I wore to class that day, my hair a fluffy wreck, my hands still shaking from the amount of anxiety I carry about today's French test, walking with a purpose. One foot after the other on the sidewalk, passing by the many houses on my right and the trees on my left, I move slowly, counting how many sunflowers I can see framing the darkness. In my head, I thank every person who took the time to plant their flowers at the front of the garden near the sidewalk, and then apologize for stopping to touch them. The fuzziness of the sunflower stalks reminds me of my sunflower I grew myself at home. I gave it to my mother to protect while I studied abroad. She sounded so guilty when she told me it died.

"I tried everything. I think it was the cold temperature change."

I keep walking after stopping by the sunflowers, thanking them for the memory.

The wind blows and I pull my jacket around me, still walking. I hop over puddles, or sometimes in them if I'm doing laundry the next day. I stop for a turning car. It does not beep. I thank the driver for not beeping. I then remember to thank the ivy I walked by, and then apologize for accidentally stepping on it because I couldn't see.

There are many paths into the community garden; I take the closest side after thanking the pink rose azaleas on the side of someone's concrete wall.

This place is my home and temple. This is where no one will find me, no one will ask anything

Nonfiction

of me, where I am safe and out of harm.

When I take the train home on the weekends or during the night walks that demand it, as soon as I am home, I go to my mom. On Saturdays, we are lazy, watching television until her exhaustion and my mood swings ease. She cooks and I eat too much and I fall asleep on the couch, and the sunlight doesn't hurt. On Sundays, I am outside on the porch checking on the plants she has repotted, giving them cinnamon, eggshells, coffee grounds, things I learned to feed the plants through research and tradition. I try to remember to thank my mother over and over and over again. I try to honor her in the plants I grow myself. I try to honor her in every plant I find.

Here, I find my concrete bench and sit. I say hello to the trees. I thank them for allowing me into the garden that night, and let them know that the darkness of the night has made me feel small and nervous like a cornered bird, that this is the reason I came to them. I ask that they provide some kind of comfort. The silence blankets me heavily, but I breathe with ease.

And in the dark, I can see my mother's face. She seems taller here, and her cloak of leaves dyed with the orange-gold of the streetlamps makes her look as regal as I would. She doesn't say anything and I just sit with her in the quiet of the night, thanking every plant in the garden for simply growing near me.

The hours compact. Time doesn't exist with the way the night eats.

The sun rises, and the light doesn't hurt my eyes.

Seventeen

Ivy Clarke, Mercer University

"She was unbearable and at war with the world." – "Prince Charming" by Renée Vivien

It does start off with a bang, if *bang* means sex, specifically sex without love. I am used to my body being used for my partner's personal pleasure. I am used to the way their body pulses under my hand, gripped in theirs in the dark, the rest of my body only an accessory. It is familiar in the same way that looking into a dog's mouth still reminds you of being bitten, even when the attack was years ago. I am becoming seventeen while I am becoming an open wound, which is to say: I will still be bleeding trauma into my twenties, because I am still learning how to trust my own hands.

*

The best view in Peru is from a rooftop in Lima. For three nights, after all my classmates have fallen asleep or snuck out of the hotel to go drinking, I slip under the stars—a new nightly ritual. Perched on the concrete ledge there, I can see the city writhing beneath me. Peru is so alive at night. My gaze drifts from the silhouettes of lovers in the surrounding apartment windows down to the families on the ground, who purchase trays from food trucks and crowd around small fires. I watch the club lights shiver and shake against the walls of the buildings, and I trace the moon as it makes its journey over the Cristo del Pacífico.

We celebrate our last night in Lima with dance lessons at a nearby bar. The instructor, short and charming, dips me in a salsa, and a man with long blonde hair who refers to me as a beautiful catastrophe teaches me the samba. My favorite is the merengue, which a heavily tattooed man guides me through even though I repeatedly stomp on his feet. They all kiss my hand politely when we finish our respective numbers and ask me to stay a little while longer, but the roof calls to me. I wax away the hours dancing alone on the ledge above the city until

my heartbeat starts to sound like the music and my feet move in seamless accord.

*

There's a boy I've still told hardly anybody about, who sneaks me out of my house so he can kiss me under yellow streetlights and in his beat-up car. Every time he runs his fingers up my legs, I feel like I am burning. I feel like there is a forest inside of me that I've been growing for years only for his open-mouthed kisses to consume swaths of it in flames. I let him wreck me because I've become accustomed to the scars between my thighs, and I need new ones to keep me interesting. I break it off immediately when I find out that he raped a girl, but I keep the old film camera he gave me.

*

"Family" and "home" are the hardest words in the English language for me to say. They taste like saltwater and copper. Their letters shake on a page like fists colliding with a table and a throat full of yelling. When my teachers ask me if I will miss my parents when I leave for college, I smile at them wordlessly. I go home and try to ignore how my mother's voice wedges itself within my skull in an incessant panging, try to avoid colliding with my father's precarious rage. Most of the time, I am unsuccessful. Most of the time, I am toppled over by the weight of daughterhood.

*

I fall in love with a girl for the first time. She loves the sun so much that she cannot help but radiate warmth herself, and kissing her feels like grazing violets across my lips. Loving her is the most dangerous thing I do this year. She is so soft—so easy to crush between my clumsy fingers. But the crushing part comes later, at eighteen. At seventeen, we are still love poems given blood and bodies, and that is enough.

*

There are too many gray spots in my memory. I spend days staring at the wall, at nothing. At night, I finger the pair of scissors in

Nonfiction

my closet, flirt them against the soft skin of my wrists. I don't want to die. But I just don't want to be filled with this humming numbness, either, this numbness like a fog in my skull. But I can't bring myself to scoop the blades into my flesh—it would make such a mess.

*

The dance floor is littered with wriggling bodies, all different sizes, all moving to the music pouring out of the loudspeakers. The littlest ones barely reach stand up to my knees, while some of the older dancers tower heads above me. They hold one another's hands while they dance. When I stare hard into the dimly lit room, I can see that their knuckles are white. They grip each other so hard that to pull away would be like tearing off a limb.

And they are all beautiful, dressed in their suits and glittery dresses. I'm not there to dance, but to adjust the bowties of the beaming young men and fix the flyaway hairs of the girls so that the photographer I'm interning with can shoot some formal photographs. It's frustrating work; they don't want to stand still, and they keep elbowing each other because they would rather be free and spinning under the glimmering lights.

Don't worry, the photographer assures me. I know it doesn't seem like they care, but they will. For some of them, this is the first or last time they'll see their brothers and sisters. This photograph will be all they have for a while.

I swallow my exasperation with a tall glass of fruit punch, and I start to shake my head amusedly at their antics. They grin back at me when I hand them their printed photos.

*

We wake up before the sun—3 a.m.—because it is Daisy's birthday, and she wants to be one of the first fifty guests at the new bakery's 8 a.m. opening so she can win one of the \$50 gift cards they're giving away. There are seven of us, and we take turns between snoozing in the blanket-stuffed car and holding spots in the chilly line outside. Just as when we get up to the front of the line, I am told I am

ineligible for the prize because I'm not at least eighteen. But my friends' grins, huge and sweet, and that striking magenta sunrise, are enough to make me forget about my exhaustion.

*

It is tradition every Christmas for my family to make a trip to a quaint German town called Fredericksburg, about an hour north from our house. There, each of us buys a new ornament for our Christmas tree, something that represents us. I am ecstatic to find a singular, small rainbow, hidden behind the snowmen and Santa Clauses. My mother is not.

I'm not putting that shit on my tree, she says, turning her face away.

The crystal bird I leave the store with is pretty enough, and I hang it about midway up the tree. In the mornings, when the light streams in just right, I sit on the stairs and watch the colors the crystal creates dance against the wall—a silent, shimmering protest.

*

Blueberries and pecans roll off the counter and onto the floor and for once, I don't mind the mess. Neither do I mind the stickiness of the pineapple juice on my cheeks and the grape skin stuck under my fingernails. It's March 14. That means it's pi day and it's pie day, when my friends and I gather each year to bake an assortment of the flaky pastries. Like the year before, the coconut cream pie is a disaster, but the apple and rhubarb pies are smashing successes. We fall asleep early, a pile of bodies that are half-girl and half-woman, our bellies all filled with warmth.

*

According to the psychologist Arthur Aron, there are thirty-six questions that are guaranteed to make you fall in love with someone. I find the study while on a call with my best friends at the time. We can't believe it, so of course we have to try it, just to prove our angsty teenage biases. We giggle our way through the questions about if we'd like to be famous, what our perfect day would look like, who we dreamed about having

dinner with. But by the end, we are all softly sobbing into our phones' receivers.

I can't remember most of my childhood. I don't know when I started becoming numb.

I've already slept with so many men that I shouldn't have, just to feel wanted, and I just feel dirty.

I'm starting to realize my last relationship was abusive.

We fall asleep on the phone together. Alone in my dark bedroom, I pretend that my blankets are their arms around me. At school the next day, we don't discuss the secrets we shared at school the next day, but we squeeze each other's hands as we listen to the macroeconomics teacher drone on, and we pretend that nothing bad has ever happened to us—that we are safe together.

*

Huckleberries are almost like blueberries, but bigger and sweeter, and they only grow in the North. While on a summer vacation with my family to Montana, I try everything huckleberry-flavored that I possibly can: huckleberry tea, huckleberry coffee, huckleberry pancakes, the huckleberries themselves. My favorite is the huckleberry ice cream, two huge dollops of it squeezed precariously into a waffle cone, which stains my lips purple all day, to my mother's embarrassment. Truthfully, I don't even like huckleberry very much. It is just good to feel filled by something.

*

My name flies out of the judge's mouth without warning and slams into my eardrums so abruptly, I am sure I've fallen out of my chair. I feel everyone's eyes on me as I shakily stand up and follow her excitedly-motioning hand to the podium. If my ears are working, I've just won my first poetry competition, and I am terrified to read my poem to a roomful of peers and adults. My voice doesn't shake from stage fright, though—it's the fact that I am reading a love poem that I've written to another girl. I take a deep breath—then cry. And then I read.

*

I'm glad that it's my step-father who takes me to attend the scholarship weekend at the out-of-state college because he doesn't ask as many questions as my mother does, and I am tired of getting punished for wanting something outside of what is external to their wishes for me—for wanting at all. They still think I'm going to be a journalism major, not English, and I don't fight it; at least I can call home and say I've changed my mind while I'm sitting beneath a beautiful magnolia tree. I picture it months from now, when the leaves absorb my mother's sharp cries of offense and drift on the wind away from me.

*

This is the year of the total solar eclipse. I don't get to see it directly, though I want to. I watch the kitchen fill with shadows like a bowl, like the sky is slowly pouring itself in, and feel the whole Earth drink. Then the darkness recedes again, and the countertops glimmer in a way I hadn't noticed before. It is the same day; only I am different.

*

It's a regular Saturday afternoon. I sit in a blanket fort before the television with some of my friends, watching a movie in Japanese. We couldn't find an English version, but it's one of Kayla's favorites, so we're all content to watch the colorful scenes flit across the screen and imagine our own dialogue. There's a mug of matcha tea between my palms and all the windows are open. I close my eyes and lift the cup to my lips, letting the warmth fill my mouth and the laughter around me soak into my ears.

