

47th Annual Agnes Scott College

# **WRITERS' FESTIVAL**

April 5th - April 6th, 2018



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# HISTORY

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's state-wide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's festival are Eula Biss, Mat Johnson, and Jacqueline Goldfinger '00.

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 Writers' Festival is made possible by the Emma May Laney Endowment Fund for Writing, the Margaret Guthrie Trotter Fund, and the Ellen White and William Wyeth Newman Writers' Festival Prize. We wish to thank President Elizabeth Kiss, Vice President for Academic Affairs Kerry Pannell, Eleanor Hutchen '40, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. Thanks to Xinyao Li '17 for the magazine's cover art. Special thanks to Charlotte Artese, chair, and other members of the English department.

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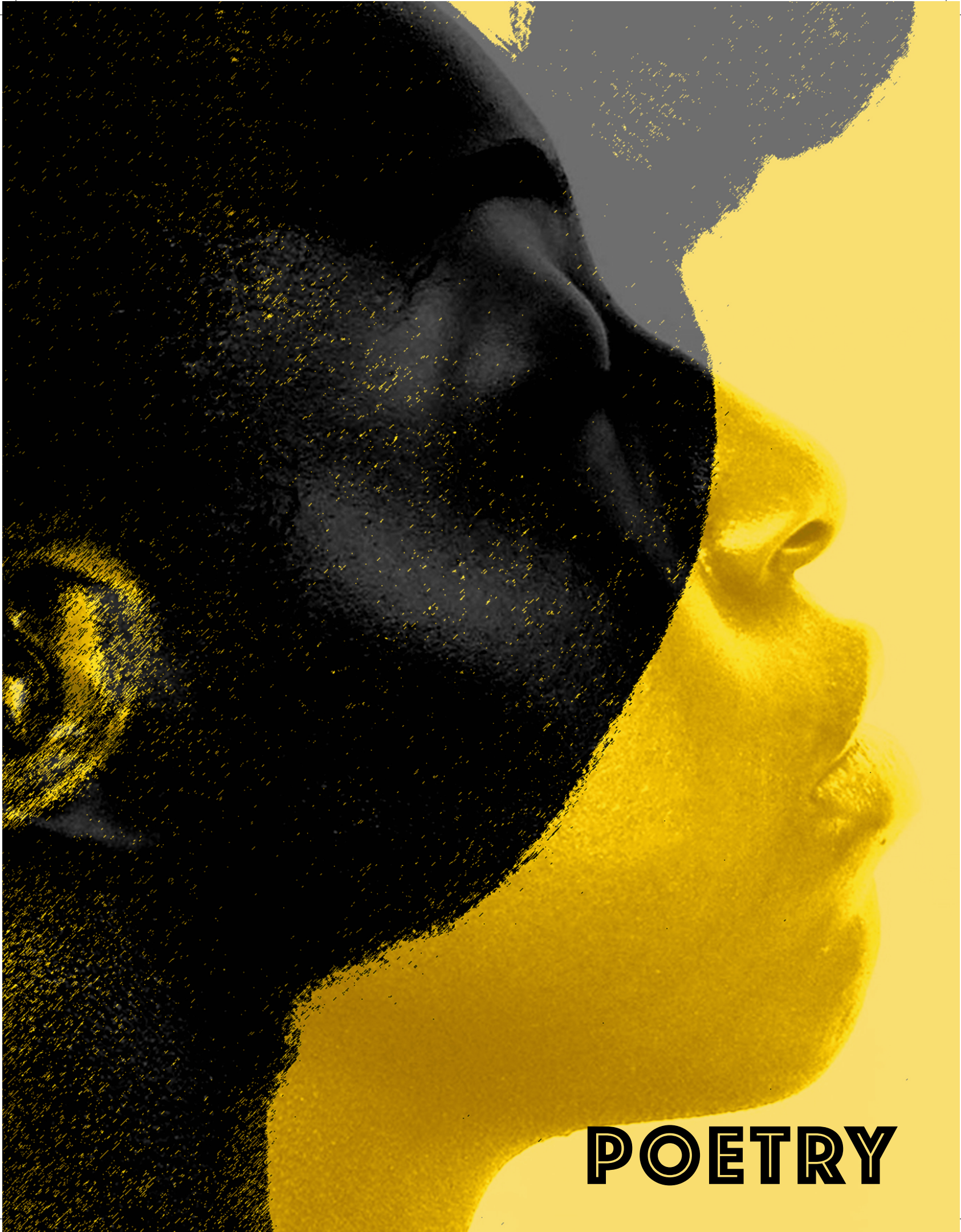
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**POETRY**





## Flight of the Ladybug

Alejandro Lemus-Gomez  
Young Harris College

In my father's study, on the highest floor,  
the morning light crashes against the windows.  
He walks up there in red plaid slippers.

When he moves in his chair, the pneumatic pump  
squeaks all the way down to the basement,  
along with the *taca taca taca* of his keyboard.

His fingers strike the buttons so quickly  
my mother calls it *ametralladora*  
*literaria*. His hands loaded with letters,

ready to fire at the work stacked up  
since the day he came to America.  
Steady pay is the only way we'll make it

to next month. On the cracked floorboards,  
the corpses of dead ladybugs. Their shells  
still glossy like lollipops. They pile up

underneath the windowsills and on his desk.  
They spend their last flights repeatedly crashing  
into the windows, hoping to be freed,

until the impact finally breaks them.

## Curaçao

Robby Nadler  
University of Georgia

you cheated winter out of its smile  
dangled tooth and rally to its skein and wept arbor day  
frost fold and heavy heavy dunk heavy on scream and creamed pants  
until the cracked cloud sugar wrinkled the edge of blue  
like the beginning of blue the assault on blue the refute of blue  
the refusal of blue the refuse of blue the revival of blue  
the refurbished blue the reconfiguration of blue the rewound blue  
the reread to blue the reclaimed blue the revealed in blue  
the revamped on blue the reversal of blue the reignited blue  
the rewording of blue the recast of blue the received blue  
the reincarnation of blue the regressing blue the redialed blue  
the reworked blue the redistribution of blue the release of blue  
the reused blue the rehearsal of blue the repeated blue  
the life of blue the window of blue the beige of blue  
the answer to blue the questions for blue the hospital in blue  
the morning with blue the marriage to blue the small hands of blue  
the skunk of blue the ellipsis of blue the burial of blue  
the street you drove on that iced over and sent you past the guardrail that leads to blue  
this is the only reason why i remember you

## Of late, all creatures

Genevieve Arlie  
University of Georgia

including most insects, excluding most  
people, are almost impossibly precious

to me, the dispassion of suffering  
we inflict on us almost unbearable:

carpenter ants my housemate  
feeds a mixture of borax

and powdered sugar curled fetal  
in one another's mouths; earwigs

striving out of torrential  
rivulets in the shower, washing

out on their spineless backs.  
Nightly I dream of abandon-

ed dogs and comb the local  
adoption listings for one

the size of a human  
newborn, one I could carry,

even if couldn't walk. A thousand miles  
apart, the geometrist

& I  
text each other from bed the bad  
puns for which I adore him,

but he can't make up his mind  
and can't not. I remind

myself love is not  
love. What besides

the heart works its whole  
life until it stops?

## Short Grocery List After Our Breakup

Sara Kaplan-Cunningham

Emory University

Tissues, my mom wrote at the top

after she heard, thinking

we were the same.

All women endured grief

over a man like an occasion.

Next came potatoes,

this one mine. I like them

mashed, the way my dad makes them.

Papaya, sweet & healthy & orange

I think. I've never had one;

I'm trying something new.

Nothing is wrong

with old things.

Ava's blue, long-sleeved shirt

I stole when we were thirteen.

When we didn't know

where to put our hands.

My thighs, her lips.

It still fits. When I told her about you,

she asked about your hair, shoulder-length.

*Do you think that's sexy?*

I don't remember my face.

But my shoulders rose

to meet her question. I ached

to peel back her lip

like the skin of a mango.

Mangoes, lastly.

They're my dad's favorite.

I've eaten them my whole life.

## When Fillets Float

Paxton Spessard  
Young Harris College

In Kenya, I learned that sometimes cows get kidney disease. They will experience exponential advancement of illness, and this creates an expensive inconvenience for the callous-handed farmer who relies on the milk for nourishment and for profits. He can't afford the medication, so a quick and easy slaughtering is favorable over a prolonged, mooing death.

He skins the cow naked—down to flesh and tendon, and hangs it by the rear hooves in a tree. Fraying rope and loose knots suspend the carcass six inches off the ground. The farmer then rides his *pikipiki* into town to summon the village “vet,” who returns to the humble home (which is made entirely of handmade bricks) and the empty cow pen. He examines the flesh for spoil—the belly, the thighs, the ribs, the neck, the rump. Peering out from behind the wall of meat, he catches the eyes of the farmer and reassures: *Nyama si kuharibiwa*. What blessing! The meat is approved for sale.

I listened to the farmer unravel his story in English more broken and crooked than his teeth. He grinned, and with a bouncing strand of Swahili, told me something along the lines of,  
*I maybe get enough money from meat for new cow.*

I nodded and told him that is good news, but I was in a trance; my vision was locked on the swaying mass of lifeless animal.

What a fool I must have looked like—*silly muzungu*, never seen dead cow before. It's true. I hadn't. The cows I know are book-ended with sesame-seed buns and decorated with ketchup and saggy cheese.

But there I stood, (surrounded by sugarcane and avocado trees) teetering on the line that connected the dots between the animal and my plate, ignorance and insight, bovine and beef.

## The Forest Below

Paul Cunningham  
University of Georgia

the below ground  
the forest below  
the roots' entwine

|||

how below reaches above  
a mycelium glister  
dewy powerlines of thirst

|||

how those lines do shake  
themselves  
undead

|||

subterranean sweet stinks  
transmissions of carbon  
the forest below  
the forest below  
the meat of the forest  
a trembling wisdom  
from below

|||

hunger signals, reports  
from the forest below  
sucks from above  
information scrolls

|||

the nodework: twinklings of life  
a network of leaping worms  
a network of confessional fungi  
a ceaseless connection of slangs

|||

*How those roots and branches pang!*

|||

spacious room far below ground  
urn-earth of radiant green  
an all-new subterranean tomb discovered  
teeming with unleavened hosts  
*Urne unto us*, this grass-hop  
my time-hop body decomposing  
along a Like-y timeline  
from mishap to misfortune  
misshapen below buried logs of Ancient Fir  
whole trees of coal and branch  
whole trees and heart chambers  
shooting spirals of green blood  
as my body hugs wet stone

|||

my Temple of Diana future  
my harlequin flora  
remains bay-leaf sharp

|||

Magnetic Resonance Imaging  
of a tree-log, a long body  
a spine-lattice photographed  
in spin-spins of medicine  
*Let us get back to you*,  
via telephone whispers

|||

signal interference  
data corruption  
call lost on the trail  
call lost and a thud

|||

a Gothic trunk sunk deep  
collapsed into a blaze of dehydrating light  
and the ashes eventually sintered  
into a darkness  
a Robert Smith wig  
dripping hard-stirred honey  
until the thigh bones go weak  
with wonky flatline static

| | |

a dirt-encrusted iPhone vrr-vrrs  
 against the belly of a soft, old toad  
 a barrel of crude explodes its way  
 into an already-unhealthy circulatory system

| | |

the below ground  
 the forest below  
 the roots' entwine

| | |

blood, chlorophyll, petroculture  
 my doctor swabs my throat  
 my throat-culture reveals  
 a world of contamination

| | |

our plastic throat  
 our shared community  
 and the Dracula  
 we never speak of

| | |

*(We dare not speak  
 of what's present)*

| | |

but a subterranean forest  
 but a crawling arborescence  
 but a sublime tree-talk  
 knows how to node

| | |

below: frieze of lichen  
 below: mossy tongues of stone  
 below: a system sobbing signals  
*A lack of Sun, a lack of Sun!*  
 (elsewhere: a starving tree)

and the network of fingers  
 locate the thirst  
 locate the tree-fabric  
 the pushing fingers  
 push against the dome  
 tracings of moisture  
 across the fabric of time  
 a Beast from Below  
 paints ropes of cool belly  
 a zigzag buddy-system  
 across the cave ceiling  
 the ceiling of roots  
 a nourishing green drool  
 now all restored becomings

## My Thigh Gap Is The Grand Canyon

Caroline Crew  
 Georgia State University

though inhabited continuously  
 in the habit of grind  
 everyday I make myself on purpose  
 am I around myself  
 in the habit of circumference  
 my wideness vast and though  
 inhabited for a thousand years  
 waiting to be discovered  
 by European explorers  
 in the habit of declaring false starts  
 what my rim rides forth  
 you don't know the breadth of it  
 can you open your legs to this land  
 a limit on visitors no no no  
 erosion prevention is for the children  
 in the habit of safety  
 a ticketing regimen  
 not to protect assets  
 to love the country

our eros our erosion  
my thigh gap is under Federal Protection  
seasonal closings (ice)  
not to habituate tread  
*honey did you take a picture*  
take my picture  
I'm in the negative space  
I'm negatively capable  
do you only love that which appears  
in total visual dominance  
you visited a Rothko once  
you forget the other paintings  
when is meaning big enough  
how far will you drive for it  
nationally significant beyond  
one nation under god  
my thigh gap is visible  
from the International Space Station  
a habitable artificial satellite  
is that what you will name our children  
children of the thigh gap  
have we protected them enough  
in the habit of regulation  
a habit of traffic stops woven  
to silk *ma'am are you sure*  
*you should go out like that*  
how legal is my physical process  
eroding myself into a shape I want  
you like my lack  
but what about the children

my physical process in the habit  
of pleasing my self  
mind the gap  
mine it

## In the Movie

Molly Armato  
Agnes Scott College

In the movie he thinks it's you and I know it's not but I still scream when the knife comes into view. I'm a birthday cake in the dark. A current moving blind around your house. I'm the people that turn into animals. Or cut their hair in the bath. A finger in a zip locked bag. A mouth with an extra jawline. I'm the legend that lures you underwater. Fire flickering to every edge of the sky. I'm the girl that makes the crops grow. The miracle the village prays for. Red hands on the dirt, skim milk in the sun, cheesecloth soaked in ether. The joy and terror of womanhood in equal parts. I am blood between the teeth. I am hair in the disposal. I'm the home you can't feel safe in, a mirror becoming a window, the eye forever turning inward. The mother mourning becomes. I am the church where you were hurt, the field where you should have been abandoned. I'm ice where there should be scalp. I'm establishing shots. The creature in the woods you want to love. I am sharing a Coke when the knife is brought to your neck for slaughter. I am sacrifice by any other name.

## MOCK EXAMINATION ON NECROMATIC PRINCIPLES: PRACTICE PROBLEM #3

Lyrik Courtney  
Agnes Scott College

timed write<sup>1</sup>.

in the classroom. one professor claims  
that in the event of tragedy, lake water can be  
substituted for blood during reanimatory rites.  
& i wonder about whether or not his theories  
can be trusted. he is in conversation with  
the Devil, but there are other ways to die.  
the plight of necroeconomics: to drown  
or not to drown &, if lucky, to embrace the  
guttural tongue of ego death in a manner most  
pleasing to the soil. that is, i hulk my teeth  
around the edges, sink casket-deep. a hawk slams  
itself against the window in ritual atonement,  
lured by our avarice. the floor is lined  
with chalk by way of graceless hands. &  
now blood, puddling along the pane to  
swallow light. no ethical magic anymore.  
no lakes. no salt. no seeing what is really  
there—only the glory refracted by callous  
shapes. the hawk is not a hawk. rather:  
a series of warped circles. Death: Master  
Architect, cancelling out all symmetries  
with me at the center, teaching myself  
to see beyond the atoms.

### Coup d'œil

Megan Clark  
Georgia State University

Mid-sentence, you look up to find me  
across the room, and a yearling pauses  
at this breath, in the Cascades, along a curve  
of road as headlights skim the embankment.  
A hush of thrushes, billows of smoke  
across terracotta roofs. You look back  
into your glass, and the Atlantic swells,  
battering the sides of a crab boat,  
beige paint scraped from the hull  
left in the sea too long. In Pinos Altos,  
a runner, reflective tape limning  
his spine like tapetum lucidum,  
stops midstride at the sound of snarling.  
None of this is new. Pan out  
to the other half of Earth  
scattered with pinpricks of light.

---

1 Outside sources only

## Conjure Woman: Judith Carmichael

Christell Roach  
Emory University

I.

The horizon is a line parting  
properties, a fence of burrs  
marking untamed grass.  
We walk to the edge of the lawn,  
feet crunching fresh-cut blades  
of grass, and we wait. Brel plants  
his foot matchweed-like, a kickstand  
into the green naps. She feels feet  
on her land like any colored woman  
feels hands in her hair. We watch as she  
emerges with pots, dogs, and bruises.  
They say she lived in that house  
with a white man, until one day  
he swelled like a baked potato.  
Mama says she got tired of being hit,  
did that sawgrass voodoo, and cried  
when she heard the sirens. We stood  
before her as she cussed and spat  
and started singing *my man he don't  
love me// he treats me awful mean//  
he's the lowest man// that I've ever  
seen. She looks at us face by face,  
pair by pair, tells us this here land  
is the body of my man. You step  
on it, I kill you.*

II.

We walked up the street, and back again.  
This time we would ask to touch her. We  
would ask her to let us read each wrinkle,  
ask her to let us trace the cigarette burns  
on her arm, ask her to let us tie palms  
around her wrists and stomp our feet. She  
living history, sister of the revolution,  
retired to South Florida. She carried  
a generation beneath each eye, always  
looked at us as if we a crowd. She  
never liked a crop of black kids lingering.  
We asked her why she's so different from  
Stokely, why we never read about her crazy  
ass in some book, and she blasted Hendrix  
for seven days straight. She did not leave  
her house to walk her dogs, did not fetch  
her mail, did not turn out the lights at night.

III.

Once, I saw Ms. Judy tanning  
in the middle of the night. She  
wore sunglasses and reclined  
by her pool green as sawgrass.  
Once, a few days after Katrina,  
she blasted that geechee folk  
from a busted convertible,  
walked stop sign to stop sign  
with a shotgun slung across her  
shoulder. She once had a party  
at her house, but mama wouldn't  
let us spy for fear we'd see  
bodies. Once, I fell off my bike,  
landed in her yard, and she walked  
out her house with a baseball bat.  
The boys fetched my daddy,  
and she stood facing his 6'6"  
build, as his shadow, laughing  
out puffs of smoke.

IV.

When I reached nine summers,  
I got locked out my house, and she told  
me to come to hers. She was cooking,  
not food. Not anything edible. Mama  
said women like her don't cook, only cast.  
*If you must look on me, do so with your hands  
in the pot.* She gave me cerassie & bread-  
fruit, oil from the fats of meat, and yard-  
weeds to drop in when she told me to.  
After I did my part and squinted  
at the steam, she sat me at her table.  
I looked at all the gator skin and hair  
and lost everything in me. She pinched  
the fat of my arm, dragged me outside,  
and sat me in a dirty pool chair.

IV.

Ms. Judy, I hope the sawgrass blooms  
in your belly. Oh Lord, let the pythons  
swell every pipe in her home. Let her  
accent fall flat as rotten ginger beer,  
let her favorite island be swallowed  
by rising tides, let each swim cast her  
into a riptide, a saltwater cyclone.  
Let her live through drowning in her  
green pool, let all her water taste of salt,  
let her land on the no-fly list, let her fall  
into the mouth of a manatee, let no weave  
catch to her head, let her skin peel  
each season. For these things I pray,  
and sign them in castor oil.



## On the Metropolitana di Roma

Brian Heston  
Georgia State University

The quaked train screeches, wheels sparking tracks  
as we pass into a cave of dreams, but no dream—  
only a tunnel, where my face blank-stares back.  
Behind me, some subway Madonna out of Raphael  
watches the small cosmos dozing in her arms,

no more scientific than a celestial temple bursting  
with angels, a sliver of saint bone tabernacled  
in a necklace, that medieval mind searching  
for something beyond city stench, the wind carrying  
the Tiber's stink from one end of Trastevere

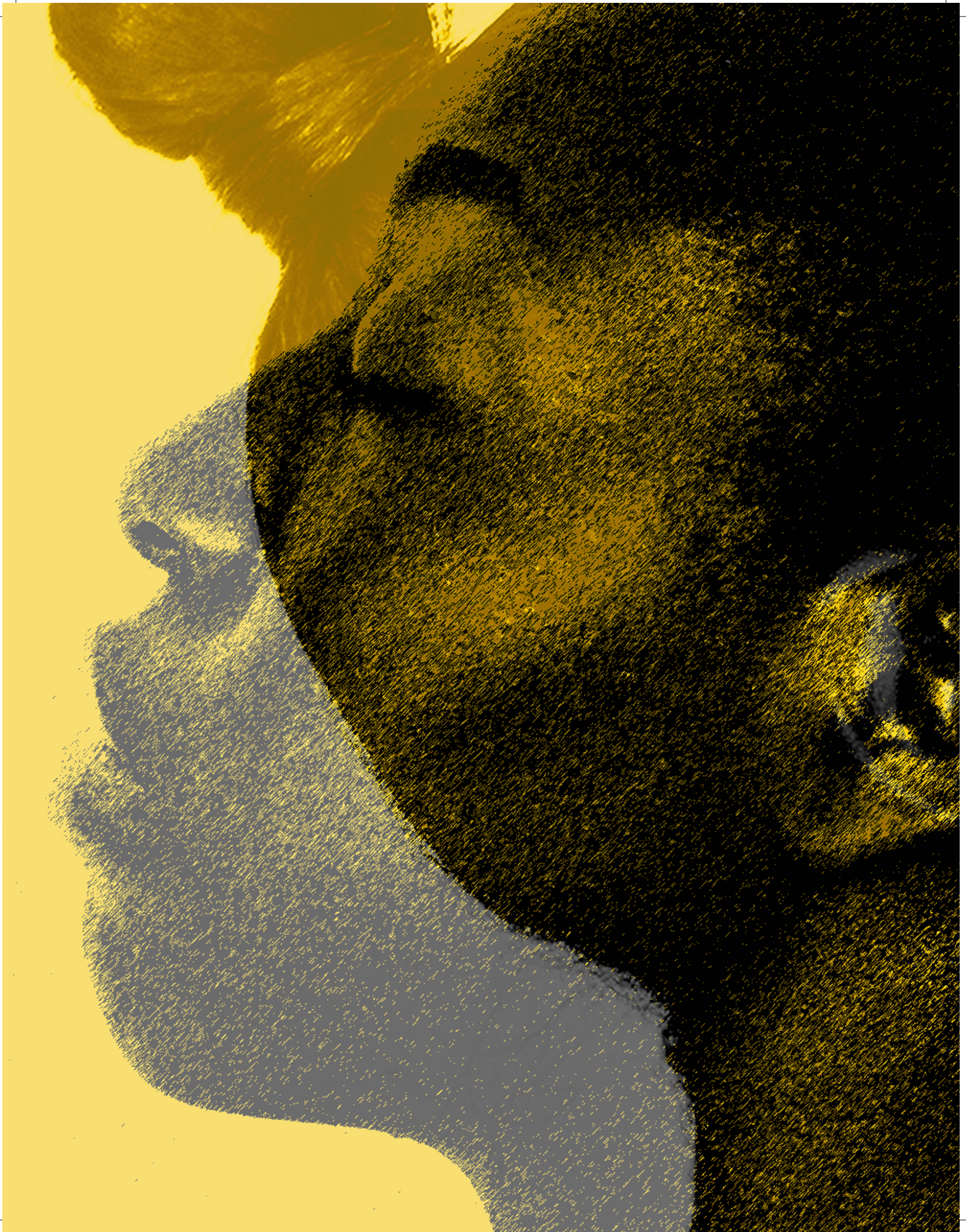
to the other, wafting even into the Duke's shuttered  
window while he and his tubercular duchess, his five  
cherubic brats, devour radish and mutton stew,  
a little stale bread budding with Penicillium that will  
one day be scienced into penicillin, a moldy miracle.

