



THE

WRITERS'

51st ANNUAL

AGNES SCOTT

WRITERS'

FESTIVAL

AGNES SCOTT

WONNIE ASHCROFT

51ST
WRITERS'
FESTIVAL

April 5-8, 2022

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

This year marks the 51st anniversary of the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival and its return to an in-person format. When you read this magazine, you are joining a legacy of writers, students, and lovers of art expressing their creativity and talent. This year's magazine is about connections, whether fleeting or life-long. After more than a year of separation and isolation, it is more important than ever for the Writers' Festival to stand as a beacon of that connection. This magazine is a labor of love from its staff and contributors to you. We hope that you find inspiration and belonging within these pages.

- Ash Busick '22, and A'Lyah Releford '23

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 Lidia Yuknavich, Tina Chang, and Anna Cabe '13. 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. Special thanks to Nicole Stamant, chair, and other members of the English department at Agnes Scott College.

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POETRY

My Father Comes Home Drunk

Kain Kibodeaux, University of West Georgia

My father placed a shotgun in his mouth
after he danced out Carolyn's, past
the Crawfish Dish, through traffic, where headlights
squinted his brow to flattened cities.

He breathed sun
into the cold swell of steel and gargled
the words, "I'm going to do it," then collapsed
in houses built on my palms, like that deer,
he shot with the same Mossberg off Sabine
Ave, where the air smelled of blackened catfish.

We watched the buck
tuck behind the blades of grass, grabbed
the antlers, branches of cypress that stabbed
stories into skyline, and dragged it
into my father's shadow. We sat under
dogwood, next to the singing gun, counted
the flap of buzzard, and wondered how
trees wore their smile, crooked and empty.

I asked him why he didn't pull the trigger.
He said, "It would have been loud," as if
the silence wasn't loud. Loud as
a pocket full of bees, loud as horses
stamping his name in the clouds.

What I Wanted to Tell You the Night We Almost Split

Summer Rand, University of West Georgia

You think the world is ending
tomorrow or tonight—
either way, I apologize
for sinking the sky
into your shoulders.

Like you, I've borne the moon's
dead pearl weight and cratered it
with wishes when I was certain
my lungs were dredged from loneliness
before breath braided my ribs.

But love still looks you in the eye.
Forget the scraped skin of it.
The night is softer here:
we'll wrap it around us,
we'll line our veins with it.

Make no mistake, God will still peel
the ozone off Earth like an orange
and bite into our luck. We'll catch
the sigh of stars pulled from midnight,
and somewhere, clouds will ricochet off blue.

But for now, the bullfrog outside our window
swallows a song about the sun pushing
pink over the horizon, and I sit
in the bathtub, soaping the day's dust
from elbow and heel, almost new.

my mother's childhood home stood next to a dairy farm

Srinidhi Panchapakesan, Agnes Scott College

a field of fly-infested cows sang her to sleep.
cows covered by big spots
on their backs, burned on. i burn
my tongue on hot tea, but continue to drink. the pain sets in
only after i finish the cup. i greet the pain.
i greet my grandmother's screams
each night (my grandfather is not here to scream back).
she smells like sandalwood,
like my mother's cabinet of saris. my mother is covered
in saris, pinned on. i pin
a picture of a dark green home to my wall.
i pin a pride sticker to the right. my parents will think
these are two things i do not have. i have
a dark green mug. i drink from it each morning,
avoiding the chip at the top. i avoid
the sandalwood stench of my grandparents' screams
each night we stay in their home.
my mother can not hear them
over the cows' deafening songs.

The Lift

Henry Koskoff, Emory University

I was seven in a muddy lawn
freshly shot by the sky.
Bugs waded in the carnage.
My brothers & I, my two brothers & I,

we slid through as the rain up-
cycled leaving sheets of clay
for landscapers to deal with.
We were painted. The pigment

was hot. I remember knowing
the innate fixture of things,
how this shallow bog would soon lift
& become a fantastic dirty cloud.

Science was readymade
as the snacks that brought us inside.
My brothers ran. I waited
in the carnage. My parents took note

that it was odd. Recently
they've been unfurling stories
which paint me as a cosmic invader
flung headfirst into Real Life.

But no, I was actually a bug
in that warm plot. I wanted to be
lifted— thought if I covered myself
in enough of earth's juice

I could rise & fall back
into place. Thought it would be nice
to see our house from above. No one ever
told me otherwise, so I stayed there

for about five minutes with my
eyes closed.

For: Mama

Camryn King, Agnes Scott College

My mother's circa 1990 Reeboks
slip off her heels
in the yellow-red of the dim closet.

She is flying.
shoes shake
and smoke hangs in our lungs.

My mother hatched
from a burning egg in Lincoln.
It cracked her shell, singed her mouth.

She drops us in the fire:
Pick blackberries, chase the pig,
watch out for—

Her mother was hit by a train.
No, her mother is hit by a train.
A magic trick gone up in smoke.

Is that what she screams about?
My grandmother, waking me
and darkening my soles as I run?

From my mother's mouth grows
kindling, branches that splinter out as
her mother strikes the match.

Turns out you can fight fire with fire.

What came first? The blackened egg or
a daughter
avoiding the flame?

My mother settles in the ashes,
slipping the shoes off.
We beg her, again, again.

Cutting Grass In Love

Daniel Jackson, University of West Georgia

I think of burning hollyhock
and meadowsweet. Of sweet

tea and sweat, of you,
my wife, in a ladder-back.

You wait to call me in,
to wipe the beads

of work away, cut
the evening open.

I think of how tree
frogs cling in storms

to tempered glass, how morning
stirs the dogwood's sleep.

Eve at the Window

Eliza Moore, Mercer University

If spring comes,
it is because we still deserve it.

The cherry blossoms
stretch towards the light
like small fists opening.

Perhaps someday
we will say goodbye
to the garden.

Eve looks over at Adam
where he sleeps
with the apple still hanging in his throat,
never dislodged,
for at night the sweetness
still colors the breath of his dreaming.

She gets up
and walks to the kitchen,
pours a glass of water,
stares out the window at the ghosts
of the cherry trees
blurred like smoke,
lovers intertwined.

Perhaps this is the only story.

Outside, the years are turning.
The trees orbit around themselves,
the light folds back into itself,
sweetness ruptures like small bombs
in the mouths of flowers.

Soon it will be gone from her.
She closes her fists.

We must deserve it, she thinks.
We must.

Impotent

Autumn Darling, Agnes Scott College

I was baptized, like all
women before me,
in bottomless rivers
of stale blood.

Wet where skin
meets metal, the afterbirth
of in-betweens soak
through pads and into soil.

Fingering garden rows, I am
digging to plant bitter
white blooms, smothered
and falsely barren.

Deep voices still whisper
blasphemous blessings,
offer replacements for
broken needles.

But I've never felt more
alive then when burying
darned bedsheets in
sodden earth.

Deadnames

Lucas Bixler, Agnes Scott College

i'm starting to think
 clean light is mythical.
 there's nothing
 but eternal burning
 that rolls round the pit
 of my stomach, bubbles
 up like acid does,
 and illumines mismarks
 of muscle guts and folds.

family spits through
 phone calls cuz they don't get
 that it's not about
 their names for me
 at the start,
 when the anguish
 of birth was fresh and
 the light first waded
 my water.

nor what i called myself
 the second time, waking
 up in a swamp
 after dreaming of pulling
 up bodies from the lake
 all night until finding
 one that looked
 how i'd like to.
 hands worn and wrinkling,
 numb from mud
 but not numb enough
 to keep me from nestling
 another beacon
 in that fresh, flat chest.

really, it's about how it felt
 to float:
 greedily peaceful.

the sun could never scorch me,
 my roots could never end.

FICTION

Life Line in E Major

Vincent Ray Price, Agnes Scott College

When they washed him off he struggled and screamed until he was put back in his mother's arms so she could hold him close and rock him and smile up at the doctors who told her it was a boy even though she already knew and when she took him home his grandparents cooed over him and held him bottle feeding and spitting up and then babbling and being waved at by strangers in the grocery store and crawling and then teetering on tiny feet and before his mother knew it he was speaking in sentences and going off to daycare and kindergarten and keeping books in his room to make her read over and over and then reading them himself and by fifth grade he had two friends who sat with him at recess to play card games while the other kids ignored them and as sixth graders the three of them had some kind of idea that they needed to have boyfriends or girlfriends and so he pretended to date one of them until she had her heart broken by nothing in particular and they all went back to just being friends with a sigh of relief because now that was over with and they could say they'd tried it until high school when they knew they definitely hadn't tried it but it was beyond that point because they were going to different colleges and he found himself without the two friends he'd had until the college lesbians took pity on him and accepted them into their esoteric rites and it wasn't legal for them to marry so he married one of them and lived with the two of them and raised their children as an odd couple of three through labor and babbling and walking and somewhere in this time he realized something was wrong and put on his wife's lipstick just to try it and felt ashamed until she saw him and taught him how to do his makeup and used her rickety sewing machine to make a dress that would fit and he cried and she gently asked him if he was figuring something out and well it turned out maybe she wanted this because after all she'd never really fit in with the boys and the kids went off to college with three mothers one of whom was still trying to figure herself out going through second puberty in her forties but by the time the kids were graduating and getting jobs and renting apartments she was more confident in herself than she'd ever been and the jobs she'd lost along the way weren't as important as this

new one that never knew she was different and even though she didn't make much she made enough to retire on when it was added to the others until the legally unmarried one died suddenly in her sleep of an undiscovered heart condition and the two of them clung tighter to each other and their children and realized they needed to make plans for the eventuality that they wouldn't live forever and sure enough she learned through a humiliating trial of their insurance and doctors that she had prostate cancer the devil she didn't want to say the name of so her wife looked at the papers and hugged her and they didn't tell the kids who had kids of their own until it was too late and the treatment she'd avoided wouldn't help anymore anyway and the kids were mad she hadn't done anything but they couldn't understand that even though it hurt she thought it was better to die as herself than to decay as some man she'd never been and when she went to the hospital for the last time Death gently cradled her head to their chest like her mother held it to her breast.

Cloudland

Lyrik Courtney, Agnes Scott College

Brigid was young, horny, and naïve, and therefore it was easy to attach herself to women that would not love her. That was how she'd come to know Lori. Brigid's loneliness, worn around her shoulders, snapped to her older colleague like static the first time they passed each other in the hallway, and she'd frozen as that bolt of desire passed over and through her. Brigid was not stupid; grief counseling had taught her how to spot a bad coping mechanism from a mile away. She knew it was 'unhealthy.' But whether or not she could ever address her compulsion towards older Black women would be contingent upon her dealing with the matter of her dead Black mother, so Brigid chose to ignore the pithy mantras of her grief counselor, and made the poorer choice. She leaned in and let her fantasies coagulate.

Brigid met with Lori four times a week in the basement of the Cloudland Community Center where they ran Senior Activities. Together, they passed out Sudoku puzzles printed on waxy, brightly-colored paper. The center was open to visitors from 9am to 5pm during the week, and until 7pm on Saturdays and Sundays. The building had been slated for reconstruction in the late eighties but had never quite made it, and as a result, the watercolor tiles wore a dirty brown sheen that made the surrounding walls look centuries older than they were. Littering the floors were white, water-logged boxes full of neglected tax documents. The seniors, mostly women, swayed in their seats like seaweed, sucking audibly on hard candies or their own gums, and scribbled at their puzzles.

Lori had worked at Cloudland the longest of all the Recreational Coordinators and was de-facto leader of Senior Activities. She sat at the desk in the center of the room with her arms crossed over her chest, and surveyed the going-ons like they were something serious. Brigid stood at the back of the room with her clipboard. She was supposed to use the attendance sheet on the clipboard to make note of who was struggling with the puzzles and who had finished early, but often the numbers got away from her. Occasionally, she would look up from her board and find Lori smiling out of the corner of her mouth at nothing.

Cloudland should've had a battalion of part-timers in the summer. The hiring staff were easy-going and the work was straightforward, but the virus had shaken something loose in the general public, and the town was still reeling from the slow ripple of its after-effects. It was hard enough to build morale amongst the residents, and it was impossible to find enough teenagers who were willing to work with the infirm and aging, or who wouldn't flake when the work got too messy. Brigid, however, was twenty-two. Her apathy often overwhelmed her, but she was at least diligent enough to be trusted around the aging and infirm. When Brigid and Lori weren't in the basement running Activities, they were in the former clerical office. Brigid's chair was right under the AC unit, and she often used the bracing cold as an excuse to walk back and forth from the vending machines across from Lori's corner desk. Favors were easier to carry out than small talk; Brigid would fill Lori's water bottle for her if it was empty, or bring her a Twix from the machines when she had extra change.

Lori lived by herself, and that was one of many things that Brigid loved about her, how she moved like she didn't belong to anyone. Brigid liked to watch her loping from table to table with her overalls down over one shoulder and her heavy carabiner scraping against the thick denim. Lori. She was respectful of everyone but indulgent with few. Brigid once heard their supervisor mentioning to a secretary that before Lori was hired, it had been impossible to find someone the seniors would listen to. Before her, Cloudland had plucked from a rotating list of potential hires; vagrant busy-bodies who were cycled in for six months at a time. But Lori was the perfect employee. After every Activities session, the woman reported dutifully to the book-keeping office to return the balances sheet and the Cloudland debit card. Then she and Brigid would return to their lonely little office, Lori humming softly while they tidied, Brigid merely listening, until the time came for them to put away the games and puzzle sheets. Lori would wrap her long brown arm around the girl's shoulder, just close enough for Brigid to feel the warmth seeping through her t-shirt.

“Good work,” the older woman would say, with her lips parted in a smile. Brigid swore she could see the gold-capped molar on the right side of Lori’s mouth winking out like a pole star. “I’ll be seeing you.”

That was the extent of their communication.

Lori worked at the center full-time, which was unusual. Most of the Cloudland staff were contractors. Aside from Brigid, there had been two other part-timers running the same programs for different age groups: Rashad in Pathmakers (youth events), and Coleman, the white boy who worked Junior Activities for the younger adult residents. Interdepartmental programming had been halted on account of the virus, but there was nothing to stop the employees from congregating in the break room in between sessions. Rashad was the apple of the secretaries’ eyes, partly because he was the youngest guy on staff, but mostly because he had a shiny gleam about him that reminded everyone of the guy on daytime news. During their downtime he would roll a few misshapen little joints. That way he and Brigid could sit along the bay windows with their shoulders touching while they smoked.

Lori sometimes gave her strange looks on the days she came back from the break room smelling like sweat and Rashad’s funky cologne, but Brigid didn’t think anything of it. She’d been unpopular in high school and the gravity of her face was an affront to most strangers, and no one had ever smoked her out before Rashad. And she liked listening to him talk, anyway. Rashad took himself for some kind of philosopher. He was constantly reassuring her that love would come.

“It’s not you,” he would always say, “We just live in a cowardly age. Love would be everywhere if people weren’t so pussy.”

“A cowardly age?” Brigid liked parroting him. Doing so guaranteed that Rashad would get lost in his thinking, which allowed her to sneak a second hit from his joint without him noticing. Inevitably, Rashad find himself moving away from the ledge to pace the room in a chocolatey fugue. Sometimes, on days where Coleman took his lunch break at the same time that Rashad and Brigid were smoking, Rashad would walk over to him and cause a scene.

Coleman was the son of investment bankers. Coleman worked at Cloudland for the community service hours that would send him to some prestigious Christian college on a full merit scholarship. While he had not bragged to Brigid personally about his school choice, she had overheard Dolores in the halls bragging on his behalf. Coleman wore black loafers, furry jumpers, and wire-rimmed glasses too big for his face. Coleman was a creature of many habits. He liked to brush his teeth in the accessible bathroom stall after his break snack and refused to do it in the hallway water closet—even if that meant Merry, Dolores’ PA and the only wheelchair user on staff, was forced to ride the elevator to the basement to pee. Coleman would feign disbelief whenever anyone called attention to this moral discrepancy. Above all else, he was arrogant, and his arrogance was catching; Coleman refused to talk about the weather with his coworkers. His vow of contemptuous silence only served to bolster Rashad’s own unearned confidence.

The two men were ridiculous together; Brigid was sure she would hate them had they met under any other circumstances, or if they weren’t so funny. It didn’t matter where in the room Coleman sat, because Rashad would follow him. Rashad would lean down, smiling, and slam his elbows into the table, scattering the pieces of whatever puzzle Coleman had set aside from the game shelf for his lunch break. It wasn’t surprising when Coleman invariably told him to fuck off. They were half-married, how they nipped at each other.

When Coleman quit two months into his contract, Rashad followed him. Their respective terminations were mere days apart.

At Cloudland, it was against protocol to pry into the personal lives of the clients. Young children and the elderly were impressionable and prone to capitulation in situations of abuse—be it financial, emotional, physical, or sexual. Consequently, according to the terms of her bloated contract, Brigid was not allowed to ask more than simple questions about the lives of her charges prior to their stay at the Center. Under no circumstances was she allowed to solicit (or accept) gifts from clients.

This ordinance stopped absolutely no one from talking to her, however.

Ms. Elkind, who preferred to be called Ronit, was Brigid's favorite client; her incessant chatter meant that Brigid never had to worry about keeping pace with her, and could put aside the mask she wore to pander to clients in favor of listening, for once. The two women spoke nearly every day, and over the course of several stories, Brigid had gleaned a surprising bit of information about the Center from Ronit. The building had been constructed in the early 70s, and operated for a decade or so as a family-run homeless shelter. Then the family died. The building passed from one set of opportunistic hands into another, and was thereafter tentatively used as the base of operations for a childcare center. That was how Ronit had first known it: she'd moved to town in her thirties and worked there, as an assistant teacher teaching 'proper' English to the children of Mexican immigrants and poor Blacks. That was exactly how she said it, too: 'Blacks.'

"What a funny coincidence," Brigid said, as if she'd never heard the story before. She slathered her hands with a moisturizer that had the consistency of marzipan and got to kneading the worry out of Ronit's arthritic knuckles.

Ronit had been unlucky with children. One pitiful son who'd robbed her of youth and money, a string of stress-induced miscarriages during her second marriage, and then it was off to Cloudland, where her memory had worked itself into a knot. She was fond of Brigid. Ronit was always quick to say that was what she'd wanted in the first place: a girl.

This attachment was, to Brigid, a modest inconvenience. Emotional investments were difficult for her. Liking Lori and wanting to be suplexed into the bed of her truck was one thing. Being Ronit's surrogate daughter—and thereby bearing all of her hopes, dreams, and fleeting whims—was an entirely different beast. Ronit had been raised by white, Southern goyim with no ties to her own heritage save her name, and she'd inherited all of their unfortunate prejudices just the same as she'd inherited their husky Alabaman accent. It was convenient, Brigid had mused more than once, that the woman was mostly blind.

But Ronit was mumbling again. "A town with a poisoned river is a better place to be than a town with no river at all."

Brigid smiled lifelessly. "Something like that," she said.

"Shouldn't have eaten that fish!" Ronit was rambling now, the way she usually did after Activities. "Rotten fish makes you rotten," she slurred, "No wonder everyone got sick."

Brigid switched hands. She even hummed to let Ronit know she was still listening. Certain clients needed more encouragement than others.

"I drink the water," Ronit continued, "and I haven't died yet."

"Right."

Ronit tilted her head in the direction of Brigid's voice. "Do you eat the fish?"

"Of course not," Brigid said. "I'm a vegetarian." This was a quarter of the truth. Brigid was a vegetarian, and had abstained from meat for several months now, but her conversion was a recent development. She neglected to mention that she'd spent her entire childhood loving seafood. After the funeral, after Renee had come down to clear out her sisters' house and left her fry pans and expensive knife collection to the dogs at the local pawn shop, Brigid had stopped eating fish. The other restrictions—pork, beef and gluten—followed shortly thereafter.

"And look at you," Ronit cooed. "Pretty and healthy." She reached up a thin hand, the hand Brigid had just lotioned, and pinched vaguely in the direction of the girl's face. Brigid inclined her head, making it easier for Ronit to grasp at her cheek. For a few seconds, they both sat there, one woman squeezing at another's face until the skin grew tender. From this close, the old woman's vaccine scar was plainly visible—a shiny-white gleaming along her temple, behind her limp curls.

"My good girl," Ronit said. Her right eye, covered in a milky film, rolled skyward. "Not dead yet."

Over the intercom, the hourly bell tolled. Brigid dropped Ronit's other hand as if it were hot coal.

"I want to see you."

Those were the first words Brigid uttered. The first call had dropped during the elevator ride to the first floor, when Brigid mistakenly hit the call button instead of the little 'i' symbol that showed a person's contact information.

She had ditched Ronit to take her lunch. She sat on a wooden bench in the guest smoking area of the courtyard that the contractors

had partitioned off behind Cloudland's west wing. Sometimes she took her breaks here. She would drink down the lumpen soups that she brought to work in a steel canister and sketch a little something in the notebook she kept tucked away in her bag. She'd drawn Rashad once, documented the contours of his dark, plain face.

Rashad snorted into the receiver. Brigid imagined she could feel his damp breath moistening the fine hairs on her cheek.

"Rashad," Brigid implored after a measure of silence.

"Bridge." His voice was flat, but not unfriendly. Its depth surprised her. "You got my number from Dolores?"

How did he know that?

"Dolores told me HR would delete my shit," Rashad continued. "Should've known they'd be too lazy to get around to it."