*

To celebrate our impending high school graduation, Helia, Rain, and I want to consult the spirit world for insight into our futures, so we perform a wish spell. Helia finds the three of us a candle each—yellow for her, red for me, green for Rain—and a chant. Supposedly, if we say the chant over the candle, make our wish, and blow out the flame, whatever we asked for will come

Nonfiction

to fruition within five years. We do. Helia and I are both superstitious, so we refuse to say exactly what we wished for out of fear that it might not come true. We decide, though, that it will be fine if we merely share what kind of wish it was. Rain gleefully exclaims that he hopes for happiness. Helia desires wealth. I cross my fingers to give my wish extra strength as I tell them that what I want, more than anything in the world, is love, love, love.

Adrift in Altamont: An Apodioxis

Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia-Athens

I. Bookstore Suspended

I will watch her go. Her phone in one ear, her finger in the other. My eyeballs bobbing above the bookshelf. A copy of Benjamin's *Illuminations* in my hands. I will watch her go.

And when I try to remember how it happened—minutes from now, a month, a year—I will slow down the action and fill in the gaps with details perhaps all my own:

Her black hair whipping out behind her. Slow-motion. Women fresh from the march with painted signs propped like muskets on their shoulders browsing the women's studies shelves. The books falling from her hands, bouncing once upon the floor. The bell ringing on the door. A group of flamboyant highschoolers flipping through poetry anthologies trying to phrase their ticklish sensitivities. Her face screwed up (as they say) in a question. A black cat arching its back on the counter. A motorcycle growling past in the drizzle. Her eyebrows furrowed (as they say) in a question. A picture book of vultures in a yellow leather chair. Her face pinched, pursed, puckered (as they say) in a question—her body slack, disbelieving then lurching through the door.

I will remember watching her go in slow motion, my own face a question—though in hindsight I already knew. In hindsight we had both known all along. In hindsight fear becomes foreknowledge. I will remember taking two steps to follow. Her not being. There.

Then standing beside two men in fatigues arranging a rainbow of zines on a rack. While outside too many people on the streets filed past. Mothers marching, children slung in sacks upon their backs, their breaths sweet with milk.

I will remember how she disappeared like a fish through the throng of white people singing "We Shall Overcome." One day. All of them making fists in the air—their hands inside of their gloves. One day. While back inside beside a stack of tomes, a young blonde woman in glasses will ask the cashier, "Have you heard of a book called *Beloved*?"

I will tangle the lines between fact and fiction as the days tumble past and I sprawl through depiction. I will come to wonder if I manufactured this instant. Because it will come to mean so much. Must remember. Holding Benjamin in my hands. The little boy with rubber glasses who retrieved the clutch of books that bounced once upon the floor. The acidic old-book-smell inside the store. Must remember the vultures flapping their leaves on the yellow chair. Must beware—and attempt to feel—the book *Beloved*'s despair. Must remember—before she ran—browsing the art section—before it began—flipping through black and white photos of BDSM. Must remember how I thought, "I am doing it again," remembering then—there—sneaking through the Public Library as a third grader with my best friends to stumble and stare at anatomy gems. BDSM. Where to begin? We tied ourselves into knots. What succor from these naked women hanging from the spine? We chose who would retrieve the book by drawing lots. Quietly ripped the fruit from the rind. We pocketed the pages. Extended olive-branches of shared understanding like doves. Semantics in the tone of our eyes: now: airbrushed ornaments in concrete cells, then: those with their skin peeled back, flashing organs beyond their folded lapels. Even diagrammatic science was sexy. Then. Quoth Noah's empty-clawed raven: "nevermore."

I will remember the girl saying "Beloved," and remember remembering "rememory."

I will remember the bell jingling on the door.

I will remember watching her run from the store with her finger in her other ear.

Fear tightening her face. The little boy on the floor. Some news from the doctors. Different than before. And the more I tell myself that this is exactly what happened, the more I will come to believe that it could not be—could never have been—any other way. The horoscopes spin. Potential evaporates. Sex becomes science. Fate catches up day-by-mundane-day.

II. Stratagem Insouciance

“Come Together”

We will wait on C.’s friend and her husband in the bar of a brewery called the Funkatorium. It will be packed full of stacked hogsheads and young professionals performing nonchalance. The A-side of *Abbey Road* will envelop the space as the performers flit by in an array of costumes. More gaudy in a way than the drag queens upon their holy altar. *Sprezzatura*: a feigned indifference. Costumes culminating in expensive boots on the one end and professional haircuts on the other. A proliferation of hipster barbers in the mountain town, claiming the FRINGE and cutting it close. The lot of these performers IN and OF this emerging consumer culture where blue jeans cost 250 bucks a pop and designer sports coats fit nicely over designer T-shirts. Where—simultaneously, and right down the street—hip clothing has never been cheaper in the history of the world. Single-serving outfits stitched by Bangladeshi children. Tossed into trash cans after clubbing Saturday night. Jewelry made of plastic and gilt in gold has become a synonym for smiling. These yuppy-hipsters avail themselves of all of the above. Yes, in the loop of targeted advertising, we buy what we are sold.

“Something”

Painfully on display as they scroll through their phones. Their fingernail pop art matching their dress prints: wedges of fruit or pizza slices, slices of white clouds on blue skies, yellow geometric skeletons on purple backgrounds, and birds. The blonde birds in bright lipstick and delicate, webbed, golden jewelry made—DIY—by friends

of friends will talk of practicing yoga and making kombucha from a communal mother. Passed hand to hand through the brand new neighborhoods bulldozed into the sides of the mountains. These blonde- or brown- or ginger-headed birds in bright pink lipstick and tight blue jeans, in dresses over tights with glittering pumps upon their feet, these drinkers of sour craft beer with next week’s potluck on the mind, these birds still play the part of TROPHY to the fuzzy-bearded young professional men in their brown leather boots and their Buddy Holly glasses who consider themselves—without a single exception in this chic industrial barroom full of hogsheads and hardwood and wrought iron and hair gel—outdoorsmen. Who consider themselves outdoorsmen who, without exception, have the latest flashy gear to prove their identity: crashpads, quickdraws, trad racks, play boats, headlamps, backpacks, dome tents, Jetboils. Outdoorsmen one and all, gearheaded granolamen, driving all-wheel drive Subarus with roof racks, ready to blaze into the remnants of this country’s wilderness. Inheritor’s of their fathers’ fathers’ mischief capped in coonskins, reeking of blood and sex and gasoline. Wet blankets soaked in smallpox. Misty eyed at the mention of any frontier.

“Maxwell’s Silver Hammer”

That’s why they drink this burgeoning beer. All of them well aware, I am sure, that the Funkatorium was the pet project of Wicked Weed, a local brewery that sold itself to the mega-conglomerate Anheuser Busch-InBev less than one year ago. A local brewery that traded independence for a big-fat-fucking check from the world’s largest brewery owner. But that was their plan all along. So the owners have since explained. And these casual cool performers are well aware—no skin off their backs—these pretty birds, these well-groomed outdoorsmen. A simple fact: in the beer frontier, these businessmen/brewers saw a hole and staked a claim. Alcohol is their oil and they should be admired for that.

Of course these patrons grumbled about it over

steaming bowls of organic quinoa at the local co-op when it was still BIG NEWS. Of course they repeated what they had overheard inside this or that hip barroom over the course of a few weeks. But really, it was no skin off their backs (metaphors from slave-times percolate the language). The taste is what matters, they reassure one another now. The taste is what matters. Really. The place is still as independent as can be. Wink-nod. Wink-nod. They are well aware—but they don't care—as they perform nonchalance in the pale light of this room in their array of very expensive, very carefully curated duds. *Sprezzatura*. Always sizing each other up, always jonesing to one up the Joneses at the other end of the hand-hewn craftsman table. Soaking in suds. This is why they pick up their phones—one after the other—and point them toward the speakers to capture songs on Shazam. The hits on *Abbey Road* spin by—one after the other—caged by these colonists not because they LIKE the songs but because the songs sound like they SHOULD BE LIKED. When witnessed the difference is not so subtle.

Carefully tipsy—each and every one—with designated drivers. This FUN has been pre-planned and programmed into their calendar. All along. They live their lives on a leash. They think themselves well aware of reality. As they throw back Budweiser beer and cheers one another on this or that mild milestone: a marriage, a promotion, a cruise this summer, a baby on board, etc. This Bud's for you. Life: one long string of advertisements. That's what we're living for.

I will be Old Scrooge, I will be Maxwell, staring them down, mumbling humbug, envisioning silver hammers splitting skulls. I will order the sourest thing on the menu and not be able to taste a thing. Blood and guts running from my nose. C. will sit on a stool beside me, thinking about the call from the doctor that morning. And as we rotate toward each other, her parallel thighs in black blue jeans will come to rest between my own. We will talk about dressing alike. Even while living apart. Busted Vans and black blue

jeans, flannels and shades on strings. We will figure it impossible to put a finger upon when it happened. Spiraling out from this idea to the arbitrary nature of everything in the world. We will talk about dogs that look like their owners and owners that look like their dogs. Everyone and everything wearing costumes and playing pleasantly in the chaos around them. We will fit right in with this fucking bunch, and hate ourselves for being there. Wondering if they wish their clothes worn-out like ours, distressed from the rack at the popularly overpriced vintage pop-up down the street. Well, C. will say. They need only wait. An attribute for which we Americans are not well known.

"Oh! Darling"

I will think about C. thinking about her mother.

About sitting in the chilly hospital waiting room with Oprah Winfrey on the television screen, while her mother wastes away on the bed beside her, her half-closed eyes fixed on the June day outside the window. Sweltering. Surreal. About her father asking the nurse at the reception desk if he might borrow a blanket for his daughter—him mumbling about forgetting to bring C. a sweater, worried that the nurse might think him negligent, although there is plenty on his mind, he says out loud, defending himself as the nurse raises her eyebrows in what seems to be a judgment upon his parenthood, the word SINGLE-PARENT fluttering erratically through his skull like a moth against a bulb—really, plenty on his mind, he says again, forcing a laugh—as he asks again if he might borrow a blanket to wrap around his daughter's shoulders as she sits with her dying mother and June sweats outside the window.

"Octopus's Garden"

Then C. will put her jean jacket back on and we will not look so much alike. While the silly carnival of performers jibber-jabber around us, pose for picture after picture on their sleek fragile phones. *Oh what a joy*. As we observe to each other that

Nonfiction

this is why they came. *For every girl and boy.* To prove they came. *Knowing they're happy and they're safe.* Tautologies rule this world. I was once told by an Altamont native that at any given time—whenever she stepped from her front door—she expected at least sixty percent of the people around her to be tourists. And that's lowballing, she said. That's lowballing. Especially in the fall with the leafers.

Yellow leaf, red leaf, blowing down blue ridge, the smell of locust fire in the always-spreading suburbs.

C. will sit and think about the phone call. Think about her mother's death. She will grasp again for a fleeting reason. Then smile to herself and swallow the absurdity with a mouthful of beer. A sucker for sours herself, she empties the glass of a traditional red ale aged with blackberries and dates in whiskey barrels packed with *brettanomyces* and named—no joke—OBLIVION.

When a guy in a J. Crew and Patagonia get-up tells me that he loves the Charlotte Hornets and asks if he can buy what he calls my REALLY RAD RETRO CAP, I will laugh and shake my head as if I do not speak his language. I will pull C. away from MUGSY BOGUES, man, MUGSY BOGUES, and ALONZO MOURNING, man, and DELL CURRY—that's Steph's Dad, man. Did you know that? And LARRY JOHNSON—grandmama, man, grandmama. Did you know Larry Johnson was grandmama?

Of course, a horse, a horse. Gold-toothed Larry Johnson promoting converse sneakers in drag might have been my first conscious exposure to cross-dressing. But instead of having a conversation, this asshole will blather on about his purchasing power, opening his wallet that I might peek inside and be dazzled by dollar bills.