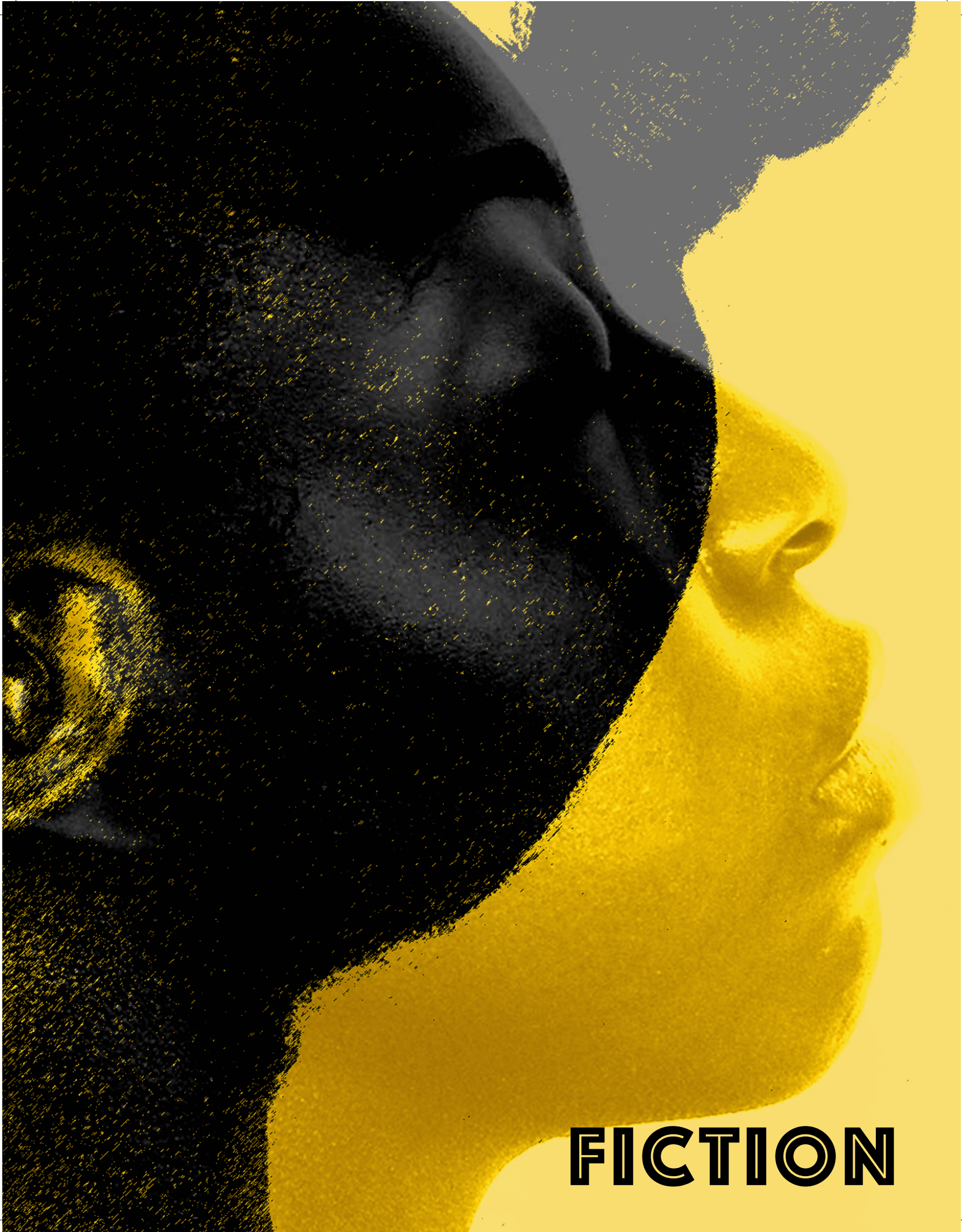
Like my own mother during those late nights  
at Beneficial Savings where she processed checks,  
none the money once offered by a favorite aunt  
to send her to college, only to have her father say "no."  
I try to see her in that other life, hunched at a desk

in a 1960s dorm room, too-close pastel walls  
interrupted by the quad streaming in from outside:  
sunbright and windless, ash and spruce emeraldizing  
the milky sidewalks, the world a Constable or,  
if she squints, a Monet. She returns to her veterinary

textbook, its black and white horse bowels and dog brains,  
cat ovaries and parrot lungs. Eyes ruby with exhaustion,  
she speeds notes onto the pages like they're ready  
to go blank, as if the book is moments from being  
snatched away. What else is there to say when the train

you get off isn't the same one you got on? The lights  
go black; they come back, and the Madonna is gone, leaving me  
with my mother buried beneath pale hospital sheets,  
a violet poking through a snow-tuft, her eyes turned  
toward the window. What they see, I cannot know.





**FICTION**



# The Vine that Ate the South

Megan Clark  
Georgia State University

What trouble had I ever caused? None that I could recall. I was quiet, I was mostly tidy, I kept to myself and I complained only a little, mostly at the announcement of my betrothal. Such protests were short-lived and futile as the back of my mother's hand stifled my objections. The marriage and the slap were for my own good, she promised me. My soon-to-be-husband was a small-time merchant, looking for, and I quote, "a girl that can hold her tongue and run a register." At our first and only meeting, he said I would do, and that it was a shame Lara, my sister, was already taken. Sadly, the man chosen for me was not the boy who helped during hay season, whom I watched from the safety of the house and imagined coming through the doorway one day to ask about the angelic face that had enthralled him from the attic window. But he never did, and I never went out to the gate to speak to him before he left for good last summer.

My family never had to worry about me until now, as another summer approached and when my eyes began turning green and my cheeks flushed a pale indigo. I bore all their sorrows and mine as well, since I came into this family late, after my brother and sister were marrying age, when my mother least wanted another child. She was past motherly decorum and had always spoken to me as if I sprang from her as a fully-grown adult without a touch of childishness in my body. When I cried, she hardly acknowledged me and left me to soothe myself. She often said, "Diana, I don't see what you're carrying on about. Nobody looks pretty when they cry." If I tried to get her to hold me, she tugged her skirts from my grasp and set me to work doing something well out of her sight, hoeing the garden in the summer or mending clothes in the winter. I learned never to be too idle in her presence. Being useful and quiet were what my mother valued most, so that's what I aimed to be.

The visits began when Mrs. Brown lost her husband in a tractor accident and, in my mother's eyes, imposed herself upon our home for far too long one afternoon. The lines around her mouth deepened as Mrs. Brown spoke about God's will and her husband's crushed spine. My mother soon found an excuse to leave poor Mrs. Brown dabbing her eyes at the table with only me for company. Mrs. Brown kept talking and talking, and I didn't have the heart to stop her, so when she finally decided she was winded, she promised to come back tomorrow. I had barely

spoken, only interjecting with "how awful" or "oh no" when she paused long enough for breath. She came back every afternoon that week. I knew we were the closest neighbors to her, but we rarely socialized before then except when we passed the peace at church.

More and more women dropped by, asking to sit a moment. I offered them the best chair and when they turned their sad eyes on me, I knew Mrs. Brown must have told them. None of them expected any guidance from me concerning their problems. Carrie prattled on about her colicky baby and how her toddler son once tried to smother the baby to quiet his wailing. She switched the boy good, she said, and he refused to go anywhere near his baby brother since then. I didn't know how to soothe colic or if I could bear beating a child or how Carrie could ever sleep through the night again, so I made sympathetic noises. I didn't want to appear stupid and say the wrong thing, though I'd gone until the eighth grade unlike other girls who only went until sixth. Not that math or spelling really helped when it mattered. She talked herself out and was soon succeeded by Marge, Mrs. Clouse, Lucille, and Janet. If two of them convened on the same day, at the same time, the women would sit across from each other in relative silence, trying to outlast the other, but eventually failed and were forced to feign reasons to leave.

I have been told that though my face is plain, it is patient, and people were always searching for a comfort they can latch onto. Maybe that is why neighbors came to the house and sat in our kitchen while I washed the dinner dishes and told me their problems when they were sure my mother had wandered a safe distance away. She knew what they were going on about, but I thought this was one of her few acts of kindness towards them and me. I was sure she could find a way to eavesdrop if she was powerfully interested. They always left a sweet, maybe a bundt cake or a chess pie, as thank you, and that was why I struggled into the dresses passed down from my sister. My mother never nagged about this, though she did tug on my tight shirtsleeves or waistline and asked if I'd thought about letting them out. "Husbands," she said, "appreciate a woman with restraint." I still accepted and ate each peach cobbler, each custard that they left. I kept their secrets, no matter the raised eyebrow my mother shot my way whenever they left.

Marge told me that her husband wanted

her too much. She laughed darkly, stole a cookie from the plate that she brought me, and said, "He just wants, wants, wants. What's he do afterward? Sleeps. Lord help me, it's like being ridden hard and put up wet. You know what I mean?"

I didn't, not truly. I knew better than to stable a horse or mule without cooling it down after a long day of work. I reckoned it was comparable to being a woman with a needy husband who asked you to do all the work but didn't treat you like you wanted when it was all said and done. As usual, I agreed with her and commiserated though I didn't have a husband yet and didn't know if he'd be attentive or neglectful, though I had a good guess as to which. Marge smiled wistfully when I reminded her of this. She patted my head before she left, which I didn't care for, and said, "Enjoy being a girl for as long as you can. Don't let 'em take this sweetness that you were born with." Maybe she was confusing that with all the sugar they fed me.

Mrs. Clouse said nearly the same as Marge during her visit. She pressed me to her ample, sagging bosom encased in navy polyester, as I stood stiff as a sheet left too long on the line, and implored me to cherish the time I had now, the time I would soon have with my husband. For as long as I could remember, people, most ardently my mother, told me marriage was the greatest gift any a woman could receive, right after childbirth. I think Mrs. Clouse was feeling nostalgic. She pined for the early days of her marriage. She was experiencing the opposite problem of Marge. Mrs. Clouse's husband never touched her, and she explained in exquisite detail how, forty years ago, she had been crowned the fall festival beauty. I could see where a strong jaw had resided in her hanging jowls and how men could have lost themselves in her powdery blue eyes. She left a jar of strawberry preserves that I later spread on Janet's pound cake. Janet's hens and their refusal to lay a single egg, not a solitary one, were her worst troubles.

When the ground began thawing last March, instead of only spying from the attic, I began sleeping there, unbidden and without a fuss, when my mother convinced my father, a man who could never make enough at the sale barn, to take on a boarder in my old room. They could only find a string of traveling salesmen to occupy the space and usually only for a night or two, usually when they had gotten lost on the country road. Then these renters fizzled out, but now my room was someone else's, the men's, and I refused to leave the attic. It grew hot as summer settled into the house, as if hot coals crackled in the eaves, but I would open the one

circular window (what my mother called a rose window) and peer out into the cooler night air, incising shapes from the sky by connecting stars with my hovering fingertip. I enjoyed staring off into the distance, and my parents often asked what could occupy the space between my ears. I didn't care. Sometimes I was thinking, sometimes I was tired. I stayed up late, sweat trickling down my back as I whispered all my neighbors' worries, and sometimes my own, to the moon. My wedding would take place as soon as the last field had been cut since my father boasted to my soon-to-be husband that we would be too busy to spare my steadfastly working hands before then. My soon-to-be husband agreed and said his store wouldn't be very busy until after all the farmers had cashed in their crops and started flooding in to snatch up dry goods with their new wealth.

Lara's husband was doing business in the area and she stopped by, sitting gingerly in the good chair and easing back slowly. Her hands wrapped around her expansive middle, and mother brought her glass after glass of iced tea. For once, I sat instead of standing, and Lara grabbed my hand and smiled at me. Despite the heat and her pregnancy, she remained much prettier than me with wide hazel eyes and auburn hair that stuck to her sweaty forehead.

"You're to be married, that's such wonderful news," she said. Mother brought her a cold washcloth to press against her neck.

I nodded and said, "I'm looking forward to it."

"Then you can have a little one as well, just like I will." Lara's voice remained bird-like, cheerful, but her eyes grew misty. She looked at me, never over at mother. "You'll love it, Diana. I can't wait for it to be over," she paused, "so I can meet him finally, you know?" Lara laughed and then drank her tea too quickly, nearly choking on it. Mother smiled down at her and stroked her hair.

When Lara hugged me to leave, she pressed me hard against her, and her belly felt too large and strange. Lara looked close to tears again. Her husband stood by the fence, a dark silhouette of a man with his hands in his pockets. He was a sod salesman, always saying he sold more than dirt, but dreams of grassy perfection. "We'll be back for the wedding, don't worry about that," Lara said, and she used a handkerchief to wipe her face of the sweat and tears.

As the date approached, it grew harder and harder to tear myself out of bed. I no longer even had the comfort of spying on that boy any more as father hadn't the money to pay for extra help and stayed outside from before breakfast until well after supper, coming in to eat

a cold plate alone. He hadn't been lying about needing me this summer. He pulled me from my housework to help load hay onto the trailer that we then stacked into the barn. I thought of Lara and what grew inside of her and how hard she had held me. One morning I found it nearly impossible to climb out of bed. I only wanted to lie in the sunlight streaming across my legs and back. It was hot but in a comforting way. Later, as I swept the front room clean of the dust father dragged in from the cow fields, my mother turned to say something and dropped the plate she was holding, causing it to shatter on the ground. I jerked at the noise and looked at her in shock that she'd allowed a precious plate to break.

"Are you warm?" she asked.

"No," I answered, puzzled. "No more than usual."

"Then you've let your face get dirty. Finish here and then go wash it off."

I scrubbed my face with water in the bathroom, squinting at the small mirror over the sink. I looked flushed, but I had no fever. She sent me to my room and I thankfully climbed back into bed, glad to be free of further chores. The next morning it was even more difficult to climb out of my bed. After breakfast, Katherine dropped by and waited for me to fill up the sink with water before chatting about how her two dogs were no longer getting along.

Her voice trailed off though when I turned around to give a reassuring head nod as I usually do, and she asked, "Have your eyes always been that color?"

"Which color would that be?" I asked.

"Such a strange green," she said.

Under my confused gaze and an affirmation of my brown eyes, she petered out, stopped talking and excused herself under the pretense of having to be home. She left in such a fluster that she took her plate of divinity back with her. My mother, on hearing the screen door slam, returned, walking slowly, as if she hadn't been waiting for such a cue. Upon seeing my eyes, she took my face in her hands and studied me long and hard, saying I must have been bitten by something and to go upstairs and rest while she called a doctor.

Father yelled and yelled about having to pay for a home visit but soon resigned himself to the bill. The doctor, with his cool hands and cold stethoscope, deemed me healthy, only prescribing bed rest and plenty of fluids.

"Kids," he said (I frowned at the word), "go through changes. There's nothing wrong, so there's nothing I can do." He shrugged, gave my father his bill, and left.

In an attempt to heal me, my mother poured buckets of soup down my throat as

one would pour water or fertilizer on a prized seedling. I heard my parents talking downstairs, about how my soon-to-be-husband should be kept in the dark, how maybe I could wear a thick veil on the wedding day. I doubted that would work. The first day in the mirror I had looked flushed, but now when looking out the window at night, I marveled at my skin, now a lavender color laced with darker, mulberry-like veins, the brightest pigmentation on my cheeks. When I rubbed my hands along my face, the texture of my skin was no longer soft, but rather rough, nearly like scales. My eyes stayed a deep green. Deep inside me, I felt something twisting, and I clutched my stomach as cramps rolled through my muscles. Soon, the neighbors stopped visiting me. My face had changed, and they were unsure if I could be trusted now that I was cloistered. I only saw my mother and very rarely my father. Mostly, I saw him by looking out the window from my bed. My only comfort was lying in sunlight. My body felt lit from within, and this was extinguished each evening as the sun went down. The moon no longer held any solace for me with its chilly stare.

After my eyes and my skin, it was my hair. My frizz turned slowly from dull gold to green with the roots turning dirt brown as if submerged in soil. I could see this faintly in the reflection from the windowpane. Slicked down into coils by their weight, the verdant ropes of my hair twisted down my spine as it grew past my shoulders, past my elbows, past my knees, heavy, but I did not mind. They wound around me like snakes after a night, and my mother screamed at first seeing them. I hung them out the window and felt leaves flourish from my used-to-be hair, felt them each grow to be as big as a dinner plate. Since my window faced the east, I sighed in contentment each morning as the sun rose and shone on me and the vines hanging along the side of the house. I wanted them to become longer and longer. The twisting inside me lessened as they grew. My father threatened to cut them, but my mother wrestled the shears away from him in time. I didn't know if chopping them would hurt or if I would bleed or maybe even die; none of us, not even my father after he cooled down, wanted to find out.

Then my fingers turned green. Ovate leaves pushed out from under my fingernails, and I gazed at the progress calmly. It was natural, as if it were my nails growing or my hair or my skin after a sunburn had peeled away. My fingers, then my whole hands, turned into twisted vines like my hair, and the next morning I lifted my arms above my head and laid my used-to-be hands out the window with what once was my hair. When my mother saw this, she screamed at me and slapped me again

before crying. I had only seen her cry once before, when, while cutting potatoes, I asked her why my brother and sister were so much older than me. I always assumed her tears was a brief moment of weakness on her part. After yelling herself nearly hoarse, she left. Later when she brought me my soup, she begged, something she had never done before. She begged me to stop, to see sense, to wise up, to act like a grown woman. She said I would grow to love my husband in time as she had grown to love my father. That if I didn't like him then maybe I could get a divorce. Before long, she even promised to break the engagement if only I would stop this tantrum that I was throwing. I tried to respond, but I found that my tongue had turned into a thick vine and I could make no sound. My mother's face went white. After this, she stopped speaking to me and began only bringing me water, pouring it along my intact torso which soaked it up like dry soil. She must have told my father because he only came to see me once more before relegating himself to the first floor. He stepped in as my back cracked and a root crown emerged above my tailbone. He quaked at the noise and averted his eyes. I spread out in the room. He gripped the doorknob tightly and slammed the door. My used-to-be legs, now roots that looked like sturdier, browner versions of my viney hair and arms, soon punctured through the wall and down the backside of the house in search of an anchor, in search of sun-soaked soil. I uncoiled and uncoiled until that pain inside of me dried up.

A week before the wedding, my betrothed stopped by our house. I no longer had ears, but I could still hear him. "Have you been planting for the government?" he asked.

"Wha-a-at?" answered my father, clearly nervous about such an unexpected visit.

"That mass of kudzu all along your house. I know some hands who are getting prime pay for planting that."

My parents laughed as if he'd told a joke. "Yes, of course, you know it's been dry this year and the hay's not so good...so I planted...yes..." My father trailed off.

"Where's Diana?" my soon-to-be husband asked.

"Sick," my mother said quickly. "Yes, sick, very sick," my father echoed.

"Is she in her room?" he pressed further.

"We moved her to the attic. For the fresh air, the sunshine," my mother said.

"Can I still see her?"

Though my mother and father protested, I heard my soon-to-be husband climbing the stairs. I imagined his hat, which he had told me, with a straight face, was called a pork pie, sitting low on his head, brushing the tops of his

wing-like ears; his thin lips curling into a satisfied smile at doing as he pleased; his fingers, dingy with ink from ledgers, grasping the handrail as he climbed higher and higher. After he opened the door and peered in, he looked back at my parents and asked, "What game are you playing?" Like I said, I could still hear him though I had no ears, I could still see him though I had no eyes, and I could smell him though I had no nose. I could feel his hand brush through my tangle of vines though I had no skin, and I could taste the paper and lead on his hands though I had no tongue. I could no longer look in the rose window, so I do not know for certain what he saw, but reflected in his small, round glasses, I sensed everything was green and rustling and stretching towards the sun. He searched and searched on the bed for me, and he left cursing my parents, promising to defame them at every opportunity in town as swindlers of the first rate. He left as my used-to-be soon-to-be husband.

I became troublesome. I swallowed the house in my vines, first the outside, stealing all the sunlight, then the inside, embracing every nook and cranny. Neither chopping nor fire nor poison affected my growth, and my parents fought and fought for as long as they could, no longer asking if vines could bleed. They moved out, and my name died on their lips. Southerners close their windows at night to keep me out.

As a girl, I rarely left my home, but now I've stretched from our house, along the road, and my tendrils most likely now clutch at your windowsill. My sister, despite the warnings about my invasiveness, fertilized my main root system until she died, or at least I think she must have died since she no longer comes by. Mostly, I am green and my leaves wave in the wind, barely betraying that a house lies beneath my thick curtain. My vines blossom thick stems of purple flowers. I flourish. I have been plucked and taken into others' homes to be jellied and jarred. Sometimes, people's hands flutter through my vines, and I swear they hear me sigh with their touch. That boy, whose face I saw framed by the rose window, once stopped by my used-to-be house to linger over my sweet late summer breath.



## Public Statement

Nora Banner  
Georgia State University

Before Wednesday's brush-up rehearsal for the second week of *Hands Tied*, the producer called a meeting. He invited the playwright, the actor, and the director, phoning them one by one. "There was an emergency," he said. It had to do with the future of the production. 5:00 p.m. call instead of 6:00 p.m. Tardiness would result in dire consequences. Dinner provided.

He picked up enough Szechuan chicken and pork fried rice for three of them, along with a tub of tasteless, vegan stir-fry with sauce on the side for the actor, and set up the plates and food buffet-style in the theater on a card table he set up behind the last row. At the bottom of a steep incline of seats, the stage was dark and mostly bare but for a two-by-six-by-eight-foot platform covered in spackled cloth. Behind the platform hung a scrim where a slide projector would provide black and white photographs for the settings: the colonel's rose garden, the legislature's hall, the prisoner's torture chamber. With the light shining just so, the audience couldn't see the rack of props and thirty-two costume "suggestions" behind the screen—the mink hat for the colonel's wife, the blazer for the arms dealer, the bulletproof vest for the cop, and the blindfold for the prisoner, all to be portrayed by the company's single actor. The small cast saved money initially but now, if he wanted to, the producer could hire more actors, as he'd packed the house in presale tickets for the remainder of the run. They would not, unfortunately, be finishing the run.

This was all thanks to the reviewer who'd covered Thursday night's preview of their one-woman drama concerning the recent years' public executions of journalists, vandals, and protesters of the regime. Eight months ago, when he'd thought to launch the show, the producer figured the people were ready for some dissent on the stage, and he received a permit to produce what the regime thought would be a harmless one-woman musical about a washed-up film star. In reality, the producer had told his company, they'd make a statement for a few hundred theatergoers looking for a little song and dance escape. They'd come for light entertainment and leave with inspiration, having witnessed somebody actually voicing the truth for them. In voicing the truth, their company would keep art, true art, alive. He believed it was worth the risk, if there actually was a risk.

And thus he convinced each company member to sign a contract taking responsibility

"for his or her part in this social action and its repercussions." They knew the danger, but the regime had yet to send a performance artist to the firing squad. So far, the legislature had more or less ignored the entertainment industry because in those times, the entertainment industry did nothing but entertain—particularly the theatrical entertainment industry. No one—the playwright, the director, the actor, the costume assistant, nor the producer's daughter running props—actually believed the theater had enough life in it to threaten the regime.

But that all changed when the review in Friday morning's paper raved of the company's boldness and the actor's ability to make the audience laugh, cry, and think. And even this would have been fine if the reviewer hadn't coined the show a "call to action" and "a change of tide." By Friday afternoon, tickets had sold out for the remaining three-week run. Every last Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday matinee had an extensive waitlist. Such success was a distraction from the potential, or should the producer say *inevitable*, consequences of putting on such a scathing critique of their government, and he was at least partially to blame—he shouldn't have let things get so out of hand. If he were a responsible man, he would take responsibility; if he were a saint, he'd take all of the consequences upon himself and let the rest of the company go free. But he was not such a man, and he would do no such thing. Besides, he knew that sending a producer to the firing squad, a man whose name was rarely known beyond his industry, would not satisfy the regime.

For a similar reason, he did not invite the stage manager to the meeting. He did not invite the sound woman, the light board operator, or the costume assistant, even though she assisted the actor in no fewer than thirty-two costume changes during the ninety-minute show. He did not invite his daughter.