"What's up?" he asked. "You're the last person I expected to ever call me."

He was right, she couldn't deny it. In a perfect world, Brigid would have no troubles, and as a result, no reason to ever call her former coworker. But the world wasn't perfect.

"You used to lecture me," Brigid sighed into the receiver. "And I know you don't think I took any of it to heart, but I remember everything you said. Everything," she emphasized. "Even—no, especially—the, uh, love stuff."

"Cowards," Rashad muttered.

Brigid rolled her eyes. "I think you were right."

"This is so weird, bro." Rashad sighed, but there was a delighted undercurrent to his speech. "You! Of all people! Calling me."

"Yeah, it's something."

"Love is something," Rashad sniped, at the same time that Brigid asked abruptly, "Do you want to meet up?"

She tumbled over the resulting silence. "I hate talking like this. It feels, you know." Brigid pulled the phone away from her mouth and put the call on speaker so she could rifle through her bag.

"We can grab food," she said. She felt strangely hurried, as if Rashad might disappear into the ether if she didn't make her pitch fast enough. "Let's meet somewhere."

It was strange, she realized, to hear Rashad's voice without seeing his face. Something had changed him in the brief period following his departure. Made him more

deliberate.

"You paying? You rich now?" There was an edge to Rashad's teasing, though she could tell he didn't mean to be cruel. Rashad was ribbing her in the same way he'd ribbed Coleman.

"Far from it," Brigid jotted down the details of their engagement in her little book. "But I'll see what I can do."

They met at a diner. Renee, her aunt, was delighted to hear that Brigid was going out with a boy, even if it was only for an evening, and even though they'd only worked together for the better part of a month. So that was how Brigid arrived: with waist-length twists piled inordinately high and heavy on her head and her absentee ass squeezed into a pair of pleather pants so tight her underwear seam was on display—or would've been, had she worn any. On the walk up, Brigid monitored her appearance and gait as they were reflected in her phone's black screen. She looked pretty in a sticky, waxy way. That was the thing about femininity, she supposed.

But Rashad. Her eyes sought him out. With her hair pulled back so tight, she felt like a raptor as she scanned the dingy little restaurant for his familiar face.

There, leaning against the jukebox with his hip cocked. Rashad's easy eyes were ringed with new crow's feet. Brigid watched his attention dash back and forth along his phone screen, and wondered what it was that had hooked him so. He looked up when she called his name, and his smile was as goofy as it had always been.

Rashad nibbled on the corner of a fry. "S'not a courtesy call. Not a date either, so." He gestured with the fry at Brigid's general—*everything*. "Why do you look so good?"

Brigid rolled her eyes. "My aunt."

Rashad's exhale said a lot. "She still on your shit about boys?"

"Define 'on my shit'."

He snorted. "Like. Homophobic."

Brigid clacked her fresh acrylics against the gauche retro tabletop, pursing her lips to make that axolotl-esque expression that was characteristic of all twenty-nothings across the continental United States. "Yeah," she said. "Renee's still on my shit." She paused. "And Coleman? You still on his?"

Rashad didn't freeze under the weight of Brigid's scrutiny, but it was a near thing.

"I don't know how much you actually remember," He tried to deflect, scratching along the bridge of his nose. He pretended to inspect his french fry.

"Probably enough? You told your parents. That you were..."

"—fucking, yeah." Rashad cleared his throat. A swig of coke, another handful of fries. A glance behind him and out the door, like he was plotting his own escape.

"Fucking," Brigid repeated. Perhaps that was true.

But Rashad looked askance. "Seeing each other," he clarified.

"So you keep in touch?"

Rashad was silent. He pushed his fries around the plate until they were fully submerged in watery ketchup.

"Let's...not, maybe."

"No, yeah," Brigid said. "I'm not trying to interrogate you." She sucked the last cold clump of strawberry milkshake harshly through her straw.

Still, she couldn't quite help herself. The details of the boys' falling out evaded her, and she was hungry for details. She decided she would press him, just a bit.

"I know it was serious. You used to write him those letters. Notes? The little, you know. On the backs of the breakout charts." Brigid pushed what was left of her own fries toward Rashad as a peace offering, then put on her most reassuring smile.

"Damn," Rashad swore as if it had only just occurred to him that his feelings could be hurt. "I can't believe the Post-It's gave it all away and not my breakdown in the Leisure Lounge about him moving to Michigan. That's so crazy."

"Damn."

"It's so crazy."

But Brigid was smiling, and so was he.

"Let's not," Brigid echoed him.

"They were actually quotes," Rashad snarked around a greasy mouthful. "bell hooks. I had to coach him through the classics, you know."

This much Brigid could guess. She'd nearly tripped over Coleman once as he was stumbling out of the elevator. She hadn't looked at him closely, but she would've known him by his cardigan regardless—the same scratchy wool that he wore to work every day. On that

day, the fuzzy sleeves had been crumpled haphazardly over his elbows, and someone had hidden a pink sticky note in his breast pocket. Or maybe they wanted it to be seen as proof. *See this? I love him. I love him.*

"You liked him," Brigid said, and she could feel her eyes softening.

"Yeah. That didn't stop him from being a dick."

Rashad's movements slowed as the carbs kicked in. From this close, the dark circles under his eyes seemed to glow with supernatural aloofness. He had not looked like that before, so cold and restrained.

That was when Brigid felt it: a stirring in her gut, like a storm warning. Different from the kind of arousal she was used to. She tucked one hand under her thighs to keep their sweat from sticking to the booth seat and used the other one to scratch at her baby hairs.

Thankfully, Rashad was just as impatient as she hoped he would be.

"It's obvious you aren't here to catch up," he said, after they'd both sat in silence for a miserable minute. "I'm not good at beating around the bush, so. Spit it out."

Brigid pushed the plate with her half-eaten quinoa burger further into the center of the table. How would she phrase it? *Don't worry. It isn't you. But you know her, the woman I'm in love with, and I know how Coleman hurt you, which makes me think that we could get even.* She would go on to explain the sick, sinking feeling that overcame her every time she masturbated, and how fearful she was of touching herself now, knowing how that feeling of collapse would overtake her every time she spread her legs. She would say all that and more. She might even tell him about her paintings. The drawing in her book.

If it hadn't been for the jukebox, Brigid would have said everything. But one of those cheerleaders on the far side of the room had sauntered over to the machine while she was plotting her appeal. Then there was music, wafting through the diner like an exotic fragrance.

The melody clung to Brigid. Suddenly, she was changing course.

"Well," she said, "it's probably not what you think." Her previous indecision hardened into something steelier as she sat there. The grease from Rashad's penultimate fry shined along his fingertips. Without looking away

from him, Brigid swiped her tongue along the backsides of her teeth, then bit down until she tasted blood.

"I want you to take me home," she said.

When Rashad leaned back in the booth, his eyebrows were nearly at his hairline. "For sex."

Brigid clarified. "If you want to. If it's not weird."

"For sex."

"I just said that."

He blinked at her. "For heterosexual sex. With me."

"Yes," she said.

"Brigid," Rashad spoke with the utmost gentleness in his voice. She couldn't read any judgment or accusation in his voice at all. "You don't want to have sex with me. You are a lesbian."

Brigid chewed at the inside of her cheek until yellow bloomed along her skull. "It's actually never too late to start hormone replacement therapy," she said.

"..Well, right. I'm sure that would be a really reassuring statement if I were a woman."

"I know I'm a lesbian," Brigid said, and left it at that. What was obvious to her seemed pointless to explain. Of course, it was better that Rashad was a man, and not a woman she wanted to impress. If Rashad laughed at her during sex, she might be able to brush it off. It wouldn't hurt Brigid to be judged by him any more than it hurt her to be the only black person left at Cloudland. But she couldn't imagine another woman making a joke of her, let alone Lori. No—it ached to even consider it. She wanted to be ready.

The cheerleaders on the other side of the diner were guffawing brightly into each other's open mouths, and Brigid found their excess to be a helpful distraction; her eyes caught on the shiny fabric of their tennis skirts and stuck there. Her own sweat was cooling.

"I mean," Brigid said, "don't let me pressure you. We haven't seen each other in weeks, on top of this being a weird—"

But the sound of Rashad scratching his thick nails against the tabletop tugged at her gaze until she had no choice but to lift it.

Situation, she'd wanted to say, or request. But Rashad was already nodding to himself as if her own change of heart had settled something for him, too, and Brigid's grip on the formalities had crumbled.

"Sure," he said. "Fine." Blasé as ever, but

the waxy timbre of his voice teetered on the edge of a laugh, which teetered in turn on the edge of hysteria.

Brigid waved the waitress over. All she could see of Rashad were his fingers, curled around the car keys. She would wish in the coming days that she had paid more attention in that moment to his face, or how his voice had fallen. But it was easier to look away from him. She swallowed what remained of the iron in her mouth, and refused to glance behind her at the cheerleaders, who continued to glow even after the laughter had died around them.

It would be simpler if she rode him, he explained, but Brigid politely declined. She had a weak core and even weaker knees. Rashad simply nodded, his fat head jerking like a marionette. Then he pushed her over like a sack of rice and spooned her from behind.

Stretching her out took longer than anticipated. She appreciated the gentleness of that first push in, how the sensation of Rashad's knobby fingers contrasted with the rasp of her callused toes against the linen sheets. They were pink, his sheets. Baby pink. A lot of things were: his new pipe, his picture frames, the trendy crates stacked up in his closet. The room decor was surprising, how it pointed to a Rashad far more conscientious than the one she had come to know. but Brigid put her musings aside. Desperate not to think, she let Rashad fold her until she crumpled like tissue paper into the press of his ribs. Silently, she made a list of small pleasures.

What was it that Brigid liked? She had failed to answer him before. Now she had her truth. It was different, of course, from masturbating. She was relieved that Rashad had been vocal in his appreciation of her half-hearted blowjob, but he was quiet as he entered her, with all his concentration on her eyes and mouth.

There were no real words between them; all communication was whittled down into something animal or alien. Brigid echoed his soft grunts and clenched down against the spongy press of him. They rocked together. Birdsong leaked in through a crack in the bedside window and was accompanied by faint light. The light painted watery stripes over the column of Rashad's throat. Droplets of sweat caught this light and refracted it,

and underneath the sweat was his rabbiting pulse. Brigid followed the strange trail until Rashad did something with his hips that choked off her moaning at the source.

“There,” he said, and sounded pleased. He rolled his hips again. It was as if someone had cut a wire. Brigid pressed her hand into the throbbing between her legs, stroking until her eyebrows knitted together and her cries grew hoarse. His sweat was everywhere on her, but Brigid had forgotten to care about being dirty. Quietly, with his lips pressed against the flat of her cheekbone, Rashad told her he wanted her to feel good. And she was aware that Renee was sure to be home by now, waiting for her at the table with another microwaved meal, but Brigid was too far gone to do any worrying. Black spots muddied her list of pleasures. When the pages ran together, she let them slip away. Then she sank.

Rashad was quick to wipe away the cold smear on her ass before it dried, to fold the wet cloth and dab away her sweat with upward strokes. When he was finished—cleaning her and stripping the streets—Brigid flattened herself on the bare mattress. She lay there like a dead starfish, enveloped in a pink glow the same color as Coleman’s sticky note.

Coleman. Now they would be dick sisters, Brigid thought. A grunt from Rashad startled her out of her fog.

“Use the guest shower,” he said, and slapped her hip with the sticky rag. It was a reminder shaped like a command.

“I might,” Brigid said. “I don’t know. My hair is already kind of fucked up, and you don’t have any products.”

Truthfully, this was an understatement. Brigid caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on Rashad’s nightstand while she was on the comedown. The twenty-four-hour mascara had held, but the rest of her face was melting. She looked like she’d been electrocuted and then sat out in the sun. Her thighs and lower back ached, and her tongue was still sore from when she’d bit down on it in the dinner. Brigid scraped the wounded muscle over her teeth.

Polar star, she thought reflexively. Gold-capped molars.

And suddenly it didn’t matter that the sex had been good, or that her chemistry with Rashad was proven and real, or that she might want to have sex with him in the future

because it had been fun, and because maybe labels didn’t matter all that much. In the end, he was not Lori.

Sitting at a man’s side in a man’s house on a man’s bed, Brigid was still thinking of another woman.

The spotty darkness of the earlier orgasm had already receded into memory, but there was a new stain to replace it, a mold to eat away at everything. Gradually, her limbs grew heavy with cold. Grief sat on her like a stone. That shroud of loneliness seemed to tighten itself.

“Mom,” Brigid called out softly.

When no one answered her, she stretched her mouth into a foreign shape and wailed. By the time she’d mustered enough strength to roll onto her side, the room had grown dark around her. Rashad, her new lover and not-quite-friend, was nowhere to be found.

Snapper

Madison Petty, Agnes Scott College

The moon hung fat and heavy in the sky, dripping low light over the sand. Oliver could almost touch it from where he stood on the beach, hand outstretched and trembling in either wonder or fear. He never left the house (his house) this late, not since they had moved to the ocean. Not since they had gotten a new housekeeper.

Angelica had told him not to come down to the coves at night - Angelica who could effortlessly pull on a wetsuit like sealskin and master the turbulent waves. She had never drowned, never been close to drowning, but when she had pulled his face forward to look in his eyes, her hands felt cold and stiff. Her eyes weren't scared: they were burning, an icy black like Oliver had never seen before. His father hadn't liked the look of them when Angelica had first come to the house. His father hadn't liked Angelica at all before, hated her soft footsteps and salt-crusted nails, but Oliver's mother told him it was okay. His father just never had the time to know her, to love her. Oliver has time.

"The cove at night is not for you," Angelica told him. The floor was cold underneath his feet, carpet removed a few days ago because it had to be cleaned (it couldn't be cleaned) and the wooden floorboards looked like they were rotting. Clawed fingernails gripped his chin up, up, up again to meet Angelica's gaze. "The cove is not for you. Don't be a selfish boy."

He didn't nod. He didn't need to. Angelica forced his face up and down, stretching and exposing his neck to her garbled whispers and warnings. Not for him. Not for him. Not for him.

Angelica told him he had a lovely house now, a house all for him and his mother, and that he shouldn't be a selfish boy and want more. His father, Angelica told him, had been a selfish man.

But the floor was so cold at night without the carpet and the house felt so empty. The silence echoed throughout the room like a shriek, bouncing off the walls over and over and over and over again.

His father used to put on records. He would invite Oliver's mother to dance barefoot on the carpet, their own little ballroom, and Oliver would sit on the couch and watch them twirl, his father's fingers so tight on his

mother's waist.

Tonight Oliver had woken up to the sound of waves crashing, all the windows in the house thrown open. When he had crept down the stairs, peeking between the gaps in the railing, he saw Angelica and his mother moving to the rhythm of the ocean, feet gliding over the hardwood floor. Angelica turned, her face a cold mask of black and white, and Oliver ran. He didn't know fear well enough to name him, only that he felt cold, and through the windows he could have mistaken moonlight for warmth.

He walked down, down, down to the beach, ocean roaring like the open maw of a beast.

The moon hung, trembling, swinging wildly from a neck he could not see. The sand wasn't warm but it was deep, malleable as boy-skin, shifting under his stride. Selfish, to destroy such a scene in such a cove that was not for him. Angelica would be angry, as angry as father had gotten.

But Angelica loved him - that's what his mother said. Oliver's mother never used to say the word love before, only whispered it under blankets, voice soft and sad. Love, she said, could be cold and cruel, could be sharp like a tooth. Oliver hadn't understood what she meant in her soft arms, under the warm blankets, but now he was eleven and a man. Now he had seen his mother and Angelica holding each other tight enough to suffocate, spinning across the rotting floorboards in the silence of an empty house. That love was as new to him as fear, brothers born into existence to fill the void his father had left.

Step. Step. Step.

Crunch.

Under his feet there was a line of dark toy soldiers in the night, marching to the tide. He bent down - turtles. Baby turtles after having hatched. Their nest was yards back, a dark twisted lump spotted with broken white shells. It was twice as big as Oliver and long, laid to rest on the sand like some forgotten monument.

The turtles were in a perfect single-file line, unmoving. More than forty corpses from end to end. Not rotting - petrified like driftwood. The one under his foot had been crushed, shell exploding under his heel and cutting up the skin.

There was a bloodstain on the cove's carpet. It couldn't be cleaned.

The corpses around him stirred, shifted, dragged themselves from their perfect line so they could congregate around the bloodied wound. More and more appeared, summoned from the waves and beneath the ground, greedily grasping at his toes and his ankles and his calves and his knees and his –

A wave crashed into his side, further than the tide could carry it. He inhaled, salt burning his lungs even as his throat was grabbed tight, fingers finding familiar scars.

“Darling,” Angelica sang, beautiful Angelica who never drowned. “Isn’t it past your bedtime? Your mother and I were worried about you.”

She rose from the waves up, up, and up again, and carried him past the turtles and the sand and the nest. Oliver had one last look at his father’s sunken face half-wrapped in the carpet, cold and bloated as the moon.

The Sweater Curse

Genevieve Clark, Agnes Scott College

Noelle wakes up alone, curled firmly on her side of the bed. The indentation where Emily’s body lay has gone cold, so she sits up and swings her legs over the side of the bed, wincing at the cold floor on her bare feet. The air is more still and frigid than usual, so she takes the blanket with her, wrapping it tightly around her shoulders. She hears metallic clanking from down the hall and guesses that Emily is attempting to cook. Quietly, she pads over to the dresser and opens her sock drawer. First, a pair of thick wool socks to protect her feet from the cold floor. Underneath her socks and underwear are several skeins of yarn and a mass of soft, fluffy material with two knitting needles sticking out of the top. She pulls it from the drawer and lays it on the bed to contemplate it.

She’d bought the yarn last January. A merino blend in a delicate shade of amethyst, it was the nicest yarn she’d ever bought. The price per skein could have been dinner out, and she’d bought seven of them, a ridiculous expense on her new-hire salary. It was so soft and lovely she was afraid to knit with it, convinced her clumsy hands would spoil it. For months, she didn’t do anything with it other than smooth her hands over it when she opened the drawer, careful to make sure Emily didn’t see.

It was a Friday night, and she was knitting so fast that Emily said she looked like a movie stuck in fast-forward. Sleet was coming down thick outside, but when Emily turned on the television, the weather channel predicted snow. The promise of a white Christmas cheered Noelle. It had been a long and tiring year: the end of her master’s program, shuffling from shoebox apartment to shoebox apartment, living on ramen and saltines, and moonlighting as a barista when her desperate hunt for a job straggled on longer than expected. The ride finally came to an end in late October with an offer and a slightly less cramped apartment, just in time that they had to manage unpacking and Christmas decorations. So, she was knitting the last of her Christmas gifts, feeling a charitable kindness towards the world. Emily was curled up in her favorite chair, blanket thrown around her shoulders, reading a book. For a moment, Noelle let her hands still so she could look at her. Emily’s

eyes squinted slightly, as they did whenever she was focused on something, but she could still see their hazel shine, made golden by the lamp illuminating her.

When Emily caught her looking, she graced Noelle with a warm smile and set her book aside. Her eyes fell on the needles in Noelle's lap.

"Are you ever going to knit me a sweater?"

"Maybe someday," Noelle said, smiling indulgently. "Haven't you ever heard of the sweater curse?"

Emily wrapped her arms around her knees and rested her head atop them. "Why on earth would you curse my sweater?"

Noelle laughed and shook her head. "I don't curse it. According to an old wives' tale, the sweater curses the relationship. If you knit your significant other a sweater and you aren't married, the relationship will end before you finish it."

Emily snickered. "So, you'll give it up on the first date, but you're waiting for marriage to knit me a sweater?" Noelle threw a pillow at Emily, who wasn't anticipating it and took the hit full force to the face.

"Oh, you are going to regret that." Her voice was low, almost a growl, as she picked up the discarded pillow and stalked towards Noelle.

Noelle's stomach jumped with anticipation and she only had time to slide her knitting out of the way before Emily was on her, knocking her back into the couch cushions, batting her with the pillow. Noelle grabbed onto it and pulled. Emily followed, climbing fully onto Noelle, attention fully on winning. Noelle stilled as she realized Emily was effectively straddling her, something that Emily realized a second later. Emily's smile became predatory in a different way.

"Hi," Emily whispered, teasing. "Can I help you?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Noelle grabbed Emily's face and pulled her down as the pillow slid forgotten to the floor.

She bought the yarn after New Year's. Purple, Emily's favorite color. Superwash, so it wouldn't shrink when she inevitably forgot that you never, ever machine wash anything hand-knit. And she'd sat on this, her little secret, until spring, when Emily finally put a ring on her finger, and she felt safe enough to begin knitting.

She sighs and folds it back up to put in the drawer, then heads towards the kitchen to face Emily. She finds her hunched over a bowl, a smear of flour on her cheek. Now that she's closer, she can smell smoke in the air. "Shit!" Emily hisses, spinning around and focusing on the pan on the stove behind her. She can't make out what it might have been; whatever it was is charred black now. Emily hasn't noticed her yet and Noelle's not ready to reveal herself, so she leans against the doorway and watches her.

Emily scrapes the black goo out of the pan and sighs. Her curly blonde hair is piled on top of her head as though she'd done it in a hurry and several pieces have already sprung out, dancing merrily as she darts across the kitchen. When she turns to dump the goo in the sink, she spots Noelle and goes very still. "I didn't hear you come in," she accuses. Noelle shrugs and goes to look at the pan. Emily softens when Noelle stands near her.