Incoherent. Ignorant of reality. Seeing no strangeness in treating a stranger in a bar as a manikin in a storefront window. Everything in the

world for sale. One just has to know the price. If I could have anticipated the moment, I would have made a deal with the devil, would have pawned everything I owned for the opportunity to vomit on command. To spew Budweiser beer all over the curated duds of this bright capitalist with the consumable earth spread-eagled beneath his feet.

"I Want You (She's So Heavy)"

Instead C. and I will walk away, and stand tangled in the rock garden outside. Snow piled over the cairns and melting in the sun. Unable to be grasped. Unable to be owned. She will point out how everything is underwater, how everything is still shaded by the snow, how throwing shade might be a defense mechanism, how our eight appendages together make an octopus, how I might hum squidbilly Harrison licks instead of pointing out the faults of these objectifiers, instead of pointing out the hoarding of these thing-collectors. Away from the birds and the hungry outdoorsmen, this moment becomes a little hideaway beneath the waves. Beyond the endlessly echoing arpeggios and the crescendo of windy static and white noise.

III. Lost Baedeker of Elusion

Soon these friends will come. Soon. Talking of being exhausted. Talking of being frustrated for the duration of the day. They don't know why, they'll say. Just frustrated. Nothing going right, they'll say. Too much spring cleaning in the big brand new house filled with big brand new things. Talking. They don't know why, they'll say. Too many things. Frustrated. Nothing going right. Sufferers of ennui. They don't know why. Talking. A general malaise over the sunny snow-struck town. Frustrated. About everything. Confused perhaps that buying big brand new things didn't fill them up like they thought it would. Wondering perhaps why pregnancy didn't have the heft that everyone promised. Snubbed by expectations at every turn in the road. Fumbling then choking over the word SHOULD. Frustrated. We are all

racing toward the bottom, are we not? I will ask, raising my glass as if this is a toast.

The woman in the yellow wife beater and no bra will jeer at the husband as he sits beside me looking past his wife. As he winks at this stranger even as he nuzzles his flat-black converse sneakers between the thin ankles of his wife beneath the table. We will drink our beers and listen to their announcement. SURPRISE. We will congratulate them, of course. Of course there was a reason she was not drinking. Of course, C. will say she thought something was up. Of course. They will say, enough about us. Enough about us, of course. And ask us about living long distance.

We will talk about the length of the drive, about the space-between being healthy, about how we have done it before, about books, about the illegal Airbnb, although nothing about the not-yet-weaned-seven-year-old. Nothing at all about the illness, of course. Although nothing of the phone call that morning. Of course the husband will ask about our plans for the rest of the day. He is what C. calls an ACTIVITIES-KID. The entirety of his life mapped out. And filled with things. The wife, on the other hand, will not pry. She knows we are on a romantic getaway. That's what she will call it. Here in the land of the sky. Acknowledging that we do not see so much of each other. But of course her husband will ask. And of course we will realize that we forgot that he would ask. And of course we will have no plan of escape. We should have made a plan we will say with our eyes. Taken a cue from this energized queued up capitalist.

Should have taken out a blank piece of paper before they arrived and drawn ourselves a map. A tool of colonization my professor wrote in the margins of my final paper. Nothing more. Everything has become arbitrary. A globe of wandering imposters. We should have drawn ourselves a map for direction. Instead. We will stare blankly. Shrug our shoulders. Look into the wells of each other's eyes—for just a moment—pleading for the right words of declination.

Then allow ourselves to be lassoed into supper. Of course. Just before we leave the brewery, I will see the husband down the hallway to the bathroom pinning the woman in the yellow wife beater against the wall. He will see me seeing and wink at me while he whispers in her ear. She will laugh and slip her hands down his pants.

And when we leave, the two women will climb automatically into the backseat of the Honda Fit. The two men into the front. As if there was an understanding about who pilots whom along these white-washed streets. A *Leave it to Beaver* arrangement. Inspecting the glove box, stretching his legs in the passenger's seat, the husband will say: This car is not so bad after all. Then talk about a friend of his who could have gotten us a deal on a Subaru.

We all fall into habits, passively consenting to a million things a million times a day. The women will whisper in the backseat about the intuition of their bodies. Personal. Political. Powerful. An assertion of shared community. Informing the way they see the world. Which they seem to assume to share.

I will wonder why the husband thought he and I were in cahoots. I will wonder whether to tell C. about the woman in the yellow wife beater with her hands down his pants. And wonder whether C. will tell her friend. And wonder—again—if it is possible to pinpoint where anything begins.

As I park the car C. will get a call and rush into the dark. Over the crackling salt in the road, over the rinds of dirty snow along the curb, over the ice-cracked asphalt. Ravaged. She will rush from the car with her finger in her other ear just as she did that morning at the bookstore. And the married couple and I will stand with our doors ajar and watch her disappear like a fish.

Then. We will walk inside, this married couple and I, and I will explain how I do not feel that it

is my place to explain, and explain how, when she returns, C. will explain, and then—nonetheless—I will proceed to explain. As best I can, I will say. I don't know much, I will say. It's not my place to say, I will say. Before I say, and say, and say. It is not my body. She would not want this. It is not my secret to tell. But I will tell it anyway.

Away. Disembodied. Upon this stage in this restaurant: fey. I will watch myself perform in the light of their concerned cliché. Grilled over the fire of their unease, a spineless fish fillet.

Until finally, I will nod toward the window, indicating C. who will by that point be wandering back from the dark. C. who will be standing outside on the sidewalk, oblivious, pushing back her toboggan to reveal a furrowed forehead. I will glug down a Narragansett tallboy, trying to make small talk after coughing this anvil onto the table. We will all wish that we had hammers in our fists to tink-tink-tink some understanding into being. C. will come inside on the verge of tears and explain what I explained. We really don't know much, she will say. We're finding out in real time. She will hold up her phone and shrug her shoulders and chopstick limp noodles from the lukewarm brine. She will apologize. They—the pregnant couple—will say there's no need to apologize. She will explain more and apologize again. Again they will say no need. The husband will nod his head knowingly and begin expounding upon what little he knows about what he calls THE DISEASE. While we shake our heads NO. No, no, no. Although we said we do not know much, we certainly know more than him. No. Stop explaining, we scream with our eyes. Infuriated all of a sudden for some reason as we dump the plate of Japanese French fries into the Ramen broth. I can't taste anything, I will keep saying, squirting Sriracha into the bowl. I can't taste anything, trying desperately to shut him up and escape from this ever-deepening hole. And I can't hear anything, I will try again. My head is full of blood and the whole world is underwater. I can't hear a goddamned thing, I will say.

Though by that point—of course—everyone will have stopped talking.

IV. Long Distance Double Date or Rules of Thumb for Donuts

As we leave the restaurant, the husband and wife—the ones who will have, over steaming bowls of very expensive ramen, been complaining to us about moving into their brand new big house, about filling it with brand new big things, the ones who just announced to us their pregnancy and their sprawling alien frustration with the world, the ones who went silent after the word CANCER and then went about constructing an imaginary narrative of our future as if it was already chiseled in stone, then—subsequently—went about systematically reminding us that their life was no picnic either—this couple will meet a couple of old friends on the sidewalk outside, and we—C. and I—will continue straight to C.'s car and watch from behind the windshield as these sufferers of ennui hold their sides and laugh and slap each other's shoulders, and hug and kiss each cheek, and laugh and laugh and poke and wink, and promise to see each other soon.

Behind the glass, we will sit confirming that neither one of us wants to hang with them any longer. I shouldn't have told them, she will say. It doesn't matter, I will answer, reaching for her hand. It's nothing against them, she will say. No, I will agree. Of course not. A long day. It's been a long day, we will both agree. Perhaps a movie in the bedroom at the Airbnb?

But there—again—we run a risk. Neither one of us wanting to surprise the suckling couple on the couch again. Thinking back to the night before, I will ask C. if she thinks the child's eyes looked accusatory when we walked in. The mother, of course, C. will say. She knows he's too old for that. No, the child, I will answer. Didn't it seem like he was daring us to pass judgment? Didn't it seem like he was daring us to continue thinking

precisely what we couldn't help but continue thinking? He's only seven, she will answer. He doesn't care about you.

Then the husband and wife will be climbing into the backseat, laughing and talking about old friends. Then remembering—all of a sudden, when they catch our eyes in the rearview mirror—that we are much older friends, and that they are supposed to be performing SOMBER. Decorum mandated. So. They will say again into the silence as we roll down Haywood that the day has been frustrating for them. So frustrating, they will say, but they don't know why, as flurries fall against the car.

What infidel world is this? When we buy our way into good graces by playing roles of expectations. Conforming to images that we believe everyone else already sees. And thus believes. To fit oneself comfortably into the image is to become static. To become the stereotype is to die the only death that ever existed. Criminals in striped pajamas scream through their iron bars. Well? What did you expect? Syphilitic seamen seeps from the mouths of blind boys, and girls with short-shorts—shorts deemed too-tight (passive)—wake up in alien landscapes with their underwear inside out. Well? What did you expect? we say, and say again. And say again.

Of course we will hit a pothole on the way to their brand new house, and C. will begin to cry. Out in front of the Tastee Diner where drunks feed hot dogs to each other behind the plate glass. A flat tire, blown through the sidewall—unpatchable. The husband and I will jack up the car on the wet asphalt, him taking the jack out of my hands and doing it wrong, me wrestling the jack from him to start over again. All along, he will be telling me what to do, and I will not be listening. Mouth breathers in the diner fogging up the glass. Ketchup smeared in dancing phalluses across the condensation. Then I will do the telling, and him the not-listening. Praying that the voyeuristic fools—the fools finger-painting

curses in condiments—will not rush out of the diner suddenly with French fries in their hands to give us their two cents to boot. We will go on like this for some time. Until C. tells us to stop. Until C. tells us to shut up.

Heroine on a dim stage—arms spread to the blistering stars—she will shake her fists at nothing in particular and ask why men are such idiots. Her friend, standing beside her, emerging Madonna-like from the shadows, will nod her head—sadly—in agreement, holding all along to her belly that is not even close to showing yet. Now prepping for transformation.

Into the silence, C. will worry aloud about not being able to get back to Durham. About not being able to get to work on Monday. But really she will be thinking about the phone call from the doctor that she received in the bookstore that morning. And the second phone call in the parking lot that smelled of East Asia as the clouds swooped down—like the Assyrian wolf on the fold, the whole world gleaming in purple and gold—as the sun dropped into the valley.

No farther than seventy miles, no faster than fifty miles an hour. Rules of thumb for donuts, the husband beside me will say. He will hug the jack and the tire iron to his chest as if he never loved anything more.

It takes four hours to get home, C. will mutter to herself. It's my birthday. Before she begins to cry again. No matter, I will answer. No matter. There's nothing to worry about here. I will find a tire in town tomorrow morning. I will make it better, I will say. No. C. will shake her head. No. There's nothing you can do, she will say. There's always something I can do. No. C. will shake her head. No. Emphatic. There's nothing you can do.

And she will be right. And she will be writing. She will be wright, and she will be writing. She will be rite, and she will be writing. She will be right, and she will be writing, she will be wright,

Nonfiction

and she will be writing, she will be rite, and she will be writing, she will be right, and she will be writing, she will be writing, she will be writing, she will be writing the words to this song long after I have given up. Long after I have tallied the project into the long string of lost causes. She will be forever writing words to the tune of tangibility. A rite of passage. I have gotten it wrong. I always have. I am always getting it wrong. But she—adherent to truth, reality rooter—will forever be writing the words to the world on the head of a pin. A maker of worlds. Of service. A builder. A ceremony unfolding in the shape of a friend. In her righteousness, I hear James Agee's radio test—*Is what you hear pretty? or beautiful? or legal? or acceptable in polite or any other society? Or is it beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium in human life—always refusing THE END.* Always righting my wrongs. Always obscuring the scrawl of my palimpsest pretend.