It was quite possible that the actor, the director, and the playwright would assume that the purpose of the meeting was to extend the run, perhaps plan a tour. How the producer wished this were the case.

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The director arrived first, in a merry mood and with his own bottle of wine. The actor and playwright came in together, for they were on

and off seeing each other. They contributed nothing. The producer fumbled as he opened the pinot grigio, and the playwright took over, divvying the bottle in the four, stemless glasses from the company's kitchen.

After everyone but the producer took seats, side by side in the row below the sound booth, the playwright slapped her armrest and announced that no less than four theater companies across the nation, three of them repertory, had contacted her after last Friday's review requesting to produce the show as part of their next seasons. An additional theater company on the other side of town requested to produce the show as soon as next month. She announced all of this as if they had had won some sort of victory.

"I should get straight to the point, then," said the producer. He swallowed to clear his throat. "This afternoon, I received a phone call from the legislature."

As soon as he said "the legislature," the actor slumped, the director straightened, and the playwright bent forward, hugging herself.

"The legislative assistant called at around three this afternoon." The producer went on to remind them how he'd figured the regime would be watching; he had produced three plays earlier in his career, when people still attended the theater to think, and all of those were subversive in one way or another, all of them challenging the regime in one way or another. The public executions hadn't yet started at the time of those productions. "But," he said, "even then the phones were bugged."

*Hands Tied*, the legislative assistant had said, went too far in provoking disdain for the policies behind last year's executions, promoting imagery and ideas that directly threatened the citizens' well-being. It provoked the people to threaten law enforcement. It provoked threats from ordinary citizens, and worst of all, she'd said, it provoked riots in front of the legislative building, thereby preventing public servants from arriving to work in safety. The producer had known all this, but again, this swell of response, which he'd interpreted as success, had blinded even him to potential consequences. But of course: *The louder the people, the louder the legislature*. Was it not a line from the play? And did he not require each company member, including his daughter, to sign a contract? Simply closing the production was not enough, the assistant had said. Shutting down the theater was not enough.

"Somebody will have to go," the producer told his playwright, director, and actor. "And if we can't narrow it down to one execution, the entire company, including my daughter, will pay." He scanned his small

company as he finished: the director gripping the arms of his seat, the playwright biting her lip and shutting her eyes, and the actor's eyes welling with watery horror. "I'm afraid it's time to review the contract," said the producer, and then quietly, "I'm very sorry."

"So you're telling us," the actor said, interlacing her fingers and placing her elbows in a triangle on the back of the seat in front of her, "you're saying that one of us will have to die because somebody saw our play and started to riot?"

"It's hardly a riot," said the playwright. "They're hardly protests."

"How bad are the protests?" the director asked. "Did anybody die?"

"No deaths to speak of," said the producer. "But the regime is nonetheless frightened by the reactions to our work."

"Remind us why we're the ones responsible for what other people do," the actor said.

The producer refilled their glasses. "It doesn't matter whether we claim responsibility, personally, or not. What we believe in, at this point, counts for very little. We spoke, and they responded." He leaned against an aisle seat and sipped his wine. "Either one of us steps up or we all face the firing squad." He thought of his daughter and wife. "Our families included."

"Well, you are the one most responsible," said the director to the playwright. "You're the one whose ideas the people are rioting about." The producer tried to offer the director some rice, but he waved the food away. "Not hungry," he said. "Imagine that." The director was usually hungry.

"Well," said the playwright to the director, "it's your vision bringing my ideas to life. You're the one who interpreted them." She had no trouble stuffing her mouth with a forkful of fried rice, as the playwright tended to eat when nervous.

"I'm thinking," said the producer, nodding at the actor, "they want her." He looked at her with genuine sorrow when he said, "She would make the strongest public statement."

"Makes sense," said the director. "She's the one that's making the most impact. She's the one convincing the public to respond."

"You were right," said the playwright, before washing her words down with pinot grigio. "You were right that the ideas came from my mind. So if they shoot me, they prove what I was trying to say in the first place."

"Remind me again," said the actor, "why we need to make a public statement?"

"What about jail?" said the playwright with her face lit. "I'd sit in jail—hell, I might be able to finish my next project with all that

downtime."

"Prison is not an option," said the producer. "Trust me, I tried. And we've already made our statement," he said to the actor. "It's the regime making the statement."

"But it was your idea to put the show out there in the first place," the director said, raising his voice at the producer. "You talked me into taking it on—said it probably wouldn't get that much attention."

"Yeah," said the actor. "We signed the contract because you convinced us that the theater is dead anyway."

"Listen to what you're saying," said the producer. "Did you hope the theater was dead?"

"Speaking of attention," said the playwright to the director, "if that's what you want, have you considered martyrdom?"

"True!" said the actor. "If you face the squad for us, you'll be remembered forever as a man who died for his art."

"Anyone who steps up will be a person who saved lives," said the producer, "my daughter's included."

The director finished his glass and passed it to the producer to pour him another. "If that's what this is about, saving your daughter's life, then why don't you step up for the martyrdom?"

"It's not just his daughter," said the playwright mercifully before the producer needed to respond. "It's all of us. And then some. First us, then the protesters." She rubbed her temples. "I've spent a lot of time with this regime in my head. You know," she said, now glaring at the producer in resentment, "to write this play for you." She did have a good point there. He had commissioned her. "They take their statements very seriously."

"Now, this might be something," the actor stood from her seat and said, as if she were giving a speech. "The people are on our side. The people are rioting."

"They are not rioting," the playwright said.

"Protesting," the actor said. She drained the rest of her glass. "Anyway, if one of us steps up, the protestors might provoke a war and bring this whole thing to a halt."

"That quickly?" said the director.

"More likely," said the playwright, "they might start rounding up the protestors unless one of us steps up." She was referring to a moment when, three years ago, a hundred or so college students protesting the execution of a physics professor were hauled off in police vehicles and never heard of again. It was the subject of one of the actor's monologues in the play. The fact that the legislature had not yet interrupted the protests but had given those involved in the production a chance to resolve the situation

with a single sacrifice was, in a sense, a kind of progress from how the regime had previously handled dissent.

Regardless, the producer understood that such a sacrifice would perhaps bode well for the future of his company, when and if he ever tried to launch another show. He set the bottle on the table. "Does that mean you're considering stepping up?" he asked the playwright.

"I still think he was right, it should be you," the director said to the actor, and then to the others, "She's the most recognizable face. They might still be blood thirsty after one of us."

"I'm pregnant," said the actor.

The playwright put her fork down and gaped.

"If you kill me, you're killing two of us. You're killing my daughter."

"Get out of here," said the producer.

"Please," said the director, "nobody's going to believe that."

"You've had a lot of wine for a pregnant woman," the producer said.

"Okay, you're right," the actor said.

"But I had you for a second," she said to the playwright.

"Maybe you're right," the playwright said to the director. Her voice shook. "She is the most recognizable face. Maybe she *should* be the one to step up."

"It's what I've been saying," the director said.

"I need more wine," said the actor, almost at a whisper. "I'll think about it. How much time do I have to make the decision?"

"An hour," said the producer. In an hour and a half, he would be home with his wife and his daughter.

"An hour!" said the others.

The producer looked at his watch. "Or forty-five minutes."

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In her dressing room, the actor guzzled enough champagne to move beyond awareness of time and space. Meanwhile, she had to get into costume one last time. The question was: which of her thirty-two costumes should she wear? What would make the best statement?

"One of the citizens," said the producer. "The prisoner. She will be one of us."

But the director said, "It's much more interesting to be shot while dressed like the officer." He had a point.

"Interesting, how?" said the playwright.

"You're onto something," said the producer. "She will go out as one of them. They'll be executing one of their own."

"I hate that word," the actor said before she burped on her bubbly. "Execution. It sounds so heartless."

\*

The producer watched the officers drive off to the capitol with the actor in the back of their van, but that was all he could watch. Shouldn't he, out of all of them, have known the repercussions, the risk? He'd made his career on boldness, equating audacity with art, and now—now he just wasn't sure.

At home, his wife had made a quiche. His daughter joined them at the table. The news station broadcasted the execution, discussing the matter for hours beforehand, so everyone, including the producer's daughter and wife, understood why the brush-up rehearsal had been cancelled. They understood the uncertainty of their future. "It was a good show," his wife said as she set a slice on his plate. He poured from another bottle of champagne for his wife and his daughter. Together they toasted what was, at the end of the day, his most successful work.

But he had no career now. He didn't share the actor's belief that the people would respond on her behalf. He envied that she could sacrifice herself with such purpose, such hope. After the meal, instead of watching the television broadcast, he went to his desk and made a spreadsheet for all of the refunds he'd be distributing over the next few weeks.

\*

If he'd watched, he would have seen aerial footage of witnesses flooding the capitol steps and across the wide green mall, winding around the city in a pointillist river of people, some blood-thirsty, some saying she should have known better, some saying anyone with brains would have known better and others grieving for the future of the stage.

If the producer had watched, he would have noticed that the actor was dressed as both a citizen and an officer, making the statement that they were like one of us and she was like one of them. Blindfolded, she marched between officers to the firing wall near the capitol's fountain, water flowing behind a now-green copper dove, to remember the lives sacrificed for law and order, for peace across the land. The blindfold slipped a little and the water flowing was the last thing she saw. She hoped her death would be enough for the next good thing.

THE END

## For Hayden

Sydney Bollinger  
University of West Georgia

I can only reasonably start this story with the day he sat inverted on his mother's porch while asking me about the Fountain of Youth. Hayden hasn't died or anything, but we haven't spoken in seven years. Sometimes, when he visits his family, I watch him walk through his yard out to the forest behind our neighboring houses, the same forest where we spent that afternoon when we were twenty. I didn't believe him, though. I never saw the Fountain of Youth that he claimed existed. It's hard to believe such a thing ever existed anyway because God isn't real, and it's likely we'll just wander around in the afterlife searching for meaning on a humid afternoon that smells of manure.

He liked to sit with his feet over the top of the porch swing, head dangling towards the ground. His blond hair lightly scraped the cement. I watched him as he used his legs to propel the swing back and forth, rocking his lower body with precision to set the swing in motion. The chains attaching the swing to the porch creaked under his weight; they were old and nearly rusted through. Once, earlier that summer, I asked him why he preferred to sit like this, and he told me it increased blood flow to his brain, so he could be more creative. His yoga teacher taught him this.

"Do you think about the Fountain of Youth, John?" he asked. He had closed his eyes while swinging rhythmically, keeping time with the hum and roar of the cicadas which had returned for the summer following their thirteen year slumber. As kids, we would run around his yard pulling forgotten exoskeletons off of tree trunks, compiling the shells in a five-gallon bucket and then using our hands to crush them down into dust. Hayden dumped the crushed bits in his mom's garden, because he thought the organic matter would help fertilize her lavender.

I slid down in my chair, my neck pinched between the crease of the seat and the back, letting my knees fall naturally, which meant they jutted out at strange angles. "No," I said. "Should I be thinking about it?" He let out a deep breath as he pressed his hands into the concrete, swinging his legs to the side, his bare feet landing flat on the ground in a round-off like motion. "Impressive."

"Simple," he said, rearranging his body into a criss-cross position. He faced me with his head leaned back against the seat of the swing. "So, I've been meditating in the woods."

"That's nice," I said. "What's that have to

do with the eternal youth?"

"We don't have to move on," he said.

"You're being cryptic. Have you been reading that Natalie Babbitt book again? *Tuck Everlasting*? You know that's fiction, right? You can't stop time, or prolong it."

"No," Hayden said. "Also, I'm not being cryptic. You're just not listening to me. This summer could last forever, as long as the summers lasted when we were seven."

"The summers were three months long."

"Three months to a seven-year-old is thirty years," he said. Hayden wrapped his fingers around the leg of the chair I sat on, squeezing tight and then releasing the pressure. He knocked on the wood, mockingly testing for imperfections. "Good craftsmanship."

"Thank you for the kind review of my work," I said. "This project really took a toll on me." I ran my right hand along the right arm of the chair, the backs of my fingers catching wisps of Hayden's blond hair in the process. The summer before this one, Hayden's dad requested my assistance on a project, believing I would be useful in his woodshop because I recreated the sets of Stanley Kubrick films with Legos well into my high school years and once earned an A in shop class. His dad used his hammer to knock lightly on my door that morning, and I spent the day handing him screws and looking for his power drill which he continually misplaced. The chair—a decent representation of our combined work—sat proudly on the front porch, a spot which usually meant glory, but no one drove up and down our road unless they made a wrong turn.

"You handed my dad screws. I watched you guys while I shot baskets," he said. "I used to shoot baskets, and now I meditate. Progress."

"Have you been reading the Bible again? Or studying up on Buddhism?" I asked. Hayden closed his eyes, straightened his back, and, facing forward, positioned his hands to hover in front of his heart so they pointed to the sky. "Shouldn't you be ohm-ing?"

"No," he said. "I'm aligning myself and expelling the negativity I'm receiving from you."

"No negativity here. I'm not the one who thinks there's a fountain in the middle of the goddamn woods," I said. He opened his eyes and relaxed his shoulders. I slid off my chair to join him in sitting on the concrete porch. My legs hung over the side, a few inches above the zinnias his father planted every year. Hayden

repositioned himself so he sat next to me, his shoulder softly brushing mine. I folded my body in half so my arm could reach down and touch the petals.

"I don't believe that my dad really plants those. He's never out here," Hayden said. I turned my neck so I could look up at him; he stared into the zinnias, hypnotized by their coloration.

"Are you dying?" I asked. When he began talking about everlasting life, I thought he must have been diagnosed with cancer or something. He probably had six months to live. This would have been a tragic story about my sick friend, not a story about me trying to understand the essence of Hayden.

"Not dying," he said, smiling at me with too many teeth. "You know, I could be dying. I could die right here. There's no way to tell." Hayden pushed himself up, using my body for balance. He accidentally moved the sleeve of my t-shirt, creating an unflattering off-the-shoulder effect. I readjusted my shirt, while he stood over me.

"Thanks for this," I said.

"It's a sexy look. You should show off your shoulders more. I might not be able to contain myself next time."

"Again, thank you."

"Whether or not you believe me, I'll be at your front door at nine tomorrow morning. I'll bring some snacks. I think my sister has some Capri Suns or something," he said.

"Do I have a choice in whether or not I want to go?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Oh, and wear a muscle tee. Let's see those shoulders." I looked forward, heard the front door close behind him, and then gingerly stepped over the zinnias and walked through Hayden's yard into my own, went through my front door, up to my bed, and shut my eyes.

\*

He knocked on my door as I finished lacing up my old cross-country trainers. I had been careful to stay as silent as possible. I never wanted to face the repercussions of accidentally waking my mother, who often slept well into the afternoon, exhausted from her nightly shifts at the factory where everyone in town worked. Her years on the assembly line had zombified her.

"John," he said from the other side of the door. "Are you asleep?" I heard the creaking of old wooden floorboards. My mother had gotten up. I never wanted to speak with her, especially upon waking. She would tell me about her night, her sadness, her inability to move beyond our

front yard or drive further than the factory. I did the grocery shopping. I took the dogs to the vet, cooked meals, washed her clothes, made sure she bathed a few times a week, paid our bills.

Without tied shoes, I slipped out of the house, the right side of my body narrowly missing contact with him. He steadied me with his hands, moving me so I stood directly in front of him. He removed his hands from my body, letting them fall to his sides. He wore his ball cap backwards so a few pieces of his blond hair stuck out between the fabric and the plastic adjuster. He had a drawstring bookbag on his back which sagged with weight.

"I'm not asleep, but my mom is. You know how she can get," I said. I closed the door, turning the knob completely to shut it, then releasing it with care to minimize the added noise.

We called the overgrown and uncared-for space in between our houses "the prairie," because we used to think this tiny space must have been what Laura Ingalls Wilder traversed while on the American Frontier.

Hayden walked through the prairie, always a few strides ahead of me, moving steadily. He watched the ground for a stray baby rabbit or dead mouse, taking care to not step in dog shit. This never made sense to me, because we were about to walk through a field that reeked of newly-spread manure. Much of what he did never made sense to me, because he always seemed so sure of himself, yet he withheld his confidence from me, assuming that somehow I would understand what he meant by every action and non-action. I sometimes wish I would have asked him more questions or sent him an email. I think I restricted myself too much.

\*

I hated soybean years. There was no sense of anonymity; we could be seen from ten miles in every direction, our too-big frames lumbering through these fields like Bigfoot. Somebody could shoot and kill us from ten miles away, if they really wanted to. Our presence destroyed the perfect flatness of the landscape, but Hayden refused to be stressed about this. He kept walking, expecting me to follow him even though I thought this Fountain of Youth quest was a bit dramatic and would have been perfectly happy watching him shoot baskets in his driveway.

Our steps were careful, the steps of responsible adults who understood that we should stay between the rows of soybean crop, carefully avoiding potential contact with the plants. As kids, though, we liked to smash things, take out our anger on the only object around

us. We figured no one would notice. No one actually walks through their own field; they just sit up in their combines and tractors, watching the money as it is planted and harvested.

"We should get back to our roots more often," he said. We were about halfway to the tree line at this point, each of us slightly sticky with sweat. Hayden kicked up dirt, which coated my skin.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You should know," he said. "We should come out here more often." He continued walking, refusing to answer me, thinking I should be able to decipher his words. He always thought I understood everything he said, though I never did. Asking for clarification was often useless; he would tell me that if I desired to understand him, I would. He never realized I didn't have time for shit like that back then. I couldn't sit around and mull over his words, because unlike him, I had other things to do. I envied that he had the time and money to go to college. He always wanted to be away from here.

We continued to walk in the direction of the trees, finally close enough to see the individual leaves and varying shades of green produced by each one. I often thought that the farmers who used that field must have felt bad for the deer or something, so they decided to give the animals a small sanctuary habitat. We smoked pot out here in high school, confident enough to leave the small remainders of our blunts for the native creatures to find. Hayden and I may be single-handedly responsible for the decrease in the local deer population.

He reached the tree line before I did, stopping abruptly, letting his back face me. I imagine that he had been entranced by the magic of the forest or something. He had to have been to have seen what he thinks he saw, or wants to believe he saw.

I didn't pick up my pace, just continued my walk until I stood on his left side. He said nothing.

"Do you have a plan?" I asked. He looked at me, the expression on his face unchanging.

"Why would we need a plan?" He walked into the woods, leaving me to follow him or return home alone, so I went after him, ducking through the deer tunnel that served as our entry gate. Sunlight filtered through the canopy in a way that allowed bright pockets of space to dance, shimmering with the sound of songs that were too high a frequency for us to hear. The life of the small forest waved to me, branches taking in the slight breezes, birds chattering with one another. The silence of the field did not exist in this enclosure. We entered their space as aliens.

Hayden disappeared from sight, but

I could still hear his voice from somewhere beyond, calling to me like God.

"The tree's still here, the bent one, do you remember it?" he asked. My eyes moved in the direction of his voice, immediately resting on our mythic starting point. The tree towered over his relatives, rising straight up through the forest. Then, about six feet above the ground, it bends at a near ninety-degree angle, shooting up sideways until breaking through the canopy into the sky. As kids, we used to sit on the horizontal part of the trunk, eating lunches, scribbling in our field notebooks, crumbling crackers for the birds to eat out of our sweaty, sticky palms.

"Do you remember when you fell?" I asked, projecting my voice into the greenery.

"Did I?" he answered. I could not locate him; he existed all around me, voice coming from all directions, as if the forest amplified his presence.

"Hayden, where the hell are you?"

"Keep walking forward, just don't step on me," he said. I watched my feet take their careful steps, paying close attention to every spider and beetle that scurried across the ground in the wake of the vibrations I created.

"Why would I step on you?"

"I can see it from here," he said. This time his voice came from a clear direction, tunneling to me, so I turned slightly and began walking straight. I saw his shoes first: basketball high-tops that LeBron James had signed, though the signature was covered slightly with manure. He used to never miss a Cavs game; he would drive up to Cleveland a couple times a month if he wasn't too busy with other things. I went with him a few times, wearing a jersey I borrowed from his dad with an Under Armour shirt underneath. Hayden wore his snap pants and these shoes, wanting to appear ready to jump into the game as soon as the coach gave him the nod.

"You can see what?" I said.

"The Fountain," he answered. I guess I should say that at this point we disagreed. There was no Fountain of Youth. I never saw it. I still don't know what he was talking about, but that doesn't mean that what happened didn't happen. I think maybe he never knew what he meant by this. There was no life everlasting, no fountain to drink from, just trees, bugs, and his blond head smudged with dirt and a splash of blue juice from an antifreeze-colored Kool-Aid Blast. He had his eyes open, with one of his arms folded under the back of his head, knees bent so his shorts settled in the crease between his thighs and hip bones. I felt odd standing over him, like it wasn't my place, so I decided to lie down beside him. My already grass-stained white t-shirt sank into the mud, absorbing the earth. I mimicked his posture: head rested on

my arm, knees bent in the air. All four of our collective knees swayed slightly, knocking into each other on occasion.

"There's no fountain," I said. "We used to come out here all the time. I don't know why you would think there is a fountain. I told you this yesterday. There's not even any fucking water." He turned his head to look at me, moving closer to my body so his shoulder touched mine, close enough that I could smell the sickly-sweet of the Kool-Aid on his breath.

"We can stay out here forever, John. Don't you want to do that?" he asked.

"I don't know, Hayden."

"I wouldn't have to go back to school."

"What the fuck is going on Hayden?" I shifted, propping myself up with my hands. The sun had moved to a position over the forest, creating spots of sunlight on the ground, one of these small patches burning intensely on the back of my head.

"Are you an adult?" he asked me.

Hayden sat up next to me and used his hand to turn my face toward his own.

"I don't feel like one," I said. "Especially not out here." I turned my head and looked back up to the sky.

"But, are you?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "You are too, you know."

"You build chairs," he said, turning to face me, our bodies tethered together by an invisible rope.

"I don't build chairs. I watch your dad build chairs while he bitches about you not playing college basketball," I said. He started crying, and he probably wouldn't want me to say this, because Hayden never liked to be caught crying. The tears filled the crevices of his face as his ears turned red. He shifted so he could lean into me, so my left arm wrapped around his body, pulling him closer into my chest, just as I used to comfort my old girlfriends. Hayden wasn't my girlfriend. He latched onto me. I kissed the top of his head.

"I never should have left," he said, voice barely above a whisper.

"It's okay," I answered. "You were never going to stay here. I know that." We pulled apart, both of us falling to the ground, resuming our previous positions. I watched the small expansions and contractions my body made in order to allow me to breathe. I closed my eyes. I saw nothing.

Hayden grabbed my hand.

"You hate it when I'm gone. Don't you?" he asked.

"You know the answer to that," I said.

"If we sit out here forever, watching the fountain, I could hold your hand. It wouldn't be strange anymore." I pulled my hand away from

his.

"You're going to have to go back to school. We're not in the same place," I said.

"We're both right here," he said. He placed his hand on top of mine. I let him. "It's here, John. It's beautiful."

"Stop acting like we can fucking stay here. I don't have the options you do. Even if I wanted to leave this town, it's not a possibility for me."

"I don't have to go back to school."

"What the hell, Hayden?" I said. I opened my eyes to watch the leaves on the tree sway back and forth in constant motion with each other, intertwining, the individual parts acting as one.

"If I leave in a month, if I go back to school, that's the end, you know?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said. He leaned over me, kissing me, a quick peck, for the first and last time. We stood up, abruptly, and walked out of the woods together.

Hayden and I didn't speak to each other for the rest of that summer. When he went back to school, he wrote me letters which I burned. It was easier to turn the letters into ash than it was to read them.

The following December, I watched him walk from his house to the woods. He took glances at my house; he probably knew I watched him from my window. He probably wanted me to put on my boots and coat and follow him outside. I saw him skate across the ice-laced field, his feet catching on trapped plant material. I imagined him flat on his back, eyes facing the sky, watching his imaginary fountain. I like to think he thought of our last afternoon.

He wrote me once after that December.