"I made pancakes. Lots of chocolate chips in yours."

"Oh."

Emily hesitates like she's expecting more, but when Noelle is silent, she fills the empty space. "You can sit down at the table. I'll bring you a plate."

They'd painted this kitchen yellow in June. None of the plates matched; Noelle had found them all at estate sales and thrift shops, brought them home one by one until they had enough for a group, and when they did, they had their first dinner party together, using their full moving boxes for tables and chairs. Emily had bought nearly a dozen plants to sit on the windowsill, then she forgot to water them, and now their shriveled bodies still haunt the window, curling brown and dropping leaves on the floor.

After a few minutes, Emily sets a plate in front of her and sits down across the table. The pancakes are golden brown on the outside, but the uncooked center oozes out when Noelle pokes at it with her fork. She dumps maple syrup on the stack anyway and takes a bite, barely managing to suppress a wince when the oddly salty taste hits her tongue. Emily usually skips out on cooking, but it's been so long since she's made an attempt that Noelle forgot why she's usually the one in the kitchen.

Emily also takes a bite and makes a face. She swallows with great effort and sighs.

“Ugh. I really thought I had it this time.” She stands back up and holds her hand out for Noelle’s plate. “I’ll put them back on the stove for a few more minutes and see if that helps.” When she passes Noelle, she bends down and presses a kiss to Noelle’s cheek. She lingers for a moment in Noelle’s space, but Noelle doesn’t move.

She doesn’t want to sit in the oppressive quiet, and she also doesn’t want Emily to attempt to fill it, so she also stands. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

Noelle takes a moment to breathe and wash her face, and then drifts back to the bedroom. Without really thinking about it, she opens the sock drawer again and pulls out the sweater. She sits on the floor with her back against the bed, legs crossed with her work in her lap.

The needles slide out easily. She remembers how they clicked together when she was working, flashing merrily in the light. The process had been complicated by secrecy; she had stolen hours in coffee shops and on the bus home from work for months. She’d told Emily she was going out with friends and instead had sat in the lobby of the 24-hour McDonald’s, sipping a sweet tea while she attempted to eke out a few rows.

Was that when Emily had done it? Was it retribution? She can still see Emily in front of her, arms crossed defensively. “Well, it’s not like you’ve been around lately!”

She feels tension in her throat like she might cry, but she doesn’t. She can’t give it to Emily now. Can’t imagine wanting to finish it after everything, wrapping it, putting it under the tree, and watching her open it. The yarn wraps easily around her fingers, and she gives an experimental tug. The most recent stitches unravel.

Noelle placed Emily’s gift in her lap and returned to her seat, grinning. She had done trial runs of fucking socks for months. Toe-up. Gusset heel. Magic circle. She’d given double-pointed needles an honest try and ended up sobbing in a Starbucks after dropping her stitches for the fifth time in a row and resolved she would never use more than two needles ever again. Eventually, she settled on three patterns. First, she’d made socks with honeycomb cables in a vibrant goldenrod, to compliment Emily’s favorite sweater. The second pair was made from wool she bought during their first trip together,

when she saw a yarn shop and Emily rolled her eyes and said, “Fine, twenty minutes.” She always thought she’d eventually make something for Emily from it. The yarn was more her color than Emily’s, a rich, dark green, but she hoped Emily would remember the trip and appreciate them anyway.

The last and most difficult pattern was her first time with color work, but when she saw them, she knew she had to try. On one of their first dates, she and Emily had gone to the farmer’s market to put together a picnic, when suddenly, Emily had vanished. Noelle was frantically worried that she had made a mistake and drove her away, until Emily had returned a minute later, smiling bashfully, holding a bouquet of lavender. “You mentioned they were your favorite flower, so when I saw them, I had to.” The finished socks were covered in sprigs of lavender, and she put dried lavender in the toes before wrapping them.

Emily pulled off the bright red bow and tore into the box. When she discovered the socks, her smile dropped slightly before she remembered herself. “Oh, I love them!”

“Socks?” Emily’s mother leaned in, mouth curled.

“Noelle knits, Mom.”

“How sweet.”

Emily kissed Noelle on the forehead and Noelle quietly smarted the rest of the morning, until Emily’s mother pulled out the spiked egg-nog and she got buzzed enough to forget about the whole thing.

Two months later, Noelle found the socks in a basket of clothes that had just come out of the dryer, felted, and stretched beyond repair.

Noelle pulls on the working yarn again and finds she doesn’t want to stop.

She had been working from the top down, with only one sleeve left to go. The body unravels slowly. The yarn was so thin... she had to put in hours to progress only a few inches. There’s a tiny portion under the bust where she had twisted her stitches. She hadn’t noticed her mistake until days later, and by the time she had, she was so far along that she decided she couldn’t go back. There’s a particular pleasure in pulling out those stitches.

When it’s done, something in her bursts free. She drops her head into her hands and finally, mercifully, starts to cry. There must be a thousand yards of yarn on their bedroom

floor, the pancakes are still burning in the kitchen, and in a minute, Emily will come check on her and see the mess, but she doesn't care.

"Noelle?"

Emily's standing in the doorway, fidgeting with her ring like she always does when she's stressed. Does she know what Noelle does when she's anxious? Noelle has spent so long dedicating herself to the study of Emily, but she still doesn't know if she's ever been studied in return.

Emily comes over to Noelle and puts a hand on her shoulder. "Noelle, what's wrong?" Noelle shrugs her hand off, brushes the tangles of yarn off her lap, and stands. Emily has left the kitchen a mess. The pancakes that were raw a few minutes ago are smoldering black in the pan. She hears Emily call for her but doesn't hear footsteps to indicate that she's following.

She leaves the mess and heads for the front door, opens it, and stops for a moment. Her ring is heavy on her finger. They put a table in the entryway with a dish for their keys and covered it with pictures. Her graduation almost two years ago, Emily standing next to her and exaggeratedly pointing at her degree. The first wedding they'd gone to, when she'd caught the bouquet and Emily had winked at her, a silent promise. Her favorite photo, from their trip to the lake three years ago. Her hair had been bright pink that summer. Emily leaned into her, their knees knocking together, a bubblegum-colored strand wrapped around her finger. She was looking at Noelle, eyes crinkling at the edges. Noelle had a container of bubbles in her hand and her lips were pursed, the bubbles frozen iridescent in the air around them. She was leaning on Emily's shoulder, Emily's other arm around her. They haven't taken a picture like that in months.

She twists the ring off her finger, drops it next to the photo, and lets the door fall shut behind her.

Meat Factory, Colorized

Emma Dollar, Emory University

I found Charlie in a box down by the river the summer after eighth grade, two days before my brother Mateo's seventeenth birthday. It was a river where people dumped lost things. My friends and I went there sometimes to search for bicycle gears and old men's watches. This time, Mama took me down to the river to look through the slumped piles of disintegrating cardboard boxes for a puppy. Most of them had already been emptied by the homeless guys who walked along Main Street, shaking flea-ridden puppies at passing cars. "Only ten dollars," they would say.

"Why don't we just go to the intersection to get a puppy?" I asked her as I kicked another empty box.

"Those are dirty dogs," she said, looking away towards the muddy river. I opened my mouth to protest, to say that we were looking for the same dogs ourselves, but the words caught in my throat. We didn't have a car to drive through the intersection on Main Street, and if she went up to one of those men herself, she would look like she belonged there. So we went down to the river instead.

"All empty," she mumbled to herself, rubbing her forehead. "The Molinas had a litter this Sunday. Where are those dogs?"

One of the boxes farther down the river shuffled and twitched unnaturally. I slid down the muddy bank closer to the water, where people sometimes dumped extra boxes and rusted bicycles.

"Valentine!" she called out after me.

"Be right back!" I yelled. Mud squelched into my socks through the holes in my baseball cleats, the shoes that Coach had made me scrub clean with a toothbrush last week. The box shuffled a bit closer, and whatever was inside began to squeal.

"Mama!" I yelled again. "I found a baby pig!"

And there he was. His name came to me as if in a dream: Charlie, like Charlie Gehringer, the Mechanical Man hall-of-famer from the Detroit Tigers. He was smaller than any pig I'd seen before, and the hair on his back was coarse and rough. At first he cowered in the back of the box, but as I gently pet his head, felt the ridges of his thin ribs, his quick shallow breaths, he slowly nuzzled into my touch. He huffed out a breath of hot, moist air into

my palm.

“That’s a runt,” Mama said, coming up behind me from the bank. “He won’t even make a good sausage.”

“He’s going to die if we leave him here,” I said. Charlie looked up at us with wide eyes, his snout twitching as he sniffed the air. “Look at him! Please, Mama? I swear, I’ll take care of him.”

“He’s supposed to be Mateo’s dog,” she said, raising an eyebrow at me.

Mateo didn’t really want just a dog, I knew. What he wanted was a pitbull, or a rottweiler, or a bulldog. Something with sharp teeth and anger to match his own. Something that would make him feel powerful.

“I know,” I said, lifting Charlie out of the box and cuddling him to my chest. He was already small, made smaller from days without food down by the river. Mateo would hate him.

“A pig?” he yelled as Charlie shuffled happily across our living room. “I wanted a fucking dog, Mom!”

“A pig is easier than a dog, *hijo*,” she pleaded with him. “We can feed it the scraps. We don’t have to buy it a bed, or food, or toys.”

Mateo’s face got all red and blotchy when he wanted to hit something. The walls in his room were covered with posters that hid the holes where the plaster was the weakest. A deep pink flushed his cheeks as he shook his head, breathing in deeply to stop the tears trembling at the corners of his eyes.

“You and Papa never loved me,” he hissed at her. “You would’ve gotten *him* a dog!” He thrust an accusing finger towards where I squatted on the floor with Charlie. Guilt sat heavy in my stomach for convincing Mama to accept the pig instead of a puppy as I watched her lip tremble. She had only risked the burden in the first place because she wanted to see him smile again.

“Mateo—”

“I’m going out,” he said, turning away from her. “And you better not get too attached to that pig, either, *gordito*. When it’s big enough I’m going to sell it to the butcher to make bacon.” He licked his lips and smirked at me.

“Shut the fuck up, Mateo,” I said.

“Valentine!”

“He always says it, Mama,” I argued, still staring at my brother. He held my eyes for a moment, challenging me to say more, before he slapped the kitchen counter and laughed.

“Alright, Val,” he said. “Let’s go out to the field. It’s my birthday.”

The baseball field was a thin, scraggly piece of brown lawn looped in chain-link fence behind Mrs. Engel’s old house. The older boys were already there by the time we arrived, drinking Budweisers and tossing a ball around the beaten red diamond. Ronny, one of my friends whose older brother hung out with Mateo, peeled himself off the fence and ran over.

“Did those college recruiters come back for him yet?” he asked as Mateo walked out onto the field. The other boys cheered him as he got down on one knee and shotgunned a beer.

“Not yet,” I said, watching for the moment when they’d start to play. Mateo lifted the bat like it was an extension of himself, twirled it through his fingers as though it weighed nothing. Crouched.

“Hey, did you hear I have a pig now?” I asked.

“Really?” Ronny said, impressed. “How big is it?”

“He’s small now, but he’s gonna be huge,” I bragged. “We found him down by the river.”

The ball cracked against the bat like a gunshot, and our eyes followed it as it spiraled across the field and into the woods beyond. Mateo turned to us, the grin on his face sharp like a rottweiler’s. “Go get it, little piggies,” he taunted.

Ronny and I jumped off the fence and ran into the woods. Another ball cracked off the bat behind us and crashed into the leaves next to my foot. I heard him laugh, pictured him balancing on the balls of his feet as he prepared for another swing. He’d swing until he missed. He’d swing until they were out of beer and the other boys went home and then it was just me and him, tossing balls back and forth through the dark, humid air.

“You’ll like Charlie,” I said, aiming a fastball at Mateo’s face. He raised his arm and folded the ball into the glove like it was nothing. “He’s so cute.”

“What are you, five?” Mateo shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about fucking Charlie.”

“I picked him out, you know,” I said. “Not Mama.” The next ball whizzed past my face, nearly catching on my cheekbone.

“Then you’re just as much of a dumbass as her,” Mateo said.

“Asshole,” I spat.

“At least I’m an asshole who’s good at baseball,” he snapped back. He leaned down and picked up another ball, gave me an easy toss into the glove. “Just shut up sometimes, okay, Valentine? You never know when to shut up.”

I bit my lip to keep the angry tears burning my eyes at bay. Mateo and I both got the habit from Mama, who always cried as she yelled at us when we were little. I bounced the baseball in my hand and imagined it smacking right into his mouth, right into that taunting little smirk, as I said, “No, *you* shut up, Mateo.”

But no, the ball sank right back into his glove, like it knew it belonged there.

“You think Mama made empanadas for my birthday?” he asked after a few more tosses in silence.

I hoped that she didn’t, even though empanadas were my favorite too, just so he’d see that she wouldn’t let him yell at her anymore. He couldn’t control her. But I knew as soon as we’d left the house, and she’d stopped crying into Papa’s old pillow, that she’d pulled out the beef and the dough and begun pinching them together.

“Maybe,” I shrugged as nonchalantly as I could. We met each other’s eyes, stared for a moment, and then took off running back towards the house.

Mateo beat me by a few seconds, crashing in through the front door and kicking Charlie aside to get to the kitchen first. The pig let out a sharp, high-pitched squeal as he slid across the floor. Mateo was already at the counter loading empanadas onto his plate. “Can you tell that pig to shut up?” he said.

“You hurt him!” I protested, cuddling Charlie into my arms and petting the back of his head. “Hey! Leave some for me!”

“Mateo, there’s two for you and two for your brother,” Mama said.

“I’m bigger, so I need more food,” Mateo argued. He kept three on his plate and went to his room, slamming the door behind him.

“Has Charlie had anything to eat?” I asked, getting up from the floor and scooping the last empanada onto my plate. It was still warm from the oil.

Mama shook her head, still staring at Mateo’s closed door. “There aren’t any scraps tonight, *mijo*.”

“He’ll never get big if he doesn’t eat,” I muttered, listening to my stomach shift and

gurgle after a day of running outside. What if I never got bigger because I didn’t eat? I tore off a piece of empanada and crouched down next to Charlie, letting him snuff it out of my hand. He ate the piece and sniffed around hungrily, licking my hand for more. “There’s no more, buddy,” I cooed at him, scratching behind his floppy ears. “Oh, no. You’re so hungry. Okay.” I ripped off another piece and watched him chew it enthusiastically. He seemed to almost grow as he ate, thickening around his thin ribs and stretching taller to lean into my touch. He wouldn’t be a runt, I thought proudly, letting him nose another piece of food out of my hand. Tomorrow I’d go to Ronny’s house for lunch. Ronny’s mom always made huge lunches, more than him and his brother could ever eat on their own.

“Mateo’s such an asshole,” I said, standing up and filling my mouth with food. “If I had two empanadas, I could give a whole one to Charlie.”

Mama didn’t respond. A silent tear tracked down one of her cheeks and trembled on the edge of her chin. I watched her for a moment, hoping she might not say anything so I wouldn’t have to ask her what was wrong. She didn’t. I picked up Charlie and my baseball glove and walked quietly to my room. On the other side of the wall, Mateo was laughing and playing Call of Duty with his friends on his old Xbox. I closed my eyes and listened to my stomach gurgling with hunger, Charlie sniffing around my room, Mama in the kitchen beginning to clean up from dinner. Before Papa died, he would’ve come into my room around this time—after he got home from the sports bar—and told me play-by-play the winner of the Marlins game that night. If they’d won, he’d brag about how I was destined to be the next Giancarlo Stanton. If they’d lost, he’d rail on about how Stanton hadn’t hit a home run. And then Stanton got traded to the Yankees, and Papa got lung cancer, and none of it mattered because Mateo was better than me anyways.

It wasn’t Mateo’s fault that he was a baseball star, even if it was my dream first. Baseball was mine and Papa’s shared thing, and then Mateo joined the team in middle school and it suddenly became his and Papa’s. Mateo couldn’t toss the ball with me because he needed to get five more hits before he was allowed to eat dinner, Valentine. Mateo couldn’t play video games with me because Papa took

his Xbox away after his team lost a game. Mateo couldn't have time for me because he needed to be good enough to be a star, to get signed to a major league, to pay for Papa's chemo treatments.

But Mateo was fourteen then, and the cancer moved faster than the years he needed before he could join a national team. Papa got sicker, and skeletal, and shriveled, and Mateo got angrier, and angrier, and angrier. When Papa was too ill to go to the sports bar, I would crawl into his bed and tell him play-by-play the winner of the Marlins game. He would give me a baseball card he'd traded with the nurses for my collection. The night before he died, he gave me Charlie Gehringer. I slept dreaming of the Mechanical Man striking Mateo out with every effortless pitch.

Mateo had a baseball game later that week, an official one, on the nice high school field with green turf and a crimson diamond that they locked at night. The girls would scream when he ran out onto the field, all white and shining in his newly pressed uniform. There'd be recruiters in the stands, nodding their heads in approval as he smacked home run after home run out of the park. I stayed home with Charlie trying to teach him tricks, even though all my friends went to watch them play. *Jurassic Park* was on TV, and every time one of the dinosaurs roared, he tucked his ears in fear.

"Charlie, roll over," I commanded, holding a slimy piece of lettuce above his head. I'd guided him through the move a couple times before, but he seemed to only understand that he should throw his body around on the floor, bumping into the coffee table and threatening its precarious arrangement of dirty cups. He was almost as tall as my thighs and just as thick, even though it'd only been a week since we found him as a scraggly runt in a cardboard box.

"Charlie, twirl," I said. He spun in a circle and looked expectantly at the lettuce in my hand. That trick had already won us free food at two places in town, and "roll over" was certain to win us more. Already, I woke up at five every morning to sneak into town with Charlie, where we would walk barefoot over the still-cool pavement and shuffle through the local restaurants' dumpsters for scraps of food. Charlie's lettuce had been scavenged from a half-eaten burger tossed behind McDonald's.

As he chewed it, he stood a little taller.

Mateo barged in as the movie's end credits rolled, red dirt smeared over his uniform like blood. "Get out of here, piggies," he sneered when he saw us. "You know what? I need twenty bucks first. Give me twenty bucks."

"Shut up, Mateo," I said, feeding Charlie a piece of dog food I stole from Ronny's house. "I can't hear the movie."

His face darkened and he moved closer, towering over us. At this distance his face really did look bloody, like it had been torn open. Maybe it had. He'd hit the ground particularly hard going in for a save, caught what would've been a home run and won the game. Or maybe it was after the game in the parking lot outside, his face pressed against the gravelly pavement. The older boys on the team, jealous boys, huddled around him and laughed as he squirmed.

"You can't do anything to me or I'll tell Mama," I said, wishing my voice didn't crack. Ignoring the blood that trickled down his nose and into his teeth. His breath was hot and dangerous against my cheek. He had not saved the home run ball and won the game.

The kick was hard and fast. I felt the breath whoosh out of me as I slammed into the ground, my side burning in pain. He kicked me again, once in the leg, then in the side. I reached up and covered my face as I wheezed and gasped for breath, but only sobs came out.

"You tell Mama," Mateo said, sitting down on the couch and setting his feet on the coffee table. "First I'll kill Charlie. Then I'll kill you."

"Fuck...you," I spat at him.

"What was that?" he asked mockingly, grabbing Charlie in his rough, bloody hands. The pig squealed and thrashed in his arms. Mateo's nose pinched as he struggled to keep him steady, but Charlie seemed to only grow larger and more indignant in his hands.

"Mateo, please don't," I begged. Tears burned in my eyes. "I won't tell her." I knew I wouldn't even when I first threatened to. Mama didn't discipline either of us after Papa died, despite Mateo coming home with black eyes or me swearing in public. She remembered how Mateo and Papa would scream at each other for hours after Mateo crossed one of Papa's many lines. And she had already lost one of them.

"And the twenty dollars?" Mateo asked.

"I don't have twenty dollars," I said, holding my hands out for Charlie. Mateo sighed and dumped him into my arms. The blood was beginning to crust on his face, gluing one of his eyes shut. Charlie nuzzled into my chest, his heart thumping hard and fast against mine.

"Well?" Mateo said. "Get out."

I wobbled on my feet, my chest burning as I stretched the skin to stand up. In my room, Charlie and I inspected my side in the mirror. It was still pink from where he'd hit me, but it would be purple soon. Maybe even green.

"He was just in a bad mood, Charlie," I whispered to the pig, petting his ears. "You have to get big, Charlie. We have to protect each other." Charlie snorted.

"You know, he'll ask me to play baseball again with him tomorrow," I told him. The pain was worse when I stood up, so I turned the lights off and crawled into bed with Charlie. His large body was soft and warm against my arms. When he laid next to me, he suddenly seemed as though he was my size. I imagined that Charlie might grow so big that I could sit on his back. We would ride all around to county fairs across the country, performing tricks for adoring crowds so that they'd beg us to take all their prize money. We would be so big and powerful and untouchable that Mateo could never hit us again.

"He's gonna get signed to a big team, you know. Like the Miami Marlins. He can come visit on the weekends." I stared at Charlie as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. "I wish I could play with him forever."

Charlie snorted again, maybe even disdainfully. I squeezed my eyes shut as tight as I could so the tears wouldn't get out.