Entheos, Genesthai

Anna Sandy-Elrod, Georgia State University

Tucked away in the La Latina neighborhood of Madrid, a small restaurant serves only mushrooms, served in a multiplicity of ways. Late one winter evening, my husband and I, married less than a year then, hovered outside the door, waiting for one of the few tables to empty, for our chance to dart inside and claim a spot. When the opportunity came, we stepped in, peeling off our coats, shivering lightly, and noticed that the floor was peeled away in several places, replaced with sheets of thick glass so that we could see the mushrooms growing on the old, wet wood beneath us. The deep orange walls, too, were festooned with mushrooms in honeycomb cases. We ordered and ordered, and the plates kept coming—mushrooms buttered, and salted, fried, bathed in sauce, chopped fine and served with capers.

*

There are numerous origin stories for the mushroom. In one, God walked through a field with Saint Peter. When Saint Peter picked a stalk of rye and began to chew it, God told Peter, "The rye is not for you," so Peter spit it onto the ground. A mushroom would grow from the grain, God said, and commanded that Peter let it be for those in poverty.¹

*

In *Food of the Gods*, Terence McKenna posited that the fruit which Adam and Eve ate from, widely and incorrectly portrayed as an apple, was instead a symbol for a psychedelic mushroom, a thing from which one bite gave them knowledge.

If this seems absurd, consider that the Abbaye de Plaincourault, a twelfth-century chapel in France, houses a famous fresco which shows Adam and

¹ This clearly-Christian myth bears striking similarity to a Lithuanian story in which mushrooms are the fingers of Velnias, god of the dead, reaching out from beyond our world to feed the poor.

Eve in the Garden with the serpent, all entwined around a large red-and-white spotted mushroom, likely the Fly Agaric.

What, besides knowledge, can mushrooms give? In the Biblical tale, Adam and Eve's bite caused their eventual deaths. In ancient Egypt, though, mushrooms were associated with immortality, and no one but royalty, the descendants of the Egyptian gods, could consume them.

It is unlikely that mushrooms can grant us immortality. For themselves, though, life is far less finite.

*

Approximately 500 years before the birth of Christ, the Persian King Xerxes tried and failed to invade Greece. After that, Xerxes is said to have dropped the title "King of Babylon," but he's still considered to be the inspiration for the fictional king in the Book of Esther.

Today, beneath a swath of woodland in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, a honey mushroom grows unseen and voracious. This mushroom, the *armillaria gallica*, has been alive since King Xerxes's failed invasion, since Esther is said to have approached the king and touched his golden scepter. Above ground, all we see of this mushroom are clusters of what look like small, gold-brown toadstools. Beneath the ground, though, the mushroom swallows everything in its path, a many-headed monster.

*

For as long as I can remember, I have had a propensity for belief. In every myth and fairy tale I find the crumb of the story, the thing that must have been true, the reason the story repeats across time and cultures.

As a child, I watched the intensity of the Pentecostal church services I attended, the way that people I knew to be quiet and controlled gave themselves over to song, dance, fits of worship. I both feared and envied the abandonment of the self. I knew I would one day experience it too.

Nonfiction

"Worship is better than any drug," I was often told. Later, older, I would wonder at the similarities.

*

In the 1970s, the British archaeologist John Marco Allegro wrote *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, in which he claimed that mushrooms were at the root of many early religions, Christianity included. Allegro believed that primitive religions were based on fertility rituals and aimed to produce reproduction both symbolically and literally. The mushroom, then, was a gateway to understanding God.

*

In Western culture, the mushroom that most often comes to mind is the Fly Agaric, the red and white-spotted mushroom that appears most often in fairy tales, the mushroom Alice took a nibble of on her trip to Wonderland.

It's thought that this mushroom was used by shamans and religious leaders in northern Europe, and that the hallucinogenic effect could cause one to distort size and space, explaining Alice's sudden spurts of growth and shrinking. Indeed, a friend once described the terror she felt upon, on a mushroom trip, suddenly realizing that her boyfriend's torso had become extraordinarily, monstrously long.

Perhaps it was not Alice who changed size at all, but Alice's perception of the shapes and objects in the world around her.

*

Recently, after a period of the heavy rain and high humidity that indicates late summer in Georgia, I was walking my dog—a miniscule, fawn-like chihuahua—and noticed an onslaught of mushrooms, peeking from under trees and out of sidewalk cracks, bursting in patches in my neighbor's yard, clumping on piles of wet brush. They had appeared almost miraculously, suddenly appearing everywhere when there had been nothing there the day before. Within

a week or two, they were gone as quickly as they had come, no sign of them except for a wrinkled mushroom cap here and there where they had been knocked from their stalks.

Out of sight, though, they wait, their mycelial network unspooled beneath the ground, ready to sprout again, to resurrect.

*

The broad term for a substance that causes altered states of mind, changes in perception or mood, consciousness or behavior, is entheogen. Entheogens, such as magic mushrooms, have been used as religious or magical aids across the world, spanning continents and civilizations, stretching back as far as we know how to go.

Entheogen, as a word, is created from the Ancient Greek *éntheos* and *genésthai*, meaning, in English, *full of god, inspired, possessed, rooting our word "enthusiasm," and to come into being.*

From this, we can gather that an entheogen causes one to enter the state of being enthused, inspired, euphoric. From this, we can see how a magic mushroom sprouts religions and divinity and inspires its users to transcendence.

*

Several years ago, a study found that a single dose of psilocybin² can cause a person to become more open to new experiences for over a year, to unlock creativity, art, novelty, deeper emotion. The mushroom trip is said to profoundly affect sensation and passion, to accelerate joy and connection to the self and the world. When the thalamus is slowed, and the brain's connectivity speeds up, lighting up area after area of the brain, the person is suddenly transcendent, and these feelings linger.

² Psilocybin is the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, the bit that is best known for bringing about vivid hallucinations, oversaturating colors and dissolving the boundaries between objects. The psilocybin also contains two toxins that reduce the body's response to fear stimuli, effectively giving them a temporary state of fearlessness.

*

Early on in grad school, I took a class on medieval rhetoric. At some point, during a lecture on the *Malleus Maleficarum* which lapsed into a more broad discussion of witchcraft, my professor posed the theory that the infamous girls' contortions, fits of screaming, and delusions that sparked the Salem Witch Trials were caused by self-induced hysteria, a working of oneself into mania. "Like the Pentecostals and their speaking in tongues," she suggested.

Glossolalia³, also known as speaking in tongues, is taken from the Greek, and indicates utterances akin to language, noises that approximate speech. As the granddaughter of a Pentecostal pastor, I was as familiar with the phenomenon of speaking in tongues as I was with that of passing the offering plate. I knew it only as prayer. That this might be seen as hysteria, as witchcraft, as something abnormal never crossed my mind then.

*

There are endless theories for why the Salem Witch Trials began, for what prompted two average young girls to behave manically, beginning one of the most incomprehensible periods of American history. One of them considers that the girls had inhaled fungal spores. Another considers the idea of ergot poisoning, caused by ingesting rye that had been contaminated with the fungal disease. Almost all of them consider mass hysteria; once the accusations of witchcraft began, they could not be contained.

*

In his essay "The Mushrooms of Language," Henry Munn writes that those who eat magic mushrooms develop "an inspired capacity to speak." They are, he says, "the ones possessed by the voice." To Munn, and those he writes of, "Language is an ecstatic activity" and the effects of the mushrooms serve that ecstasy, allowing them to speak with

3 This is often confused with xenoglossia, the sudden ability to speak in an actual, unfamiliar language, which is more true to the definition of occurrences in the Christian bible but much more rare in practice.

ease, to become poets and prophets, to speak with perfect eloquence and power. It is as if the words are appearing miraculously, leaping forth without the speaker's effort, "as if existence were uttering itself" through the speaker.

When I read this, I think of the gift of tongues and interpretation, a phenomenon explained in the New Testament and practiced by the church I grew up in. Inspired by the divine, a believer will begin to speak, ignorant of their own words, allowing spontaneous and free discourse to spill forth and deliver a message from God. Often, this message is delivered in the midst of euphoria through glossolalia. At times, another believer will be compelled to translate the message for the congregation, making use of, as Munn says, "heightened perceptivity." There are no mushrooms here though, just intense communication and surrender to a deep trance.⁴

*

An infamous experiment with mushrooms is known as the Marsh Chapel Experiment. On Good Friday, in 1962, volunteers were given either a dose of psilocybin or a placebo before attending a religious service in Boston University's chapel. Those who ingested the psilocybin reported a deeper, more mystical and profound spiritual experience.

*

In the Pentecostal religion, speaking in tongues is an outward sign of salvation, a manifestation of God entering the human.

While we commonly think of psychedelics as recreational, there is a theory that hallucinogenic experiences significantly influenced the development of religion. This theory is known as the entheogen theory, with *entheogen* meaning, quite literally, "that which causes God to be within an individual."

Allegro posited that ancient peoples may have considered rain to be a supernatural semen, fertilizing the earth and causing the harvest

4 This has been referred to as a state of dissociative hyper-arousal.

Nonfiction

to grow. Allegro continued this line of theory, suggesting that plants, especially mushrooms, would have absorbed this heavenly semen and so, when consumed, would allow a person closeness to God, or the gods.⁵

*

In ancient Greece, secret ceremonies were held yearly for Demeter and Persephone. These ceremonies, the Eleusinian Mysteries, called for a special drink. In the *Illiad*, Homer portrayed this drink as being made of barley, water, herbs, and goat cheese. The barley is thought to have been parasitized by a fungus whose psychoactive properties triggered the intense experiences of those at Eleusis.

*

While camping in the Ozarks as a child, it was not uncommon for me to find rings of wild mushrooms growing in the damp of the forests. I thought little of it then, but for a long time, in many areas of the world, the appearance of these things was not to be taken lightly.

Fairy rings, increased fertility, doom, the presence of the devil—cultures across the world have associated mushroom rings with the supernatural. Even for the non-superstitious, there are dangers. Not all mushrooms are safe to eat; some bring about psychedelic side effects, some death.

*

Some mushrooms are said to decelerate brain activity, to cause the thalamus to respond like an insect caught in honey, still moving but slow, viscous. The thalamus can be thought of like a gatekeeper, the *Horae* of your brain, limiting connections from passing through. With the thalamus sedated, information can travel freely throughout the brain.

⁵ Some ancient cultures believed that eating the mushroom was to consume the flesh of the gods, reminiscent of the Eucharist, which Catholicism believes to be the transformed body of Christ.

This could be why the psilocybin in a magic mushroom can produce a brain state similar to synesthesia, causing letters to taste, numbers to appear in vivid color. The brain is hyperconnected, synchronous.

*

Like many religious traditions, Christianity emphasizes gathering to worship, the rush of increased connection of human beings in a mass, a tent revival, a prayer circle. When the members of a congregation move to the front of a church, lift their hands all at once and begin to speak, they unify, become interconnected, coexisting in one physical and mental space.

This is where many find miracles, holy experiences, unexplainable occurrences. This is what I pictured when my professor described the hysteria of tongues.

*

Invisible to us, mushrooms have vast systems of communication—a latticework of underground strands that allow them to freely share information, to feel the vibration of our movements and alert each other that we come, to prepare for what's to come. This community allows them to thrive for centuries, appearing and disappearing above ground, but always present beneath.