I never wrote him back, but I did write this. I mailed it to him.



## Hazen, Nevada

Alyssa Hamilton  
Reinhardt University

Cunning, little guillotine, don't think I can't outrun you. You hanging cloud over the mountains that swallow the highway I walk along, a couple miles away from my broken-down Camry. It was shining and silver when I left it, a halo like a sole feather held to the sun, stolen from a bird's wing. There's this quail enslaved in my spine, knocking and pecking on my vertebrae to ask who's listening. It aches for the Sacramento skyline, not the gas station in Hazen with no one else around. Cracked and callus—cruel, far, tired away from home. Bricks and shutters and shudders and cold. Glass or glaciers in the window pane? I'm not sure anymore. Been a long time.

Everything is all cardboard boxes now. Eaten by moths or dust mites, maybe the mealy worms I brought home from school a long long time ago. They're in the attic or basement of my father's new house, clothed in cobwebs, shivering in a damp space where no one likes to go, only to change the damn lightbulb or get the long-sleeved shirts out in winter. Or maybe my father burned them up up up in smoke and scattered them on my mother's grave. Maybe he'd like to scatter me there, too. He locked me out out out. He saw my mother's eyes set in my face. He didn't let me back into the house after that, not after seeing the smoke I made.

The old house sold again last week. It's been two families since I slept beneath its roof. I watched the realtor shake hands with a stranger; I know it's true. Northerners who saw a ghost town in some movie and got sick of snow bought it. And now I walk along the side of the road, the dry Nevada soil caught between my nails and skin, dust from Route 50 coating my eyes.

Did he know this is where I'd end up, having to carry a quail inside me when the rain has been missing for days, and all I'd feel is heat wrapping around and around and around my legs? Did he feel my mother's weight like this? She's been dead for five years now. Dead for five damn years, and I've made twenty ghosts from her, one for every year my feet have known the ground. I still mourn in dark cloth draped around my body, all brocade melancholy. All this black in the desert. I am one of the beetles. Or pieces of torn tire littered on the side of the road. But he doesn't care.

A truck driver asked me if I needed a ride a couple hours ago. He cared enough to ask. He was worried since the weatherman said tonight

was going to be a chilly one, one of the coldest nights of the season. I told him no. And he kept on driving. He probably has some home to go back to. Some drywall to patch in the playroom while his daughter laughs behind him, wanting to make him smile. He looked like he would smile at her.

I wish I'd find that room again.

But it's long gone. I still look for it in the thunder. It's the same storm that swallowed up my mother. I see her silhouette in the lightning after each plume of smoke escapes from my pipe, her face in a sickly-smelling fog. The clouds are the same type of dark, the kind that is sweet and see-through, like the legs of women, not opaque like lifeless eyelids. She laughs in my phosphenes.

But it's late now, and the night is like that kind of hard dark. I can barely see the white lines on this side of the asphalt. The moon was shattered last night. And I don't sleep anymore. I found something better. I stop. Turn around.

There are two lights running towards me now. Too small for search lights, even though Daddy wouldn't come looking for me anyway. Too big for suns or raptures. They shine like my mother's smile. I can hear the roar of her heart, the proud beating after a waltz with my feet on top of hers, her bones humming to the music. It roars louder and louder and louder. She's just as alive as I am. Just as alive as I am. The eyes stop and stare at me. A figure opens the door, leans out of the driver's side.

She's got eyes like I do, green like leaves when they're alive and glutting on sunlight. They're all filled with light, bursting with it, smiling with a white that's all hot and compacted. They're like living in a fire under a glass observation dome. And I'm the one who gets to look in. This time. Not doctors or cops.

She asks me if I need a ride. I nod and climb into the car. Her hair ribbons pale against her pretty blue dress. I smile at her. Her car smells like new cotton. She asks me where I'm going. I don't know, wherever she wants to take me. She says she'll take me to a gas station where there's a phone since hers isn't with her. The one time she forgets. She smiles and laughs when she says it. And it's so beautiful.

She asks me about my name, offers me hers in a voice like silver mist. It's Vera, and it's like a wedding dress tightening around my ribs and pulling my spilling insides together. I tell her I like that name, and it sounds like I've heard it

my whole life or maybe in a dream a few times. She asks if I want a cigarette, but I don't want one since tobacco makes me feel like there's an awful weight in my lungs that pulls them down until I throw up. At least, the one time I had one it did. She laughs again, all wind chimes warbling in the air around me.

I put down the visor to take a look in the mirror. Papers cascade onto my lap, and she tells me it's okay, that she saves everything compulsively, a habit she picked up a while ago from her mother. She holds up a ticket stub, proof. It's from another state, from a museum trip she took years and years ago.

And all at once, I am at home on my mother's hip, my temple resting on the curve of her neck, arms wrapped around her like a silk scarf. She strokes my hair, cradling my head. Daddy is looking somewhere else, another canvas. I had been excited when he told us we were going to Reno for a couple weeks. When he told me, I thought about sitting beneath a steel palm tree, watching the sun go round the sky all day. Or riding the iron horse somewhere far far away where it snows.

I trace the funny, dark paths on the inside skin of her elbow, see grey and white armies marching in her veins. She blows smoke circles so I laugh. The smoke makes her do funny things and dance with me when Daddy's not around after he's dropped me off at her house. She shakes ashes out of her blonde blonde hair that turns to moths—they flee to the lightbulb in the ceiling—burn into nothing. She takes my hand in hers, moves my finger to gesture at the painting before us.

"*Study of a Female Nude*," she reads. "*Henri Lehmann*. It's on loan right now from New York. Mariah, isn't she pretty?"

She is, I think. She's blushing because her breast is out, and it's embarrassing to be naked for so many people. Her hair is braided, though, and I don't know why. If she had all that time, why not put on a slip at least? She's going all clear about her legs, evaporating into the leather of Daddy's wallet or belt. It's not really *her* face anymore. It's the one in the picture I used to have beside my bed, the one holding a newborn in a fuzzy pink blanket whose eyes turned green in reaction to sunlight. My eyes got that way. Just like Mama's.

Vera asks me why I'm quiet. I tell her I was just thinking of something, forgot where I was for a moment. It's a funny thing, to forget where you are, even though your body is touching all the same things in the same way it always has. Vera smiles, says that's why you forget. You get used to it. You can get used to anything, really. Sit long enough on a needle and suddenly it's like it's no longer hurting you. Like falling asleep,

really.

I smile. I've heard all that before.

She tells me she fell asleep in an alfalfa field once and when she woke up, she was wrapped all in violet flowers. They were soft and wet, something like morning dew even though there was never any where she grew up. Alfalfa, she says, has such a great root system, digging so far down down down that it's real hard to kill, even in a drought. That's why it grows so nice around here.

She asks me, could I imagine being tied up in those damp cobwebs, so far under the ground that it's a whole new color soil I never thought was around here, in a system of roots I was giving life to, making those purple flowers sprout up and smile at the sun, the green getting bright as my eyes? Imagine a stalk growing ten-feet tall because of it, winning a prize at a local fair? Imagine it never stopped growing, broke out of the atmosphere, and there were showers of petals in space, floating around all confused and not knowing how to really breathe out there?

I tell her it'd probably be cut down before it ever got that tall, sold to feed horses or cattle, something like that. Something has to consume it. That's the only reason why it's grown. She shrugs, looks at me. If that's what I think.

She asks me who I'm gonna call when we reach the gas station. I tell her I don't know. Haven't I got some family nearby? I tell her I don't—my mama's been dead a long while, and my daddy doesn't want me coming home. He told me not to go and follow my mother, to throw out my pipe and wash myself clean, but I didn't listen to him. I wanted to see my mother in some way again. He doesn't understand that. Pictures can't talk to you, can't really do anything but stare at you. My mama's not in a picture. No more than I am. Paper is cold. Bodies aren't. And I haven't seen hers in a long long time. Even when she was alive. My daddy made sure of that.

And when Gram called the house, a voice shaking cobwebs off the memories I had of Mama, she kept asking for Daddy, and I wondered why would she when he wasn't even her son, and they didn't talk much except about rehab, how Mama was losing all her pretty, white teeth. His face went all pale when he took the phone. He had to go on a long long drive before he told me. And like that, she was dead. My ears got hot when the words burned them.

There's this loud crash, my seatbelt clicks tight against my chest, snapping against my shoulder as the brakes slam down. Vera turns the engine off, looks at me, then clicks herself free of her seatbelt. I follow her out of the car.

It's on the road, all lit up in the spotlight

of the headlights, bursting through the dark. Its wings, white tick marks on a brown background, are stretched out on the pavement. The long feather from its head is broken, tired like a Vegas showgirl. The blue neck is snapped, eye gazing up at the sky, black as the spaces between stars. Poor bird. Poor bird.

Vera keeps saying she didn't mean for it to happen. She didn't mean to do it. Didn't mean to. She's sobbing so heavy into her hands. I can't move, can only stare at her body heaving. And that's when a small, violet petal slips between the fingers clinging to her face. Another falls, another another another. She looks up at me, spilling into petals crumbling into her skull, mouth drying and falling down into dust, her skin shriveling to her bones, tightening and bleaching sickly green. The remains all tumble down next to the quail. All that's left is a stalk of clover-fooling alfalfa.

I step through the dashes of quail blood, approach the stem. I pick it up, see the green the same as my eyes. Yellow feathering roots sway in the slight breeze. They inch down to the ground, weaving through the dark trying to find soil. It's still alive. I run to the edge of the highway, clear a space to dig, shove a finger into the ground, claw up the soil. I drive the stalk in the ground, pat it tight in the earth. But it just curls, a yellow and brown spiral, and the dirt crawls over it, and it's gone. The soil wanted it. All of it. The headlights go out behind me.

I turn around. The car is gone. The quail, nothing but a black feather torn in two lying on the asphalt. There's a silence pressing down on me. I begin walking again, the same direction the car was going.

There's that warmth again, creeping up my legs like roots, hot in my chest and heavy in my lungs. Such a labor, to have to breathe this way. I could keep on going, ignoring the pain in my feet, layered in dirt and quail blood and shards of beak gnawing at the nape of my neck, trying to make their way into my skull. Then to grey matter, I think. Matter. Does it? Ever-presence and swelling in the universe, thousands of purple petals disintegrating before they reached anywhere they wanted to. And it won't stop growing apart, won't stop leaving me behind to go somewhere closer to another set of stars or alfalfa field away from an overdose, the one that wrapped itself around my mother and never let her go. Predict how I'd decompose, evolve, find some way to force myself to take up another space I never knew. Is any of this what I wanted?

And after all this time, I just look at the dry earth. I assert myself upon, its old splits wrinkling into the face of the man who tucked the blankets too tightly around me at night.

Withstand me! Support me! Pack down tight, the sheer willpower of my bones and muscles and organs and fat and whatever else is bound and imprisoned by this body. Make room for me in your life. You have to. You just have to. I am here, don't you know? Maybe not for terribly long, but I am here now. You will have your revenge when you invade my body after I am embedded in you somewhere else. Absorb me then. After that, I'll have to withstand another's presence just as you do now. Just wait. You'll have your time.

There is a wind that comes rushing by me like bird wings. For a moment, it feels like there is enough force to sweep me up to the stars. But then there is nothing. Gone that fast. Everything leaves so fast here. Everything.

But *something* has to acknowledge that I carry some importance in this heap burdening my ribs. Because once Mama was dead, she was dead, and that was all that was ever said about her. No one ever talks about how she danced or ran her fingers through your hair when you cried near her. No one ever talks about the softness of her skin by her collarbones or staying up all night to bake cakes for no reason. No one ever talks about how she was my mother.

I keep walking, my tongue running along the ridges of my molars, feeling the mountains trapped in my mouth. A whole skyline is stuck in my skull, one I'll never get to see, only feel in my jaw when I'm aware of it. I want to see that skyline. I hope it's prettier than Sacramento. I'm sure it is. My mother helped create it, after all, this terrestrial silhouette all my own. A wet sunrise in my mouth each morning. Then a mountain begins to move, parting from the ground, and a copper-tasting geyser rushes to fill a new emptiness. I raise my hand to my mouth, spit out a mountain.

It's a jagged pearl, smiling in the moonlight. There's a deep river going down the middle, the same red as the eyes that left me behind. I drag my thumb across it, the wet sticking to the channels in my skin. And I see her.

The hollowness of her eye sockets. The slight curve of her brow. A deep cupid's bow, full lower lip. She's there. Mama's there. She was living in my mouth all this time. All this time she was still with me. Her face is frozen. She won't talk to me. She won't say she loves me. I stare and stare and stare and her eyes are shut shut shut in an enamel death mask. Did I put the plaster over your face, Mama? Did I? Or did Daddy, when he said he never wanted to see you again? Did he? Or Mama...

Mama, did you do it?

I drop to my knees. I squeeze her face tight in my right hand, my left clawing into the

dirt. I ruin the homes of the mealy worms, the nurseries of beetles and ants. I gouge out rocks and old candy wrappers, exhume newspaper remains and mountain quail eggshells. The soil gets to feel damp like my mouth. I'm deep enough.

I'm sorry, Mama. I'm sorry, but the soil wants you. All of you. Just like the alfalfa, just like how it did with you before. Dead things are supposed to stay dead. Dead things stay in the soil. But you never did. You just never did. I have to put you back. It makes me sick to do it, Mama, it really does. It just turns my stomach into this great, heaving quail that wants to fly from my throat but doesn't have the strength to. It really does. You found that abandoned nest of their tawny eggs when I was little and you tried to save them, but they never hatched. You cried for three days when you knew they were dead. And then you buried them in their calcium caskets in the backyard, held my hand as you sang softly to them and put a little piece of quartz at the head of the fresh mound. I have to do the same, Mama.

I have to bury you.

# One Before Another

Ellaree Yeagley  
Agnes Scott College

The event that produced us, Caroline, the inner mechanism run amok, the single zygote split into two identical bodies, was spontaneous and random. So was your death. There's no preparing for that sort of catastrophe. It's like the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs. Who could have predicted?

I thought about that today while Mom and I shoved your gnarly old underpants into a garbage bag. Caroline, dude, come on. I know Dad raised us to be thrifty, but sometimes you just have to pony up for some new drawers. These were gross, but every frayed edge and dangling length of elastic, every faded, amorphous period stain, was a baseball bat to the gut. They felt like relics, a fossil record from a lost epoch—one more verdant and hopeful than the present.

We have—*had*—the same faces, height, skin texture, hair color, and even similar timbres to our voices, but you should know that old Marvin isn't fooled. He dodged my hands when I reached to scoop him up, scrambling under the bed. He wouldn't come out, not even when I rattled the Tupperware with his treats, nor did he growl when I swung my arm through the accumulation of old socks and lint tumbleweeds after him, no. Instead, his eyes tracked me back and forth at night from the space between the floor and the bed's footboard, two glowing, green, disembodied mirrors. *This isn't right*, he seemed to say. *You are not right*.

Since you died, I've been reading a lot about historical twins. Chang and Eng are my favorites. They were identical *and* conjoined. Conjoined! I imagined how, if we'd been conjoined, I would have followed you into death, quickly and naturally. One after another. The poor guy at the crematorium would have needed to fold us at the seam so we'd fit in the furnace, where we'd disintegrate into the same kind of dirt. I still find the image of our ashes shifting beneath the roots of Dad's gardenia very satisfying.

But then I thought about how we would have fared in our lives up to that point, about what a pain in the ass it would have been to synchronize our schedules, the indignity of showering together as adults, of sleeping in the same bed. I thought of turning my face away while you had sex, of one of us co-hosting the other's fetus. I recalled how you wouldn't let me take my work shoes off in your apartment because my nylon trouser socks made my feet

smell like old popcorn. We would have killed each other long before any outside force could intervene.

Passing glass storefronts means seeing your ghost striding alongside me, so I stopped going out, except to eat—mostly at food carts where there's little risk of catching my own reflection—and to work. I keep my head down in the office bathroom. The water swirls down the toilet bowl in little whirlpools, whisking my waste away, and I'm always careful to avert my eyes before the surface resettles. My coworkers stare when they think I won't notice. I don't care. I don't want to look like a complete person, and I don't want to take time off. Working is far easier than being at home, where I must shower and dress in the dark.

*Don't look around*, the walls whisper. *Draw the drapes. Cover the mirrors, the toaster. Unplug the microwave and turn its face against the wall.*

Caroline, getting older is going to be weird. I'm already steeling myself, but there's only so much a person can do. I'll smile eventually, and I'll keep smiling; I know how grief works. The root system of crow's feet and smile lines spreading across my face will fascinate me because I will be discovering how you would have turned out. I don't know that I'll ever be able to look in a mirror and see only myself. Perhaps the upside to all of this is that I'll be too preoccupied with your aging face to worry much about my own physical decline.

Fast asleep, I watch the kitchen plants vine with intent to strangle. Their rubbery stalks spread so quickly I can smell the earth turn and tumble from the chipped lips of your thrift store teacups. Green coils up the neck of a wooden spoon. Green veins a halogen bulb, cracking its shell, filling the cracks—violent shadows splatter across the ceiling. *I am the opposite of potential*, says the spoon. *Crumbling*, says the bulb. In the morning, the plants resume their fixed positions, jutting stiff and brown from the neglected soil.

Pollux loved his twin brother Castor so fiercely that he sacrificed his own immortality to bring him back. I love you like that, Caroline. You knew that, right? I hate that I don't have something Pollux-level practical with which to prove it.

A week after the funeral, Mom came by with a cat carrier to collect Marvin. He yowled pathetically and barreled toward his food bowl, as if I didn't exist. *Haven't you fed him?* she said.

Together, we boxed up your apartment. *Look, look*, Mom kept sighing. *Can you believe she kept this thing? Oh my God, remember this? Did your sister ever vacuum? Caroline, what were you thinking?* Light shifted through the drawn curtains. Curls of dust. Distortion.

We bagged up your underwear and threw them in the dumpster with the kitchen and bathroom garbage. There was a moment of panic where I imagined the trash compactor pressing down on these things that used to cover your flesh and nearly jumped back in after them.

I couldn't part with your derby skates and concrete-scuffed kneepads. I've taken home the one succulent I haven't managed to kill. I keep your denim jacket with the patches in my coat closet. Mom had a harder time paring

down. *I have to keep the maraca*, she said. *Remember how your sister tortured Marvin with that thing? Shake it and see if he'll come. Oh man, this photo! Your Dad still loves to bitch about that cruise. Remember this? The waiter couldn't tell you two apart. Look, look. And these. And this. And. And.*

I kept one last fossil, Caroline, one last relic: a peppermint tin filled with your baby teeth. Each one was only worth a quarter in Dad's cheapskate tooth fairy currency, and yet each was once part of your living, breathing body. When I hold those teeth, Caroline, I hold preserved, as if in amber, the blueprint of you. Put another way, I hold my double, or half of myself, reduced to a speck.

## “Apocalypse” Means “Revelation” in Greek

Shelby Turner  
Agnes Scott College

Michael put the stew one of his older students made for him behind the driver's seat. She had said he needed a woman to take care of him. She had said it in English, so he praised her. Then, he ran away quick before she offered up her daughter again. The stew she made would probably spill as he drove off. It would definitely spoil before he got there. He'd have to throw it out once he got out of sight of the church. But he'd have to drive slow first. This part of the church parking lot needed to be repaved. Chunks of pale asphalt littered the cracked desert landscape of pavement.

He bumped his way along it.

It was a four-hour drive to the gorge from Charlotte. He had his little overnight bag in the passenger seat behind him: hunter green with worn leather straps. A bottle of champagne to celebrate the occasion. Underneath it was the stack of the latest homework assignment. His car smelled like old coffee. He turned on the radio. Public radio. It went fuzzy. Then a preacher. And there were more and more preachers the further he drove away from the city. This one was particularly adamant.

“--and it is sin in the eyes of God. And that man will surely go to Hell, for he rejected Jesus Christ as his savior.”

He decided to keep listening. Cows and cow patties lined the road now. He remembered being little and telling his sister that there were special cows in the mountains. One set of their legs was shorter than the other so they wouldn't have to bend their knees as they grazed. She believed him. His dad had been the one who first told him that joke. Now, promises of fudge and pecans. Just twenty more miles. A yellow billboard with a simple “Jesus” scrawled across it in Times New Roman. Then, goats on the roof of a restaurant. That was their attraction. Smell the goat shit as you eat your once-frozen fries. And the next town had a general store. Fried apple pies. And in the back, they had three live bears. They had rescued them, of course. They had been mistreated before. Of course. And now he was on the reservation. Get your Native crafts at our Indian-owned store. Indian.

He went into the liquor store. He bought liquor. He didn't normally drink; he only chose what he did because it came in a blue bottle. Then, he parked in the parking lot of the Days Inn. He took a few swigs. He went in. The woman out front smoking followed him in and went behind the counter.

“I have a shared reservation.”

“What's the name?”

“Hewitt.”

“Yeah. I see that. Right here. You're gonna be on the second floor.”

She handed him the keys.

“Ya know, you really don't need to make reservations at the Days Inn.”

He gave a little smile, turned his head coyly.

“We got a drink machine in the stairwell, but it's cheaper if ya just go across the street to the gas station.”

The glass door was already closing behind him.

\*

He jumped onto the bed, chest down, and went into his email. Two legs rose from the quilted bedspread, just socks with their puckered toes. “Where are you?” he wrote, his fingers clumsy over the touchscreen of his phone. Bad reception, too.

The ceiling fan hummed. Who put a ceiling fan in a motel room? He and his cousin had once tried to dry their bathing suits by putting them on a ceiling fan and turning it on. It didn't work out that well. Actually, it had gotten them both and the entire room wet and broke the ceiling fan. They got in trouble for that.

There was a TV. He picked up the remote. The local weatherman was Black. That was surprising. Then, he reviewed his ABC's, the puppets of a children's show singing to him.

His phone buzzed.

“Go to the shower,” it said. She must be nervous. He said he would respect any of her wishes, though.

He went to the shower. He passed the microwave and the black mini fridge. The sink wasn't in the bathroom. It was out front. A multipurpose counter, food and toiletries. And the sink. The coffee machine smelled like there was some sort of mold growing in it. He walked passed it. He couldn't find the light at first. It was outside of the bathroom, in the open closet with its lone rod.

They had a bottle of soap on a chain, attached to the tiled wall with a suction cup.

He heard the door open.

It closed.

They passed a few minutes in silence.

“Hello?” he said.

"Stay there for a second, please." Her voice shook, but it seemed like the type of voice that usually sounded sure.

She cleared her throat.

"Okay. I'm going to go to the bathroom door. You get out of the shower and go to the other side. On the count of three, I'll open it."

"Okay," he said.

He went to the door, the tile feeling cold through his socks. She could probably hear his heavy breathing on the other side. He tried to take a slow breath.

"One."

"Two."

"Three."

The door swung open, revealing a young woman in pants. She looked... healthy. Put-together. Normal. Her hair was short and neat, cut within the past few weeks. Combed, but not gelled down. Soft. She had a strong nose, and only a slightly curved brow. It made sense to him.

"Hi," he said after they passed a few moments staring at each other. Her eyes went down his body, his eyes down hers.

"You're very tall," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Are you--are you going to wear that? I mean, did you want to take a few minutes to get ready or--"

"I don't really think it matters what we wear," she said.

"Okay. It'll only take us five minutes to get there. Do you wanna talk or--"

"I brought some cheesecake. You said you liked cheesecake."

"I do."

"Why don't we have a slice before we head over? See how that goes?"

"Okay."

They sat down on the sheeny couch with its strange geometric patterns. They each maintained a respectable distance. She had two forks. One ate from the lid while the other ate from the container.

"So, what did you do today?" she asked.

"I teached. And you?"

"I wrote a bit of code." She dug her fork into the cheap cheesecake.

There was a pause.

"This one company keeps coming to me with more and more projects. I'm going to be one of their employees before I know it if I'm not careful."

"We wouldn't want that, would we?" he said.

"No."

There was more silence.

"I was really expecting you to be unattractive," she said.

"I was expecting the same for you."

She made a noise like a laugh.

"I set up an office for you yesterday. I painted it blue. You like blue," he said.