The bruise stretched from my armpit to the left side of my stomach. The skin began as a deep purple color, veined with red, like rotting eggplants. The next day, Coach made me run around the field ten times when I told him I couldn't play because my arm hurt. "Let's make your legs hurt too, then," he said. He let me stop after the fifth lap, when I leaned over and vomited onto the grass. I watched the older boys practice from the dugout for the next week. I watched Mateo. He was big and strong and knocked pitch after flawless pitch out of the park with that same hard, fast swing he hit me with.

By the end of July, Charlie was so big he could barely fit in the house anymore. I cleared him a space in our tiny, crowded backyard and slept curled up against his side every warm summer night. Mama had to start hanging the washing in the neighbor's yard so that he wouldn't chew our clothes. The people in town loved to watch us walk together, the skinny Sanchez boy and his giant pig. All the vendors on the main street fed us churros and tacos and halal to compete for whose food Charlie liked best.

"That pig is getting fat," Mateo said, licking his lips. "It's almost time to take him down to the butcher."

I ignored him, ripping off another piece of falafel to feed to Charlie. The halal vendor liked him especially. He would pat Charlie's wide pink flank and say, "This is the king of all pigs. The king of all pigs right here in Miami!"

"Or maybe I'll just do it myself," Mateo continued, biting into the empanada he'd stolen from my plate. "That's what a man would do. Open him right from the belly to the head."

"Mama, tell him to stop," I complained, petting Charlie's wet snout. He huffed and blew hot air in Mateo's direction.

"Mateo, stop bothering your brother," she called from inside the house.

"Remember when you used to throw up when you saw blood?" I taunted, smirking at him. "I'm sure you'd make a great butcher."

Mateo's eyes darkened, and he moved his fist back like he was about to hit me. I flinched away, but then he paused and his gaze flicked towards Charlie, towering over us, and back to me. The smile slipped back on as easily as it first disappeared. "Let's go to the baseball field," he said. "We can teach Charlie how to play catch."

I stared at him, waiting for his fist to land, but he just turned to go inside. He came back a moment later with our gloves, a bat, and his baseball. "Come on, beasts," Mateo said, slapping Charlie's side.

"Let's go, Charlie," I said, petting his head. I shimmied onto his back and carefully maneuvered into a sitting position, clutching his neck for balance as he began to move. Mateo walked a few feet ahead of us, not stopping to check if we were following. After a few minutes of trudging in silence, he finally said, "You know, Georgia Tech offered me a full

ride. For baseball.”

My stomach sank. “I thought you wanted to go to University of Florida.”

“Georgia Tech’s better. Those guys get signed right out of college.”

“You’ll be far away,” I said quietly.

Mateo laughed bitterly. “You won’t miss me. Mama won’t either.” He kicked a rock down the street. “I have to get out of this stupid fucking town or I’ll die.”

“I’ll miss you,” I argued, but even as I said it, I wasn’t sure I believed myself. I thought of the bruise on my side from months ago that still stained my skin a sickly green. I thought of him stealing Charlie away to the local butcher. I thought of how I might eat four empanadas instead of one when he was gone. I hated myself for wanting it. Mateo glanced back at me, and I saw in his eyes that he didn’t believe me either.

“Well, I’ll come visit you, then,” I said.

“I don’t want you anywhere near me,” Mateo said. He looked away towards the baseball field, hidden by rows of dilapidated houses. “Every time I look at you, I see this place. I see Papa.”

“Fine,” I said, swallowing the tremble that threatened the confidence in my voice. “I don’t want to see you anyways.”

Mateo smiled. I’d said exactly what he wanted me to say. We walked in silence until we got to the field, where Ronny and his brother were already practicing their swings.

“Hey, Val!” Ronny shouted when he saw us. “Look at that beast! He’s huge!”

I smiled proudly, ignoring Mateo as he walked onto the field to greet his friend. “Right? He’s almost as big as my house.”

Charlie knelt down in the scraggly grass and began to chew at the wilting weeds, always hungry. Ronny was saying something else to me, but I couldn’t hear. I slid off Charlie’s back and watched Mateo turn towards us, winding up for a swing. I felt the air whoosh past me as the ball went wide and bounced in the grass by Charlie’s head.

“Mateo!” I yelled.

“Aww, did I scare the little piggie?” Mateo asked mockingly, miming tears as Ronny’s brother laughed behind him. He was one of the seniors on the baseball team. Ronny told me sometimes he bragged about pushing Mateo around, taking his ego down a notch. They were all the same. Behind me, Charlie grunted and started chewing Mateo’s baseball.

“Hey!” Mateo’s smirk dropped instantly. Papa had given him that ball when he first started playing. “Stupid pig! That’s my ball!” He started running towards us, swinging the bat in his hands.

“Leave him alone, asshole!” I yelled, crouching in front of Charlie. My body barely even covered the mass of his face.

“Get the fuck away, Valentine,” Mateo ordered.

“No,” I spat at him.

“Fine,” Mateo shrugged. The bat cracked across my legs before I even saw it moving through the air. The hit went straight into my bones, and I felt my knees buckle beneath me. Ronny shouted. I watched Mateo raise the bat to crack against Charlie’s skull.

The sound was sharp and terrible, but Charlie’s high squeal was even worse. Mateo raised the bat again. The half-eaten ball rolled out of Charlie’s mouth, and he gnashed his thick teeth together. Mateo faltered, staring at the ruined baseball, and Charlie lunged for his arm. Mateo screamed and smacked his fist against Charlie’s snout, but he refused to let go. I imagined the bones cracking. Pig’s teeth were strong and Charlie was hungry. I imagined Mateo tasted good. Delicious, even, compared to grass and baseballs.

“Valentine!” Mateo screamed. “Fucking help me!”

There was something inside of me, a deep, dark bruise, that liked seeing him helpless, in pain, like I had been so many times. It filled up that empty, hungry hole in my stomach that I hadn’t even realized was there until I saw Mateo on his knees. As I watched, Charlie seemed to grow even bigger too, both of us swelling and ballooning with anger. I hesitated for a moment too long before Ronny yelled, “Val!”

I limped over to Charlie and Mateo, who was slumped over in pain as my pig ground through his arm slowly. “Charlie,” I soothed, petting his snout. “Hey, buddy. It’s okay. I’m here. You can let go now.”

Charlie looked towards me and slowly released his jaw, letting Mateo’s arm fall from his grip. Mateo collapsed on his hands and knees. He looked at his torn arm, gagged, and then retched into the dead grass. His breath came out in short, heavy gasps.

“He needs to go to the hospital,” Ronny said.

Mateo murmured something under his

breath. As I leaned closer, I barely made out what he was saying: "I'll kill him. I'll kill you. I'll kill all of you. Oh, fuck. Oh my fucking God. I'll kill myself."

"I can drive," Ronny's brother said. He and Ronny looped Mateo's arms around their necks and dragged him towards the Jeep parked on the other side of the road.

I looked at Charlie, his jaw wet and dark with my brother's blood. I looked down at my hands. They were covered in it. In the distance, Mateo screamed and sobbed as they tried to lift him into the passenger seat. I knew Mateo was not crying only from the pain, although it must have been agonizing. That was his right arm. His throwing arm. His batting arm.

"Val! Are you coming?" Ronny shouted from the backseat as his brother started the car.

"I have to take Charlie home," I called back. "I'll tell my mom and we'll come meet you!"

The car ripped out of its spot and skidded down the road. I leaned down to pet Charlie, whispering sweet, calming words as he continued to slobber over the ruined baseball. There was a thick gash along his head from where Mateo had hit him. I picked the ball up from the ground, an unidentifiable ache knotting my stomach when I saw Papa's faded signature ripped in half. "Come on, buddy," I said. "I'll fix you up and then we can go get empanadas from town."

My stomach growled in hunger. Whatever had filled that void inside of me was gone now, and I was empty again. I relived that moment of Mateo on his knees over and over in my head, just to fill my stomach, to feel a bit more full. I relived hurting him again. Was this what he felt when he saw me cower in fear? It was intoxicating. Charlie and I turned back down the road and walked away from home, towards the town again. Me and the beast were hungry.

One of Those Unsent Letter Exercises

Ivy Clarke, Mercer University

I

Because the universe had a start, it must have an end.

I've tried to write this letter a hundred times, but the starting point always changes. In some versions, I'm how you imagined me instead of who I was. In others, I replace all the "I"s with worms and let them crawl all over the page, smearing the ink with their slimy pink bodies. Sometimes I write nothing except your name, and I shove the paper into the back of my mouth and grind it with my molars into pulp.

II

In the beginning, there was a bang. A bowl clattered down from the top cabinet in your tiny kitchen because you forgot it was up there when you were rummaging for a clean plate. It was green and slick, and when I ran my palms over the concave surface, it was uneven, likely handmade.

Thank God that didn't break, you said. My mom would've killed me, and then you, and then me again. You slid your hands across mine when you took it from me. The weight of them was familiar and warm.

What is it? I asked.

My sister made it in, like, second grade or something, you say. You wiggled your eyebrows at me. *Maybe we'll put the confetti for your wedding in it one day.*

If you don't stop messing with me, Bella's always going to see me as her little sister's weirdo friend, and then our families will never merge, and you'll be the one to blame, I said and smacked your arm with an oven mitt. You defended yourself with a hand towel whip and we danced around the kitchen, laughing and slapping each other, until your mom was yelling at us to *Hurry up and put the damn cookies in the oven! The house feels like a furnace.*

III

In the beginning, there was a collision. Your mom was the chaperone for the middle school dance, and she watched you closely under the blue strobe lights, so you weren't able to sneak off to a corner with the boy you brought. I hated seeing you so still in that plastic cafeteria chair. You've always been the type of person who looks beautiful in motion. So I pulled you out and swung you onto the

dance floor and we spun, a glittering catastrophe of pink and purple tulle.

IV

In the beginning, there was a bounce. The music was so loud at our joint graduation party that the ground was pulsing beneath my feet in the garage, while I watched you in the front yard wondering how you didn't throw out a hip with the way you thrashed your body around when you danced. Did I ever tell you that you remind me of one of those long, inflatable balloon mascots that bend and twist with the wind outside car dealerships? But you were always having fun, and you looked so happy that no one could ever make fun of you, not really, not even me.

Well, okay, except your mom, but she's your mom. She was clinging onto me at that party, just sobbing into my shoulders, complaining that we were going so far away for college and telling me that I was always like a daughter to her and now she had to watch her two baby girls leave the nest. I was patting her back when we heard you yell and we looked up to you mooning us, in the middle of our party, and your mom rolled her eyes and wiped away her tears and said, *Actually, take her now before I kill her*, and I almost threw up from laughing as our grandmothers gripped their frail chests and our dads both chased you down the street, your hands flapping in the air.

V

In the beginning, there was a creation. All those nights you stayed up with me so I could finish my art projects. You'd say you didn't mind, that you liked watching me draw or paint or whatever I was doing, but the dark circles under your eyes gave you away. I don't remember ever thanking you. I always thought I'd have forever to grab you caramel lattes the next morning.

VI

In the beginning, there were multiple beginnings. There were a thousand firsts I shared with you. You were my first kiss, back when we were pretending we were just practicing for boys. All the late-night pastry runs we went for in my first car. Being the first person you told when you published your first story. I held you in my arms when the first girl you loved broke your heart. Purple, my first unnatural hair color that you helped me dye. My first best friend. My first love.

VII

In the beginning, there was a DIY movie projector. I think it's the first memory I have of us together. Do you remember? Our fingers were so little that my mom was afraid to let us use the kitchen scissors, but they were the only thing that could cut through the cardboard. We spent three hours working on the thing only for it to project the images reversed and out of focus. But we could never stay quiet during a movie, anyway, could we? You'd shush me all the time, but when I'd finally shut up, you'd throw your popcorn at me or ask for my opinion on the hotness of one of the characters and we'd be off again.

My parents took me to California over the summer, and it was the first family trip in years that you didn't come, and it was the first time they stopped asking me if you wanted to come. They've stopped asking why you don't come around anymore. Why does it matter what happened? Why does it matter if all the lights on the marquees reminded me of your knobby knees, glowing in the television's flashes of light? Why does it matter if I still have those photographs of the good parts, the sweet parts, hanging from the LED clip lights in my room back home, filling my 2 a.m.'s with your absence?

VIII

In the beginning, there was a hole. There was also a needle and an apple, and I guess it's sort of a creation story. We were eighteen and stupid, and it was your first healthy act of college-age rebellion against your parents for not piercing your ears as a kid.

You know I don't like blood, I said, *so why am I doing this?*

Just do it, you baby, you said.

The truth is, I hated it when you called me baby, especially because you're five months younger than me, so I jabbed the needle through your ear hard on purpose. If it makes you feel better, I regretted it immediately. You screamed so loud the RA came to check on us, and everyone in our hall followed to peer inside our door, remember? Maybe you don't, since you had buried your head in the bed. I'm still sorry they got infected. You never even got to wear hoops.

IX

If I saw you now, I would tell you nothing, probably. Or I would tell you you're an asshole. I wouldn't tell you that my hands have ached, have been empty, have been waiting to

wrap around your shoulders again.

There's that thing, you know, object permanence, babies have it, they don't know something exists if they're not looking at it, and I was always your baby and now I can't find my hands.

How do I know I have hands when you're not looking at them?

X

Because the universe had a start, it must have an end.

I've tried to write this letter a hundred times, and it always ends the same.

What to Expect When the End is Nigh

Marylou Sutherland, Mercer University

Frequently Asked Questions: What to Expect When the End is Nigh

So, you are coming to terms with the Absolute Truth that someday you will die.

Good for you! This is the hardest step to overcome. Much harder, in my opinion, than the death part. Yet for millennia, when I have come to collect the souls of the deceased, there is often a lot of panicked questioning and general upset. Responses have ranged from anger ("Who the hell are you, asshole"), to denial ("I'm not dead, I can't be dead, no, please"), to my personal favorite, bargaining ("If you bring me back to life you can have whatever's in my wallet, pal, promise")¹. So, to help you get a grip about the concept of death before actually dying, I wrote this helpful pamphlet to explain some of the more common questions I get.²

1. Who are you?

Good question! I've been called many names over the span of my existence, though none have been perfectly accurate:

Chronos,	The Fates,
Kan-Laon,	Father Time,
Dalia,	the Grim Reaper,

the "irreversible cessation of respiratory and circulatory functions," and so on. My friends usually call me Horace, though.

I am the Vessel of Death, the Minder of Clocks, the Keeper of Minutes, the One Who Came Before, and the One Who Will Remain After. My form tends to manifest as a tall, thin specter wrapped in a cloak of ashes and rags, which is probably where the 'Grim' part of my title came from...But all things considered, I think I'm a fairly pleasant deity.

2. How does death work? Will it hurt?

Now, in the physical sense, you probably already know how death works, at least from

¹ Friendly announcement: though attempting to bribe the Grim Reaper with cash is an admirable goal, it will only lead to disappointment, as I don't have a bank account.

² Because you are not dead (yet), I had to figure out a simple way of reaching out to potential clientele without causing a ruckus. So, you've probably picked up this pamphlet in a doctor's waiting room, the subway, or on a grocery store bulletin board next to coupons for bikini waxes. There's no need to worry about how it got there, or how the Vessel of Death got access to a double-sided printer. It doesn't matter, really.

an outsider's perspective. Biological functions permanently cease in the body for a variety of reasons, leaving a shell that begins to decompose and get smelly after a few days. Simple, gross, and easy to recognize.

In the metaphysical sense, however, you humans have come up with a variety of interesting theories as to what happens to the "soul," the immutable substance of a person that remains after death. Some imagine the soul's passage on a ferry. Others imagine the snipping of a wire or the weighing of a heart for the sins it hides. Perception of the soul comes from the soul itself, so it would be inconceivable for me to refute your beliefs about the passage of your own soul.

From my perspective, though, here is the best way I can explain it. For every person, there is a perfectly unique mechanical clock that begins ticking the moment they are born. I am the Minder of the Clocks; I try to keep their gears oiled, their hands shifting at the correct rate, and I fix what I can. But every clock, without fail, will someday stop ticking and never start again. And that is when I know to come collect you from your body, and escort your soul onwards.

It's important to note that this is not Fate. Fate and destiny are the prettiest kinds of lies, dreamt up as retrospective explanations for the inexplicable. I assure you, the Clocks do not start or stop at some chosen minute; your death will not be like the timer for an oven going off. Instead, each Clock keeps ticking until it simply can't anymore. Maybe it's a break in the springs that stops time, or perhaps the gears have been overworked... Whatever the reason, I do not know when your Clock will stop ticking, nor could I give you a moral or predestined reason for why you are dead or alive. Life and death are simple issues of mechanics, which makes everything that falls in between dictated solely by your own free will. Fun, right?

As for whether death will hurt, I don't really have nerve endings, or a single physical form (not to mention I have never died), so I cannot say whether it hurts in a "pain" sort of way. However, here are a few anecdotal statements from the deceased that may help:

"For it is not death or pain that is to be dreaded, but fear of pain or death."

– Epictetus, 50-135 C.E.

"Death is but the next great adventure."

– J.M. Barrie, 1860-1937 C.E.

"Huh. Dying wasn't so bad. Also, the Grim Reaper (Horace) is super cool."

– William Shakespeare³, 1564-1616 C.E.

3. What comes after death?

Ah, sorry. No spoilers.

4. No, really, please tell me what happens in the afterlife? Just between us?

Alright, fine, you've won me over. In the end, I take you to a beautiful farm with a babbling brook, a double rainbow, and a very nice farmer family who'll take good care of you. It's even the same place where your parents dropped off all your childhood pets, so you'll get to see all of them again, woo!⁴

...Please believe me when I say that I cannot tell you. It would never be "just between us," would it? And life after death is not the point of your existence on Earth. So try not to worry about what comes after, if you can. Live to live.

5. How could you be so cruel and heartless, etc., etc.?

I have long been called cruel, which I see as a fundamental misunderstanding of my work. War is cruel, because it makes humankind think they are invincible, even as they grow more vulnerable. Love is cruel, largely for the same reason. But time? Time has no teeth, no talons. Time is not the edge of a blade or a broken promise or a poisoned apple. Time is—that is to say, I am—but a cadence in the background, that notes the beginning and ending of a thousand lives, a thousand songs, all playing at once. Endlessly fair. Patient as can be.

I am not cruel. Though I have no physical heart, I feel for you, truly. It is very hard to come to terms with the notion that Death is not some force of malicious evil, but rather the plain acknowledgment that life is precious because it is not an inexhaustible resource. It ends, my friends, like everything else.

³ Some of you may well be currently grumbling that "Shakespeare never said that!" For your notes, he said it post-mortem, as I was leading him to what comes after. Are you truly going to tell me that I (the Grim Reaper, if you forgot) am wrong?

⁴ Sarcasm, in case it wasn't clear.

6. How did all of this... start? What was the beginning of life itself?

Ah, this is an interesting one. When it comes to a singular person, it's pretty simple to figure out the beginning of their existence: just locate a birth certificate and count backwards nine months, give or take.

But when it comes to the birth of life itself...which beginning are you referring to? Which life? When you're as old as I am, you find that you lose track of how many times the universe appears to restart, in light of something new. For instance:

- In the beginning, it was hot as hell, and loads of molecules were too busy crashing into each other to recognize what they were building.
- In the beginning, there was a little fish that dragged itself onto the shore, and taught its children how to walk.
- In the beginning, there was a Garden where pink amaryllis and water lilies grew, and it existed for the sake of keeping joy, not survival.
- In the beginning, there was a War.
- In the beginning, a War was ended.
- In the beginning, the sun had begun to rise. And for the first time, a person said, "Good morning," to which someone else replied, "Why, yes, it is a good morning." And it was.

Don't you see? I cannot cite a singular act of creation as the beginning of it all, because it is the nature of life to create more life. Not just through basic reproduction, but through continual evolution of what the human experience looks like, making yesterday and tomorrow seem almost like different species of living.

Death and the simple passage of time, I get. But this? The ability of humanity to continually change and learn and grow? It confounds me, even after millennia of watching you do it.

7. What should I even do now, if I know I'm just going to die anyways?

Well currently, you are in the lovely spot that comes after the embryo and before the grave that I like to call "All of the Rest in the Middle." Here, there are wonderful things for you to experience, such as breakfast for dinner, true crime podcasts, subway station performers, and the night sky. Oh, and birthdays! One of my favorite things that you humans

have dreamed up. Whether it's a slice of strawberry cake and a chorus of bad singers, or a day spent much like any other, a birthday is the simple recognition that you have lived, and you are still alive, and that this is something to be celebrated.

So, what should you do now? Rejoice because you still can. Read your daily horoscopes. Make small talk with people on the elevator. Tell your family you love them before you leave for work. Eat a slice of cake, and try not to worry about the calories. Know that I could come for you in a week, or 50 years from now, or in 20 minutes, and live accordingly. See you soon!

NON

FICTION

My Brother's Hands

Lane Porter, Agnes Scott College

His hands are chubby—which we used to call husky—but my brother has grown through the years, his weight distributed from his tummy to the acceptable places. He is eighteen, tall and muscular, but his hands are round and doughy, like they've always been. I remember his hands when we lived on the beach, inexperienced and playful. His soft hands and short fingers waved driftwood which he used to poke washed-up jellyfish. He grabbed handfuls of muddy sand where the water met the coast and let it drip from the bottom of his fist, building small towers in the spaces between tide pools. His hands created them, and his feet knocked them down. He would run with his sandy hands behind him, menace to the seagulls. He was an architect, a playmate, a king, and a nemesis to the nine-year-old me who preferred to carefully pick shells from the sand.