Like the mushroom's fungal network, our brains create connections, or synapses, to allow the various regions and parts to communicate, to send information across these pathways so instantaneously that we aren't even aware it's happening.

When I type this, my fingers move before I am fully conscious of the desire to move them. To experience tongues, the frontal lobe, the language part of the brain, stills and the mouth speaks.

*

While many studies have shown that religious practice, such as prayer, has beneficial effects

on the psyche, there are others that indicate something much different. For believers who report a life-altering religious experience or extreme religious activity (for instance, being “born again” or speaking in tongues), one study showed that there was quite literally a shrinking of the brain.⁶ Of course, the theory could also be flipped—perhaps those with smaller hippocampal areas are more likely to pursue extremism; perhaps they are born with religious and/or spiritual proclivities. Do I, someone raised in the throes of religious extremism but no longer practicing it, have a shrunken brain or an enlarged one? One thing science is sure of is that religion affects the brain, not only chemically but physically. Neurotheology, the scientific study of the neural correlates of religious or spiritual beliefs, experiences, and practices, is devoted to finding out how.

*

In another origin story, a Christianized version of the Aztec legend of Quetzalcoatl, Christ walked across the earth and where droplets of his blood spilled, mushrooms grew. The mushrooms, fleshy, contained the essence of life. When Henry Munn tells of this legend, he lingers on the flesh of the mushroom: “Flesh of the world. Flesh of language. In the beginning was the word and the word became flesh. In the beginning there was flesh and the flesh became linguistic. Food of intuition. Food of wisdom. She ate them, munched them up, swallowed them . . . and all at once, out of the silence, the woman began to speak, to chant, to pray, to sing, to utter her existence.” That is, I think, what we all want: to speak our existence.

*

When I bite into the meatiness of a mushroom, I am not seeking fertility or God, yet I am following a desire for bliss, a moment of taste on the tongue, a decadence.

I followed this desire when I was young, seeking divinity in worship, tongues, baptism, connection.

It is not new to seek.

*

Like everyone before me, I look for answers. The origin of the mushroom, the worship, the glossolalia. The explanation for the miracle, the transcendence, the way the world becomes unrecognizable and more recognizable when we drink, or eat, or pray. So powerful is our desire to recognize story patterns that we see them even when they're not there—the joining of bodies to create more bodies, the first bite of a psychedelic mushroom, the hysteria of witch trials or the theories of their beginnings in a fungus, the joining of hands and language in a church, the drink and dance and dissolution, the spit of rye on the ground.

6 Or, hippocampal atrophy.

[PLACE MINUS MOTION]

Zachary Anderson, University Of Georgia-Athens

"The straight line (road, frontier, grid, linear history and narrative, monologue) is disrupted by the trope of crossing (dialogue, diaspora, rhizome, the fold)." –Neil Campbell, The Rhizomatic West

9/8/20

8:53 am MDT

Wind Speed E 15 G 25 mph

Barometer 30.29 in (1025.8 mb)

Dewpoint 18°F (-8°C)

Visibility 0.75 mi

Wind Chill 10°F (-12°C)

First snow, and 60 miles south the Cameron Peak Fire has exploded to over 100,000 acres and triggered mass evacuations. A dusting now, but there may be ten inches by evening. Not a car in sight. An icy lattice blurs half of the East Camera. The image's membrane mutes the wind that layers bands of white across the road surface. Darker streaks run through it—dirt and oil from passing semis, or ash from Colorado.

9/15/20

8:45 am MDT

Humidity 42%

Wind Speed S 7 mph

Barometer 30.40 in (1021.7 mb)

Dewpoint 25°F (-4°C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Wind Chill 44°F (7°C)

Looking west toward Vedauwoo (the name is a corrupted version of the Arapaho word for "earth-born") the Sherman Granite hoodoos float above a layer of haze. A few states further down I-80 are on fire now, towns with names like Talent and Phoenix smudged off the map. In the west-facing webcam, a billboard for a fireworks stand rides the bend on the interstate, its violent yellow matched by a school bus on the opposite side. Steady westbound traffic. Over the ridge to the east turbine blades puncture the interface. Microsoft's data center outside of Cheyenne claims to be powered entirely by wind energy from the Happy Jack and Silver Sage wind farms. But the language is vague, suggesting that the 59 megawatts purchased by Microsoft are translated from renewable energy credits. Black Hills Corporation of Rapid City, which holds a monopoly on electricity for South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming, owns these wind farms. Black Hills Corp. also operates the Wyodak Mine in the Powder River Basin, the oldest continuously functioning surface coal mine in the country. The road surface is dry and clear enough to make out the variegations in the asphalt, abstracted by the webcam's low resolution. Overlapping media. The Department of Transportation archives all these webcam images for two years. I don't know what powers the servers they live on.

9/22/20

11:53 am MDT

Humidity 16%

Wind Speed W 7 mph

Barometer 30.28 in (1015.4 mb)

Dewpoint 26° F (-3° C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Ten miles of visibility, almost enough distance to see past the money in the landscape. And a landscape itself is a kind of capital, the rare earth metal buried in a distant prospect. On this stretch of interstate, the money flows but never really sticks. Around half of the 13,000 vehicles that cross a given section of I-80 in Wyoming per day are semi-trailers, most from out of state. This is the Continental Divide; the money flows to the coasts. In 2012, the town of Buford (pop. 1) was sold at online auction for \$900,000 to a Vietnamese investor. Pham Dinh Nguyen sold his PhinDeli brand coffee exclusively in Buford's gas station until 2018, when the station went out of business and the single resident left. Strange how these desolate four lanes and wind-scarred median are also inscribed with the ghostly traces of global capital. Some of it drifts off the passing tractor trailers and sediments into the freshly striped road surface, roughly \$6.4 billion over the next 30 years according to WYDOT estimates.

9/29/20

7:53 am MDT

Humidity 35%

Wind Speed E 6 mph

Barometer 30.37 in (1026.3 mb)

Dewpoint 10° F (-12° C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Wind Chill 30° F (-1° C)

"Areas of smoke before noon," from the Mullen Fire in the Snowy Range, appearing as purple gravity waves in the west. Eastbound, a ghostly freightliner has just entered the frame, trailed by two filmy yellow lens flares, hovering. A glitch in the disappearing medium as the webcam records its own presence. The lens flare and the silvered outline of the hills gives the image a cinematic feel. Paradoxical loop: the still image makes a shadow of time passing; the film still creates the illusion of an event. I'm thinking of Nelson Goodman's definition: "A thing is a monotonous event; an event is an unstable thing." A sudden awareness of time's extension into the landscape, or as Robert Smithson writes in "Entropy and the New Monuments," "Time becomes a place minus motion." I get the same kind of amnesia from driving on the interstate that I get from watching a movie. Smithson writes about this too in "A Cinematic Atopia": "The monad of cinematic limits spills out into a state of stupefaction. We are faced with inventories of limbo." The idea of the West has always been cinematic: its ideology of progress and expansion depend on narrative logic and silvered horizons. Aporias, convenient voids. Cinematic amnesia is the foundation of the West.

Nonfiction

10/6/20

8:53 am MDT

Humidity 24%

Wind Speed N 3 mph

Barometer 30.34 in (1020.9 mb)

Dewpoint 15°F (-9°C)

Visibility 1.75 mi

You need a horizon to make a frontier, and (after oil and gas) this is Wyoming's biggest export. What Deleuze and Guattari called the "rhizomatic West" with its "shifting and displaced frontiers." In Cheyenne, I grew up breathing the fumes from Frontier Refinery and wandering through the arcades of the Frontier Mall. With its pattern of mile-markers, their shadows like sundials, I-80 regulates the horizon, imposes its temporality, and closes the frontier. William L. Fox writes that "the grid exercises authority over space by applying a ruler to it in all senses of the word. It stretches out a straight edge across unenclosed space and automatically extends a map to the romantic horizon." The white tile floor of the Frontier Mall floats in my vision, stink of frying grease and dollar bills worn soft. The purpose of the interstate was always to standardize the authority of the nation-state. Travel was secondary. The 1938 Congressional report *Toll Roads and Free Roads* proposed a "system of direct interregional highways, with all necessary connections through and around cities, designed to meet the requirements of the national defense in time of war and the needs of a growing peacetime traffic of longer range." Across from my elementary school, hollowed-out Peacekeeper and Minuteman missiles still gleam along the interstate, the live warheads asleep in their bunkers on the prairie.

10/13/20

10:17 am MDT

Humidity 29%

Wind Speed S 10 G 17 mph

Barometer 30.26 in (1017.8 mb)

Dewpoint 17°F (-8°C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Wind Chill 44°F (7°C)

A lenticular cloud in the western view mirrors the lens flare in triplicate. High wind warning, waves breaking over the Laramie Range. At the summit, twelve miles to the west on the former Lincoln Highway, a thirteen-foot bronze bust of Abraham Lincoln looms on a thirty-foot Sherman granite pedestal. The Sherman batholith formed in the Middle Proterozoic, around the same time as the Great Oxidation Event that triggered the earth's first mass extinction. Cyanobacteria mats offloaded waste oxygen, toxified the atmosphere. Chemical economies all the way down. Lincoln's brooding bronze was cast in Mexico City and shipped by train to Sherman Hill, just southwest of Buford, in 1958. The monument was relocated to the summit in 1969, upon the construction of Interstate 80. From the interstate, traces of the old Lincoln Highway emerge in glimpses, roadbed now a seedbed for prairie grasses. In Portland yesterday, protestors pulled down a different statue of Lincoln, who was responsible for the largest mass execution in American history. Thirty-eight Dakota men hanged in Minnesota in retribution for the Santee Sioux uprising. Seven hundred miles away, Lincoln's cast-bronze stare surveils traffic at the top of the gentle slope the railroad surveyors called "The Gangplank."

10/21/20

1:47 pm MDT

Humidity 55%

Wind Speed NE 16 G 21 mph

Barometer 29.95 in (1010.6 mb)

Dewpoint 25° F (-4° C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Wind Chill 32° F (0° C)

A monument is a null structure, a smooth surface enclosing an asymptote that names itself "history." On a bigger timescale, Eisenhower's interstate will be a monument in bitumen and thermoplastic paint. Infrastructure no longer "below" anything, translated to empty artifact. "Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future," Robert Smithson wrote on Donald Judd. The highway reflectors gleam like Judd's metallic surfaces. Just west of Buford, the Ames Monument flashes into view for just a few seconds before diving back behind the snow-fenced hill. The sixty-foot pyramid memorializes Oakes and Oliver Ames, whose illicit dealings with Crédit Mobilier defrauded the U.S. government and funded the Transcontinental Railroad. Its spike driven into the landscape is shaped from local Sherman granite, named for genocidal general William Tecumseh Sherman. A monument is a sedimentation of ideological and repressive regimes. The pyramid's architect, H. H. Richardson, is also responsible for Trinity Church in Boston and the State Asylum in Buffalo.

11/8/20

5:56 pm MDT

Humidity 38%

Wind Speed SW 10 mph

Barometer 29.68 in (1003.4 mb)

Dewpoint 10° F (-12° C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Wind Chill 25° F (-4° C)

Headlights get reduced to twin diamonds as the last light leaks out of the surveilled sky. Particles scatter like a viral load. In the east-facing camera, no sign of reflectors, no "microcrystalline ceramic beads for maximum dry and wet reflectivity" tracing a lane. Just a single sparkle of headlights thrown into darkness at highway speed. Deterritorialized lights burn on the DOT hangar that houses plows and sand. The state of Wyoming is the largest contributor to the Energy Policy Network, a lobbying group for coal interests across the country. The dark money sails out of state on the same roads I ghosted down as a child, half-asleep to a now-apocryphal song about the "lights of Cheyenne," now endlessly entangled with their coal-fired power plants.