"I do like blue," she said.

"Well, it's blue."

He dropped a forkful of cheesecake on his lap.

"Oh--"

"I have a little laundry stick," she said. "I don't usually have one, but I had a feeling..."

She pulled it from her simple bag. She popped off the cap, then hesitated.

"Is it okay if I..." she asked.

"Yeah," he said.

She moved slowly. Perhaps, she was trying to keep from falling, but she looked unsure.

His legs were only slightly splayed. Would she venture between them or stay to the side? Ah, she stayed to the side. She scooped up the gob of white mush, little wet crumbs sticking to her fingers. Her nails were neither short nor long, well-rounded. She pressed the felt tip to her bare finger a couple of times to start the flow of soap.

She braced herself against the couch at first, but eventually gave up and wrapped her hand around his thigh. He could feel her nails through his pants as her fingers steadied the fabric. Sharp, cutting, but in a pleasant way.

"You really wanna go through with this?"

"Yes," she said.

"I do, too... Is there anything else you wanna talk about?"

"Eh..."

He got lost in the dusty curtains for a second.

"Are you sure you don't want kids?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Then, I guess we'll handle the rest as it comes along."

\*

The chapel, like everything else in the town, was wood-paneled. A large bear carving was at the entrance, painted with Native designs. They pulled up to the window in Michael's car, the woman, Allison (that was the woman's name: Allison), seeming stiff in the passenger's seat with its cracked-leather. The stew was still behind his seat, the driver's seat. It had started to stink. He had moved the stack of papers to the backseat.

They waited for a few minutes but nobody came. He stuck his long arm out of the car, knocked on the window.

A mean-looking man with an overhanging brow came over after a few minutes.

"Hello. We're here for your ninety-nine dollar package," he said.



"You gotta be patient, boy. I was in the bathroom. A man's gotta go to the bathroom every now and again."

The portly man leaned out of the drive-through window and looked into the car, squinting, scrutinizing.

"I'm gonna reference God in this ceremony."

Michael and Allison looked at each other.

"Okay," Michael said.

He rustled the papers of a clipboard.

"Y'all the Davidson party, right?" He looked at Michael. He only really looked at Michael.

Allison smiled, leaned in, cocked her head.

"Our reservation's under Magd," she said.

"Y'all got rings with you?" He was looking at Michael again.

"No," he said, embarrassed. He had been surprised that she didn't want rings. He had one, from his grandmother. It was in his pocket in case she changed her mind. He guessed he'd just pawn it.

"Go ahead and hold each other's hands, then."

They reached for each other, and the car lurched forward; Michael hadn't put the car in park. He yanked his hand from hers and snatched at the gear shift.

It was the first time they had touched each other. Well, that he had touched her.

"Marriage is God's greatest hope--"

Allison put on an understanding smile, forehead puckering as she spoke.

"We wrote our own vows, actually."

Surely, she didn't need to resort to this, to him--

"Well, let me get through this piece first."

Michael hated the man.

He started over, more resolutely this time. "Marriage is God's greatest hope for his creatures. For a man and a woman to commit themselves to each other in his holy name is good in the eyes of the Lord. It is good to be united in holiness. Now," he looked at the certificate, "Michael, you may now pledge yourself to Allison using the vows you wrote."

They heard a phone ring from inside. The ordained priest closed the window to answer it.

"Soulmates, right?" she winked and gave a cynical laugh. He shook his head, saw her teeth showing in something like a snarl. He pitied her.

They used the premade vows.

\*

"Do you want me to carry you through?" They stood at the doorway of their motel room.

"No."

"Okay."

Michael opened the door, held it open for her. They walked in one after the other.

"Well, Mrs. Magd. Or Ms. Magd? Does that part change if you keep your maiden name?"

"Huh. I hadn't thought about that yet."

He shifted his weight.

"What now?"

"We could have sex." He was hoping to see her give that warm smile, the one she gave the priest. But she recited it like a weather report.

"Would you like to?"

"At least once a week from now on. Studies show it's an important part of maintaining intimacy."

"Okay, um... Is there anything you like in particular?"

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They held each other as they lay in bed. She was warm, and her shirt was on his side of the bed. He could feel it tangled in the covers at his feet. She had a scar just under her left breast. Said she had gotten it back when she worked with horses. He still wore his socks. They felt tight on his feet now. He wanted to take them off.

The ceiling fan hummed on.

"Did you think you would be married three days ago?" he asked.

"I didn't know you existed three days ago." She turned over onto her belly.

"You were drunk when we decided to do this, weren't you?"

He looked back at the ceiling

"Tell me what you said before. About arranged marriage," she said.

"It ensures you don't have regrets.

Regular marriage... it's like when you walk into an ice cream shop with thirty flavors. And you go out with pistachio but you don't even enjoy it because you think you would have been happier with the cookies and cream. If there are no options, there is no chance for regret."

He tried to gently run his fingers along her back like he had read about online.

"What did you do when you were lonely?" he asked.

"I took a Xanax and went to sleep. You?"

"I journaled. They're all addressed to you, I guess. To my future life partner."

"You feel any different yet?" she asked.

He stared at the popcorn ceiling. He could feel the callous from her smart shoes against his shin. They were on the floor next to him. He didn't know how to answer.

## My Brother, Hakim

Amaris Anderson  
Georgia State University

I only knew six things about my brother, Hakim.

Only six because he didn't like for me to open the door to his room unless it was a *life or death* situation. Like when my Titi wasn't at home and I started my period when I was only eleven and I had to double tap on his door.

He asked his *non-girlfriend*, Maya, who was always sleepin' in his bed, to go help me with whatever I was crying 'bout. So she went up under our cabinet and cursed to the ceiling 'cause we didn't have *no pads in this rundown place*. She grabbed my hand and said we were gonna go on a little field trip.

It didn't look like no field trip to me. All we did was walk to her cousin's job at the gas station the green one where everyone in the neighborhood went to get their spoiled milk and eggs. Then she brought me to the back side of the store and told me to pick whichever kind I liked, but I told her, *I don't like any of them*. But all she did was laugh.

Then she picked some up and brought them to the register. I covered my face while her cousin scanned those big ole ugly diapers and put them in the plain ole ugly black bag. He smiled with his crooked, yellow teeth and handed the bag to me.

*You're a big girl now, eh?*

He spoke in a deep accent. And my eyes flew all the way open, cause if he knew, then everyone at school would know that I had *it*. Then I would have to start eatin' lunch in the bathroom again, like how I did when I first moved in with my Titi.

Maya told me not to worry, she said it just meant that I would have *bigger tatas* than the rest of the girls in my class and that they would all be jealous of me.

Then she walked me back to the house, where she taught me how to shave my legs with conditioner and a knife, but to be careful so I wouldn't chop my leg off.

Then she started yellin' at Hakim, going off about cleaning up some dishes, so he wouldn't be living in no *pigsty*. She said she was gonna take me to her house to spend the night until he could get the house in order, cause *This is no way for a YOUNG LADY to live*.

She cursed at him. But Hakim ignored her because he didn't like it when Maya yelled. And if she yelled too loud, he would yell back, and then the police would be bangin' at our door.

Sometimes there would be trouble just for

yellin' too much.

And my Titi would tell him that he needed to stop all of that and remember what happened last time, when he had to get that bracelet around his ankle.

And that was the first thing I knew about my brother.

\*

2.

Hakim was a Mus-lim.

Well, he said that his daddy was one, and I learned from Kiani Edwards that you are whatever your daddy is, unless your mama is Black, cause then that just makes you Black.

*Like if your mama was a slave and your daddy was White, you would still be a slave.*

I asked Hakim what my daddy was, and he said that I don't got no daddy but Jesus. So I figured that my daddy must have gone to the Catholic Church or something like that.

Then I asked him if Mama was a Mus-lim too, and he told me to stop asking him questions about our mama.

*You don't know nothin', Hakim.*

I marched out of his room and went to make a dinner for myself downstairs, because my Titi was too busy being a nurse at the hospital and all Hakim ever knew how to fix was some cereal.

The food was called *whatever I can piece together from the kitchen*. That night, it was toaster waffles, an old turkey leg, and some macaroni and cheese.

I piled the food onto my plate and said my grace, but then I took half of it and gave it to Hakim, because I didn't want him to die from not eating.

*Here, ugly.*

I put the plate on his bed and he laughed and I sat down on the floor practicing my spelling words so that I could be in advanced classes like how Maya was in.

*Hakim, what's your name mean?*

*I don't know, something about being smart.*

*Why would your name be that? You don't even go to school.*

*I don't need no school.*

And Hakim turned on the television and didn't speak another word to me. So, I practiced writing his name in A-ra-bic cause he said when he dies, he wants it on his tombstone.

Those letters didn't make no type of sense to me, but he told me that not everything will always make sense.

Then his friend Javier called and Hakim grabbed a cigarette off of his dresser and told me he'll be back and to lock the door and call Maya if I need anything. *Don't go bothering Titi.*

He scarfed down his food and left.

That's how I knew that he wasn't even a real Mus-lim, because they never eat when it's still light outside.

\*

3.

My brother was always drawing something.

He said that his drawings didn't mean anything and that me and Titi shouldn't get so worked up about them.

Titi was excited for him. *You could sell those, baby!*

*Nah, these just staying in my room.*

I told him that if he didn't sell his drawings, I would just sell them for him and pretend like I drew them. He thought that was funny and then told me to get started on my homework.

*Hakim, why are you always tellin' me what to do?*

*How come you never listen?*

*Because I'm a girl and I don't have to listen to what no boy tells me.*

*I'm a grown man.*

Titi told him *Sixteen don't mean you a grown man*, and to stop talking like that or she will make him pay some bills.

Then Hakim started drawing so much that his art teacher sent a letter to Titi telling her that Hakim needed to be in the art show at his school. When Titi asked him about it he said that it's nothin' but a bunch of white people who wanna drool over his drawings but not take him very seriously.

*Stop making excuses, Hakim.*

She made him put on a suit and practice showing off his artwork downstairs to us and one of his *real girlfriends* who watched from the kitchen. Titi wouldn't let her sit on the sofa because she said she was *fast* and fast girls can't sit on her good furniture.

*And now, presenting Hakim's beautiful drawing!*

I yelled to the top of my lungs while Hakim showed us his drawings, and when Titi asked him which one he was going to showcase, he told us that his teacher had it at school and that we would see it next week.

So we got all dressed up, me, Maya, and Titi. We all looked very pretty and Titi sprayed perfume on us and when we went to Hakim's

school, we saw all those people who had good drawings. I was searching for Hakim's name, but everyone kept coming up to tell me how pretty I was in my pink little dress. I told them thank you, because my Titi told me I couldn't be rude.

*Your nephew has so much potential. He is an amazing artist.*

That's what the white lady who was Hakim's art teacher said to Titi after she hugged Maya and pinched my cheeks like I was some type of baby.

Then she pointed us to where Hakim's art was, and Titi started crying when she saw it. It was me and her, and some other pretty lady, who looked like if I tried hard enough, I could remember her. Our faces were painted in different colors, like blues, pinks, and oranges. And a single tear fell from the lady's face.

*Vibrant colors that reflect the simplicity, yet complexity, of love, loss, and womanhood.*

Maya said right then, that Hakim was something special, but that he just couldn't see it.

I thought to myself, *Is that why he didn't show up to his own art show?*

Titi nodded her head like she could hear me.

*Yes, that's why.*

\*

4.

I never thought Hakim would fall in love with anybody.

But then here comes this girl named Lisa. Hakim swore that she changed him and made him wanna stop smoking weed and turn Catholic so he could go to Mass every Sunday and ask for forgiveness for his sins.

*Letting girls sleep in your bed is a sin, Hakim.*

He laughed when I said that and told me to mind my own business.

Lisa was tall, light-skinned, and had long hair. Hakim said she was the type of girl that you would dream to be with but would never actually think that you could stand a chance.

He said that she saw some of his art pieces up on the wall and so she went to go find the *mysterious Hakim* so that she could introduce herself.

I told him that she sounded like a *gold digger* to me. She knew Hakim was gonna be famous and she wanted to be famous with him.

Hakim got real busy with Lisa once Maya left for a *big city*. She said her daddy had a new job and that she was going to live in the house that came with his company. I knew that she was mad at Hakim, cause he didn't go with her. He didn't even tell her goodbye. Just sat

in his room listening to Nas because he said it provided a *healing for his soul*.

I guess Maya must have really broken his heart.

I tried asking him about her, but all he ever wanted to do was talk about Lisa, like she was some type of walking goddess.

*Now, you should really consider straightening your hair.*

*I like my naps, Lisa.*

*Hmph. There ain't nothin' cute about a nappy-headed little girl.*

I didn't like her. My Titi tried to convince me that it was because I wouldn't like anyone that Hakim brought home.

But Lisa stuck around for awhile. She even ended up having family dinner with us. Hakim said he loved her and begged her, *baby please, I'm sorry*, after he cheated on her with Cassandra, who lived in Greenville Apartments across the street from us. And Lisa cried about it like a baby for months. Everytime she came by, there was crying and pleading and a whole lot of nothingness.

She said she was done with Hakim.

*I'm not going back to him!*

But she did. Stayed with him even when he started going to college downtown and started bangin' all the rich white girls. We were all shocked that he made it into college, but somebody must have really believed in his artwork cause they even gave him a scholarship.

I finally thought that my brother was doing something right in his life. But then he decided that he was going to marry Lisa after graduation.

*I don't like her.*

He told me that I didn't have to, but that I should learn how to quickly, because he already found a ring.

\*

5.

Fireflies can spark a lot of emotion.

I found that out in the summer, after he asked Lisa to marry him. We were down in Florida on vacation, lying on the beach while it was starting to get dark outside. Titi got a break from being a nurse at the hospital, and me and Hakim had saved up a whole bunch of money so that she could have some time to relax.

*Titi, do you ever think about my mama?*

Her voice cracked a little when she told me that she thinks of her all the time.

*Hakim never wants to talk about it, but he knew her better than I knew her.* I thought back to that painting at his art show.

*I know baby, I know.*

We were quiet, and I thought of how my mama wouldn't have liked Lisa, either. She

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would probably think that her hips were too wide, her mouth was too big, and she was a hypocrite. Hakim was too young to be getting married to someone. She would probably just say that he wants to hold on to her quickly because he's afraid that he'll lose her.

I closed my eyes and thought about the words that I liked spelling when I was a kid.

*Apparatus.*

That word was all about structure.

*Euthanasia*

Medical suicide.

*Heartbreak.*

A form of homicide.

And that's what Lisa must have felt after Hakim yelled at her when she showed him the firefly that lay nice and pretty in her hand. His voice was loud and booming as he told her to *get that thing away from him!*

She was confused and laughed at him, telling him that it was nothing but a silly firefly.

So he ran.

I never saw him run that fast, except for that one time when he stole a piece of candy from the gas station.

Titi stood up and hurried over to Lisa to ask her what happened, but I sat still on my beach chair, being careful not to say a word until it was just right.

My feet started moving before I could realize it and I found myself back into the hotel, double-tapping on Hakim's door.

*Hakim, open this door right now!*

Nothing.

*Hakim!*

I sat down, outside of the door, with my ear to it, waiting for him to speak.

*Hakim, I know you're by the door.*

He didn't answer me.

*Hakim, you can talk to me, I'm your sister.*

*You're supposed to talk to me about everything.*

He was quiet and minutes passed by.

*I yelled at Lisa.*

I sighed, trying to bite my tongue so that nothing sarcastic would roll off of it.

*Why though?*

I could just hear him breathing.

*Maya loved fireflies.*

\*

6.

I didn't know that much about my brother.

Our relationship was never completely ideal. I was his younger sister, but I was always watching after him, making him food, and making sure that he was okay.

*Maya is sick.*

No one had to tell me that. I knew it. I

knew because she would call me and her voice would sound weak and she didn't even talk about Hakim. I knew something was wrong when she stopped yellin' at him.

So I stayed in Hakim's room for most of the night, sitting on the floor eating macaroni and cheese. I had to keep him company.

He didn't say anything. He just sat on his bed, rocking back and forth. We sat in silence as the sound of police cars and loud music played outside.

And I thought about how sometimes, when you love someone, you aren't supposed to chase after them. Because while they are running, you might be the thing that's bringing them down. And maybe that's why Hakim wouldn't follow Maya, maybe he was too scared that he would mess her up.

*I'm sorry, Hakim.*

Then he cried.

And I hugged my brother for the first time.

And he cried some more, and then when he stopped crying, I cried for him. I drove him to the hospital and we sat in the cold, white waiting room together. I held onto his hand.

But my brother- he was dying. His eyes were bloodshot, his ears must have been ringing, and I could feel the lump in his throat.

There was a doctor and Maya's mother, and they told Hakim he could see her, but he couldn't even make it through the doors. He just turned around and started walking the other way.

So I followed them into the room and I saw the body of the girl who once showed me how to shave my legs with a knife and conditioner.

Her skin was flaky with chapped lips and her hair and her body was frail.

*Look at you, you're big.*

I smiled slightly as I heard her small voice speak to me.

*I told you. Your tatas look great.*

Then she started laughing and her voice started cracking. And when she asked about Hakim, I told her that he left. So she cried and yelled and cursed to the ceiling because he was leaving her, just like he always did. Then she coughed and coughed. She coughed so much that blood spilled out of her mouth and her mom had to run and get a doctor to make sure that she was okay.

She turned her face away from mine and a tear fell down her cheek. I could almost taste the salt as it ran down her face.

*Baby girl, you can't see me like this, okay?*

And it slowly broke every bone in my body.

I didn't know a lot about my brother, Hakim.

But I found out one more thing that day when I saw him walking through the door with his eyes still bloodshot red, his body small and broken, and a painting in his hand.

He wasn't going to watch Maya die.

## Stillness

Emma Sachs  
Agnes Scott College

I work at the cemetery. The newer one, just past mile marker 164, with its loose gravel paths and dandelion infestation. In a bathroom-sized office I answer phones next to a graduate student writing his dissertation on the anthropology of American funerals, or something of that sort. We don't talk much. Really, we don't talk ever. I don't know anything about him except the color of his socks, always purple. They glow bright and aggressive in this dim place, peeking harshly from under khaki pants that never quite reach his ankles, as if he has just finished a growth spurt. Once he mentioned a girlfriend, maybe a fiancée, but I never asked about her and he never brought it up again.

His name is Paul, although in my head I only ever think of him as *the graduate student*. It just seems to fit his body better, the length of it curling around him so that I don't need to see him as anything more than passing headlights out of the parking lot. He sits behind me, so close that when he leans back to breathe in for a heavy-chested sigh, he bumps against my shoulders. He never apologizes, but I usually do, rolling forward so my knees are pushed painfully against the hard edge of my desk until he moves back to his space. I've caught him staring at my breasts a few times. It shouldn't bother me, but it does. I hate the way it opens me wide for examination. His eyes feel like fingers, prodding at my nipples, noting how my bra is two cup sizes too big now. I've taken to crossing my arms over my chest when he's speaking to me.

His desk used to be mine. The one I have now—bigger and closer to the door, although still made of heat-warped particle board—belonged to Maureen. She was the family administrator before me. On my first day, she—tight-lipped and stiff-limbed—led me on a tour of the grounds, pointing out the small, fenced-in historical family cemetery, the groundskeeper building, and the section of land that was yet to be filled with the dead. She never asked me my name. I'm not sure if she ever even knew it.

A few weeks after I started working, she was let go. A kind way of telling her that she had been unknowingly forced to train her replacement. Up until that moment, we assumed my hiring was simply an expansion of our department. Her termination notice slipped in a memo we all received. It lay, halfway down the page, in a paragraph filled with information about conserving water and only printing necessary documents. Unforeseen

budget cuts, was the reason they gave. But I've always suspected it was because she never remembered to express condolences to family members. I do. Even to the ones who yell at me about flower arrangements. I know that anger is far more comforting to shovel over pain than acceptance.

On Maureen's last day I saw her spit into my coffee as I was coming from the bathroom. I chose to forget her persistent rudeness and believe that her firing really was an injustice worthy of whatever form of retribution she deemed fit. I chose to forgive her. But later, during lunch, I found a dead bird outside the service entrance, twisted in a holly bush. I carried it back towards the parking lot, trying to ignore the thick smell of decay that seemed to stick to the sides of my lungs, and the way the brown feathers pushed out from between my fingers as if it were trying to escape. I don't know quite what I planned to do with it, whether at first I really had wanted to throw it in the garbage can near the back door. Whatever the intention, I felt the gravel shift beneath my feet as I turned towards Maureen's car, parked in the spot that would later become mine. I placed it, wings splayed, on the driver's seat of her sedan, the talons scraping against the leather. I left early that day, before she noticed the tiny thing ruining her upholstery. But sometimes, when all the death and anger and sadness I see gets too heavy, I imagine Maureen finding the bird. I imagine her lips, always stuck in that unwavering expression of disapproval, peeling away from her teeth into a grimace. And when I do, I feel in control once more. The silence does not seem so unbearably loud and the walls slow their spinning enough for me to sleep.

If this technique fails, I wander barefoot before heading to my car, feeling the gravel bite into the bottoms of my feet. The only thing dividing the cemetery from a collection of newly built homes on the far north side is a shamefully forsaken walking path that stretches away towards the fishing lake ten miles or so to the left. I've never seen anyone use it, and the dandelions have taken over all the cracks in the sidewalk, their tiny yellow heads halfway through exploding in the wind. I often wonder what it must be like to live in those houses, to sit on the back porch in the evening, child sleeping in your lap, watching the fireflies dance over a thousand ended stories. Mothers, fathers, babies who never even got names. All of them defined

by what they do not do: live. This is the truth of the matter; we are all made up of what we cannot do, of what we are not, for those things are far more infinite and nameable than what we are. I have begun to make a list. All of the things that define who I am.

Things that I do not do:

1. Dye my hair.
2. Separate the darks from the lights when doing laundry.
3. Go to the monthly neighborhood barbeques and potlucks I am invited to.
4. Remember to call Aunt Jenny back until the answering machine is full and beeps at me every five minutes until I make space for new messages.
5. Steal extra toothbrushes from the dentist's office.
6. Parallel park.

\*

Sunlight poked through the half-open blinds of the bedroom window; it was later than I thought. The air stiff and hot against my skin. My lips tasted salty from sweat or tears. I'm not sure which, because I'd begun to cry in my sleep. Sometimes in the evenings too, and even once when the grocery store was out of maraschino cherries.

She was quiet that morning. I didn't feel her tiny body twisting or kicking her usual "goodmorning" rhythm within me. I rolled forward, placing my feet on the floor. She, silent still, as I heaved myself up from the bed, wobbling a bit. From the hall, I could hear the water from my neighbor's sprinklers slapping against the kitchen windows, rattling the jars of sun tea. Although the nausea had long since ended, every night I still lined the windowsill with tall mason jars filled with water and thick slices of ginger and whatever else I have on hand. That day it is mint, from Kara. Every Monday, she walked the three blocks to my house, pulling two bags of groceries in her rusted-out yellow wagon, her tiny, aged feet shuffling forward. I've offered to drive her, or to meet her halfway. But every time she pats my belly, smiling at me so that her eyes nearly disappear amongst the wrinkles, and says something along the lines of, "I know your mama would be all filled up with pride and happiness if she could see you now." Which I've come to realize is her way of saying "no."

I picked up each jar from the window sill, and swirled the honey yellow liquid around a few times, watching the ginger settle down to the bottom of the glass again. It was warm to my touch, almost ready to drink. I watched, slightly dazed, as the water droplets rushed down the

glass, gaining speed as they consumed the ones below them. I placed my left hand against my stomach.

"I can't wait for you to see this," I whispered to her, the only other one in this empty house. "This place, the world, is so stinkin' beautiful." I paused, feeling a trickle of water run down my thigh, seeping into my sock.