His palms are calloused where he's gripped his baseball bat since he was old enough to hold it. Batter up, Big Poppy, my dad would call to the toddler with his eye on the ball and his small, doughy hands choking the neck of the bat. I would ration my soda and popcorn for the unbearable length of each baseball game where we lived for my brother's hands. We watched through the chain-link fence how his hands threw and caught and missed and threw and caught gloriously and missed, and we cheered for those hands and what they could do. Husky became impossible, dexterous, champion. He would peel his batting gloves from his hands and throw them in my dad's trunk, and the orange dirt of the infield clung to the sweat in the creases of his palms.

His nails are short and ragged and always in his mouth, the only tell of the anxiety of a young man whose height and extroversion make him an unlikely nervous biter. We both fidget. I stretch scrunchies, and he spins the beads of the bracelets his friends make him, chunky and well-loved. At fifteen, his hands are easy on the steering wheel. He is a much better driver than I am, and we cruise around the church parking lot where I am teaching him to drive. We practice turning and parking, backing up and breaking. His confident right hand finds his Dunkin' Donuts coffee in my cup holder. He takes a sip, puts it back, and brings his fingers to his mouth with the urge to gnaw on his nails. But his hands find the turn signal, windshield

wipers, emergency brake, and I trust him with my life. On a road trip a year later, he bites his nails when he drives on the highway. He listens to heavy metal and a podcast, and I take a nap. We switch places at a peach stand in Georgia, and I watch his hands enter his mouth again when it's his turn to fall asleep.

Birds of A Feather

Chelsea Cobb, University of Georgia

The Hummingbird

The hummingbird heart beats one thousand and two hundred times a minute. Twenty beats per second. My mother's heart skips beats, arrhythmia. It goes undetected, silent pause, chambers sputtering to start back up again.

Through our kitchen window, a hummingbird remained poised motionless, aside from its wings, a blur of fluttering blue, hovering over our bird feeder. It shifted from left to right so quickly that there was no in-between. There was only here and there and back again. The small bird stuck its long, pointed beak in the red tray of the feeder and ate. My mother stood still, her hand over her mouth in awe. The air was pregnant with silence, the good kind, the kind that's calming and divine. My mother's fingers, resting above her open mouth, were stained in oil. My mother held her breath, heartbeat slowed, a hummingbird's pace reversed.

She blessed the house in oil every morning. Every day, for years, when she woke up in the morning, she'd pray and dip her fingers in olive oil before covering the house in tiny oily crosses. They stain every door, every window, some parts of the walls. She started doing this shortly after my father left.

I looked at the tiny bird and the oil-stained cross shape blurred in my periphery at the corner of the window. The hummingbird continued feeding then zipped from side to side. Hummingbirds consume more than their own weight in nectar each day, and to do so, they must visit hundreds of flowers. They are able to store just enough energy to survive overnight. In a sense, they are always on the brink of dying. The sweet tang of nectar is what keeps them alive. They enter a state called torpor, a deep hibernation-like sleep, to slow their heart rate down and prevent energy reserves from falling to a critical level.

Holy oil is what keeps my mother alive. That is her torpor. Maybe that's why she felt so connected to the hummingbird. My mother's drive into religion, her perceived duty to bless our house and steer away demons, was just a long, deep sleep to preserve her energy. If she didn't have anything to fall back on, her heart would not have a reason to beat.

Then, like that, the hummingbird flew

away into the trees. My mother's hands dropped to her sides and she let out a breath like she'd been holding it the whole time. She whispered, "wow," shook her head slowly, as if coming out of a different state of mind, and continued cooking. I went upstairs to my room and noticed another cross on my window. The cross was oblong and tilted, resembling an "x." The tail end of the crucifix dripped, a mockery of blood.

I wiped it off.

From my bedroom window, I watched the trees of my backyard and a tiny blur of blue and pink passed through the forest for such a short moment thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. In a miniscule flash of vibrant color among a deep shade of evergreen, it went from here to there. Never to return again.

The Dove

I often have recurring dreams of immaculate conception. I hold an infant gifted divinely from God. I'm sitting on a bench and a few doves are hopping on their tiny feet on the ground around me. Maybe they are from God, too. Doves belong to the same family as pigeons. Although, white homing pigeons are usually used during weddings, funerals, or magic shows in place of real doves. I wonder how people would feel if they knew the pigeon – the flying rat – was a representation of their marriage, or their uncle's death, or their Vegas family entertainment. A pigeon dressed up like divinity.

The two birds hop towards each other and simultaneously cock their heads in my direction. They study me, black pupils darting.

The baby is a boy, and it stares at me, also. I look at the baby and instead of being completely perplexed over my spiritually conceived pregnancy, I worry about my son's future. How could I raise a baby without a father? Even more troubling, how could this baby have the life it deserves?

As if sensing my unease, the baby scrunches its small features into a grimace. Then he cries.

The Penguin

"You're a little penguin," my dad said. I pulled the penguin hat over my cold ears and fell backwards into thick, plush snow in our front yard. My arms were out to my sides, covered meticulously in layers of clothing. Hanes

T-shirt, electric blue hoodie, soft blue winter coat, white knit gloves, long thermal underwear, thick gray sweatpants, two pairs of socks, snow boots. I grabbed a handful of snow and listened to the crunch. The sun hid in the sky, faded light.

It was a snow day in Ohio.

All the schools and businesses were shut down, making me one happy third-grader. While my siblings went back to sleep, I decided to throw on as many layers as my mother demanded and play in the snow. I felt the wetness trickle through my scarf and melt against my throat. It felt good.

I turned my head and watched my dad shovel snow out of the driveway. He was bundled up in sweaters and earmuffs.

The air was hushed as I watched snowflakes drift and drop. It was then that I felt a sacred quiet. Growing up, I didn't know much about religion except that there's a man who lives in the sky writing down everything you do wrong. At least that's what I thought it was. But when I looked at a white sky, I felt a pull in my chest that made me want to believe in something bigger than myself. I just didn't know what it was. I only knew that I loved the way that the Earth felt quiet when everyone in the world was asleep except for me, my dad, and the snowflakes.

With my dad's black sweater and white gloves, he looked like a father emperor penguin. The father emperor penguin keeps the egg warm after the mother lays the egg. She goes off to the ocean for two months to revive her nutritional needs. So the father is left in the freezing Antarctic winter, holding the egg between the tops of his feet and his brooding pouch. He relies on balance to keep the egg in place.

My mother never left for a long period of time, but often it felt like it. The evening before, I had just finished putting the dishes away to dry. We had barbecue chicken, and the grease was thick and caked on the pots. I stacked the dishes on the drying rack, half-listening to a sitcom rerun, my siblings laughing. My eyes wander towards the television, my hands scrubbing, thoughtless. I got lost in the familiar rhythm of the show and I didn't feel my hands slow. Then, hands snatch a pot off the counter and swipe the inside.

"Didn't I tell you to scrub this grease off?" I didn't answer. She threw the pot back

in the sink, grumbling, then one by one, plucked the rest of the dishes off of the counter and sunk them into the murky water. "Do it again. And right this time. You're just sorry." The sound of china clunking against the sink was loud and I felt the echo in my tired wrist bones. The balls of my feet were aching. My mother said "sorry" a lot, but not to apologize. She used it as an adjective to describe us, meaning worthless, poor quality. I believed her.

I grabbed the sponge, dabbed it in a drop of Dawn – never more than one drop – and ran water over the pot, staring at the filling water until my eyes lost focus. I licked salty tears from my mouth and wiped my face on a wet sleeve. A hand took the sponge out of the water and I moved aside to see my dad wiping out the pots. He told me to go sit down.

He'd be the balance between us, the father penguin having to warm an egg from a mother in a cold ocean.

In the yard of snow, I reached my hands out to touch the snowflakes. The sun began to part the clouds that shielded my face. A bird, maybe an eagle, seemed to circle the sun, around and back again.

The Eagle

My mother loves eagles. She swears that she sees a few of them every day on her drive home from work. She says that they're a sign from God.

One day, when she picked me up from college, she saw the birds again.

"Gosh, there they are again. They always follow me," she said. I'm unsure if she's talking to herself or me. She's been alone for the last three years so she claims that she has to talk to herself to keep from going insane.

"There's a demon in your father and that's why he left." This is said with so much confidence that I almost believed it. My mother looked at me then, and I can tell that she was hoping that I would take her seriously. I shrugged and looked out the window.

That she'd believe in something like demons struck me as odd. My father identifies as an atheist, and his lack of faith makes my mother think it must be derived from something demonic.

My faith is vague. I could feel it slowly slipping from whatever I had hoped it to be and into something I kept questioning. I'd like to be numbed with oblivious pretenses

of a world that is exactly as it always has been. And whether or not Jonah was swallowed by a whale or women are made from the ribs of man, it'd be nice to know that I was sure about something. I just hang between, somewhere between doubt and conviction.

Maybe she just didn't want to acknowledge the truth; my dad was ruined long before he left. She needed to pin the blame on something a little less sad, a little less ruined.

And if that truth was supposed to be internal, then possibly, there was a bit of truth growing inside of all of us, in different ways. Mine, quite literally, in the form of a divine fetus.

Maybe, the baby was just a carbon copy of who I could be - divine. Whereas I should feel liberated, instead I stared at my creation, composed of my DNA, and wept. Sometimes, my mother will pass by me, slip oil onto my arm, and whisper a quick prayer.

I'm not sure what she's trying to save me from. In the car, I stared at the eagles as they circled around. In some religions, high-soaring eagles are believed to touch the face of God. These birds are probably not even eagles, but my mother refused to accept anything else.

Whatever they are, I wondered if God had really sent them for my mother as a gift. Or a sign.

The Crow

Before my brother went to prison, he used to have imaginary friends that looked like crows. He drew them on lined paper with a blue Bic pen. They had long oval heads for faces, pointy triangular teeth, and long beaks. He talked to them, complained about school, or our parents, and they listened.

He showed me pictures of them. They had regular names like Chuck and Justin, and funny personalities. When he told me about them, he looked at me like he wanted me to believe him. I did. I knew he found comfort in these two-dimensional characters who were fleshed out in his head.

"But why the beak, though?" I asked him. He showed me the pictures he placed carefully in a notebook. I knew he cared about them because he never did anything carefully.

"It's a crow. Like a cross between a human and a crow. Crows are smart, you know? Since I'm dumb, they're like ... a better part of me. They understand."

My brother and sister fought a lot, physically and verbally. He once shoved a large toy skateboard ramp directly at my sister's face. Her eye bled and blackened. I had to talk to the school psychologist about whether my brother ever hit me. For some reason, I didn't trust the woman. Her voice was too soft and her office was too dark.

In prison, my brother converted to Islam. It makes me wonder if he only needed something else to believe in once the voices were drowned out behind the haze of medication. If he needed the whisper of another voice, a prophet from a long time ago to ask him about his day. I wonder if he thinks that voice is real. And if he can discern that voice from his own.

The Duck

My least favorite birds are ducks. For five summers, I've worked at a Christian sleepaway camp in Ellijay, Georgia and every Wednesday, we take the kids on the Cartecay River.

The clearing of the river reveals a wide expanse and the calmer parts are homes to ducks and geese. When I saw a duck, I gripped the handles of my tube tighter. I can't explain it, but they freak me out. At this point, the girls were warmly tired, their arms sore from trying to scoot their tubes and their heads lolled from the sun's heat. The smell of salt, water, and dirt overpowered the senses.

The ducks swam slowly across the water as we floated closer. A mother duck, a Mallard, called a hen, led her ducklings. I watched them as they ascended to the bank. Mother ducks will swim half a mile to get food for their ducklings.

Like a mama duck, the girls formed a trail behind me as I guided them around rocks and killed spiders in their terrified frenzy. I get now why the mother duck swims miles without them.

The houses along the river are elegant, with long winding stairs and landscaped backyards. There's one quaint red house with a screened-in back porch. We floated down the river towards the house and there was a boy, about two years old, in red pajamas with his hands pressed against the screen. He smiled at us, pure and sweet, and waved.

Tears welled up in my eyes and a hot feeling my chest sputtered like an old engine

cranking. Just a few days before, I found out one of my friends from college had committed suicide. She walked into an abandoned house, put a gun to her head, and pulled the trigger. And I sat criss-crossed on cabin floors, babbling about after-life and salvation from a thousand-year-old book that was supposed to make me feel not alone.

I've tried to be okay with not having an answer for their questions. And I'm not sure what's scarier to turn into: my mother or my father. I'm not sure if I exist between the two – a happy medium – or something completely different, like my brother. I just know that when I looked at that child behind the screen door, something about his innocence, his noticing us noticing him, and feeling deeply seen, caused my throat to tighten. I could feel that same warm feeling spread in my chest when I looked at a snowy Ohio sky and felt something in me soft and beautiful and not alone.

And I'm lying in a bed of snow, watching my father, who, at that moment, still believed in God, and everything is okay. I'm oblivious to what it means to doubt, and I still believe in Santa Claus and ghosts. Then the river came to a rapid and the girls squealed in delight and suddenly, I was aware of the dropping feeling in my gut that comes from falling.

I watched the ducklings get all the way across the river. Some of them were half-grown, in that in-between stage that's all gangly limbs and askew feathers. One duckling was mostly pale yellow, with brushes of gold and white. He looked odd, like maybe he somehow knew, in his own way, that he was coming into a new self. He swam furiously. He tilted his head down, collecting water, then throwing his neck back again. He shook out his feathers, a water halo forming. He turned to look at me and blinked. Then, with one flap, he flew out of the water. The other ducks swiveled their heads, their bodies still floating downstream. The lone duck kept flying away from the group, his strange, discolored body soaring higher and higher until he was a small yellow dot, a golden sun fading until it was a blackened star. Then nothing at all.

Cost of Being the Best

Maggee Chang, Agnes Scott College

When my mother was pregnant, the pianist from the Taiwanese church gave her a list of *American* names. "It looked unique," she explained. *It looks like you spelled it wrong*, I used to retort. Spelled or misspelled, whether I like it or not, my mother was not the best at naming me—not even my Chinese name put me at ease. *Yiqin* sounds beautiful in theory—it means family nostalgia or closeness, my birth symbolizing the first and only blood relative my mother had in a new country, eight thousand miles away from a past life.

My mother's family lived in the Xuejia district of Tainan City, a rural township translated to *academic excellence* in English, but it was a small rural town of farmers. The most commonly spoken language in Xuejia is not Mandarin Chinese, but the Hokkien dialect. It's higher intonations with different pronunciations that have no rhyme or reason than *it's just how it is*, according to my aunt who had never left Xuejia. When I ask why my mother came to the United States, she thinks of the quiet town that made everybody restless-- "People in Taiwan like to make comments and give unwanted advice about your life and look as if they are the most upstanding people in the world. They only do that because they've never seen the rest of it."

I didn't say my first words until I was two years old. My father thought my mother coddled me too much. There is virtually nothing in common between Chinese and English, except for Western words like *coffee* or *cheese*. When I turned one, my mother went to her home country of Taiwan for the first time since emigrating, introducing my grandparents to their grandchild.

"*Yiqin* must be mute-- she's already two years old and doesn't talk! You were talking when you were six months old," my grandmother told her daughter, shaking her head. My mother panicked-- my parents had just moved to the United States only three years ago. There was no money for a doctor. If they found something wrong with me, the agony of not doing anything would be too much for newlyweds, new parents, new immigrants. To my grandmother, my mother was not new: she was the third child of four, the second

daughter. There was nothing new about her, besides the new grandchild that couldn't talk. Perhaps for the first time, my mother couldn't say anything either.

No one would be surprised if I told the life story of my mother-- she was ahead of the curve from the day she was born. She spoke her first words when she was six months old. When she was twelve, my mother left home to live with her grandmother to enroll in a better school district outside of Xuejia. She was the first in her class every year. The first in the family to go to law school. At the young age of twenty-four, she met my father, a member of her local tennis group.

Despite twenty-five years between them, my mom never saw his age. She saw their tennis matches, breakfast dates, and easy conversation. In 1999, at the turn of the twenty-first century, after a bitter fight with her parents about marrying the first person who made her feel loved, my mother packed two large suitcases and emigrated to the United States with my father. Parts of her stayed in Taiwan. For the first time, my mother cursed herself for being first place in everything-- all of her achievements to be the first, to be the best, were erased once she became the first to disappoint her own family, to be the worst daughter. As calculated as she is, as genius as she is, choosing the life of an immigrant was choosing to surrender. She surrendered her family, her language, her winning streak. There was no plan once she landed in the Hartsfield-Jackson airport with two suitcases except to start all over again. Being the best means being alone, but feeling like an unwanted guest in someone else's home feels lonely.

When my mother and I returned to the U.S., she listened to my father. "If you wanted something, I would force you to say it," she recalled. No one remembered my first word; only the relief I said anything at all settled in my parents' memory. From that point forward, when I went to school speaking English with my friends and went home speaking Mandarin Chinese, my family nagged me about my Americanized Chinese or my Chinese English. I blended grammar structures, making my grandparents laugh over the phone about not being a real Chinese person. My friends teased me for pronouncing words wrong, not knowing I learned them from my

parents whose third language was English. "You're not like the rest of your friends. No one is going to question if *they* speak English. *You* have to work ten times as hard to be twice as good." I try so hard to be the best I end up being an unwanted guest in two people's homes.

Life must have been difficult, believing that the only way to be loved was to be the best. Sometimes, it creeps into the back of my mind at three in the morning when I look at graduate programs, but it must be at the front of my mother's mind when she goes to work, where people tell her to calm down or speak clearly. The possibilities of how hard my mother had to work to be the first, to be the best, ate my confidence and force-fed guilt. Over time, our experiences as unwanted guests, as each other's only family, made it difficult to distinguish who we were apart from one another. Yet, I find it in the various degrees and certifications hung across her office or in the twenty-year-old Chinese-English dictionary with bent pages collecting dust on a bookshelf. I find it in *me*—on a therapist's couch wondering why it's so hard to tell people how I feel or in my writing wondering why I can't write a single word without thinking of what my parents will think. I see it sitting at our desks, looking over our heavy shoulders, like unwanted guests. It keeps the family together; living in our nostalgia, our desperation, our achievements.

Images of My Mother

Eliza Moore, Mercer University

I

When I think of my parents' years in Guatemala, I always picture my mother with her wedding ring in her mouth. She must have been able to taste the new metal as it sat on the top of her tongue, a secret still foreign to her body, but the most important one she has had to swallow. She watches the men walk towards the bus; machine guns halfway obscured by the bus driver's shoulder. The vehicle is full of American high school students. They look at my father with wide eyes. He keeps his voice calm. "Have your wallets ready. Give them everything before they have to ask. Avoid any confrontation. Don't look them in the eyes."

The men kick open the door to the bus, shouting, "*Entreguen sus billeteras!*" "Hand over your wallets!" They move quickly, striding down the aisle, guns pointed at the ground, grabbing wallets from outstretched hands. My father unwraps his watch from his wrist in one swift motion, placing it on top of the leather square of his wallet. Inside it are twenty *quetzales*, his passport, and two letters from my mother, folded into tiny white rectangles. They dump everything into a black bag. When they near my mother, she finds herself staring at the weapons in their hands. The man looms over her and she can smell his heavy breath and the hot musk of his sweat. She is twenty-three and from Yuba City, California. Her high school boyfriend owned a gun, she remembers, and so does her father, though she has never seen it.

She still remembers the way my grandmother looked at her when she told her she was moving to Guatemala to be a missionary. It was as though something she had thought was safe was now compromised. A young white woman in the 90s, directly out of college, unmarried, moving to a small village on the side of a volcano in the immediate aftermath of a civil war. She tells me now that she wasn't scared enough. Of anything.

The whole bus is holding its breath. She looks out the window at the traffic stopped for miles, vans and trucks and motorcycles waiting in line to be robbed on the dusty road back from *Panajachel*. She doesn't look at the student's faces, but she prays over and over, silently, that they will be quiet, that nothing will

happen, that they will not have to call unassuming parents back in the states and tell them their child was gunned down on a bus outside the city. She thinks of the promises, the pointless liability forms, faxed and signed with ballpoint pens, of the broken Spanish made almost beautiful by the way which it was offered, *mucho gusto* and *como estás* clumsy in the mouths of sixteen-year-olds from church youth groups.

The bag grows heavier the closer they get to the end of the bus. The robbers have hit the jackpot, thirty gringos in one place. The last student's wallet is stuffed into the garbage bag and it's hoisted over a shoulder. They stride back to the front of the bus quickly, speaking rapidly to each other, footsteps pounding the floor. Their reflections shake slightly in the glass windows. The two men scan the aisles once, for anything missed. Then they hurry down the steps, throw a shoulder against the door, and they are outside again.

For a moment everyone is still frozen. Their presence lingers in the vehicle, the air large and static, pressing onto chests with strong hands. Then, all at once, it dissipates, and the other leaders are asking if everyone is alright and there are tears and hugs and my father's hand in hers. My mother remembers her ring and takes it from her mouth. Its heat surprises her, a tiny flame pressed into her palm. She slides it back onto her finger.