Nonfiction

11/10/20

2:39 pm MDT

Humidity 43%

Wind Speed W 28 G 43 mph

Barometer 29.76 in (1010.8 mb)

Dewpoint 8 °F (-13 °C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Wind Chill 13 °F (-11 °C)

Pastel clouds in their pixel impasto, soft as Thomas Moran's Green River sandstone. Beyond the stretches of snow-dusted dirt and a powder blue semi-cab, the vista approaches the picturesque. Terre Ryan writes that "Nineteenth-century images of Wyoming figured prominently in articulating the relationship between Americans and their nation." The Hudson River artists helped sell the idea of the West to speculators back east. In Moran's 1881 *Green River Cliffs, Wyoming*, the sedimentary cliff walls chew out of the horizon, bleached white and capped with oxidized red. Against the weight of the Green River Formation, a weirdly perfect moon floats over distant tipis. "The bluffs are the most realistic elements in his Green River paintings," writes Ryan, "as the artist engaged in what his biographer Nancy K. Anderson calls the 'wholesale erasure' of the town's industrial landscape. In place of an enormous railroad depot, Moran depicted bands of Native Americans on horseback, even though the artist saw no Native peoples in the area." An aesthetic feedback loop, a copy artificialized in the process of its authentication, a "Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass" (Smithson).

11/21/20

10:00 pm MDT

Humidity 38%

Wind Speed NW 6 mph

Barometer 30.34 in (1030.1 mb)

Dewpoint 0 °F (-18 °C)

Visibility 10.00 mi

Wind Chill 14 °F (-10 °C)

Surveilled landscapes suggest a perspectival mastery. "Photography has been, and is still, tormented by the ghost of Painting," writes Barthes. And even with the human agent removed, even in the guise of simple data ("road conditions"), the ghost of the lordly Cartesian eye lingers. But driving at night can be perilous. A headlight in the east-facing camera blows out the exposure to a circle of unending glare, a corona of grain, an afterimage projected in the direction of motion: "an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph" (Barthes). The only identifiable feature is the illuminated guardrail extending its ruler outside of the frame. To the west, lens flare from a cluster of industrial lights tilts near-vertical. A virtual night drive. I'm barely moving as I squint into the blown-out halo from 1500 miles away. In my speaker a synthesizer in Burial's "Nite Train" blinks on like a sodium-vapor lamp. I remember drifting over snow-packed streets, watching ice crystals in the air turn the streetlights into pillars I was never able to capture in a photograph.

Note: These entries correspond to a series of Wyoming Department of Transportation webcam images, accessed periodically over three months from my current residence in Athens, Georgia using the high-bandwidth map feature at www.wyoroad.info.

Sources

- "Ames Monument Historic Site." *Wyo Parks*, <https://wyoparks.wyo.gov/index.php/places-to-go/ames-monument>.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- "Forecast for Buford, WY." *National Weather Service*, <https://forecast.weather.gov/MapClick.php?lat=41.12391000000008&lon=-105.30971999999997#.YCNXny-1h0Us>.
- Fox, William L. *The Void, The Grid, & the Sign: Traversing the Great Basin*. University of Nevada Press, 2000.
- Goodman, Nelson. *The Structure of Appearance*. Harvard U.P., 1951.
- "I-80 Tolling Study." *Wyoming Department of Transportation*, http://www.dot.state.wy.us/home/planning_projects/studies_plans/I80_tolling_study.html
- Marshall, Michael. "The Event That Transformed Earth." *BBC*, 2 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150701-the-origin-of-the-air-we-breathe>.
- McKim, Cooper and Andrew Graham. "Wyoming Is Using Dark Money To Help Keep Coal Plants In Other States Open." *NPR*, 28 Oct. 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/10/28/926625599/wyoming-is-using-dark-money-to-help-keep-coal-plants-in-other-states-open?utm_term=nprnews&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=npr.
- Ryan, Terre. *This Ecstatic Nation: The American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.
- Siegler, Kirk. "Buford: Come for the Coffee, Stay ... To Keep The Tiny Town Open." *NPR*, 5 March 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/05/518164075/buford-come-for-the-coffee-stay-to-keep-the-tiny-town-open>.
- Smith, Brad. "With our latest energy deal, Microsoft's Cheyenne datacenter will now be powered entirely by wind energy, keeping us on course to build a greener, more responsible cloud." *Microsoft*, 14 Nov. 2016, <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2016/11/14/latest-energy-deal-microsofts-cheyenne-datacenter-will-now-powered-entirely-wind-energy-keeping-us-course-build-greener-responsible-cloud/>.
- Smithson, Robert. *The Collected Writings*. Edited by Jack Flam. University of California Press, 1996.
- "Web Camera I-80 Buford East." *Wyoming Department of Transportation*, <https://www.wyroad.info/highway/webcameras/I80BufordEast/I80BufordEastAll.html>.
- Weingroff, Richard F. "Essential to the National Interest." *Federal Highway Administration*, 6 Feb. 2018, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/06mar/07.cfm>.
- Wiener, Jon. "Largest Mass Execution in US History: 150 Years Ago Today." *The Nation*, 26 Dec. 2012, <https://www.thenation.com/archive/largest-mass-execution-us-history-150-years-ago-today/>.
- "Wyoming Town of 1 Sold At Auction." *NPR*, 9 Apr. 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/04/09/150272381/wyoming-town-of-1-sold-at-auction>.



S
JUDITH
CFC 3 A
U A RA
UGI WA T
LOVE,
ELTY, JOE
THEODORE
STEVENSON
W LYTLE, DRFW
S SIDDO
GLORIA NAYZ
GRAHAM, CHA
KALENDEK
LOPA
ERM. YELLE
GRIMSLEY, J
A, RILYN
HITRA
DER

CLURE 13, O
E INGER '00, N
CABE '13, RITA DO
ORA WELTY, JOHN
ER, THEODORE
G. STEVENSON, RIC
TTLE, ANDREW
S, ELIZABLETH
OR. SHARON
ES S. JOHN
MICHAEL H
JANE
MAINE
EARL P

PLAYWRITING

Blood and Blackberries

H. Wagner, Emory University

CHARACTERS

CHILD: Innocent and intelligent. Young. If you tell the audience the Brothers Grimm had written her, they shouldn't be too surprised.

WOMAN: Believes she is innocent and intelligent. Older. Somewhere between a 1950s oven advertisement, your mother-in-law, and the Wicked Witch. Probably all three.

SETTING

Nowhere, everywhere.

TIME

We shouldn't be sure.

Note to PAs: I am very sorry.

Setting: Along the edges of the stage and in the audience are tangled blackberry brambles and gleaming berries, growing thicker until they become a wall in the back of the stage—simultaneously seductive and threatening.

At Rise: CHILD enters the stage in a plain, white dress. She gazes at the berries and touches her stomach. To the actor playing CHILD: try not to make this too, "hey, audience, I'm hungry and that's important to the plot." I mean, it is, but they don't have to know that. CHILD thinks about taking a berry but decides against it. She changes her mind, and changes her mind again.

CHILD

(she does not sound like a child)

I wouldn't be afraid of the berries if it weren't for the thorns. You see them, don't you? It seems they shine red already. And you never know which ones will hurt you—the green ones might bend, but somewhere along the way they harden, scraping at you no matter how hungry you are. But I suppose if there were no thorns, the vultures would have plucked the stems clean as bone by now.

(CHILD hesitates, then she plucks a berry from a low-hanging branch. She eats, then she goes to eat more.)

It seems my stomach screams louder the more I eat. Do you ever feel that way?

(CHILD pricks her finger. She looks at the blood.)

I've pricked myself.

(She picks another berry but holds it too tightly, and it gets on her dress.)

My dress! If only something kinder grew here.

(A WOMAN enters with a folding table and a tablecloth. She sets up the table with the cloth but does not see CHILD. CHILD picks another handful of berries and folds up the hem of her dress to make a pocket for them. WOMAN leaves and swiftly returns with a plate full of pie. She sees CHILD.)

WOMAN
WHAT do you think you're doing, young lady?!

CHILD
But that wasn't—

CHILD
(mouth full)
Eating.

WOMAN
See? The berries don't belong to you. What's that you have in your dress?
(CHILD hesitates before revealing the berries.)

WOMAN
Excuse me?

CHILD
You can have them back, but I pricked my finger on the thorns—

CHILD
I'm eating.

WOMAN
And WHAT are you eating?

WOMAN
Give them here.
(She does. WOMAN puts them in a basket.)

CHILD
Berries.

WOMAN
I think you mean MY berries! Did you not see the fence?

CHILD
I'm sorry—I've been searching for food. I didn't know it belonged to anyone.
(WOMAN walks to the table.)

CHILD
What fence?

WOMAN
I understand, it's just that every lost berry keeps us further from our customers.

WOMAN
The one right...
(She gestures behind her only to realize that the fence has disappeared behind the bushes—if there ever was one to begin with.)

CHILD
Customers?

WOMAN
Well, there was a fence. But you must have seen the sign!

WOMAN
Of course.
(She flips over a sign on the table: "Pies For Sale.")

CHILD
What sign?

WOMAN
Maybe this setback can work out for both of us. You said you were hungry?

WOMAN
It was—
(She looks around. She hurries offstage and returns with a sign that she sticks in a bush. It reads: "Do Not Pick Berries.")

CHILD
Starved.

WOMAN
Even after eating.

Playwriting

CHILD

I only had / a few.

WOMAN

You can work off your debt. And if you work well, you may get a pie yourself.

(Pause.)

Is that a deal?

CHILD

(half to herself)

My stomach is louder than reason, so yes.

WOMAN

Would your reason say otherwise?

CHILD

No...no.

WOMAN

Good. Why don't you start by straightening the tablecloth?

(CHILD does so but stains it with blackberry juice—or something of that color.)

Now you've stained it. Child, I would caution against any more mistakes.

CHILD

I didn't mean—

WOMAN

Perhaps another task would suit you better. Take this.

(She hands her a basket from under the table.)

You can pick. Again.

(CHILD watches as WOMAN puts on some gloves and puts the berries in a bowl on the table.)

CHILD

Do I get gloves?

WOMAN

They wouldn't fit you.

CHILD

But the thorns—

WOMAN

Chop chop.

(CHILD begins to do so, picking the lower berries cautiously. WOMAN watches her for a moment then turns to the audience. She picks up a berry and looks at it. She might squeeze it.)

Notice how the higher berries shine darker? Pick those.

(CHILD looks up at the wall of berries. She reaches for one.)

Higher.

(CHILD does so.)

Higher.

(CHILD struggles to get higher, and her dress gets caught. WOMAN eats the berry and pulls out a sack of sugar.)

CHILD

I'm caught!

(WOMAN adds sugar to the berries.)

Did you hear me?

WOMAN

What was that?

(CHILD slips to the ground, her dress ripping. WOMAN turns back to her.)

Well, what are you doing on the ground?

CHILD

I slipped.

(CHILD cringes. She looks at her leg—a cut runs down the side of it.)

WOMAN

Have you cut yourself already, child?

CHILD

I'm not big enough to reach the high ones.

WOMAN

Sure you are.

CHILD

If you picked the higher ones, it would go twice as fast.

WOMAN

Me? Picking berries?
(She laughs.)

No. I make the pies. I don't deal with the thorns.

CHILD

May I take a break? I'm not feeling well.

WOMAN

Well, how much have you picked?
(She looks in the basket. She tsks.)
That's hardly enough for a pie, dear. If you can't pick the better berries, I cannot force you. But it will take longer to repay me.