Kara's daughter drove my car home. I hadn't seen her since Thanksgiving, when her hair was blonde. It was red that day, dark at the roots, almost bloodied. I sat in the back seat, Kara eyeing me in the rearview mirror. My head ached behind my eyes and in my temples. It felt as if it had been ripped open. My hands shook; really, my entire body was shaking. I shivered against the fake leather, even though it was mid-June. I picked at the bandaid on my right arm, where the IV was. I remember the nurse, her eyes watching carefully as she pushed the needle into place. A purple bruise had formed under my skin; I guess she wasn't as careful as she should have been. I didn't mind though, what was a little more blood? There has been so much already. Everywhere. In my arm, on the sheets, between my legs. I thought I would never stop bleeding. Even then, the left wheel dipping into a pothole, blood gathered in the thick cotton pads they gave me. Bleeding is normal, the doctor had said, detached, watching a spot between my eyes. I wanted to ask him how any of this was normal. How death was explained away in medical terms and morphine. How he could think a word like "normal" would hold any comfort now. I try to remember his expression when he said it, but I can't. I do remember his hands, though, blue gloves covered in my blood, pushing my legs apart, holding her head. I remember her, too tiny and pale; she hadn't had time to grow hair. I remember the feel of her, still warm, limp against my chest, silent. And I remember the silence in that car. Perforated only by Kara's inconsistent, tuneless humming and our breathing. The three of us, our chests rising and falling and rising again.

\*

This morning the graduate student was waiting by my desk, sweatshirt unzipped over a plaid button-up. He clearly doesn't understand the meaning of business casual. My eyes still felt puffy and tender from the lack of sleep, but I gave him a nod as I sat down. He was there to tell me that a man was found at his wife's grave this morning. He was asleep, slumped over a freshly-filled in hole. At first the groundskeeper thought he was trying to dig up his wife, although that makes no sense since the hole was filled in, but I guess no one

thought of that. Once the policeman arrived, the man told them that his wife's dog had died the night before. He came and buried it over where his she lay. He was arrested, of course, but the graduate student was able to take a picture of him first. I didn't want to see or to talk, to make a mockery of this suffering. I wanted the silence that I had become accustomed to between us. He leaned over, too close to me. His jacket smelled of laundry detergent and whiskey, a strange combination for nine in the morning. He shoved his phone in my face so I could see this gravedigger. The man was older than I expected, in his seventies, with pencil-fine wrinkles around his eyes. Laugh lines. He seemed hollow in the photo, a hand resting like a brick on his forearm. He seemed empty, as if with the burying of this dog he was finished. He was alone now.

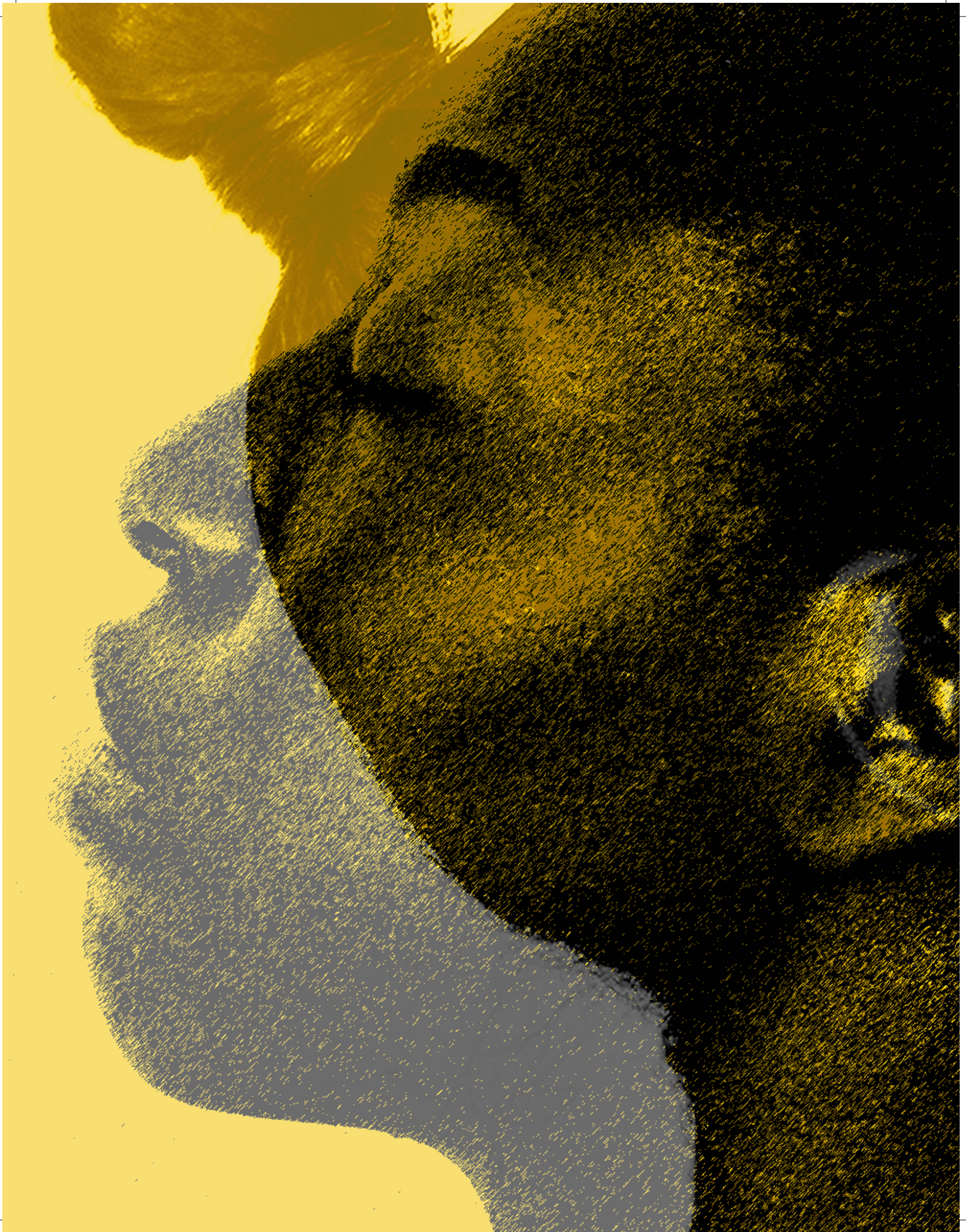
I turned my head away, towards the stack of envelopes sitting before me, to indicate that I was through looking at the photo. The graduate student moved back towards his desk and pulled out his laptop, as he refused to work on the desktop computer. After only a minute, he leaned back in his chair to speak to me, his shoulder knocking into mine. "Crazy, right. It's just some dog. Not worth all this trouble, it'll rot to bones in a few weeks." Although we are only separated by half a decade or so, I suddenly felt so much older than the graduate student. As if age was not marked by years but by sorrows, and he was still an infant to this earth.

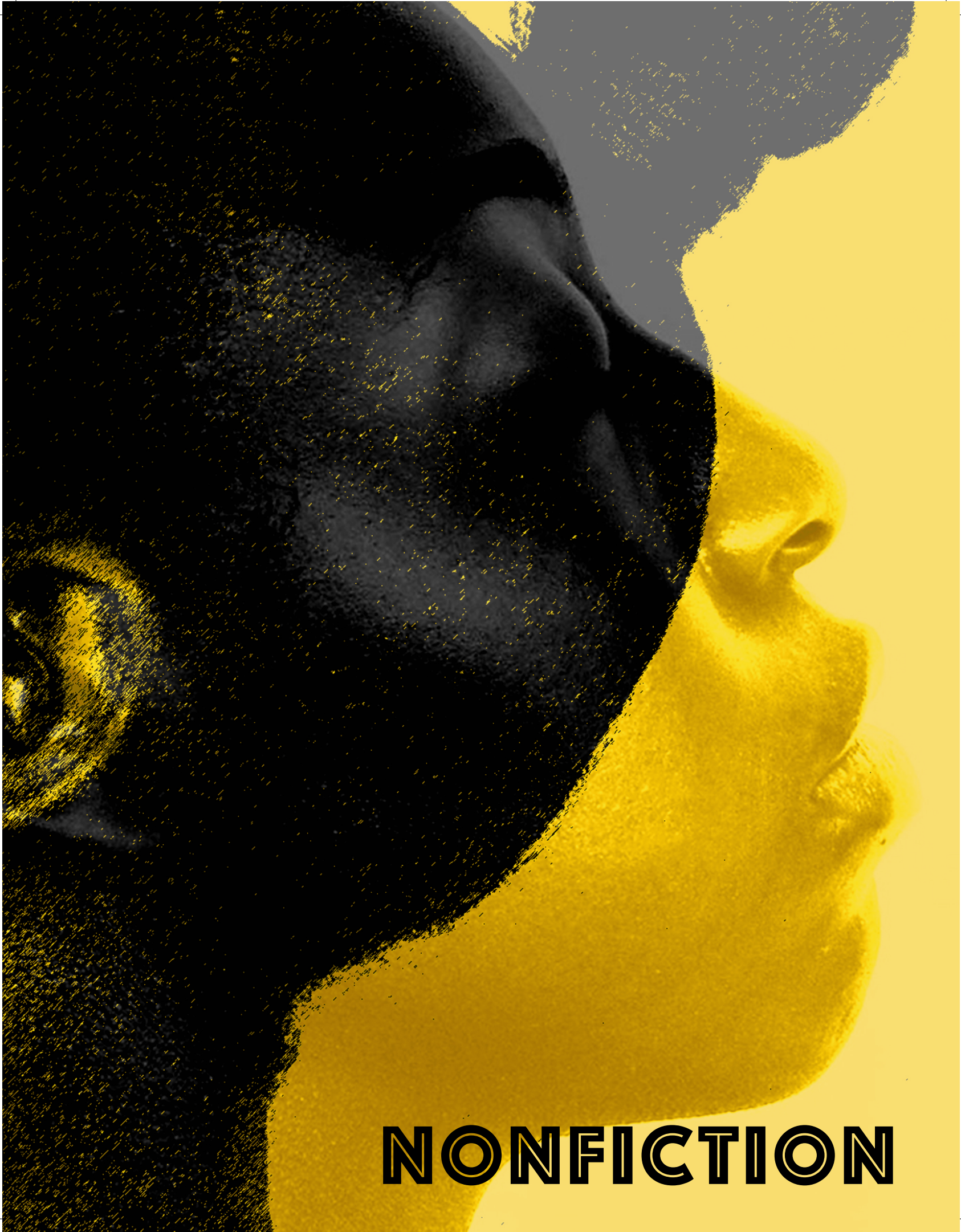
His shoulder was still touching mine, waiting for an answer. Some chuckle of affirmation that it was indeed just some dog. I remembered the dead bird. The way its talons pushed against the flesh of my right thumb. I remembered the hollow ache of a house that is empty of everything but me. I remembered the feeling of tiny feet pushing on me from inside. I remembered the way the blood felt against my thighs as I lay, like that bird, splayed out for all to see. I tugged off my sweater, all too hot, and turned so that I was no longer touching the graduate student.

After a long moment, I pushed my chair back quickly so that, for a change, his knees knocked audibly against his desk. He waited for three of my long breaths, feeling my silence lay heavy between us. "I mean," he continued, "I feel bad for his wife and all. It sucks when someone dies. But a dog is just a dog. You know?" I knew. I knew he had no clue the way loss seems to sit inside you, pushing the air from your lungs and filling up all the space reserved for any other emotion. That no dog is just bones, no baby just flesh. I wanted him to know my pain. I wanted to cut open my stomach, to thrust his hand into my empty womb. To show him how my body is a gallows, a death sentence, a robin's egg broken wide on sidewalk, a graveyard. That nothing living can survive in it, not even me.









**NONFICTION**



## The Night You Leave Her

Molly Armato  
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The night you leave her, you call a car on your phone, dizzy in the orange air outside of her apartment, the waterfall still rushing behind its glass. You sit quietly, politely, in the front seat, a plastic bowl of leftover pasta cold on your thighs. No music. No sound but the wind and A/C passing through the vents. Maybe—somewhere—a glass breaking.

The driver turns to you, asks you some question about what you're studying. Her face is wrinkled, dotted with either a skin tag or a mole. You can't differentiate in this light, bright blue bottles of beer fizzing neon across the dashboard. Her accent is deep and sounds Russian, maybe, or Polish, although you don't know whether you've actually heard anyone with a Polish accent before. It nearly sounds stereotypical—an exaggerated voice heard on television sitcoms—and you almost feel embarrassed, thinking of the way your father might say "politically incorrect" with derision. At any rate, you wish you could speak Ukrainian, or Czech, or whatever her mother tongue might be, surprising her by slipping into the language. Imagining the way her face might light up. Does she have children? Does she still have someone who understands? Perhaps her kids shrug off her square consonants and tongued vowels, wanting to fit in at school, English bubbling easily through their teeth. Or maybe she lives alone. Maybe she has to talk to herself—as she cleans, cooks, bathes—just so she doesn't forget. To make sure that a part of her won't ever get lost. Maybe she only speaks it in her dreams.

You want to be an immigrant, you think, although you know you would never actually say this out loud. What you mean is that you want a homeland, a place to return to, a dish with cubed potatoes or sliced beets passed down through generations. You want to come from such a legacy of struggling: of birth, and building, and growth. Folktales whispered into your ear at night, women with strength wired deep in their bones. Because they had no other choice. Because they knew you were coming.

Your own boring, biological parents are in two different states, most likely, and you haven't talked to either of them in weeks. This is normal for your father but unusual for your mother. The family legacy they left for you is nothing more than attempted suicides and boiled hot dogs, girls married in their teens and cats that always live outdoors.

A radio should be on, you realize. These

drivers always have some station on in the background, muffled notes filtering through the speakers, ready to be turned up if no match of conversation is successfully struck. But you realize you like the ambience. It's almost meditative. You hold your breath and swear you can hear each rotation of the tires as you slide down the street, eyelash-thin and fast as a dancer's wrist. Your sister used to dance. Ballet, jazz, tap—the lessons were in a little room above a jewelry store, and you remember picking her up at six, when it was already dark, and the way her knees shivered under opaque tights.

*Your hair*, she says, and you turn your attention back to the car. She turns toward you slightly, gesturing as if she's holding a cigarette, a body moving purely out of habit. One of her rings glints under a passing streetlight. *Is it natural?*

*Oh*. Yes. Your voice is steadier than you'd expected. It's something you've always hated about yourself—your propensity for tears, unraveling with a single mundane word. You can't cry in private, though. You have to be with someone else. It doesn't matter who—your mother, a casual friend, the drive-thru worker at McDonald's, struggling to articulate your choked sobs as you lean in closer towards the microphone. One time when you were eight it happened in the middle of a piano lesson; you spilled red grape juice on the carpet.

She looks back at the road. *It's pretty*. You can't open your mouth to say thank you so you smile and nod, lips tight, as if you're holding a piece of candy about to burst under your tongue. Your knee, you realize, is numb under the cold Tupperware, but you feel too embarrassed to shift in your seat.

*So you want to be a writer, eh?* This you have to answer. Sometimes you imagine giving different responses—say you're studying French history, maybe, or some kind of complicated physics. But you know you wouldn't be able to fumble your way through any of the follow-up questions, so you always end up going with the truth. Who is it that gets to decide what appropriate conversation is for strangers, anyway? You don't know what to say about your normal life, the checkmarks on the census, the facts you willingly accept and swallow every morning. You've been reading Sylvia Plath, and you want to talk about "Tulips," the line *I am aware of my heart*, and the way you first lost feeling in your heels as you read it on the

bus. Or the red spot you've started to notice on your neck. You want to ask her if she ever vividly imagines swerving off the road, or at least out of the lane, and the subsequent crash, like boys setting off a firework too early on the highway, the split second of peace it would give you in the moment right before the airbags swelled like campfire marshmallows, shock stealing the breath from every edge of your lungs—because you do. Sometimes you even go so far as to think of the hospital, who they'd try to contact after rifling through your wallet, as your head throbbed on a pillow in the background. You want to tell them to call your family but you can't—your mouth filled with blood and chipped teeth, years of orthodontic work ruined.

*Where should I turn? Here?* You point. All your life is pointing and staying silent, weaving

with a stranger between dark trees.

But this is not your life. This is only one night, the night you leave her, and you are however old you are, and you live wherever you tell her to drop you off, and you might be breathing but that's not what's important. Everyone you know will be dead someday. Every car you ride in will eventually stop. Somewhere you read that the people recorded in laugh tracks must have died by now but still live on, clips echoing as your father flips between shows with his feet on the ottoman. Your father is alive—for now. For now she's reached your apartment, and you cradle your bowl of pasta and open the door, walking out into nothing but cold and white. You know it's not snowing, and you know you can't turn back, and you want to cry but the car's already pulled away.

## Sew Me a Song

Anna Lachkaya  
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She did not like the brown brick building on the outskirts of downtown Minneapolis, nor the old stalling elevator that took them up to the upper floor. The square building looked abandoned in the setting sun. The elevator doors opened, and a single light bulb hung in front of them on a black twisted rope in the gray-walled hallway. They turned to the right and walked through the swinging plastic sheets towards the faint hum of sewing machines.

An older woman met them dressed in black, her demeanor brisk and loud.

"Too small to be fourteen."

The older girl assured that the younger one had just turned 14 years old. "She work hard."

"She take bus?"

"Brother drop off."

"Three dollar an hour and no break." Her sister nodded and switched to Latvian.

"This is just for a year until you are fifteen years old and can start working legally somewhere else. One of us will be back in six hours to pick you up."

\*

She remembered the vintage European sewing machine of her childhood. It did not compare with the tabletop modern versions lining the tables at this factory. Her mother used to sit on a straight-backed chair and work on neverending dresses for the six daughters. Her mother's foot moved the pedal under the table to get the machine tapping loudly, the black metal heavy with swirls of the *Singer* brand name.

The spool pin spun around, thread flowing through the vicious needle with each movement of her foot. Her mother talked as she worked, just as she talked when she slept.

*Lift the bar by the presser foot, place the fabric on the cloth plate, and lower the presser to trap it...*

*Keep it straight...*

*Keep your fingers away from the needle bar...*

\*

There used to be a *la Modiste* shop within walking distance from her childhood home in Latvia where men and women came to be fitted for a special outfit. It was next to the shoe

repair shop, next to the small bakery, at the top of the stairs on the second floor.

Once she used the back door and over the singing sewing machines asked if there were any scraps of fabric left. She had lifted her small doll, the one with arms and legs that did not bend. Painted-on underwear was all the doll had, pale naked limbs straight and unmoving. The women working there were nice. They filled her arms with satin, cotton, and silk.

"What is your doll's name?" asked the youngest woman, her dark eyes surrounded by strongly perfumed chestnut hair. She told them.

"*Atnāc atpakaļ nākošnedēļ un mums būs vairāk.*" (*Come back again next week and we will have more.*) They echoed each other.

\*

It was the month of October, their first month in the United States. The snow came early that year, piling up high on the streets and walkways. The factory was chilly. The twenty-some bodies were not warming up the room sufficiently. One night she gave in and used the sharp scissors to cut off the fingers from her knit gloves to keep at least her palms warm. Her mother's hand-knit gloves frayed with the cut, deteriorating slowly, coming apart higher and higher on each finger. She kept cutting off the dangling blue threads, afraid the snapping machine would trap her fingers. When the owner walked by and noticed her hands, she reached down, pulled off the gloves and spoke rapidly.

For one whole month, they worked on pillowcases. Rectangular black and orange cases with bats, pumpkins, and scary green monster faces. The fabric felt waxy on her fingers, as if the images had been freshly painted on the cloth. She liked smelling the fabric, the clean scent of the material turned inside out.

The rhythm of the room guided the movement of her hands. Tap-tap-tap, slowly at first, and then faster. Keep within one centimeter of each edge, rotate the fabric, tap, tap, tap, cut the thread, move the pillowcase to the pile and grab two more.

Later they all stood at the large tables and turned each pillowcase out, using a metal pointer for the corners. They tied the hanging threads. Her arms hurt from lifting them up and moving them down, up and down again. But it was nicer to stand around the tables and move

around a little, compared to sitting still for hours.

\*

Women and children of different ages surrounded her, rarely talking. Most were Asian, with a handful of white immigrants who could not speak English. A thin, angular woman with black hair, possibly of European descent, sat down at one of the tables in the corner and pulled out a square package from her bag. She peeled off the top and slowly made little sandwiches on the table in front of her. Yellow cheese hid a round cracker, and a round salami-looking circle finished the top. The stranger looked up and smiled. She came by and introduced herself as Oksana, recently arrived from Ukraine.

"Здесь... не плохо работать." Oksana spoke in Russian, a language they both could understand.

"This... is not a bad place to work," she had said. "You get a twenty-minute lunch if... you work eight hours." She spoke fast, as if in a hurry, and then paused somewhere in the sentence to make a point.

Sometimes Oksana saved her a small *Lunchables* sandwich and left it on the machine wrapped in a tissue. Later she took it outside in the hall on the pretense of using a restroom. She ate it slowly, taking apart each piece, stretching the moment.

\*

As far back as she could remember, her mother used old newspapers to cut out panels for a clothing prototype. The different shapes lining the floors did not make sense at first, until her mother fit them together like puzzle. The left chest piece met with the right chest half in the front. The back was another portion, and the sleeves yet another. A bell-shaped skirt was the easiest to make, since it only needed one seam.

She loved to help her mother cut the cloth to match the newspaper, and later stood like a mannequin as her mother pinned the pieces on her, tucking in, drawing the lines with a chalk that would be taken in even further on the sewing machine. This system did not work as well on toys. She only used a needle and a thread to make clothes for her smaller dolls.

Sometimes she tried to negotiate with her mother.

"I don't want the sleeves so short."

"Can the skirt go past my knees?"

The answer was always no. The rest of the family needed the fabric.

\*

Payday at the factory was every Friday. The owner placed a small blank envelope on her machine at the end of the day. Most of the time it was \$90 even. Sometimes it was less. She did not know how to find the answer for the lesser amounts. Maybe she used the bathroom more often than she should have.

Later at night, she counted the money in the bathroom, getting to know the foreign currency, the faces of the old men. When she arrived home late at night, she left the envelope on the kitchen table for her parents. She gave it all away and willingly, pleased she could help. There was nothing more important than family. She ate leftovers, poured a cup of strong coffee, and pulled out her schoolbooks and dictionary to start on homework.

\*

The fabrics changed in the winter. They became tougher and heavier, the wool transferring its taste to her mouth, dry and scratchy. Her neatness and precise cuts earned her more time at the cutting table. Her hands dried, and blisters lined her pointer finger where the metal scissors dug in. The factory was colder; the snow piled high on the windows outside, reflecting the lamps and the people indoors. She looked for frost flowers on the windows but could never find them.

She noticed that Oksana always seemed to work on the more complicated pieces like coats and jackets. Only she and the owner did not mass-produce the same thing. It's as if the two were the only gifted women in the room, hanging beautiful pieces of clothing on a rack next to their machines. She found excuses to pass by them and touch the buttery soft coats, the velvet pants.

"Someday," she said to herself.

\*

One time at school, the teacher woke her up, lifting his hand off her shoulder. She struggled out of the seat, grabbing at her books and notebook.

*Had she blacked out again and fallen asleep?* She had moved from the front of the classroom to the back corner just in case this happened. Nothing fell down this time. Her feet felt like lead.

"Do you need to talk to anyone?" the teacher asked. He had long silver hair with a black mustache and kind eyes. She could see that he had let her sleep through his whole period and had waited until the other students left the room.



"Nnno. All fine." He sent her to the office anyway. The counselor, a talkative woman, went on and on about drinking, partying, and drugs. At least - she thought that was what the counselor said. Whenever people spoke rapidly in English, she had a hard time understanding all the words. She watched her earnestly and nodded her head any time a question was asked. She took the letter her parents must sign, and folded it neatly before placing it in her backpack.

After the meeting, she walked to the school library, picked a corner, sat down and curled over her backpack for a few more minutes. The silence lulled her; the smell of books comforted. Some days she was so tired she did not care how well she did at school.

\*

Spring finally came. On her way to the factory, she stopped on the side of the road to tear off a few branches of lilacs. She buried her face in the familiar scent, closed her eyes, and imagined she was back in Europe, in her backyard, doing the same thing. Except - these lilacs were dark purple, and hers had been white. She looked at the small blooms carefully, searching for one with five petals instead of the usual four.