II

My parents met doing mission work. My mother had just flown down from California, and my father had been directing a team there for a few years. They were married in December, nine months later, my mother in a discount wedding dress made for spring. The first house they owned had a grass roof and no electricity or running water. It sat on farmland on the side of the volcano *Volcan de Agua*, a few miles outside the village of *Santa Maria de Jesús*. The farmers there were trying to grow blackberries to sell to the upscale restaurants in town. They had built that first house as a prototype for other vacation homes. "No one was interested," my mother told me. "So they sold it to us." There were rows of trees lining the path up to the house, and in the mornings, dozens of green parakeets would burst up from them like emeralds. My parents would lay in bed and listen

to them singing. They must have sounded similar to the way the village children did when my mother first moved there and started language school, Spanish erupting haphazardly from their tongues, incomprehensible and beautiful to her in its volume. She longed for the language to fit inside her the way it did for my father, seeping deep into her throat and staining teeth purple like the *morras* they ate with their fingers from the land. This country was different in that if a man saw her lifting something or carrying anything with weight he would say, “No, no, no,” and do it for her, taking the boxes from her arms or grabbing hold of the wheelbarrow. In Guatemala she wore long skirts and the holes from her ear piercings grew over.

There are things my parents skim over when they tell us of those years. My mother being grabbed on public buses. A little girl drowned in a swimming pool, her body floating on the surface when morning came. The day my father woke up and couldn't feel his legs anymore. These stories felt like rivers we dipped our hands into, fistfuls of water slipping through our grasp again and again no matter how tightly we held on. They were the essence of something made tangible in the Guatemalan art that filled our small yellow house, in my mother's voice when she called me *chica linda* and talked about real tortillas, the kinds made on tiled floors with calloused hands. She bought a tortilla maker and used it once before it sat in the bottom left drawer for years. Our house sits on a hill so that when it rains the water streams down the sidewalk, small rivers in the road.

Sometimes in Guatemala when it rained, the water would trickle in through gaps in the grass roof and they'd place pots on the wooden floor. I picture my mother running outside, the world such a vibrant green that to breathe it was to be more alive, the water saturating everything, mist in the distance clouding the rise of the volcano like bits of memory erased with a pencil. She stands with her arms outstretched and the rain streaming down her face, dripping from her hair. The light dances over her body.

III

The first time they robbed the little house it was through the door. My parents come back from the village to find it broken inwards, the wood splintered, frame gaping like a startled face. My mother must have put her hand to her mouth as my father pushed it slowly open.

Behind it the tiny house offers itself as though wounded. The sheets and blankets have been stolen from the bed. The mattress rests naked in the corner, the bare imprint of their bodies visible like footprints in sand. The cabinets are empty. My mother wonders who will eat dinner with their dishes, gripping her mother's set of extra metal spoons, tiny engraved flowers digging into the underside of their thumb. The camera is gone too, and my father feels a pang of sadness, missing the way he swung its strap around his neck, weight comfortable on his chest. My mother hurries to the bedside. She pulls out a wooden box and opens it gently, holding her breath. She exhales. Her wedding ring is still there. They have overlooked it.

They hold each other for a moment, in the kitchen-living room-dining room-bedroom of a tiny house in a country that does not belong to them. To have so little. Yet they can almost hear the house's heartbeat, faint and steady in the shadow of the great volcano. Perhaps it is their own.

They go into town again and they buy tools, a padlock for the door, dishes, plates, a comforter. They tell their friend Margarito. He shakes his head and asks them to stay for dinner. His house is off of a small alley in the winding roads of the village, full of children running, stray dogs, and donkeys with straw weighing down their backs. The corner stores are brightly colored with overripe fruit and soccer jerseys. There is smell everywhere, noise the same as breathing and no less difficult. Soap from the washing area in the square trickles in rivulets and gathers in corners like bits of sea foam sparkling. Margarito and his wife Florinda were at their wedding celebration. Margarito has a loud laugh and is as strong as three men, though he barely reaches my father's chest in height. The main part of the house has no ceiling; the concrete rooms open into the space in the middle where the stove sits. On the roof are a dozen chickens. Ten years from now the house will be full of voices, toys scattered on the stones, bodies occupying the plastic chairs, cheering on a soccer game from the box tv above the table.

Florinda serves *pepian* for dinner. The heat of the orange sauce fills their stomachs and the house so that it swells to be much bigger. The sky above them absorbs the same rich flavor, soaking the clouds at sunset like

swabs of bread. He tells them he will keep an eye out for their things, that they might end up at one of the corner stores. They thank him, and go home.

Home was a strange word for that little house, my mother must have thought, as she laid there asleep beside my father. He was always asleep before she was. The new blanket smelled foreign. She was reminded of staying the night at her grandmother's as a child, falling asleep in a bed that was not hers that smelled of old lady perfume and the dust of the California walnut trees. Then and now, those trees surrounded both houses, leaves reaching over them like God's dappled shadow, engulfed by a garden in a foreign world. I am not afraid, she thought. I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid.

In the morning she goes out to the greenhouse so that she can add another raised bed before the girls get there later that afternoon. They started building the greenhouse around the same time they moved in. The small building had windows full of light, plastic wrapped around beams, the sheets of it shielding the garden beds rich with nutrients from volcanic soil. It was my mother's idea to start an environmental education class. She double majored in psychology and environmental studies in college. She quickly noticed when she got there that most of the girls didn't go to school. They stayed home to help their mother or worked to support their families. The first girls that came were the daughters of the men whose land they were on. They started to bring their cousins, then their friends, until after school most days there would be a dozen of them. She taught them how to grow things, how to build them themselves, and how to foster independence the same way they teased plants up from the dirt. There was Ana and Sofía and Jimena and so many others. They were girls with red cheeks, inseparable from one another; they'd link arms and march through the grass. There was something powerful about kneeling in the red dawn of the dirt and feeling the depth of the earth with your hands.

My mother starts a girl's school there with over two hundred students. She calls it *Proximos Pasos*, which means next steps. They say, "Señora Nickole, come see, come see!" and tug at her skirt and her hands. The mission team helps her with funding. They send letters home, month after month.

Someday she will take her daughters back there, to to *Santa Maria de Jesús*. They will receive a tour of the classrooms, and the girls will stand and sing for them. Someday my mother will teach my sister and I to plant sunflower seeds. We will kneel in the dirt together, as though in prayer, and the earth will go on beating, flowers shooting upwards in spring. My mother will smile and trace their petals with her fingers. Joy was a garden she walked through. Someday growth will surpass her, life outgrowing a linear history. Next steps, next steps, next steps.

IV

The second time, they break in through the roof. There is a hole gaping in the thatched material as though someone has punched it in with their fists. My father sees it first when they are walking up to the house. He stops. My mother follows his eyes and for a moment they stand there looking. The padlock is still in the door. All the dishes are gone, except for the dirty ones in the sink. A vase. Blankets. Their entire CD collection, hundreds of them, U2 and the Barenaked Ladies and Sarah McLachlan and Billy Joel and the Beatles all cast out into the street.

They rebuild the spot in the roof and they buy more blankets. They stop washing the dishes, so that they will not be stolen. Neither of them say it aloud but they must both be thinking it: is moving giving up? How can they stay? How can they not? Who would do this twice? Are they watching the house? I ask my mother, "What about the police?" and she says, "They did nothing." This doesn't surprise her now, though it did then.

During the ministry team meeting the following week, they pray for my parent's house. They sit on couches in the poorly lit room, all of them bent over, their hands in their laps. Outside thunder clouds are forming. The morning air is thick and impenetrable. They pray that God will protect their little house and that the robberies will stop. They ask that He will ease their discouragement and give them peace and safety so that they may continue their work. My mother's heart beats inside of her, low and almost a whisper. Do not be afraid.

That afternoon she adds to the progress books for the girls. She has been putting them together for months, their art and favorite bible scriptures, pictures of them working in the garden, laughing on her back with their

hands around her neck. She finds herself smiling. At the site that evening Margarito finds them and pulls them aside. My father has been working on one of the wells all day. He wipes the sweat out of his eyes. They both feel the heat of the impending storm as it presses into them.

"I've been asking around," Margarito says. "I know who's been taking your things."

"They were the fathers of the girls we'd been teaching," my mother tells me. "The owners of the land. They knew when we would be gone and when we would be back." She sighs.

"They've been selling your things at the market." Margarito puts a hand on my father's arm. They thank him.

They ride home in silence, tired. The air hangs dark around them like a curtain before sleep. They trudge up to the house. They don't even notice at first, until they are almost to the door and then my mother grabs my father's arm and they stare.

The third time they have taken the wall itself. The planks of wood have been torn from the frame so that a hole gapes, big enough for a man to fit through. My father curses and kicks at the wood. My mother is silent. She steps through the space gently and surveys the inside. Once again, they have taken everything they can carry. On the table are the girl's progress books, the pages jumbled. Scattered about the floor. She pages through them. Some of the photographs are gone. She stares for a minute before realizing that the men have taken the photographs of their daughters and left the rest. Tears drip from her face onto the pages as she stacks them carefully with trembling fingers. My father reaches beneath the bed and pulls out the wooden box. He offers it to my mother. Her ring is still there. She lifts it and presses it gently to her mouth. The metal is cold against her lips. Thunder breaks over the house and she steps outside because it is no longer home. The rain begins.

I can picture my mother so clearly as the storm breaks over her. Perhaps she felt the rain as the bullets of a machine gun, as a lock broken, as God turning his back, even though he promised. Still, the water fell thick all around her. Perhaps she was no longer the woman who could hear the voice of God, who had known him and who had dropped everything. Perhaps the house was just a house

and it could be shaken, collapsed, violated, and the language would never love her as its own and the bullets were from her own tongue and people always took advantage and what was she doing here, anyway?

"It was so hard not to be angry," my mother tells me.

She clenches her fists and stares up into the rain.

V

Two years later, after my father's Multiple Sclerosis diagnosis, they move back to the states. My mother packs all the photos they own into a suitcase and they fly home to Fresno, California. They collect their luggage and stand at the airport terminal for an hour, waiting for the last suitcase, the one filled with photographs. It never came. It was lost somewhere, in the confusion of connector flights and four different airports. Hundreds of pictures.

A year later the phone rings. It is 2002 in Pasadena, the house I will be born in. My father picks up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Is this Sam Moore?"

"Speaking."

"Hi! My name is Lisa. Did you happen to lose a suitcase about a year ago? I work with airport security transport. The other day I was going through unclaimed baggage and I found a suitcase full of photos. There was an old address on one of them and I was able to track you guys down."

"Yes, thank you so much," my father says. "That's incredible! That must be ours."

They pick up the suitcase at the airport and bring it home. They unzip it and the photographs spill blurry across the floor of the living room. They spend hours going through them, laughing over a memory or crying out at a discovery forgotten. The years span before them, both endless and finite. Spring winds its arched back over the house, spine fluid like water, wrapping around the three of us. My heart beats faintly inside of my mother, both a promise and an answer.

The Air Is Heavy on Dark Lit Corners

Damara Soto, Agnes Scott College



I am standing on the corner down the street from our hotel in Vegas on my way back from the pharmacy with a bag of Tylenol and tissues in hand, waiting for the commanding scarlet hand to blink into an ambiguous white figure trapped in perpetual non-motion to tell me when to go on about my business. The checkout line had been longer than I expected, and what was a sky full of cotton candy pink and russet orange when I went in is now a dark onyx speckled with the occasional star, or more likely a helicopter, barely visible through the bright glow of the city lights. Cars speed by, violently corkscrewing around the curb, horns honking in joy at being surrounded by all the glittering lights and in frustration when their fantasies of debauchery and glamour are hindered with every red light. Two dark-skinned Black women in matching intricately embroidered black robes and bikinis stand next to me at the edge of the sidewalk, taking less than discreet sips from a rhinestone-studded flask. Their slightly unfocused eyes are lined to diamond sharp tips at the corners, the smell of fresh hair spray and vodka blending into an interesting, if not entirely pleasant odor, body glitter mixed with sweat shining with a crystalline sheen in patches all over their bodies. I want to compliment them, the urge to acknowledge a beautiful sight on the tip of my tongue, but I know firsthand how different pretty words can sound on a dark street from a stranger, no matter how harmless they seem. I feel comparatively plain next to them in my t-shirt and jean shorts, my white sneakers nearly a beacon of mundanity in the not quite dark of the Vegas Strip. I can't decide if I want to look like these women, or to have the confidence to not care if I do.

The woman standing closest to me has pulled out a cellphone, long acrylic nails that I can now see are a gleaming cerulean blue click-clacking against her screen nearly in time with the fast-paced dance music sounding from the pool resort across the street, no doubt their destination for the night. Her face is set in a look of concentration that is surprising for someone smelling as intoxicated as she does, lip gloss shiny lips parting and closing around phantom words from her mind and never given sound, the silver hoop

in her lower lip glinting and dimming with every movement. A man in a seemingly unironic black and gray pinstripe suit and fedora walks past us, a lit cigar slanted with an almost deliberate casualness in his downturned mouth, looking every bit the part of a brooding mafia boss circa nineteen thirty-two. The smoke trails behind him and settles around us in a haze. We both wrinkle our noses at the cloying tobacco scent and lock eyes as we do. I watch her gaze trail to the front of my shirt and a bright smile graces her face, the split second that I worry she is preparing to say something mean dissipating with the smoke.

“Oh, you’re on a girls’ trip? That sounds fun!” she says this with an excitement that is genuine despite the slightly elongated “oh” at the beginning, the alcohol no doubt having made her tongue lax with pronunciation. “Yeah,” I respond, allowing my own smile to match hers. “It’s for my friend’s birthday tomorrow, her twenty-first.”

She and her friend, who I have almost forgotten is there as well in the strangely long amount of time we’ve been standing at the curb, let out twin shrieks of delight that startle me a bit. “It’s our birthday tomorrow too!” they exclaim, so enthused with the idea of sharing their special day with another person despite that person not even being there. I am entranced by their liveliness, and I find myself gaining the courage to tell them how beautiful they are, not just their clothes or their makeup, but their very existence in this moment. I suppose part of that may be the alcohol slinking through their bloodstreams, but I pretend that this same interaction would have happened in the full light of day and sobriety. “You both look amazing.” is what I end up saying instead, not wanting to scare them away with the intensity night often brings to my thoughts. They thank me and do a series of teasing sashays that tell me I’m not the first to say this to them tonight, or maybe they already knew their loveliness without any outer confirmation. There’s a brief pause that I’m not sure how to fill, and I end up not having to because the woman on the left, who, now that I’m paying more attention, I can see has a whorling kaleidoscope of butterflies going up her right arm and across her collarbone to the base of her neck, asks me if this is my first time in Vegas. I tell her yes, and that both my friend and I are from Georgia

“Oh wow,” she says, the same dragging of the “oh” that her friend did coming through in her speech. “How’s the heat for you? I know some folks from down South, and they always say how weird the dryness is here.”

I laugh. “Yeah, it’s definitely different.” And I can see the moment when she is about to ask what different means, when we hear a sharp shout and the sound of glass breaking from somewhere away from us, but this isn’t what makes us flinch. No, that would be the sound of sirens, a familiar wash of red and blue light over our faces as a black and white blur speeds past us. None of us move for as long as we can hear the sharp ring echoing off buildings. It seems as if the world itself doesn’t move.

When the sound finally fades into the distance, we look at each other again, and are unsure how to recover the lightheartedness of the moment before. That is when the signal to walk flashes white across the street. *Keep moving*, it tells us. The two beautiful women look at me and smile, much more subdued but no less genuine, maybe even more intimate now, and wish me a good rest of my trip. I thank them, and the pair walk away toward a night of boisterous fun that I hope hasn’t been dimmed. I walk in the opposite direction.

I walk through the lobby full of people coming and going and laughing and dreaming without registering much of it. I press the button for the elevator and wait for it to arrive. When it does, I step into the blessedly empty box and push the button for our floor. As I stand there, watching the numbers flash higher and higher, I think back to the question the woman never got to ask and I never got to answer. What makes it different?

I think about that moment in the dark, and I know now how I would have answered her question. You don’t understand Southern heat by going south. You understand it by going anywhere else, stepping away and leaving it abandoned on the very edge of your senses. The absence of it brings definition. There is a heaviness to the air in the South that has nothing to do with humidity. I felt a heaviness in the air tonight, a carefully balanced weight of siren sound, and when it was gone, replaced with a great exhale.

A Seed

Marylou Sutherland, Mercer University

My toes wiggle inside my boots, like the shivering foothills of a mountain to the tiny patch of world where they are resting. Peeking through browned bunches of pine needles and husks of leaves is a bed made of soft green clover petals and tiny sprigs of grass. A morbid part of me calls it a layer of fallen dead, blocking the dying from the light. The rest of me brushes that thought away, and instead falls in love with the broken pieces: a five-peaked star of a maple leaf with no further need of the sun's rays, curling into itself as though falling asleep after a long day. Poking from underneath it, a downed seed flier, its single wing flat and dry as parchment. I pick it up gingerly between my pointer finger and my thumb, its weight unbalanced by the curved rock of its stern, treasure heavy and dormant inside.

I ponder the morals of breaking its skin to look at the seed, knowing the preciousness of what it holds, yet knowing it has a million brothers and sisters that all pursue the family business. My mind is already made up as I turn it over in my fingers, but perhaps out of respect I take the time to contemplate anyways, until I press just enough to feel the wing's hull crack, and then snap in half. I break two pieces into four, and the leftovers into flakes, down and down until all that is left is the cargo. This time without hesitating, I carve the seed open with all the eagerness of an animal, cracking hardness between its teeth to reach the living stone inside.

Underneath I expect tiny lines hinting at endosperm and embryo, reminders of the layers of stiff cell walls that I learned about in biology. But when it opens to the afternoon light all I see is how it shines, dark and glittering like a stream of onyx deep within a mine. To my untrained, wild eyes in the brightness of day, all characterizations of nature's 'rigidity' and 'precision' shrink back into only diagrams in a textbook, foolish maps drawn of a country never visited by us. I don't need to know about cell walls to have them. I don't need to remember how to breathe, and don't need to tell the leaves when it is their time to fly. Opening this seed, I have struck on the currency of life, and it needs no name.

Order exists so well at the tiniest level, rows and rows of shells enclosed with just the

right ingredients for survival: nucleus full of directions, mitochondria lighting the way. And even at the largest level of self, with all the bizarre and arbitrary behavior of us giants, there are unmistakable patterns: carnivore eats omnivore, and both eat herbivore, and omnivore and herbivore eat plant, and plant eats sun. We all contain precise gifts from each other, built into our skin, and therefore as one we feast endlessly on the star we revolve around. But there is an in-between, a level just greater than microscopy and just less stepwise than us, and it follows no rules. It is messy and scattered freely like coins from our hands, a fallout world at my feet. And oh, how lovely it is to know that life will live wherever it can land, washing the ground in a song as rhythmless and sweet as rain.

running backwards from the starting line

Madison Petty, Agnes Scott College

Knowing that someone you love will die soon goes like this – it doesn't. It stagnates, it stops. You're stuck at a red light for five minutes, thirty minutes, an hour. The car next to you is revving its engine, louder and louder and louder, and when the light finally turns green you realize your car has stalled and you've been left behind. It's a painting my grandmother made of two girls playing in the field, one just a step behind the other, hand outstretched, stuck reaching until the paint ages and fades away.

The last time I saw my grandmother, a month before my high school graduation, she didn't remember the paintings, or my face, or her name, or what room she was in. I tried to say goodbye, knowing she wouldn't understand, tried to reach out and hold her hand, but she just kept asking where she was.

Hospice of St. Mary's County, a lovely building with a lovely yard and a lovely reception room. None of her art lined the wall. There was no view of the backyard where my parents were noisily married in the midst of cicada season. She had lived by the lake in a house made of more windows than walls. My grandmother loved to paint in the light reflecting off the water, capturing the fish and flies as they danced in the air. Hospice of St. Mary's County was all fluorescent lights reflecting off of white walls and smiling nurses. I remember the beige carpet, the same shade as my old principal's office, when I snuck out of her room for some complimentary coffee. It was bad, of course, because it was free and from a fucking hospice reception area, but it was warm, and my fingers had been freezing for days. I had skipped school to be here, to drive up with my dad for hours knowing a shared silence is still better than the alternative.

The last time I saw my grandmother I was with my dad, an emotional man buried beneath years of expected solemnity, and my grandfather, a Vietnam War vet who had taught my father to live in that silence. Am I also supposed to admit my grandmother played a part? I suppose there is a timeline for the grieving period, a certain amount of days before we can tell the truth, smile at the holidays, write a story about her final days

that's more cathartic than exploitative. I'll be honest – I have not asked my father for the gory details of how he grew up, not since my grandmother passed. How could I? All I have now are the stories he forced himself to tell of the constant moves and cold homes, the memories that lived on the walls of the house I grew up in.

He was remarkably still that day when the three of us sat in her room. Grandpa played classical records on his radio, my dad stared at his hands, and I ignored the sounds of the nurses walking past the room. There is nothing worse than waiting for the inevitable, but even worse than that would have been attempting small talk.

My grandmother loved listening to classical music but she loved playing it even more. My family has a small piano in the living room, abandoned, and used as a decoration more often than not, but every holiday when my grandparents would visit that piano would come to life once again - more miraculous than anything I found in a church. My siblings and I would sit on our living room carpet playing Uno and Solitaire listening to the same small tunes on repeat. Baa "Baa Black Sheep", maybe, or "Hot Cross Buns" when she was feeling adventurous. Both my older siblings learned to play the piano, but I never bothered. Why put all that effort into practice when I knew it would never sound the same as her music?