CHILD

I understand, it's just—if I could just eat something, I would be much more efficient.

WOMAN

I think you're forgetting what got you into this mess in the first place. You will eat once you have earned it.

(CHILD begins to stand; it is an effort.)

I'm going to try to make something of what you have given me, but the basket should be full when I return. The customers are hungry.

(WOMAN exits. CHILD turns to the audience.)

CHILD

I don't think I like it here.

(She looks at the berries.)

How long does it take to starve? Maybe you've never wondered that. I never thought I would. I didn't mean to steal. I've been wandering for so long, I thought this was an oasis. But maybe working is the way to survive.

(CHILD picks up the basket and starts picking. A barely audible ticking sound begins offstage.)

It is hard for me to watch them—see?—dropping like little pebbles into the basket, to be baked with sugar, and given to the customers who have already eaten. I've never understood "dessert." Eating after eating. Still, the customers must have done this, worked so they can stop thinking about how long it takes to starve and start thinking about what to eat after they have finished eating. Maybe I'll get to do that, too.

(The OVEN dings offstage. CHILD appears panicked. She looks at the basket, which is nowhere near being full. She picks more berries as quickly as she can. She might try to shake the branches to pour them into her basket, but this probably doesn't work. WOMAN enters with red-stained white gloves and gardening shears, cutting her way through the path.)

WOMAN

The pie is almost done.

CHILD

Already?

WOMAN

We work quickly here. See this path? Even the bushes will be overgrown soon if I don't manage them.

(WOMAN starts to peer in the basket.)

CHILD

Is it difficult?

WOMAN

What's that?

CHILD

(subtly sarcastic)

Your job, I mean? Running everything, baking the pies...

WOMAN

I'm not the one who—well, yes. It is difficult.

Playwriting

CHILD

Putting them in the oven, selling them to the customers...it might be harder than picking the berries!

WOMAN
(catching on)

What are you—

CHILD

Intellectually speaking, that is.

WOMAN
(Sarcasm? What's that?)

It does require strategy.

CHILD

Your feet must be aching.

WOMAN
(suddenly sore)

Why yes, they are!

CHILD

Wouldn't you like a break?

WOMAN

Well...

CHILD

I could take over for you, just for today. And maybe then I would have earned a meal myself.

WOMAN

I see what you are doing.

(Beat. Is she catching on? WOMAN smiles.)

I sense ambition. So be it. When you are through, you'll get your share.

(The oven dings.)

Why don't you bring me that pie?

(CHILD goes to the kitchen and brings out a pie during the next line. WOMAN cuts the pie. CHILD lingers.)

(aside) Despite what you may think, I feel for the laborers. But incentive is what makes the business,

isn't it? And in any case, don't we all have to work for dessert?

(to CHILD, who is watching her cut the pie.)

Go on then. You'll have to pick quickly to keep up.

CHILD

They wouldn't tell me how to make it so quickly. Isn't there a trick?

WOMAN

It's hard work—there's no trick. You'll make the next one, then you'll see. And keep quiet, here come the customers.

(CHILD goes back to the bushes and picks. She is cut. She makes a sound but covers her mouth so she doesn't alert WOMAN. As she picks, she disappears into the bushes. WOMAN finishes cutting the pie and puts slices on plates. Lights up on the audience.)

Who wants pie?!

(WOMAN should give pie to as many people in the audience as she can. She should encourage them to eat it until she succeeds with at least one person. Kindly, of course, like a Southern grandma on Thanksgiving. This can take as long as it needs to, probably longer. She can go backstage and get more pie, or go under the table and get more pie. Or the ushers can give people more pie. Vegan pie, maybe. Gluten-free pie, if you'd like. But people should be eating pie—the more the better. While we are eating...)

Good as always, I hope? You do keep coming back.

(Beat.)

I know, the fence! It grows so quickly. I have to take the shears with me to keep from getting torn apart. But the business is growing almost as quickly as the bushes!

(The oven dings. A long pause, perhaps some noises of effort or whimpers from CHILD before she enters with the pie. She

is covered in deep red cuts—it looks more like knife wounds than scratches from thorns. Some brambles are attached to her dress. “Wasn’t her dress white before?” we might wonder. She is completely covered in red now, both from blood and blackberry juice. She puts the pie, messy and deep red, on the table. WOMAN looks at her, reactionless. Maybe she’s just stunned?)

(aside) Keep eating. Go on.

(to CHILD)

What are you thinking? They won’t eat this.

CHILD

Please, I can hardly stand. Can I have just one bite?

(WOMAN picks the brambles off of CHILD’s dress, like a mother might.)

WOMAN

I’m sorry you feel this way. I truly am.

(WOMAN takes a berry from the table and turns away from her. She picks at the thorn branch absentmindedly as she speaks. She peels a thorn from the stick and puts it in her hand with the berry.)

I can see you are weary, and I know that it is human to do things you wouldn’t otherwise in the name of survival. I will help you.

(Beat.)

You asked me if there was a trick, why we can work so quickly and gain so many customers. And I said there was not. See this berry?

(She hands it to CHILD.)

It’s small and a little underripe. You can make pie with these, but it would be no different from pie elsewhere. But there—

(WOMAN gestures to the top of the bushes.)

That is where we produce the good berries, dark as wine. I could never reach them. But every good recipe, like every good business, needs a... secret ingredient. Do you understand?

(CHILD is staring at the berry. After a moment, she nods.)

CHILD
(weakly)

I understand.

WOMAN

Good.

(WOMAN turns away. CHILD considers the bushes behind her. WOMAN picks up the shears while CHILD looks between her and the berry. She is unsteady now, and blinks a little too hard. She starts to fall, catching herself on the thorns. She yelps.)

Hurry now. They’ll be hungry again soon enough.

(She can’t help herself now. Teary-eyed, she puts the berry in her mouth. She’s not stealing—she’s eating. She closes her eyes, enjoying it. But she’s guilty still and only hungrier now. She stumbles back to the thorns. But something is wrong. She puts a hand to her throat and looks up. She decides to climb. She devolves into a coughing fit, soft at first, but it only gets worse. WOMAN talks over it to the audience.)

WOMAN

Thank you all, again, for your patronage. I wouldn’t be where I am today without you all. I hope this child hasn’t spoiled your appetite. She hasn’t learned how things work here. I mean, look at her pie. I wouldn’t think of selling it to you, I can’t imagine anyone wanting it. But you can eat it if you’d like?

(Pause.)

I don’t blame you.

(CHILD makes a sound as she tries to climb higher. WOMAN doesn’t look at her. CHILD falls into the bush. WOMAN straightens up.)

Sometimes I wonder if children read fairy tales anymore. There is always that bit at the end that summarizes everything, teaching them how to behave and how to earn what they want. If only they knew, the world might not be so cruel to

Playwriting

them. You see, don't you? What the moral of this story would be?

(CHILD stops coughing, her hand to her mouth, midway up the brambles. She is further than we thought she could go.)

(pointedly)

You shall not take what is not yours.

(CHILD looks at her hand, which, along with her mouth, is covered in blood. She holds up a sticky thorn.)

Dessert is a privilege, not a right.

CHILD

Help...

WOMAN

It should be earned, not taken.

CHILD

Please.

WOMAN

If you work hard, you will get your share. If not...

(WOMAN cuts the pie. She straightens up again, speaking louder so that CHILD can hear.)

Last chance. Climb higher.

(CHILD tries, then stops moving.)

Higher.

(CHILD stirs. She climbs higher than she has before. Amazingly, she makes it almost all the way to the top. She reaches for a berry.)

Higher.

(CHILD is stuck. The basket tumbles to the ground, and she is now suspended in the bushes, arms splayed outwards.

WOMAN sits down at the table and tucks a napkin in her top. She begins to eat as CHILD's head drops. Behind her, in the shadows: bones.)

Perfect.

END

Bones Under the Magnolia Tree
A five minute play

Maya Gelting, Agnes Scott College

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MINA: Nineteen.

JEREMY: Late forties.

SETTING

A graveyard behind a small, southern church. Gravestones litter the ground, from brand new to old as sin. Two benches sit back to back.

At Rise: JEREMY sits on the left, relaxed. MINA enters Right and makes a beeline for one of the new gravestones without pausing.

MINA

One more thing! Why couldn't you have pulled this a year earlier, when we were all home? Why did you have to wait until I was gone, I mean, Jesus Christ, Dad, you didn't tell me anything. And should I pencil you in for a weekly meeting? Here we are again, on a (checks phone) Wednesday evening, four hours from my apartment because (pointedly) somebody doesn't know when to just give up!

The world's not full of poetry. It's full of shit. I hate it here. And I always know what you would've said. Tonight, it's 'Oh, on nights like these, baby girl, the Spanish moss whispers susurrous secrets and the air sticks to your skin like a lost desire.' You know what I think? It's just hot. And sticky.

JEREMY

What got him?

(Without turning around, he motions her to sit down. She does, so they are back to back.)

MINA

Nothing special.

JEREMY

So sorry for your loss.

MINA

(rehearsed- her customer service voice)
The family appreciates your support during this difficult time.

JEREMY

(after a moment)

Can hear you thinking up in South Carolina.

MINA

(slipping back into her Southern accent)
Reckon they can.

Playwriting

JEREMY

What about?

MINA

He always said, "I've seen bones. Over on the side of the road, after the flies and the crows have picked them clean, until they gleam like new silver. That's where we're all going."

JEREMY

And I reckon bones and magnolia petals are painted in the same color.

MINA

Guess God ran out of clean paintbrushes.

JEREMY

And you have to bury something with the seed, or the roots won't take.

MINA

So bury me under the magnolia tree. And yet here we are, with a brand new gravestone.

JEREMY

If a man don't do enough in his lifetime to make a mark, no reason to make sure his grave does.

MINA

I believe my father's archeologist husband would disagree.

(JEREMY chuckles.)

Feels like someone scooped out my insides with a melon baller.

JEREMY

Sounds painful.

MINA

It's not, not really. Just—numb. Like someone emptied out all my insides and replaced them with a glass vase, one of the pretty ones, with a pink bow on the neck. And I keep trying to push my face against the glass, leave a smudge or something, but I just can't make a mark. It's still

pristine. Like nothingness. I should have come home earlier.

JEREMY

And done what?

MINA

I could have been with him longer, I could have made sure he wasn't alone. The walls in that room were too white and clean for any love to stick to them. They asked if I wanted to leave, they said I should leave.

JEREMY

Who?

MINA

The nurse. She said it was normal, it was better not to be there when they flipped it off, that he wouldn't know. But he did. I know he did. And I wasn't there. In all them stories he told there was an angel that took folks off to heaven. But there's not. Just a space, about this tall.

(She holds up a hand even to the top of her head.)

JEREMY

It's over now, baby girl.

MINA

(a revelation)

Dad?

(She starts to turn around. He stops her.)

Dad, I'm sorry, I wasn't back to say goodbye. I'm sorry I wasn't home more. I'm sorry I forgot to make you a Father's Day card and-

JEREMY

Take a deep breath, baby girl.

MINA

Daddy, do you forgive me?

JEREMY

Don't matter now. All that matters is if you forgive yourself.

MINA

It can't be over! That can't be it! There's so much more left, it's not fair!

JEREMY

It's time to say goodbye, baby.

MINA

Daddy, I miss you.

JEREMY

Put some of my ashes under the magnolia tree.

MINA

I will. I promise. Dad, please, I-

(She finally turns around. He is gone.)

I love you.

(Lights dim. We hear JEREMY singing his favorite hymn, softly. Lights up on a huge magnolia tree in MINA's back yard.