## Apologetics

Emma Sachs  
Agnes Scott College

Sister, do you remember the day we climbed out on the roof? It was mid-October; once the sky was overcast enough that the shingles did not burn our feet. We sat with our backs against the bathroom window, waiting for the street lights to sputter on—our unarguable curfew. There, in the gutters that Father had not cleaned since Christmas, one of the helicopter seeds had sprouted into a five inch tall green stalk. I remember imagining the roots pushing down through the metal and bursting into the kitchen; that a whole tree would grow from the the roof of our house, one so tall that if you and I climbed to the top we could pluck the tiny silver airplanes from the sky.

We sat in silent acceptance of each other's presence, neither wanting to disturb the other as we watched the wind bend the pinetree back and forth. This was right around the time I started calling you "the pretty sister"—never to your face though. Even then I knew to be ashamed of the constant struggle in my head, the constant weighing of us—two barely grown girls—to see who was worth the most. For me, it had nothing to do with your face; we had the same nose and eyes after all. It was the way you held yourself, even in that moment, when there was no one to see you. I remember watching as you tilted your head back against the chipped paint on the windowsill, listening to the quivering and sporadic bits of music escaping from the neighbor's house. I wished I could look so effortlessly blaise, so unintentional, as if every move, every word was not calculated and measured before being released into the world. I scratched a scab on my leg and, for once, you did not tell me that it would leave a scar. But I looked at your legs all the same, smooth and unblemished, pale against the fading sunlight and the dark of the roof. You were the pretty sister.

When it was time to go back inside, I accidentally elbowed you in the back as I stood to stoop low through the window. You were angry, with that low intake of breath through your teeth that seems to suck all the air from my lungs. The truce of the roof had ended, and I apologized, but too late. You had pushed past me, through the window, landing heavy on the floor, the window shaking. My *sorry* came once you were already halfway down the stairs, so it just hung in the air, between the shingles and the glass panes with no one to accept it. I think sometimes it is still there waiting, and that I need

only go and leave it on your bedside table while you sleep, and all will be forgiven.

\*

You were twelve the first time one of your kidney cysts burst, but we didn't know what it was then. There was blood in your pee, so Mom took you to pee more blood into a cup, and let them take blood from your arms and blood from your fingertips. So much blood. She had them run every other test before letting the nurse schedule an ultrasound. We all, I think, knew what it was. Even me. We had been trained from birth. I was the only girl in my class who knew how to spell *hereditary* before I could spell *garden*. You were a ticking clock, counting down to the day when the word *life-limiting* must enter your vocabulary. We were not surprised. But I still remember the sound of you crying, curled fully clothed in the bathtub. I didn't go in to check on you. I was too young then to know how it feels to find an expiration date stamped on your lower back. If I could, I would go back and crawl into the tub next to you. I was already taller than you, but I think we both might have fit. I wish I would have tried at least, to be with you, to breathe in the scent of lavender, and spearmint, and peanut butter that always clung to you, to tuck my chin against your shoulder, and not say a word.

\*

If you walk into the backyard, out beyond the patio that was never finished, amidst the feather grass and lambs ears, there are stones. Some are as large as your palm, but most are uneven quarters and lopsided gumballs. When broken open, either with the hammer pilfered from the tool drawer or by smashing them against the small millstone sitting by the back gate, you will sometimes find quartz. Milky, and jagged, and not worth anything, but when lined up on my windowsill, the streetlight turns them gold and shining. I kept them a secret, my own safety deposit box made of an empty tissue box, the hole covered with masking tape and craft paper. Sometimes, I would pour them out across my bed and pretend they were diamonds. Eventually one went missing – the smallest one, tiny as a thumbnail. It was lost, I assumed, down under the bed or behind the dresser. I found it, years later, in your underwear drawer, wrapped

in a piece of tissue paper next to a sprig of lavender and a bag filled with single earrings. I wish you would have asked for one, but then again, I probably would have told you no. I have taken it back now, still wrapped in tissue; it sits in the empty penny jar. On the day you left, I took it to the airport with me, held it tight in my palm so that one of the rough edges popped the tissue, scraping my skin. I wonder if you have realized that it is gone.

\*

I remember once, in the early evening, when we were both still small enough to fit comfortably in the upstairs bathtub, Mom sprinkled our bath with herbs from the garden. The scent of the lemon balm that floated on the water seemed to stick to the roof of my mouth whenever I took a breath. The window was masked with steam that rose to the top of the unventilated room to collect against the ceiling in large drops. You and I stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror. You were in front of me and I poked my finger into the thumbprint birthmark in the middle of your back. You laughed, pitching yourself forward out of my reach, closer to the mirror.

"Naked babies?" I asked. You nodded in agreement and we moved into position for our ritualistic pre-bath dance. I stood in front, you behind me, only your head visible above mine. We did our sort of peek-a-boo, hokey pokey combination while half singing, half chanting, "Naked babies! Naked babies! Naked babies!" I don't know exactly how that dance started. It just seemed to always be. Bathtime couldn't start until we had five solid minutes of the naked babies dance. Were you doing it before I was born or did it accompany me into the world? I can't remember the day it stopped either. One day we didn't do the dance, and then we began showering alone, the shower beating against my skin to the rhythm of a dance I did not know.

\*

There is a scar on your left hand, in between your thumb and pointer finger; at least I think it's still there. I hope it's still there. It was the only time I made you bleed. I don't remember what we were arguing about. Do you? It seems silly now, but I wish I could remember. Because I don't know if I was justified, and I can't even remember if it was my fault. It was Mom's favorite glass, I remember that at least, the crystal one with the chipped lip from the iced tea spoon that fell from the top shelf. It was summer, and the window unit rattled loudly

on. You had got the better air conditioner that year, the one with the remote control and the self setting timer. Mine was the brown one with the squeaky nob with the two settings, *cool* and *cold*; the one that was too small for any window so that the extra space around it had to be filled with plastic Safeway bags and the spiders and moths wouldn't find their way in. I remember the sickening sound of glass against hardwood, and how I was so sure it wasn't my fault, and how you watched as I cleaned it up. And I remember the anger, now, hot and burning in the back of my throat. The triangle of glass, as wide as a credit card, was cool in my hand, still wet with whatever had been in the cup. Your blood stained the cuff of my shirt, ran between your fingers into the grooves of the floor. I don't know who finished cleaning up. Maybe no one did.

\*

I am sorry.

Do you hear the catch in my voice? Do you feel how much I mean it?

I don't know why it took me this long. Even now the words feel strange in my mouth.

I am sorry I did not tell you that I loved you until now.

I am sorry you don't believe me.

\*

Sister, how much I have forgotten. How many of those details have slipped into those dark, grainy places. There is too much empty space now, with nothing left to fill it. I wish I could go back. There must have been more happy memories than I can think of now. I will go through the stacks of pictures again and search for the smiles, for the ones where you pulled me close to your chest. I will buy that brand of peanut butter you love. I will drive all the way back to our home. I will stand naked in front of the mirror and sing about naked babies. I will coax the memories out eventually, I hope, so that I may squirrel them away somewhere I will not be so careless with them. But for now, oh how much there is to be sorry for, and how little time there is left.

## The Double King

Caroline Crew  
Georgia State University

Once, there were two kings inside one body, but there was no two-headed king. The double king had many daughters, and they grew, and many of them left the small green kingdom for small green kingdoms nearby. When only the youngest daughter remained, the double king busied himself with song. In tending to his daughters, the double king had forgotten the songbirds and so he returned to tending his first charges.

\*

My first memory is wiggling in the grass as my father diligently planted one hundred Scots pines. Those saplings are now stalwart. As a child with a crooked fringe my father trimmed with his own father's desk scissors, I would check on the pines' growth every morning as my father and I did our rounds of the farm. Each day, we would check the magpie traps, refill the water for the bait-bird and feed it, reset the trap, and, if success had been had, I would wait in the truck while my father quietly wrung the neck of the caught predator.

\*

The double king cleared his kingdom of the black-and-white doomsayers as much as he could, and as the rhymes of *One for sorrow, Two for mirth, Three for a funeral, Four for a birth* died out, the smaller birds' song swelled across the land.

\*

I came into my father's life late: he was 62. He had already started to weather—bruises staying a little longer—and I've never known his hair other than grey. Which is to say: he already had a strong sense of self and a litany of well-honed stories that began, "And then he'd say, Phil, he'd say..." I will never know the skins my father shed, like the snakes in shit heap, in order to become the man that made me.

\*

For many years, the double king used only his first face: broad and ruddy-cheeked. When his eldest daughters were young, he used his first face. When his youngest daughters were born, he used his first face. As the many magpies

lessened, only one remained. The magpie took no joy in the rich orchestra of hedgerow song nor in the pride of the double king as he tended his daughters and tended his songbirds. Cursing the double king, the magpie flew to his table and crowed a hex that settled over his house and the whole kingdom.

\*

A bird in the house means death in the family. Often, a bird in literature means the death of the story—the clichéd weight exploding the delicate bones that are being heaped with metaphor. But the truth is the week I went to Britain and saw the full force, not the slight slippages or running together of daughters' names, of my father's dementia, my childhood home was invaded with birds. The robin dipping in the kitchen, not an ominous sign. Then, the panicked swallow orbiting the light in my bedroom. I threw a towel at it, waved a book, tried to be an air traffic controller and not flinch from its bullet body, and finally, it dropped behind a decrepit rocking horse. Grabbing the swallow and slipping it out of the window, I found its kin: three dead bird bodies stuck between the panes.

\*

The magpie's hex hovered over the double king, sinking slowly deeper into him. His first face still greeted the kingdom most days. Though his gait slowed, the double king still surveyed his kingdom, even as he traversed only its gardens and not its forests. But his first face began to flicker. At first, these brief intermissions were only glimpses of a second face: still broad but flat and colourless, as emphatic as a dishrag. This second face was empty but couldn't hold a thing: names, questions and memories trickled out of it and wasted away.

\*

Growing up with an older parent, the question of "when" is a weighted one. When did they become an old? My dad wasn't old at seventy, when he took joy in the two of us going to Sunday lunch alone and revelling in the awkward reactions of the servers when he corrected them: "No, my daughter, not my granddaughter." He wasn't old at my

graduation, when, with tears at his eyes at seeing the first of his family to gain a degree, he slipped out of the hall so that he could hug me when the doe-eyed new graduates processed out into the world. Was he old when I flew home from America at 22, and he greeted me at Heathrow with a cardboard sign and a flask of gin? Does he remember when he became old? Does he remember anything?

\*

As the double king's second face emerged and settled, he began to stare at the kingdom instead of see it. The fields were still green, but the swaying corn did not move his eyes. He walked, slower now, in the gardens of the kingdom, but it was quiet. The songbirds did not recognize the double king's second face and so would not sing.

\*

On Mother's Day just gone, I mothered my father. Woke him up with tea and toast, hesitantly tucking his morning pills onto his plate, too. I sat with him, and we looped through the same questions, like a child unhappy with your answer to *why*, but the poke to repeat the question, the *why* before his *why*, would fly away before he could grasp it. I was only visiting for a week. Late in the afternoon the day before leaving, my father looked up from his deep blank silence and asked if I could cut his toenails.

Because I don't live in this house anymore, I couldn't find any other scissors but the hulking ones his own father had owned, the scissors that my dad insisted on using to cut my hair until I was ten and old enough to go to his barber. I was as careful as I was taught to be.

\*

One day, the double king ventured a little further than the garden but not quite to the forest. In the field lay a wooden contraption. Box-like and weather-worn. The double king searched the box for meaning but found none. His second face blankly eyed the box's door as it swung open, closed. He did not remember the magpie trap, nor the songbirds. From the trees, the magpie who had cursed him cawed in victory.

\*

Arriving home after that last visit, I dropped my suitcase in the kitchen and, leaving the door open, went to water the herbs outside. I made this small garden of green sprigs in pots when my father first started to fade away, a small way to feel close to him, the farmer. Returning inside there was a sparrow on the floor. Some curse followed me home. Calling my parents to assure them of a safe flight, my dad asks, "Where are you now?" and I mirror the question back to him, quietly, though he has already forgotten what I asked.

## On Drowning Deer

Emma Sachs  
Agnes Scott College

When a deer is shot, or otherwise injured, it's thought that the animal will often go to the nearest lake and walk as far as it can into the water, drowning itself.

\*

The house I was born into was built too small for any family to live in comfortably, and just big enough for our family to live in very uncomfortably. Square rooms open up to other square rooms, each painted a different shade of yellow. There is no space for secrets, or winter coats. From the top floor, I can listen to a fist hitting the dining room table, and from the kitchen I can clearly hear the sound of vomit mixing with toilet water in the upstairs bathroom. We—like this house—are sick, and tired, and leaking at the edges.

\*

The first leak started in basement. Except we can't call our basement a basement and instead must call it a cellar because it is nothing more than dirt floor and wooden shelves. Best suited for canned vegetables, it's now used to store dried-up glue bottles and rows of glass jars and vases all piled atop each other in a crystal Jenga tower. The first leak started in the cellar.

\*

When it is early morning, and you are standing on the opposite shore, a dead deer floating on a lake almost looks human. Maybe a child wearing a fur coat, or a woman with very long hair. That is what I thought, at least. It wasn't until my canoe, still reeking of fish, slid along next to it that I fully believed it was, indeed, only a deer, waterlogged and no longer leaching blood into the surrounding water. It must have been there all night.

\*

We never could find where the cellar leak came from. For weeks, men with low voices and heavy footsteps walked from driveway to basement to bathroom and back to basement, trying to determine if it was the bathtub or the sink. Pipes were replaced and drains cleaned, but still the leak dripped on. Eventually, it was decided that a pink, plastic throw-up bucket from

a recent hospital visit would sit on a hastily-constructed ledge. It was a temporary fix, something to stop the smell of mildew from lacing into all of our shirts. Instead, it became permanent, emptied once every month, and then slid back up onto the shelf to be filled again. Sometimes we forgot it, letting it overflow stale bathwater and a dead cricket or two onto the mouldering stairs.

\*

After a while you will no longer notice the dripping sound.

\*

Some water is easy to see when it goes where it does not belong. Some leaks flood through rafters, pooling by piles of unwashed clothes. Other leaks are quieter; they are harder to notice. They run through loose chimney bricks and down in-between walls. The drywall is puckered like yeast rolls for years before anyone notices. By then, everything is ruined and it is easier to sand the drywall and patch the leak than it is to fix the damage. We do not speak of the rot that must be hiding in our walls, how when the wind blows the smell of mildew fills our noses until all of the windows are thrust open.

\*

Our house is a body of evidence, proving we were never meant to be fixers. Stand in the stairway at night, when everything is dark and quiet, and you can hear the chorus of drips we will never find. The water will come anyway, seep through cracked windows and loose floorboards. We patch the holes, not knowing that the water is still building, still flowing. That one day it is bound to overflow.

\*

I wonder if the deer knows what it is doing when it wades, body shaking, into the lake. I wonder if it intends to die, or if it just wants one final drink. I wonder if it realizes it is drowning only after it is too late. If the water leaks in through the wound in the chest, numbing the pain, slowly filling up the mouth, covering the eyes. Carrying the body further and further away from shore.

# The Black

Cortney Esco  
Young Harris College

Once my mother ran outside in a tornado. To try and understand my mother, one must first understand her relationship with horses, and with one in particular. She had dreamed of having horses her whole life, but had been unable to as a child. When she'd finally gotten them as an adult, she devoted herself wholly to breeding them, training them, riding them, all because she had a way with them, a natural love for them that ran so deep in her blood the rest of us could only try to keep up. People called our family horse-folk. It was what we did; it took over our entire farm, our livelihood. It consumed so many of our days and resources. It had seemed a natural prerequisite to being in the family. You worked with horses. It was how people identified you, what made you different, and special. You were the one with horses.

Of all the horses over all the years, my mother loved her stallion best. I knew she had gotten him long before my birth, back when her and my father were first married, and they built their barns by hand and used shovels to dig holes for every fence post. She'd bred the only mare they could afford at the time and she'd delivered a beautiful black colt, but it died shortly after. My mother was so heartbroken that my father took what was left of his pay check and drove her to a horse farm farther north in Georgia intending to buy her any colt of her choosing.

It was a breeding farm with countless American Quarter Horse stallions where she found Rainy. He was already older when she saw him, nearly thirteen and never used for breeding, though he was kept a stallion just in case. What struck everyone that saw him was his unusual color, called a golden or yellow dun, meaning a golden yellow coat with a black dorsal stripe down the center of his back. Even more exceptional, he had what's known as primitive markings as well, meaning black stripes on his legs, long stripes running down his shoulder, stripes on his forehead called cobwebbing, black ear tips and even a contrasting frost of nearly white tips on his black-based mane and tail. From the moment my mother met the solid, intelligent and well-bred gentle stallion she'd loved him. Years later he would sire countless foals for my family and go on to compete as her personal riding horse. One of his sons would go on to the AQHA World Show with his owners, the highest level of competition for his breed, and be a source of unending pride for our family. To

this day his picture is hung up on the family room wall beside Rainy's, my own and my brother's.

The tornado was nearly fifteen years ago now. I remember the first time I heard the retelling of the story, only hours after it happened, when my mother appeared at my old elementary school, drenched from the rain. It stuck in my mind because my mother was never *drenched*; she was never so distastefully disheveled. She always dressed flatteringly for her petite hourglass frame and had her hair smoothed pristinely, with the exception of a little volume in her bangs. She was never flustered, never impolite, and her naturally tanned skin always dimpled at her cheeks where they creased in an encouraging smile. She was often mistaken for a thirty-something mom though she didn't even conceive me until she was thirty-five. It was what later made the other kids adapt a popular pop song to "*Esco's mom has got it going on.*"

When she came to pick me up from school that day she was not smiling. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail and her clothes were soaked through. I remember my confusion even though we had spent the latter half of our busy kindergarten school day huddled in the hallway with thick books over our heads to "protect" us if the building was knocked down around us. I'd never seen a real tornado before, in all of my six years never even heard of anyone that had. I suppose I didn't think they were real around where we lived. Like hurricanes and tsunamis on the news, I thought they would never reach north Georgia. My mother told me she had come to pick me up and take me home. She told me the reason why, but it didn't really sink in.

The rest of my class huddled around me when I was the first to stand from the wall, the first chosen to leave the school.

"What happened?" someone asked me. I remember shrugging, repeating the words, though I hadn't really thought them through.

"The tornado flattened our chicken houses," I told them. This was met by more questions, like what was a chicken house, and what tornado, and what was I going to do. I remember not really answering and just sort of turning and walking away. I heard the whispers swiftly begin not of a tornado, but of *the* tornado, the one that hadn't existed a moment before but was now the shared tornado of Madison County that affected everyone

because they'd lived through near-death. I remember one girl, I can't remember exactly who, looking at me with a deep shock and sympathy that frightened me.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I hope everything is okay." I remember giving her a kind of strange look, wondering why she was so sorry and what was so horrible about it. Why wouldn't everything be okay? Tornadoes were just wind. All I could think was my mother wouldn't have to slave away all day in the hot chicken houses anymore. I didn't think there was anything so sad about it.

On the drive home is when I began to see the evidence for myself, and mile by mile (it was nearly thirteen from school) the magnitude of the destruction got more real. A huge tree, I believe an oak, that had stood at the street corner since before our ninety-year-old neighbor had moved into the first house on the street, was ripped clean out of the earth, its roots reaching like broken fingers for the sky, pale and stained bloody red from the clay. We only had a few neighbors. Most other houses were miles away from us, untouched and out of view even from the top of the hill that crowned our property, a feature my father called "Gobbler's Knob" that was a favorite setting for made up tales of a "great-great-grand pappy" that I knew, even then, didn't exist. Had my father told me of the damage a tornado could wreck, I would've laughed as I did at any other story. But it was my mother that told me what had happened while I had been laughing with the other children in the hall at school, glad for a day free of classes. My mother never lied, never exaggerated. The religious center of the family, she always tried to live her life as an example for us.

She told me that she and my father had been in the house listening to the weather before the power began to cut out. A bay window sat beside the dining table off the kitchen, and when she looked out it, she could tell by the sky that more than rain and wind were coming.

"How?" I interjected. She sort of frowned at me then, a little distracted by her own thoughts and driving around the debris on the road.

"Haven't you ever seen tornado weather before?" she asked. I creased my brow to say, of course not. Shouldn't she know that? Shouldn't she know everything?

"I suppose I forget you've only ever seen the weather here," she said. "When I was a child the seven of us moved all over. We saw storms, hurricanes, tsunamis. Tornadoes, we saw all the time when we lived up north. Our parents would yell at us to get away from the windows, but we'd press our faces to the glass anyway to try

and see them. I know what a tornado sky looks like." I frowned deeply at this nature so unlike my own, to rush toward danger with no fear out of curiosity. The greatest shock was still to come.

"I ran outside to get the horses," she told me. "I got Rainy first." I had her repeat the statement but could no more make myself believe it. I knew she loved our animals, particularly our horses, but to know what was coming, and still go out? It made my chest tighten just to think of it.

I had no name for it then, my anxiety, general but mostly hypochondria. My only attempt at helping it had manifested itself in habits of obsessive cleanliness, though still with occasional setbacks of totally immobilizing panic attacks for no substantial reason. I hadn't learned yet that it was even really abnormal. I couldn't fathom my mother pushing aside so easily such fear that would've paralyzed me. I envied her strength. I knew then that it was what I wanted -to be strong, like her.

By the time I knew Rainy he was also called Old Man, breeding still in his late twenties, ancient for a horse, and yet still in good shape and still unusually mild mannered contrary to his sex's trademark. I knew him only because I would run around and under his legs trying to catch my willful white Shetland pony that was pastured with him. He never so much as accidentally injured my pony that came up to his knees, or me.

I knew it was my mother's love for Rainy that made her go out at all. He was in the front pasture by the road, in the direction the tornado was coming from. She ran out to him first, flinging wide the long metal gates. He let her catch him even though the storm was approaching. Even those that don't spend time around them generally admit that horses *know* when a storm is approaching. All animals do, I think, much before we can comprehend the signs. They sense it, or smell it, or hear it far away, and the prey animals prone to fear, like horses, get anxious—but not Rainy. Like my mother he remained calm, let her slip his halter on and lead him to the safety of the barn. I was taught from a young age that was the key to dealing with all large animals. You couldn't have fear, or they would. You couldn't hesitate, or change your mind or freeze. At six, I hadn't had a full-sized horse of my own yet, but I understood what was necessary to handle them. My mother had taught me since the day she brought me home from the hospital, mere days after her C-section, and sat me up on the saddle in front of her to go for a ride. I thought I would grow into it when I got the chance.

Only once the stallion was safe did my mother realize that she felt compelled to try



and gather the twelve other horses on the farm and bring them all in as well before the tornado landed. My father came out to help, after screaming in his cowboy boots and hat, wondering what on earth possessed my mother to leave the safety of the house. Realizing that she would not be stopped, he grudgingly grabbed any halter or rope he could find and started to catch the horses that would come near him.

They worked side by side for who knows, minutes? The cows were long gone, wild roping steers that shied away from humans on a good day; the horses were all in the barn except for one. She was an old grey brood mare named Hope, long generations descended from the famed race horse Secretariat, though she had come to us from an animal cruelty case. My mother had rehabilitated her and loved her as well. She had a two week old brown bay filly at her side at the time. But when my mother went to catch her, she took off, running instead to the far end of the pasture with her foal in tow. The other pastures were small, the horses would've been trapped with only trees for shelter, but Hope was in the largest one that stretched all the way over the hill. My mother told me that she was going to go after her, but it was then that the tornado touched down.

When she speaks of it, my mother always mentions her fear, only in the respect that she didn't know if she had done the right thing. What if the tornado had hit the barn? Then all the animals would have died because she trapped them under its steel frame. She wanted to help them, wanted to save them, but she couldn't be sure of the best way to do so. With each telling I am mystified by her fear for them and not herself.