Holidays were always the brightest days at my house. My mother has spent centuries honing the ancient craft of making the perfect holiday turkey, peering impatiently into the oven and basting the bird as if her life depended on it. Every year, without fail, she delivers a golden brown masterpiece to the table, one for November and one for December, and every year, without fail, my grandmother would take a bite and declare it "The best turkey yet!"

In the months, or maybe the years, leading up to the end, my parents and my grandfather came to an arrangement. My grandmother started fearing car rides, despised being trapped and could forget where they were going, so they would miss the old family traditions, would skip the Thanksgivings and Christmases that had been arranged for decades. The holidays without her fell silent, our piano packed away and the bench used for storage.

Instead, we would all pack into the family van and mosey our way upward to Maryland once a month, to chat. We would eat at old seafood restaurants if she was having a good day, staring at the Chesapeake Bay and eating salmon. She always got a half-sized salad but she never really liked it much. There were always discussions of watching a movie, playing a game, painting the lake, but she never had the energy.

She rescued cats so her home was full of animals, and every surface was absolutely coated in hair. My mother and my sibling are both very allergic, and they would turn red within seconds of sitting down, so our visits could never last as long as we wanted. But, if I'm being honest, I was always happy to leave. I hated how she couldn't hold a conversation anymore, how repetition became our second language when talking to her. I wanted my piano player back. I was sixteen, too old to be selfish and too young to be wise, and so every second I spent in her house was wasted on trying to leave. It got unbearable in the later visits when she would take us around the house to look at her paintings, her old winter coats. Which ones did we like the best? Which are the ones we would hang on our wall?

On one of the visits nearing the end, on a day where she couldn't push herself to leave the house, she pulled out a box of rings, small stones and fool's gold shining in the lake-reflected light.

She told us to pick, said she wanted to see which ones we would choose and why. I tried on a small band with an Iranian gold coin, a circle so tiny it would only fit on my pinky finger and no one else's. It scared me, how beautiful it was, how easy it would be to lose it, so I chose a different ring, one with the gold already flaking off, because that was a loss I knew I could survive.

My siblings and I fawned over the jewelry, looked into each other's eyes, and held back tears.

This is the kindness and cruelty of knowing, of planning it on your calendar and crossing out the days as they come. Of visiting monthly, and then weekly, and then daily. She would sit on her couch and give us our inheritance early and we all know why. Her living will, passed around as we all sat in a circle on the carpet listening.

The worst part is that I can remember it as one of the better visits, a day when I wish I could have stayed. We liked to walk on her porch, look in the puddles of water for frogs. We named them, ranked them based on size, and laughed at the mosquitoes as big as our hands. It was a visit where her arthritic dog couldn't stop jumping on my lap for some shred of affection and my grandfather gave us a sword – a memory of his navy days that he had no desire to hold on to. It was beautiful, rusted as hell, and the best present I have ever received. My grandfather handed my dad a box of medals and made us all swear we would never bury him with them. I have never asked him about his days in the Vietnam War and I don't think I ever will. There is no timeline for his grieving period.

The memories of that visit, not the last, but something close to it, jumble with those of the wake, of the Hospice room, of that Thanksgiving table with the empty place setting. It was a painting underwater, a memory mixed in with the rest, how much of her could I really remember? How much of me could she tell was real?

She never wanted a funeral, just a wake held in an art gallery which still held some of her pieces. It was a full house, jarring in its volume, the sheer collection of people that had loved her and who I had never known. They were strangers, clucking over little sandwiches and sculptures of bugs. They shook my hand, told me she was a lovely woman as if I hadn't known. Maybe I hadn't known.

My siblings and I hunted for any dark corner to sit in, a small, moving pack of animals, resting on floors and stealing plastic chairs. It wasn't solemn, or silent, or a party – it just was. A gathering, maybe, where the cream puffs ran out in the first hour and my father never let go of my mom's hand. I didn't cry, but I should have. I wasn't trying to be strong, I never am, but sometimes I don't cry when I should. It makes me feel worse, that I don't feel worse, that sometimes it's hard to feel anything. The wake was the world's worst art show for me as I desperately tried to make it something more.

Even now the wake feels as cold to me as the Hospice, her art a poor substitute for her absence. Throughout my grandfather's speech about their long, long marriage, all I could hear was the nurse trying to explain to

me what happened in the space between her home and her coffin.

“Her memory is failing her,”
“She was a wonderful mother, a wonderful wife,”
“She has to stay in bed,”
“She loved to rescue animals and to paint,”
“We can make her comfortable.”

In that hospice, with its white walls and comfortable couches, I fumbled for something to do on my phone. Hours in that white room, and all I felt under my sadness was boredom, the agony of waiting for her to open her eyes. I pulled up some poetry I never finished and started the ghoulish work of translating grief into palatability.

I couldn't paint or play music, excusing the tuba lessons in middle school – but I always loved writing. I wrote everything I could, novels and poems and plays.

My grandmother would always ask me to email her my writing. I agreed, shaking my head awkwardly, and said I'd get her email from my mom. I never got around to sending her anything, too ashamed, or maybe just underestimating how much she cared. Maybe I forgot.

Here's the great irony, the great regret, the great nothing: I wrote a poem for her, about her, too late for her to ever hear it. The only goodbye I could give her, now, when she forgot my face in hospice and my grandfather refused to let us come for her final days. Or maybe it wasn't a goodbye, because goodbye means letting go, means leaving, means two people finding closure; I can't think of anyone this poem helped. I still have it, a million iterations of it, lost in my files, constantly being rewritten. There will come a day when I will edit it so completely that none of the original first draft will remain.

Here is what my father told me in the car ride up to Saint Mary's: Alzheimer's is the old man's disease and the young man's burden. Here is what it looks like: my grandmother would tell stories, disjointed, half-forgotten, with no message to them. Half-finished portraits and blank sketchbooks. Stalled traffic and empty cars. We would remind her of our names, of the date, of where she was and why it wasn't home. Why she couldn't go home. She cried when the nurses came to turn her over, to move her around to avoid bedsores.

My grandfather told us she was just scared, so we turned the music up louder and held her hand as tightly as we could. It held no weight.

We all sat in her living room, her three rescue cats curled on the edges of the couch, my siblings too afraid to get comfortable in the aging furniture so we chose the carpet. She had three cups of tea in front of her; I remember she kept asking for new ones because she forgot she had already been served. We would bring her a new mug each time hoping this one would be the one she drank from. They were all lukewarm, almost untouched. She wasn't drinking water either.

The house was beautiful and my grandfather took us to see the upper floors, the rooms shut and unused. He said my aunt had also been visiting, that it had been nice, that he was glad the family could still get together. I think it was almost worse that my grandfather was still so healthy and she was not, that he could see with eyes as clear as mine how she was fading. But she wasn't fading, and it wasn't poetry, she was his wife. She was still solid to the touch, and so he held on for as long as he could.

In that hospice room, the four of us: my grandmother, my grandfather, my father, and me. It is the unfortunate truth in our family that my father was emotionally stunted as a child because of his parents, their constant moves and their habit of soldiering on past emotional conversations, and so now mother picks up the slack. It is an unfortunate truth in our family that I carry after my father in every terrible way. When my grandfather started crying, the first time I had ever seen him weep, I froze. I did not know how to comfort him, how to confront his loss. I handed him some tissues I had picked up from the front desk, touched his shoulder as lightly as I dared without floating away, and looked to my father. He was also crying, too tired to be ashamed of his emotions for once.

In halting breaths, my grandfather said the word “after” as if it were a curse. Maybe it was – the curse and the blessing of knowing when it is your wife's time after over fifty years together. She won't have a funeral, just a wake. She wants her ashes strewn in Tall Timbers, the only home a military wife ever knew. My grandfather will go alone to California to visit family, see the ocean. He will be a step behind her but still reaching out.

Practice for the rest of his life.

And I realize him leaving us, revving up an engine for a cross-continental road trip is his present to my family, practice for the rest of our lives. Practice makes perfect and maybe soon enough I'll be better at managing the dates on my calendar and the days that stay empty and uncrossed. Maybe one day I'll be standing at a hospital bed and I will finally know what to say. I will see the light turn green and I will put my foot on the pedal and go forward, for once.

I see her lying in that hospice bed at our table, at holiday dinners and birthday parties my grandfather comes to alone. Here's the great irony, the great regret, the great nothing: I see my grandfather now more than ever because he is too scared to stay in their big house alone. He seems healthy but I will not say so out of fear he will contradict me. He had a heart attack earlier this summer and didn't tell us for a week because he didn't think it was a "big deal."

He thinks he will move soon to a care facility, leaving the big house on the lake to just sink into the waters, along with the cicada-ridden backyard and all my grandmother's art. Some of it is being given away, passed around and around like a box of rings, but I would like to think that some of her pieces will be going with her in a way. In the water canvas can rip and fold, painted hands finally grasping what they had been reaching for.

Connie Petty made the best corn casserole. She rescued abused and lost pets for decades, and any animal without a home she took into her own. She played the piano, painted everything from lake tops, to naked women, to her dozens and dozens of cats. She cared so much about my writing, and when I told her I wanted to do it for the rest of my life – she believed me.

I remember the last time I held her hand in Hospice of St. Mary's County. I remember that she held my hand back.

PLAY
WRITING

The Misanthrope Redux, Or How Moliere Might Have Ended It

Nneoma Ike-Njoku, University of Georgia

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ALCESTE: The protagonist and misanthrope, who runs a YouTube commentary channel. His video critiquing Oronte's sonnet has recently gone viral. He wavers between his crush on Célimène, whom he has been courting, and condescension toward her and the other characters.

ORONTE: A semi-famous social media poet and Alceste's rival for Célimène's heart, whose TikTok sonnet Alceste dissed on YouTube.

CÉLIMÈNE: A young and carefree social media influencer for whom both Alceste and Oronte have expressed romantic interest.

BASQUE: Célimène's manager.

LOUIS: Alceste's personal assistant.

PHILINTE: A young professional, who is a mutual friend to Alceste and Célimène. He has previously tried to persuade Alceste to tone down the critiques on his channel.

ÉLIANTE: Philinte's partner, who secretly nurses a crush on Alceste. She is "not like other girls."

PLACE

The upscale lounge of CÉLIMÈNE'S apartment.

TIME

Day.

SCENE I

Setting: We are in the lounge of CÉLIMÈNE'S apartment, where *ALCESTE* discovers that she commented "we are much satisfied at seeing it, king! 🥰" under *ORONTE'S* sonnet on TikTok following *ALCESTE'S* dragging of the poem on his YouTube channel.

At Rise: *ALCESTE* holds his iPhone away from his face in an expression of disbelief and hurt. *BASQUE* enters.

BASQUE

Sir, my client wishes to see you. She has texted you concerning—

ALCESTE

I wish to see nothing else of your client for as long as death hesitates to lay claim to me. My soul loathes deception, and above all the kind of which your client's mastery is unparalleled: the deception of a heart unbarred. I abhor the woman, and were she to employ all her exalted coquetry anew, that ease and rapidity of blinking of which, in the whole of France, the art is known to her alone, were she to attempt, through repeated flattery and passionate declarations of "you alone, you alone!" much diluted by their extent, to delude again—

CÉLIMÈNE hurries in.

ALCESTE

—I would abhor her still the more.

CÉLIMÈNE

Alceste—

ALCESTE

My Uber departs in half of an hour. Do not detain me Madam, I beg you. Louis, gather up our Postmates.

CÉLIMÈNE

But this matter concerns your life!

ALCESTE

My life is fine as it is. Madam, you must excuse me if you wish to avoid my natural bluntness of speech, and that "splenetic behavior," which stood out so particularly for you above my other notable characteristics. Louis! All our Postmates! Not a plate should be missing!

PHILINTE and ÉLIANTE enter.

PHILINTE
(to CÉLIMÈNE)
Have you told him?

CÉLIMÈNE
How? He will not let me speak!

ALCESTE
Told me what? What new-formed designs for deceit?

ÉLIANTE
Sir, you cannot leave!

ALCESTE
I must. My mind is made up. The injustices, mockeries, and flatteries by which society daily overwhelms me, will not disappear before I do. Worthy woman that you are, Éliante. What virtue! What grace! Would that the many others, men, and women all, were like you. But it cannot be so, and so I must flee. Louis! Where is the man?

A knock is heard on the door.

CÉLIMÈNE
Dear Alceste, you must hide! Basque will take you downstairs—

ALCESTE
Hide from what, dear Madam? Some new conquest, perhaps? Some doe-eyed suitor whose undeception you wish to postpone? Nay, I stand my ground! I will expose, and glory in the exposing!

PHILINTE
Would that a new conquest appeared in the place of an old foe! It is none but Oronte, your mortal enemy. Alas, his false reports have not had the effect of defeating themselves, for your great clamoring defending the video has everywhere made Oronte's protests louder. The matter will not else be settled. Having heard of your desire to keep the video, he hastens and drags the force of the law along with him. Oronte comes, and his stans, the messengers of the Marshals of France, to livestream a duel.

ORONTE
(from outside)
Open this door!

CÉLIMÈNE
Sir, you must hide, or forfeit your freedom!

ALCESTE
All of this for an execrable poem! I dare not believe it. And yet—

ORONTE
Open this door! Think not that you can escape me, scoundrel. Open, I say!

PHILINTE
Hide, mad man!

ALCESTE
A sonnet, the mediocrity and ridiculousness of which it would have been criminal to ignore! Did I not warn him of my too-plain sincerity?

ORONTE
Open! Think not that you can escape me!

ÉLIANTE
Sir, please—

ORONTE
Open! Open! Open!

CÉLIMÈNE
Hide, before it is too late!

ALCESTE
I will not! Even were the king of France to compel me, I would not change. Let it never be said that Alceste, having never ceased to declare his praise for virtuous zeal, fled its harsh rewards. Here is the misanthrope: to integrity and fairness, innocent but to everything else in the ways of men, with each other hopelessly condemned. In return for my candor, I am everywhere declared a criminal. I will not retract! I will not hide! Farewell to probity! Farewell to equity! Friends, farewell! To lend your support, check out my Patreon.

Blackout.

A Moscovite Opera

Jessica DeMarco-Jacobson, Columbus State
University

CAST OF CHARACTERS

KONSTANTIN/KOSTYA PETROVICH BUKLIN

MARYA PETROVNA BUKLINA

AUGUSTE TABAKOV

ARSENI BUDNIKOV

THE THREE GARDENERS (NADENKA;
DUSYA; YEVKA)

A VERY YOUNG SERVANT BOY NAMED
PAVEL

A RELATIVELY SMALL AND UNNAMED
ENSEMBLE OF SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN

ACT I SCENE I

A manor in the outskirts of
Moscow. It is lavish, Neoclassi-
cal, adorned by gardens and
Corinthian columns.

NADENKA attends to the
alstroemeria flower box win-
dow, picking out the stray daf-
fodils that have intruded it.

A sudden, sharp rattle beats
upon the grey stained win-
dow—a fist is visible.

NADENKA opens the window
where MARYA waits, in
half-mourning attire.

NADENKA

You called upon me, Lady Buklina?

MARYA

Yes, yes. I wanted to tell you... What was it
now? I shan't have forgotten; I know it was
something important.

NADENKA

Shall I call for the servant—the footman one?

MARYA

No, no; I can call upon Auguste myself. Oh!
Lord Buklin wanted me to ask you... He said
do not worry about picking the daffodils and
weeds from the flower boxes to-day. He says
no one can see the flower boxes anyway, be-
sides us, and you gardeners. He wants the
front gardens attended to, I believe.

NADENKA

The flower boxes, to be unattended? But we
tend to them every day, Lady Buklina. I shall
do as you wish, though.

MARYA

Of course, I do not agree with him, as is usual
between a brother and a sister, but he is the
Lord of the estate, and I am merely the Lady.

NADENKA

As he wishes, then.

(begins to turn away)

MARYA

Wait! One thing I ask of you; do not speak a
word of it to Kostya; you know how he is easi-
ly hurt. I ask, please do take care of those daf-
fodils. They spoil the alstroemerias, which
my father so loved. If not for Kostya, do it for
my belated father, our Pyotr.

NADENKA

I shall see it is taken care of, my Lady.

(MARYA looks as if she is about to ask some-
thing more, but the GARDENER walks away.)

MARYA (aside)

But does she do it for me, or for Pyotr Buk-
lin?—I wonder.

(She walks away from the window. Stage
right: there is a Georgian study, with
letters and books strewn about. It is
dusty, and the fireplace burns. Beside
the fire, sits a large, well-dressed, be-
spectacled man, in a velvet chair, read-
ing a thick leather tome. He's sweating;
the fire is hot.)

(MARYA plays a slow waltz on the piano, quite poorly. At each sour note, the man presents irritation, grunting. After she finishes playing the piece, MARYA closes the pages of music that sit atop the piano and makes her way to the study. She knocks at the door.)

KOSTYA (loudly)

Yes, Marya?

MARYA

(In a very sweet, gentle voice. She holds her hands together, like a child begging to their parents.)

May I enter the study?

KOSTYA

Why would you need to enter my study? You know I am working.

MARYA

Oh? What are you working on now, brother?

KOSTYA

(hesitates, still holding tome)

Oh... You know. I was overlooking the numbers that the caretaker from our Tver cottage telegraphed to me. He always makes so many mistakes!

MARYA

Numbers from Vasily, incorrect? I always thought him a sharp man!

KOSTYA

Even a sharp man can make mistakes. Anyway, what is it, Marya?

MARYA

I should like to enter the study to discuss it.

KOSTYA (frustrated)

If it so pleases you. Allow me a few—

(MARYA enters the door.)

KOSTYA

(Hastily putting the tome to the side.)

I asked you to wait a few moments.

MARYA

Well, I did not hear you.

KOSTYA (huffs)

As you say. What did you come to my study for?

MARYA (to herself)

Father's study... It's father's study!

KOSTYA

...What was that?

MARYA

Oh! Now I remember. You wanted the gardeners to go on and attend to the front gardens, is that correct?

KOSTYA

Yes. I see no need for daffodil-picking to-day. It is a waste of time—their time—and money—our money.

MARYA (to herself)

Father's money... It is Father's money!

KOSTYA

What are you muttering to yourself for, my dear Marya? Are you ill?

MARYA

Do I look ill to you?

KOSTYA

It is not so often that the well speak to themselves.

MARYA

Do not joke of illness, Kostya... It is those who joke of terrible things—be it illness or famine—that cause the Devil to strike them with it.

KOSTYA

You believe this?

MARYA

You know I am a woman of faith.

(She twiddles with an icon from the front of her half-mourning gown.)

KOSTYA

Of course I know that, Marya. That is why I order the chapel to be prepared for you each Sunday since... his passing.

MARYA

Oh, yes! And for that I am ever grateful. It is such a comfort, to ensure that God is present in the home.

KOSTYA

Yes, yes. Quite right. Well, Marya, I must attend to the estate, as you know.

MARYA

Oh, Kostya, allow yourself a break...

KOSTYA

There is too much for me to do to allow for such things.

MARYA

You know, Kostya, I think it would be good of you to attend the opera sometime—to allow your mind to wander away from your books and numbers.

KOSTYA

But I despise the opera...

MARYA

You have never been!

KOSTYA

I know I would not like it.

MARYA

We should go. Just once. I miss seeing Moscow. I miss seeing women about in their new dresses. I miss it, Kostya; I miss all of it so very much.

KOSTYA

I know you do... There is nothing stopping you from going to Moscow. The horses are exercised each day, and the carriage waits by the stables.

MARYA

Yes, very well. I can go to Moscow but imagine that: a woman out, in the streets of Moscow without accompaniment! It is unheard of! I wish for you to go with me.

KOSTYA

Oh, but I cannot travel to Moscow these days.

MARYA

If you were to take a break from your work, I should not see why you cannot travel to Moscow with me, to call upon our old friends and to see an opera.

KOSTYA

But my affliction, dear Marya! Don't you remember my affliction? Or have you been too distracted, with your redowas, and your polkas, and your quadrilles, and your *valse à deux temps*?

MARYA

Valse à deux temps? I do not play "*valse à deux temps*," Kostya. That is out of fashion now. And you do not know that, because you are too busy attending to the business of the estate... And I dare say, you refuse to see Moscow, just for the principle of the thing, not because of your affliction.

KOSTYA (eyebrows furrowed)

You have upset me. We shall not discuss this further. Leave me to my work... And if you shall play the piano, play it gently.

MARYA.

(Quiet for a few seconds; looking down at the floor.)

As you wish it, Kostya.

(She turns around to leave the room and makes a few steps forward, then pauses, turning her head back to KOSTYA.)

I care for you very much, you know.

KOSTYA

And I, for you... Now, if you please—

MARYA

I know. I shall leave you to your work.
(She leaves.)

KOSTYA. (To himself.)

Oh, thank God!

(He reaches for the tome he put down earlier, and continues reading it.)

(Once MARYA exits the study, she fiddles with her fingers and looks to the ground. She walks to the windowsill where she spoke to NADENKA earlier and looks outside. The lights fade out so that you can only see the silhouettes of MARYA, KOSTYA, and NADENKA.)

END SCENE

SCENE II

AUGUSTE sets a table. He wears clothes of the past century and goes about his work as an ant does, with a silent disposition and regard for some higher sense of duty. The dinner is elaborate. AUGUSTE completes his finishing touches and covers a cough with a gloved hand. He walks towards MARYA, who sits on a chair, thumbing through a small book, but not really reading it. She looks up, inquiring.