JEREMY sits under the tree, to the left.

MINA enters with her journal and sits down on the right. She rips out a page, then begins to read it aloud.)

Hi Dad. We're selling the house. We found your wedding pictures. I hope you're just as happy, gathering up sunlight. Sometimes I think I can hear you. The way the leaves rattle together in the wind reminds me of you, somehow. Stubborn. We're going up to Maine. I hope you like evergreens, too. You always said you'd find your way up through the roots until you got out to the magnolia blossoms, and you could see the sun again. I hope you like it up there.

(She places the letter carefully under the tree. She looks directly at JEREMY, and they make eye contact for the first time in the play.)

Goodbye, Daddy.

END

If Memory Serves

Drew Mindell, Emory University

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PENELOPE LANE: She became sixteen too quickly, and then never quite stopped being sixteen.

HUNTER: The villain, the prince, or something in between.

LANA: PENELOPE's live-in girlfriend.

PLACE

In and around Penelope Lane.

TIME

Now and again.

Setting: A child's bedroom. A young girl's bedroom to be precise, and everything is as fantastical as she imagines it to be.

At Rise: PENELOPE lies down on the bed, HUNTER standing nearby. They are both five, maybe six, and both are dressed for a winter holiday party.

PENELOPE

Oh no! I am falling into a deep, deep sleep! And only a kiss from my One True Love can wake me!

HUNTER

Do I hafta?

PENELOPE

Well, you are my One True Love, aren't you?

HUNTER

This is boring. I wanna see if dessert's ready.

PENELOPE

My mommy said ten more minutes, so you have time to kiss me.

HUNTER

Ugh, fine.

(PENELOPE settles back into her dream.

HUNTER walks over and leans in to kiss her. Centimeters from her face, he stops.)

Are you sure this is how it happened?

PENELOPE

Of course I'm sure.

HUNTER

I don't think so.

(PENELOPE sits up indignantly. Their foreheads smack together.)

BOTH

Ow!

HUNTER

Lie back down. It happened like this.

PENELOPE
Fine.
(PENELOPE lies down again. HUNTER
backs up.)

HUNTER
I am the prince! I have battled dragons and witches
and tax collectors, and I am here to kiss the princess
to wake her from the curse, as is my birthright!

PENELOPE
What are tax collectors?

HUNTER
Shut up! You're supposed to be sleeping.

PENELOPE
Tax collectors don't belong in fantasy.

HUNTER
I said shut up, bitch!
(HUNTER hurls himself over PENELOPE
and grabs her wrists. They are not in a
bedroom anymore; it is a locker room
now, the kind where you change before
high school gym. Instead of a bed,
PENELOPE is lying on a metal bench, and
instead of nice holiday clothes, they are
both wearing gym uniforms. They are
fifteen, maybe sixteen.)
Shut up and take it!

PENELOPE
Stop! Stop it!

HUNTER
Why? Don't you want it, bitch?

PENELOPE
This isn't how it happened!
(Immediately, HUNTER lets PENELOPE
go. She sits up, and he sits beside her on the bench.)

HUNTER
How did it happen, then?

PENELOPE
I kissed you first.

HUNTER
You did?

PENELOPE
I think I did.

HUNTER
How?

PENELOPE
Like this.
(PENELOPE straddles HUNTER and kisses
him, real filthy (like a harlot). When she's
done, HUNTER is rather ruffled, and she
sits beside him again like nothing happened.)
Remember?

HUNTER
I think I would've remembered that.

PENELOPE
Ugh fine. Maybe you did kiss me first.

HUNTER
Like this.
(HUNTER straddles PENELOPE, slaps her
back and forth a few times, kisses her
hard (like an asshole), and throws her
back as he gets up from her lap. He sits
beside her again. PENELOPE considers.)

PENELOPE
But it wasn't like that.

HUNTER
Wasn't it?

PENELOPE
It felt like that, maybe, but you never hit me.

HUNTER
Are you sure?

Playwriting

PENELOPE

Yes... Yes. I'm sure. You— Here.

(PENELOPE stands, motions for HUNTER to do the same. He does. As she describes, he performs the actions.)

It was after gym, and everybody else had changed and gone to class, but you told me to wait for you, so I did. I picked my sexiest sports bra, and I knew I'd done right because you checked it out when you came in. You said—

HUNTER

Damn, you look good.

PENELOPE

And I giggled. And you put your arms around me, and I did this wiggly sort of thing, and I kissed you. Or you kissed me. Wait, no, not like that. Nicer. It was nicer, the first time. Yes! Just like that. You kissed me, and I kissed you back, and you put your hands on my ass. Tighter. Not that tight— There. And I went sort of still. And you kept kissing me. Mmf. Wow. Lotta spit. Okay. We sat down. You made me sit on your lap, and we sat down, and you touched my breast. No, higher, like— Right. Like you were half touching my breast and half about to choke me.

HUNTER

(laughing)

You thought I was gonna choke you?

PENELOPE

Shut up, I'm telling it.

HUNTER

I didn't hurt you.

PENELOPE

I know.

HUNTER

I didn't rape you.

PENELOPE

I know!

HUNTER

I never even took my dick outta my pants.

PENELOPE

I know, I know, SHUT UP OKAY!

HUNTER

Shit, you don't need to get all hysterical. What happened next? I put my other hand on your thigh, right?

(HUNTER puts his hand on PENELOPE's thigh.)

PENELOPE

Stop.

HUNTER

What?

PENELOPE

I don't want to play anymore.

HUNTER

This was your idea.

PENELOPE

I said I don't want to play anymore.

(They are children again, and they are in PENELOPE's bedroom, and PENELOPE is getting up from her bed all flustered. Both of their heads hurt from where they just bumped together.)

HUNTER

Why don't you wanna play anymore?

PENELOPE

Maybe my mommy said five minutes till dessert. We should check.

HUNTER

It'll only take a second to kiss the princess.

PENELOPE

I said I don't wanna.

HUNTER
You're the one who picked the stupid princess game!

PENELOPE
I know! But-

HUNTER
It just takes a second. C'mon, Pen.
(PENELOPE harrumphs her way back
onto the bed.)

PENELOPE
One time, then we go check on dessert.

HUNTER
One kiss is all it takes to wake the princess.
(HUNTER approaches the bed in grand
princely fashion. He kisses PENELOPE,
and the world gets swallowed up a little.
And then HUNTER is not HUNTER, he's
LANA, and PENELOPE is in her twenties,
and PENELOPE's bed is not in her
childhood home, it's in the cramped
apartment they share in SoHo. LANA is
up and ready for the day, and PENELOPE
is just waking up.)

LANA
Morning, princess.

PENELOPE
Mmf... what?

LANA
You slept through your alarm.

PENELOPE
You kissed me?

LANA
Sure did, Sleeping Beauty.

PENELOPE
Don't do that.

LANA
Why not?

PENELOPE
Just don't.

LANA
Yeah, sure. Okay.

PENELOPE
I'm serious.

LANA
Jesus, fine. Somebody woke up on the wrong
side of the bed today.

PENELOPE
I'm fine.

LANA
You're grouchy.

PENELOPE
I'm not fucking grouchy.

LANA
Whatever, I'm gonna go make coffee.
(LANA exits. PENELOPE sits up, and
HUNTER is sitting beside her.)

HUNTER
You're bitchy in the mornings, aren't you?

PENELOPE
Pleasure seeing you here.

HUNTER
We didn't finish.

PENELOPE
I know.

HUNTER
So what do you want to do?

Playwriting

PENELOPE

Fuck if I know.

HUNTER

This whole thing was your idea. Figure out what really happened, prove to yourself it wasn't so bad, stop freaking out about it so you can move on with your life.

PENELOPE

Yeah, well.

HUNTER

Well, what?

PENELOPE

Maybe it was so bad.

HUNTER

Don't be stupid.

PENELOPE

If I'm still thinking about it ten years later, it must have been something.

HUNTER

You're wrong.

PENELOPE

You're not real, you don't get to tell me I'm wrong.

HUNTER

Exactly. You're telling you you're wrong.

LANA

(offstage)

Penny, I went ahead and threw some workout clothes in a gym bag for you.

PENELOPE

(calling offstage)

Thanks.

HUNTER

What's that about?

PENELOPE

She's been asking me to take this hot yoga class with her for months.

HUNTER

Hot yoga. Sounds fun. Why haven't you gone before?

PENELOPE

Same reason I haven't gone to the gym in ten years.

HUNTER

Yeah, I can tell.

PENELOPE

Dick.

HUNTER

Tell her you can't go.

PENELOPE

I'm not going to do that.

HUNTER

You know I'll be there, right?

PENELOPE

I figured.

HUNTER

So don't go.

PENELOPE

Fuck, maybe I won't.

HUNTER

Is that any way to live your life?

PENELOPE

You don't care how I live my life. Which is so stupid. Because I've spent ten years caring how you lived yours. Wondering if I was too harsh when I finally pushed you off of me. Wondering if you felt guilty for something you didn't really

need to be guilty for. Except you did. I didn't sleep for a week after it happened. I still don't sleep, sometimes. And I bet you didn't have any trouble falling asleep that night.

HUNTER

You don't know that.

PENELOPE

Maybe I don't. But I believe it now. Wherever you are, you're not losing sleep anymore. You're not thinking about it at all. And I am. That means something.

HUNTER

Means what?

PENELOPE

Means you hurt me.

HUNTER

I didn't mean to—

PENELOPE

Doesn't matter if you meant to or not, you hurt me. And I don't need to forget about that. I don't need to do anything I don't want to do.

Lana?

(Footsteps. LANA pokes her head into the bedroom. HUNTER begins fading.)

LANA

Yeah, babe?

PENELOPE

There's something I need to tell you about.
(LANA sits down beside PENELOPE.
HUNTER fades further.)

LANA

Are you okay?

PENELOPE

I'm fi— No, actually. Um. It's kind of a long story. We might be late for hot yoga.

LANA

Screw hot yoga. Talk to me.

PENELOPE

You sure?

LANA

I'm sure.

PENELOPE

Okay.

(PENELOPE tells her story as HUNTER fades completely. The lights begin to go down, and so does her voice. We never find out exactly what happened in that locker room. That's okay. PENELOPE knows. And now LANA does, too.)

END

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Poetry

- "Reading Ras at Sweetwater," Laurel Faye, University of West Georgia
"When They Come for Me," Laurel Faye, University of West Georgia
"Saint George in the Birds-Eye," Emma Catherine Perry, University of Georgia-Athens
"Boots for Sale," Shreya Pabbaraju, Emory University
"La Confidence," Ceci Webb, University of Georgia-Athens
"Letter from Virginia to Leonard Woolf, Burley House, 1910," Maya Martin, Agnes Scott College

Fiction

- "Real People," Grace Regnier, Emory University
"Tragedy Plus Time," Desirae Hanson, University of West Georgia
"Neighbors," Elinor Davis, Agnes Scott College
"Scattered Pieces," Margaret DiRoma, University of West Georgia
"Deal or No Deal," Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia-Athens
"Fifteen Years," Katherine Eckrote, Mercer University
"Relocation," Hannah Warren, University of Georgia-Athens

Nonfiction

- "Curses," Marisa Manuel, Georgia State University
"All the Attention in the Room," Keara Watkins, Clark Atlanta University
"In the Name of Art," Genevieve Arlie, University of Georgia-Athens

Playwriting

- "Snowstorm Pandemonium," Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia-Athens
"Haunted," Will O'Neal, Emory University

**AGNES
SCOTT**
COLLEGE

141 E. COLLEGE AVE, DECATUR, GA 30030
404.471.6000 | agnesscott.edu