AUGUSTE

If I may interrupt, the supper has been prepared, my Lord and Lady.

MARYA

Oh, lovely! I am so famished, I thought I should faint—and just as I was enjoying my reading time.

AUGUSTE

Oh... Shall I call for a doctor?

MARYA

No. Let's call for Kostya, shall we?

AUGUSTE

Do you wish for me to accompany you? Or shall I wait in the dining room, so that I can serve the supper?

MARYA

Truth be told, Tabakov, I do think my brother could use additional accompaniment, beyond my own. You see, he sits at his study and works on the affairs of the estate, with little time taken for leisure.

AUGUSTE (disbelief, slightly sardonic)
Oh? I shall call for him with you, then.

(AUGUSTE and MARYA walk to the study together. AUGUSTE walks with his hands held behind his back. MARYA fumbles about with her long mourning dress. They arrive at the study. A few moments pass in which the two are waiting for one another to call for KOSTYA.)

AUGUSTE

My Lady... Do you wish for me to call for him?

MARYA

I think that is best. He does not prefer my company.

AUGUSTE

Well, if I may be bold, My Lady, Lord Buklin—I am sure—is weighed with... these affairs of the estate as you call it. Certainly, he means no offense to you, his dear sister.

(Aside)

The only thing I am certain of is that he does absolutely nothing!

MARYA (Doubtful)

Well, that is certain, as you say, Auguste! Do call for him, if you please.

(AUGUSTE puts his hand close to the door.)

KOSTYA

(From inside the study.)

You may as well have called me from the dining room. Allow me a few moments to dress.

MARYA (To AUGUSTE, whispering.)

It's past morning, and my brother is not dressed. Can you believe it? This is why I insist he go to the opera! He forgets the clockwork of society, what it means to be among others.

(KOSTYA exits his study and faces MARYA and AUGUSTE. He pats his hair, concerned about his appearance.)

KOSTYA

I hope my attire proves I have not forgotten what it means to be among others, Marya.

(MARYA covers her mouth.)

MARYA

You? You could never forget. You are Lord Pyotr Olegovich Buklin's son.

KOSTYA

If you think so. Let us eat.

(AUGUSTE leads them to the dining room. They are all silent, save for AUGUSTE's occasional cough, which he always covers with the back of his gloved hand. They enter the drawing room. KOSTYA pulls out a chair for MARYA. She sits in it. KOSTYA sits to the left of her. They eat, facing upstage.)

MARYA

Do you like the dinner?

KOSTYA

It is good.

MARYA

I'm glad.

(AUGUSTE faces downstage, looking into the distance. He steps downstage, out of the dinner scene. The lights should not focus on him, for everything behind him still occurs, in the same moment, and with as much attention. No one is ever at the centre of life.)

AUGUSTE

I do hope Lord Buklin goes to the opera... This thing, between him and his sister—it is such madness. Each day is as this one. She will play the piano early in the day, and he will ask her to stop. She sits quietly for hours, and he continues working on the estate, or so he says he is. She will go about her day, trying to take on some businesses of this estate, asking the servants and gardeners to do this or that. And every night, this elaborate dinner. She will ask him again, and he will deny her, because of his affliction. The estate doctor, Anton, now dead, diagnosed Konstantin with when he was just a boy. She will at least convince him it is a good idea—to go to the opera, that is, but he thinks differently once he falls asleep, as if he is a new man, but not. I suspect Marya will convince him soon enough; perhaps she has it in her constitution to convince him tonight. Oh, look, it looks like she's about to ask again! And Konstantin is in

better spirits than usual. Tonight, the Buklins shall—

MARYA

Auguste, what are you doing so far from the table?

KOSTYA

(solemn.)

Even servants forget their duty.

AUGUSTE

Oh! Duty is a Buklin value, is it not?

KOSTYA

It is indeed!

MARYA

None of us should ever forget it, then.

AUGUSTE

Of course. I shall clear the table. Now for the desserts. The gooseberry pie... I will retrieve it!

MARYA

No, Auguste. Call another servant for it. I would enjoy your company tonight. Sit with us and enjoy the pie.

(AUGUSTE is baffled, but he does not refuse. He calls for another servant, ARSENI, who serves the pie.)

MARYA

As you know, Auguste, I should like to attend an opera soon.

AUGUSTE

Yes.

MARYA

Have you ever attended an opera before?

AUGUSTE

Once, I think, when I was a boy. My father took me. He had some matters to attend to in the foyer that night with some gentlemen from Norilsk. My father was a clerk for the mining facilities which were quite new at the time, and—

MARYA

Oh! Splendid! Kostya, Auguste has been to the opera!

KOSTYA

To dig metal out of the Earth with his father, it seems.

MARYA

You must tell us everything about the opera, Auguste! Was it Italian? German? French? I must say, I do prefer the Italian ones. They have a certain... *je ne sais quoi*.

AUGUSTE

I do not remember.

MARYA

Oh, you must! I am certain it must have been grand... With Sicilian singers, Corsican dancers...

AUGUSTE

It was a French one, I think.

MARYA

How grand! Kostya, we *must* go to one soon!

KOSTYA

Oh, Marya... You know I cannot.

MARYA

You cannot take a leave from your work?

KOSTYA

Sometimes. But the affliction.

MARYA

You were just a boy, Kostya. It was so many years ago. Surely, it has bettered some, or at least enough to see an opera.

KOSTYA

I do not think so.

MARYA

Oh, Kostya... If I had one wish, this would be it. We cannot live the rest of our lives in the walls of our estate!

AUGUSTE

It is just one night... If the affliction begins to ail you, Lord Buklin, you can call for a chariot, a *troika*, or what have you, to take you back to the estate. And the opera shall be no more.

KOSTYA

(Puts his hand on his chin.)

I suppose... But what a show! To make the workers prepare the horses, to make them prepare my clothes, to make them prepare everything for our leaving. And then only to come back to the estate. The opera is not an escape or break for my studies; no, it is only a prolonged preparation for my return! A show, merely a show! All for a show.

MARYA (excitement)

Oh! Kostya! We must go, we must!

KOSTYA

I shall consider your proposal. *He solemnly nods at Auguste.* I shall consider the opera: the show that precedes it, and the show that it is.

(AUGUSTE looks directly at the audience. He is doubtful.)

MARYA

I do hope you consider the proposal. And it shall not be too much of a show, the preparations you speak of. It was only a few years ago when we left the estate every week or so!

KOSTYA

I cannot consider the preparations and proposals until after we have eaten, I think. I am famished.

AUGUSTE

Let us continue, then.

END SCENE

SCENE III

The three Russians continue eating their dinner and conversing about the opera. NADENKA, DUSYA, and YEVKA enter. They are picking the weeds off the ground. The lights should keep focus on KOSTYA, MARYA, and AUGUSTE. Again, no one is at the centre of life.

NADENKA

What do you suppose they are yelling about to-day, Dusya?

DUSYA

Has age rid of your ears? The same, the same, I tell you! They are discussing the opera.

YEVKA

How boring it must be to do the same thing every day! Can you imagine? Talking about the stuffy old opera house, stuffed with stuffy old men wearing stuffy old wigs! Every night!

NADENKA

There must be a reason, I say. There must be a reason.

DUSYA

Yes; and the reason is that Lady Buklina wishes to see an opera! It is that simple.

YEVKA

Fooley. If they looked from outside the window, if they looked at themselves like we look at them, they could very well watch their own opera.

NADENKA

You missed a weed, Yevka.

YEVKA (sotto voce)

May as well hush me, why don't you?

DUSYA

We'll never finish picking the weeds, I think. The manor is riddled with them! The gardens, the hedges at the gate, even the flower boxes!

NADENKA

Be grateful you will always have a purpose.

DUSYA

Aye. Picking weeds, that is.

YEVKA

Better than discussing the opera, I say!

(The three GARDENERS laugh simultaneously, eerily, ridiculously, like witches of the night.)

DUSYA

Nadenka, do you think they will ever go to the opera?

NADENKA

I think they will go to the opera the day that this manor looks as if Lord Pyotr Olegovich Buklin is still alive and running it, and not his son.

YEVKA

He is running it, from his study! Looking to all those books and old papers for advice!

(They laugh again, a bit more subtly than before. But still simultaneously, still eerily, still ridiculously, still like witches of the night.)

DUSYA

Imagine if they heard us... We would be out on the streets, surely!

NADENKA

And who would pick their weeds? Who would remember what flowers to pick and what flowers to leave behind?

(They all laugh, the same as before.)

YEVKA

Who do you think? No one! I am certain we are the only gardeners left. No one is a gardener anymore. No one lives in the country anymore, for heaven's sake;—who even goes to the opera anymore? We have rails now, we have steam engines, we have the newspapers! Who would want to live in the country?

DUSYA

That is what I was saying! The stuffy old opera house, stuffed with stuffy old men wearing stuffy old wigs! Who would want to live in the city? I would rather pick weeds for the rest of my life.

(The other GARDENERS glare at her again.)

NADENKA

Who knows? Who are we to say Lord Buklin will not go to the opera someday?

DUSYA

Because we have sat here, picking weeds, watching them have dinner and discuss the opera every night.

YEVKA

Things may change; we may ride the troika, and then a year later, we ride the train or what have you, but people don't change. At least if I've learned anything from living with you two and working at this estate.

(PAVEL hastily walks up to them. He is panting.)

NADENKA

Pavel? What is it? What are you doing outside?

PAVEL

I *huff* have *huff* great *huff* news!
(He holds his stomach.)

DUSYA

What? Do you have an affliction too, like our Lord Buklin?

PAVEL

(He sits down on the grass, cross-legged.)
No, no! Don't be silly. *huff* You see: Auguste called Yerik to get me from the milk yard. Then—

YEVKA

Servant boys should not be passing in the milk yard!

PAVEL

Lord Buklin himself told me to; he was reading some medical text from his uncle Fyodor, a doctor from Petersburg, and it recommended applying fresh goat's milk to his—

NADENKA

Oh, never mind that. What have you to say? What is it you came to us for?

PAVEL

Auguste called Yerik to get me from the milk yard. He asked me to go about the estate and call upon all the other servants, gardeners, and stablemen. I am to tell you that the Buklins wish to see everything readied for them to spend an evening at the opera.

NADENKA

Oh!
(She laughs and points at the other two GARDENERS.)
Didn't I say it was possible? Didn't I?

DUSYA

Does it truly matter whether they go to the opera or not, Yadenka? We'll be picking weeds anyway.

YEVKA

No; we'll be readying up everything, not picking weeds.

(PAVEL is uncomfortable. He tries to walk away from the GARDENERS, but he can't seem to muster the courage.)

DUSYA

What do you suppose readying up the estate means for us gardeners, Yevka?

YEVKA

Maybe Lord Buklin has something else for us to do!

(She turns to PAVEL.)

Does he?

PAVEL

Uhh... I am not sure... Auguste called Yerik to tell everyone to ready the estate...

NADENKA

Yes, yes! We know that. But what are we to do?

DUSYA

Oh, do not be so harsh on the boy...

NADENKA

I am only as harsh as Lord Buklin is when he sees that a task was not finished in time.

PAVEL

Oh! I remember. He said the gardeners should continue picking the weeds.

(The GARDENERS all laugh, knowing that they shouldn't have expected anything differently.)

NADENKA

Picking weeds it is for us.

(PAVEL gives them a slight bow, then walks briskly away. He must tell everyone that the Buklins are to attend the opera tonight. The GARDENERS continue picking weeds. The Buklins finish their dinner. KOSTYA goes to his study to re-dress himself in something more

appropriate for the opera. MARYA walks to her room, removing evidence of her half-mourning attire. AUGUSTE snaps his fingers, and maids enter the room; they remove the plates and left-over dishes. KOSTYA and MARYA look into their respective mirrors. Meanwhile, a carriage is brought outside, downstage. The maids, servants, and GARDENERS hurry about the estate. MARYA exits her bedroom and enters the white drawing room, where AUGUSTE is waiting. He cannot help but marvel for a moment at MARYA. KOSTYA walks to his desk to rearrange his papers and books. MARYA taps her foot. AUGUSTE begins to grow worrisome, but he remains silent.)

KOSTYA

Oh... To leave this all behind, for the folly of an opera. But I should, I must! I must attend the opera... Lord Buklin—our Father, I mean—would've wanted me to go. He would want me to be unshackled, wouldn't he?

(He looks in the mirror, combing his hair back. He puts his hand on his face as if he's never seen the sight of himself before. The outdoor servicemen and women pause from their work. The carriage is readied. The GARDENERS prepare the gravel driveway.)

NADENKA

Oh, hurry, hurry! Lord Buklin will be outside any moment!

(All three GARDENERS continue, a bit more hasty than before.)

KOSTYA

But all this work... The work my father did for years, and his father before him, and so on, these estates, these estates! It's all on me now!

DUSYA

(Facing YEVKA)

Pretty up the flower boxes, won't you?

(YEVKA begins to rearrange the flower boxes.)

MARYA (To AUGUSTE)

And what will occupy you while we are gone, Auguste?

AUGUSTE

Oh, do not worry for me, My Lady Buklina. There is plenty. Though its occupants are gone, the estate must be ran by someone.

MARYA

Quite right there, dear Auguste.

KOSTYA

Oh... What is it? Only a night. Only a night and the morning after. I shall go! I shall go, condemn it!

(KOSTYA turns away from the mirror and closes all of his books. He exits his own room, slamming the door shut. MARYA stands up, excited. AUGUSTE gives her a gentle smile. She makes herself sit back down. KOSTYA's dress boots echo through the estate. PAVEL runs to the carriage, oiling the maroon metal. The metal makes a shrill whistle as he cleans it.)

YEVKA

Oh! Oh joy! Do you hear that? Pavel, stop making that horrid sound.

(He stops and looks to the ground.)

(KOSTYA faces MARYA and AUGUSTE.)

KOSTYA

To the opera, shall we, sweet sister?

MARYA

Oh! Yes! Let us get in the carriage before it gets too cold.

KOSTYA

(Starts playing with his hands nervously.)

You're not bringing your coat?

MARYA

Oh, no. It won't be cold enough for that.

(She gets closer to the door. PAVEL looks towards it. The GARDENERS wait anxiously, but they continue their task.)

KOSTYA

Well, well, I shall bring mine. We all know the Moscow weather is unpredictable. Allow me a moment to fetch it.

MARYA

Oh! Of course.

(She smiles at him.)

(KOSTYA walks slowly back to his room and closes the door. He holds his head, in pain.)

KOSTYA

Oh, my God! What am I doing? Going to the opera is such folly! What would Father think? Our Father! If only I could speak to him... I should go, shouldn't I? Marya is waiting; she has waited so long. Fine, fine, I shall go! Now... Where is my coat? Auguste!

(He rings a bell.)

Auguste! Help me find my coat!

(AUGUSTE walks briskly to KOSTYA's room and enters. MARYA waits patiently. PAVEL is bored, and even the GARDENERS have paused from their weeding.)

KOSTYA

Oh, thank God you're here. The sensible Auguste. Have you seen my coat?

AUGUSTE

Yes. I will retrieve it for you, My Lord.

(AUGUSTE rummages about the room, scouring for the coat.)

KOSTYA

Auguste... You are the most sensible man I know—

AUGUSTE

Why, thank you, My Lord. A most gracious compliment.

KOSTYA

Yes, yes, all very well. Now... It may be unfitting, a lord asking a servant for advice, but I do want to ask you... Do you think what I'm doing is sensible? To leave the estate for an opera?

(He gazes at AUGUSTE as if his life depends on it.)

(AUGUSTE finds the coat. He helps KOSTYA dress in it.)

AUGUSTE

My Lord, you left your coat amongst your books.

(He looks uncomfortable. He doesn't want to have to answer KOSTYA's question.)

KOSTYA

Ah. I do tend to do that. After the morning walks, it is just so convenient. I do not wish to ring the bell, just to hang a coat. It seems so silly.

AUGUSTE

Of course, sir. But I will never mind.

YEVKA

God, what is taking them so long?

DUSYA

Oh, you know, they have to dress in the latest fashions and all... It takes so much time to be presentable and fashionable in Moscow.

NADENKA

Oh? And you know from experience, don't you?

(NADENKA and YEVKA cackle. Even PAVEL can't help but smile.)

AUGUSTE

Back to the drawing room then, my lord?

KOSTYA

Oh... I forgot. Wasn't I asking you something?

AUGUSTE

I cannot remember.

KOSTYA

Oh, foey. Well, I suppose it was not important. Back to the drawing room indeed.

(AUGUSTE opens the door for KOSTYA. They walk back to the drawing room together. AUGUSTE trails behind KOSTYA and makes a quiet prayer.)

KOSTYA

I did not perceive you as the pious type, Auguste.

AUGUSTE

Only for my dear mother, who always took me to the church when I was a boy.

KOSTYA

I see. Sensible and respectable... Carrying on your mother's traditions.

(MARYA is excited to hear their footsteps, but she tries to restrain her excitement. AUGUSTE and KOSTYA enter the drawing room.)

MARYA

Oh, marvelous! What a marvelous coat!

(KOSTYA gives a short bow and reaches for his sister's arm.)

KOSTYA

Come, come, Marya. Let us dawdle no longer. In the carriage we shall go.

(AUGUSTE smiles.)

(MARYA accepts her brother's arm, and they walk to the door. MARYA smiles brightly at KOSTYA. PAVEL stands by the carriage. The GARDENERS scurry away, pulling weeds out from the ground as they walk away. KOSTYA opens the door, and the siblings step outside. KOSTYA doesn't close the door. AUGUSTE watches from behind. PAVEL continues standing at attention like a newly commissioned officer wanting to impress his higher-ups. The siblings walk closer to the carriage. KOSTYA helps MARYA get in, then he gets in. MARYA reaches up to tell the driver to go, but KOSTYA stops her.)

KOSTYA

Wait, wait! You cannot forget the custom. We must sit for a moment before we go.

MARYA

Oh, of course!

(They sit silently for a moment. PAVEL wipes his nose.)

KOSTYA

Okay. Shall we go, then?

MARYA

I think we shall.

(KOSTYA holds one hand to his head.)

MARYA

Is something wrong, Kostya? What is it?

(KOSTYA holds a hand out to stop her talking. AUGUSTE looks worriedly at the audience.)

KOSTYA

Shall we really go to the opera, Marya? My affliction... My head hurts.

(He removes his spectacles.)

MARYA

Oh, I'm sure the carriage ride will settle it, and the opera will cheer your mood! Reading all those books and ledgers... It is bound to cause a spell.

KOSTYA

This is no "spell," Marya, but my affliction!

(MARYA rubs her brother's shoulders.)

MARYA

Oh, Kostya... We can just ride back home or stay at an inn if it worsens! Just think about what Auguste said about the opera! All of the singers and dancers, the most talented ones from Italy!

KOSTYA

Oh! Forget them, Marya! This is such folly, I tell you. I ought to be in my study, recounting the ledgers and checking the numbers in all of the books.

(AUGUSTE shakes his head from side to side and rubs his temples.)

MARYA

We've already discussed this! You should take a break from all that. Come on, now. Let's go to the opera. Let us be with our old friends again! Who knows, perhaps we'll see someone we know!

KOSTYA

(He puts his spectacles back on.)

No, no... I shall not go to the opera tonight. I cannot. My affliction. You may go.

MARYA
One does not attend the opera alone!

(MARYA plays the same slow waltz from earlier, quite terribly, as the LIGHTS DIM.)

KOSTYA
Do as you like.
(He steps off. AUGUSTE grimaces. PAVEL does, too. The GARDENERS peek at the carriage from one of the stage wings, looking at each other.)
Shall I help you get off the carriage?

CURTAIN

MARYA
... I suppose so.
(She reaches an arm out to her brother, and he grabs it. She steps off. PAVEL moves aside for them.)

KOSTYA
Thank you, Pavel.
(He flicks him a small coin.)

PAVEL
Oh, gracious me, milord! A whole one-fourth a kopek! Thank you, oh, thank you, great Lord Buklin.
(He bows deeply.)

(The siblings walk back inside the estate. The doors close behind them, and the lights dim, so you can no longer see what occurs in the house. The GARDENERS reappear.)

NADENKA
Well, well, so much for that. Pavel, let's put the carriage and the horses back.

(He does so.)

DUSYA
Do you think they will ever go to the opera, Nadenka?

YEVKA
Do *you* think so?

DUSYA
Was it not Dumas, who said to wait and hope?

NADENKA
We have waited, and we have hoped. Perhaps someday, Dusya. Perhaps someday.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

POETRY

Napkin Note by Hailie Cochran, Mercer University

Origins by Oluwatosin Ebunola, Mercer University

Ohio as a Love Poem by Jacqueline Hernandez, Agnes Scott College

Six Feet Apart by Marylou Southerland, Mercer University

FICTION

Traffic by A'Lyah Releford, Agnes Scott College

Downhill by Marjanae Watson, Agnes Scott College

Ingrid's Friend by Sofia Leggett, Agnes Scott College

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Mothers and Daughters by Sukainah Abid-Kons, Agnes Scott College

How Covington Is Making Art Accessible by Isabella Carbone, Agnes Scott College

Reimagining 'Outside the Lines' with Accessible Art at the High Museum by Maggee Chang, Agnes Scott College

Mask Off by Genevieve Clark, Agnes Scott College

PLAYWRITING

Pig by Urenna Nwogugu, Columbus State University

Offering of Love by A'Lyah Releford, Agnes Scott College

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