She always tells me the fact that perhaps astounded me most as a child, how she went into the barn, into the tack room where the saddles were kept, and huddled under the counter with my father. She says that for once all three of the dogs and all four of the cats huddled together under the counter at once with them, and there was no barking, scratching or squabbling. There was only fear and hope for safety, for survival. My mother says she prayed then, a lot. They all waited, warm bodies, human and animal pressed together in the barn as the tornado touched down and ripped through the property. First it went directly through Rainy's pasture, then across to rip siding off of the house, then up the bottom of the hill and across both chicken houses, long blue tin structures with twenty-two thousand chickens inside. Both structures were completely ripped apart scattering a trail of shredded wood and tin. The tree from the street corner near the houses

was pulled up from the earth then. Finally, the tornado moved toward the barn, lifted, passing over it and leaving it untouched, then continued on its way. Each time I hear this fact, even now, I am mystified.

Until the end of the story, the first time I was told it, I was unable to understand the magnitude, the danger, how close I came to losing my family, to losing everything. I couldn't truly understand what my mother had done, what she had chosen to do.

We would learn later that it was not one, but several small tornadoes that struck. Tornadoes don't actually jump, one had to have lifted right before the barn and another touched down behind it moving away. The one that got the chicken houses had also taken our filled, eight-hundred-gallon, blue plastic kiddie pool from the yard and blown it away completely. We would find it some ten years later, still up in the trees across the road from the house when our neighbor passed away, and we bought her property. My mother recalls that even the metal horse trailer, weighing a couple thousand pounds and parked directly beside the barn, was moved over and turned by the tornado. The tornadoes wreaked havoc directly in front, beside and behind the barn, but the barn itself stood untouched.

I try to put myself in the position, feel the sweat of the bodies with racing, frightened heartbeats, hear the hush that my mother tells me fell over all the animals when it seemed the tornado was headed straight for them and would not stop. It's an odd phenomenon, how even fear-driven prey animals, in the face of certain destruction or natural disaster, sometimes grow oddly calm and still. Their instincts tell them that to panic is to die. Even they know that fear, when there is no time be afraid, will get them killed.

Over and over again I try to imagine the moment, the deadly calm, and each time my traitorous pulse begins to race. Unlike them, my dread rises and my body trembles and jerks and I want to foolishly flee, just imagining the danger my family was in. It was a miracle, a stroke of fate, that they were saved when so much else was destroyed. I knew I should be happy, relieved, as they were, that of all the possible damage, everything irreplaceable was saved. But unlike them, I could not shake the fear. Once the knowledge of how close my family came to death became real, it was an inescapable shadow in my mind that had not yet learned how to stop and take hold of such things.

When the tornadoes were gone and it was all over, the chickens not crushed in the debris were taken away on great trucks. When I got home, I thought I would help by walking

and putting them in a bucket one by one for the men, though I soon realized that was not an efficient means. I was used to the chickens pecking and squawking, but even they stood dazed and quiet. Yet still my mother went on taking care of the farm, a one-woman army, putting everything back in its place. Insurance would eventually replace the houses, new chickens would come, the siding would be put back on our house. Hope would come up the next day, her foal still with her. I would wonder what provoked the tame mare to take her chances outrunning the tornado, and I would wonder the same of my mother.

For years I would want to be like her, my mother. I would want to be bred of horse-folk, fearless and brave and wild. But one day, when I was older, I would come to understand. It happened when I was walking, leading my own horse. Lots of horse-folks say that every person really has one horse. You may own or ride several over the course of your life, but one will always stand out. One will be the horse that most closely mirrors your soul, that you click with, like feeling love for the first time, that you would never trade or sell or part with for any amount of money. When you think back on your life with horses, you always first think of being with them. For my mother it was Rainy. For me it was a Haflinger, a half-Arabian, half-mountain stock pony named Nuten. He was a pleasant little fellow, stoic and well-mannered ninety-nine percent of the time and very bad that one percent. I loved him immensely.

I don't remember the day exactly, some summer afternoon when I was maybe eleven. I led Nuten behind me. He was cob-sized, not a pony, not quite a horse, like me stuck in between the two. He was unusually thickly built, like the draft horses bred to pull plows; he had a large, kind eye and a stunning dabbled, yellowish chestnut coat that all Haflingers share, with flaxen white mane and tail.

I had stopped riding that afternoon because it looked as if it would rain. As I led Nuten towards the gate of his pasture, the sky darkened quicker than I anticipated. I began to breathe quickly as the thunder rumbled and the clouds rolled darkly. Sensing the storm, and perhaps my fear, Nuten began to get anxious, his nine hundred pounds of heavy bone and muscle beginning to pull at his rope. This shook me, made me realize that my fear was making the situation more dangerous. I tried to reign it back and remember my lessons. I tried to breathe deeply and keep my steps even and sure. I knew it was only a summer storm. I had to show my horse there was nothing to fear and keep my eyes on the gate ahead. But I couldn't help myself. Instead I looked up at the sky, and

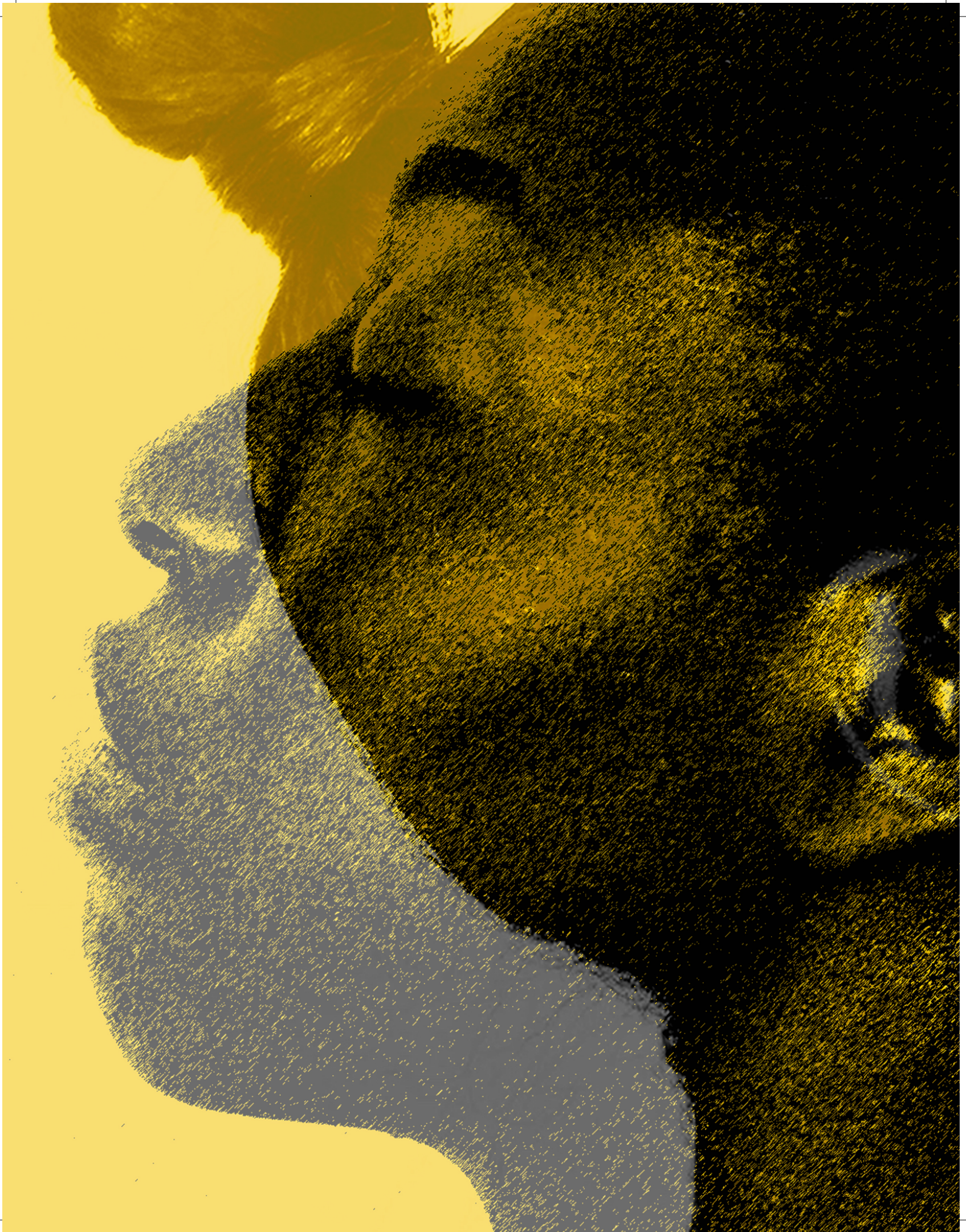
could think of only what my mother told me the day of the tornado. "When the sky gets black, not grey, not purple-ish like a thunderstorm, but black, like a wall, like you can't see through it, like you've never seen it so dark, you know a tornado is coming." My mind went numb. My vision pulsed darkly as my heart began to race, distorting my view. I was paralyzed by the thought of the black; it was all that filled my mind. I thought of the feeling of being pinned before a tornado. I thought of my family so close to being taken from me. I thought of death. My hand froze on the metal chain that held the gate closed, my eyes wide and unblinking in sudden, inescapable, total fear of the sky.

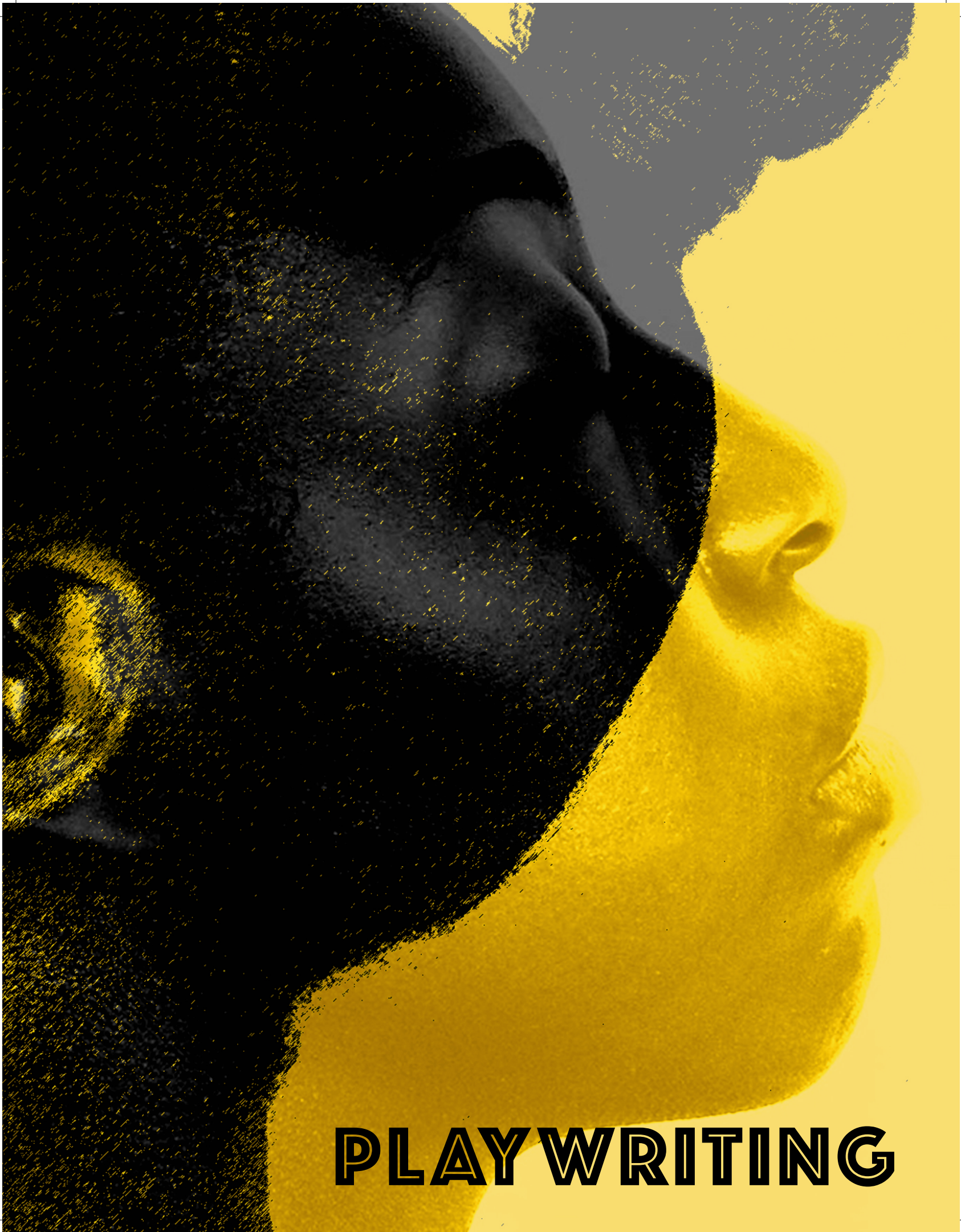
I cannot remember exactly what happened next. I think I opened the gate and ushered Nuten in, and all at once, as I slipped off his halter, lightning struck somewhere close by. I remember the blinding brightness; I remember the deafening clap of thunder. I remember my hand on the metal gate tingling up into my arm. I didn't close the gate. I didn't need to. Nuten reared uncharacteristically on his back legs, towering over me with his massive grey hooves for a split moment before turning and taking off towards the far end of the pasture. I threw his halter on the ground. I turned and ran as fast as I could back the way I'd come. In my head, I suppose I was outrunning the lightning. Maybe I thought I could outrun the fear.

I slammed into my mother's arms when I reached the barn. She grabbed me, soaking wet and shaking, and looked at me.

"What is it?" she asked me, and more thunder cracked in the distance. I stared up at her calm face, my eyes wide, unblinking, my body full of adrenaline and fear, air trying to fight its way fast enough through my lungs. I trembled and shook and hung my head, but couldn't speak. She was warm and solid and still, so unlike me. The rain drummed on the tin roof and she waited for me to explain my fear. I knew that I wouldn't be able to. It was the first moment I began to know I would never truly be like her, be horse-folk. I wouldn't grow into fearlessness. I would always struggle with my nature. One day perhaps I would learn to live with it, work around it, in spite of it. But I would never be without it. Standing under the barn, listening to the rain, all I could feel, replacing my fear, was anguish and shame. Shame for being the daughter that had left my horse and ran. Shame for being the fearful daughter of such a brave, and kind, and selfless mother that would never understand.







# PLAYWRITING



# What's Your Fucking Problem?

Robby Nadler  
University of Georgia

## Act 1

### Scene 1

At Rise: Curtains drawn. Footsteps over rocky terrain are heard. (Keep this played at a low level. Houselights should still be on. There should be no indication that the play has started.) The following dialogue consists of simultaneous conversations that lose and add people all the time. Any of the following voices could be STRINGER or ELI's.

SOLDIERS

I've got a cramp.

SOLDIERS

That's 'cause you ate the fucking sloppy joe.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

It's so fucking hot.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

I wanted the BBQ sauce.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Then you should have gotten the ribs.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

It's always fucking hot.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Ribs? Are you fucking shitting me?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

You get that package from your mom yet?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Yeah, but today is extra fucking hot.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Have the towelheads finally gotten to you? You gonna start growing out a beard and drawing pictures? Pictures of pigs? Pigs in the air with virgins.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Nah, man, I don't think it will get here for another week or two—at least.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Well, how about we just take a quick dip in that pool right beyond that giant pile of rocks?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Pigs in the mud with getting all kinds of nasty.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Don't worry, it'll get here.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Now, now. Why is it every time we go out on a mission the first thing you always try to get me to do is strip naked?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Pigs with RPGs and hiJACKing airplanes.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

That's easy for you to say. You don't have a heat rash the size of Kansas making way for your balls.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Because you're a sexy fucker that's why. Prettiest pussy in all of the Nuristan Province.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Fucking fags. Can't we go a quarter mile without you all going all homo? A quarter mile! That's all I fucking ask for!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

And let's not forget those sultry pigs in full on burqa going to de-derp-de-derp all night long. You lika a strong man in the mud? Al-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

At least you still got your toothbrush. My mouth tastes like I've been French kissing Thompson's ass all day.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

You bet my pussy is the prettiest in the land. I did *not* spend five months getting my body ready for the swimsuit competition just to hand my tiara to your broke hole.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Faggots! All of you! Jesus fucking Mary with a wooden dildo!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Hey! What did you say about my ass?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)

Put 'em—all them pig pictures—over the wall of

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
your room like a shrine. Wake up every morning  
and pray to it. Go to bed seeing them all there,  
sexy and exposed.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Shit, you wouldn't even need any of your  
Playboys anymore.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Did anyone ever tell you that you get so sexy  
when you're angry?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
He said all those push-ups have turned you into a  
really sensitive specimen of a man!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Why can't you all be more like Mink?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Rub off every night to your favorite pig pussy.  
Allah I'm going to come! Allah I'm going to  
explode! In the name of Allah-Ak-Bar-Ham-So-Ud-  
Bah-Jahm-Shi-Buh-Koo-Meh-Dah-Nu-Guh...

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Your mom told me that very thing last night.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
I was afraid you guys wouldn't have noticed!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Never says a goddamn word. Never. Never!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
One night, when you're sleeping, I'm going to  
sneak into your room...

(beat)  
...and take a dump in your mouth.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Did you happen to ask her how my dad's doing?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
A sexy beast like you? Come on! Give us a little  
credit.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Not a fucking word!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Booooooom! Cum festival on a stick.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
A dump. No joke. I'm going to eat a week's  
worth of Sloppy Joe MREs, and then, when you're  
asleep, I'm going to fill your throat with my shit.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Can't be worse than Chicken Fajita MRE.

*A few beats pass. The entire squadron breaks out  
in laughter.*

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
You're so lucky you got a mom who sends you  
stuff. Make sure you get a receipt from her on  
how much I owe. I'm gonna pay her back.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Fucking cramp!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
I would give my left nut for a squad of all Minks.  
Never a word. Not even now.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Wouldn't the right one get lonely?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Sloppy joes, I tell ya. Why in the fucking world  
wouldn't you just take the ribs?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
It's not a big deal.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Don't worry, Thompson would keep it in good  
company.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
It sure is a hot motherfucker today.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
What did you say about me?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Because the ribs come with charms. I'm not  
taking no charms.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
He said you would gladly spit-polish Sarge's balls

SOLIDERS (cont'd)  
for a pack of gum!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Nah, man. My mom's been a meth head since  
before I was born. There was nothing in the house  
growing up. Never could hold down a job. She  
used to trade our food stamps. In the winter I'd  
get so hungry I'd wake up in the middle of the  
night, go outside, and eat a handful of snow.  
Snow? Can you believe that? Nah, man, your  
mom is all right.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Juicy Fruit or Big Red?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Charms? You stupid, pig-loving, superstitious son-



SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
of-a-bitch. Charms? You actually believe in the  
curse of a pack of Skittles?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Your choice!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
I don't know... I just don't like talking about  
home. It makes me... nostalgic, I guess.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Laugh if you want, but I know two things.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Make it two packs of Juicy Fruit and I'll throw in a  
reach-around!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
So fucking hot...

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Hey, you guys hear that?

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
One: if you gave us more than five fucking  
minutes to eat and pack up, I wouldn't have this  
bastard cramp.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Just let me know when it comes.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Probably just Thompson practicing for tonight.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
No, stop. Seriously you guys.

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
Two: I'm not going to walk on a landmine  
because of a goddamned Tootsie Roll!

SOLDIERS (cont'd)  
It's just the heat. There's nothing...

### Scene 2

At Rise: Houselights go off instantly. The sound of  
artillery fire being exchanged booms through  
the theater. Screams, yells, and calls for help are  
overheard. The yells slowly transform themselves  
from human cries into those of a dog's. A  
flashlight shines from the back of the theater  
onto the still-drawn curtains of the stage. Now,  
the curtains pull back. They reveal a diagonal  
sheet of metal at 100 degrees, which covers the  
entire mouth of the stage. A hydraulic moving of  
parts is heard as the metal sheet is slowly lowered  
against the sound of an airplane's dying engine.

When fully lowered, the "light" from the deck  
of the cargo plane reveals cages piled upon  
cages. The sounds of dogs get louder.

Soldiers holding traffic control wands file into  
the cargo hold and begin to carry the cages  
off stage. (It should take two or three soldiers  
per cage. Do not rush this task. It will take a few  
minutes.) The sounds of the dogs die down as  
more cages are carried off. The last cage is  
brought to center stage in front of the metal  
sheet. The sheet is raised closed to the sound of  
hydraulics, and the plane's engines turn. As the  
sound of a plane taking off furthers, the metal  
sheet flies. All that should be left onstage is the  
cage.

### Scene 3

At Rise: The cage door opens, and WOMAN  
crawls out of it. As she rises, she shakes her hair  
and tries to smooth/clean her clothes to appear  
presentable.

WOMAN  
(to audience)

You know...

(pause)

I want to...

*WOMAN stares at the audience as if to find  
someone in the crowd that she recognizes. She  
begins to break down, but she catches herself.  
She returns to smoothing her clothes and her  
face to wipe at the tears.*

WOMAN (cont'd)

The call came in and my husband, Jack—not to  
be confused with Jack Jr., aka Jaxom—received  
the news first. Then he told me. I told Jaxom. We  
cried like any family would—when we heard the  
news, when we remembered it, when we were  
eating dinner and realized we'd always have an  
extra chair at the table for Christmas—a problem  
we solved by pushing one of the table's sides into  
a wall. The president sent his condolences via  
letter, but it was a formality. Some of the large  
news networks mentioned it, but several soldiers  
died the next day in a bigger explosion. Even the  
local paper stopped trying to milk our grief after  
a week. The other partners voted to give me the  
month off; it wasn't a request. Jack still worked  
because he's the sort who needs to in these  
situations, and well, I guess he does this grieving  
thing "right." With Jaxom at school, I'd wake  
up at nine to an empty house that didn't need  
my hand. Jack was always the one who did  
the shopping or cleaning, so I didn't even have  
the chance to let a milk carton spoil. Part of me  
wanted the tragic scene of a house fallen

WOMAN (cont'd)

into decay only because cleaning would mean I'd have a plan beyond breakfast. It's not like we could fly out to Stringer's body and because we live near a military cemetery, we didn't have to plan much. I know it's stupid, but I've begun to think that maybe the only reason people started to bury bodies in the first place was because it gave our hands something to do.

Scene 4

*At Rise: A little dog dressed as a train conductor is sitting in a child-sized toy train. The train crosses the stage with a sign it is pulling. It reads "brownies." As this is happening, stagehands, dressed as soldiers, remove the cage while erecting the scene. A made-up kitchen table is erected and a door frame is posted. The doorbell rings.*

WOMAN

(addressing audience but walking to the door)

A young pastor, whose church we never attended, dropped by the house after he saw the clip about Stringer on the local news.

PASTOR

Hello, is this the Russell residence?

WOMAN

Yes, can I help you with something?

PASTOR

Actually, it's I who should be asking you that...

*He extends one hand while holding a baking dish in the other.*

PASTOR (cont'd)

Pastor Corso. Do you have a moment? I've brought some brownies. My wife baked them. Everyone loves her brownies.

WOMAN

(hesitant but lonely)

Of course, come in. Come in.

*WOMAN leads PASTOR to the kitchen table. She begins to prepare coffee and serves the whole affair on a tray.*

WOMAN (cont'd)

(to audience)

I don't like chocolate, but I invited him in for coffee because it seemed rude not to. And, honestly, I needed the interruption.

(to PASTOR)

There's cream, milk, and several types of sugars

WOMAN (cont'd)

to choose from.

PASTOR

Thank you. You're too kind.

*PASTOR prepares his coffee. WOMAN takes hers black.*

PASTOR (cont'd)

Black?

WOMAN

Excuse me?

PASTOR

Your coffee. You drink it black. My father does the same thing. Honestly, I can't drink the stuff unless it's drowning in sweetness. My wife always jokes if I want some coffee to go with my cup of sugar!

*WOMAN offers a polite smile, then, taking a sip, mostly stirs the coffee with her spoon.*

WOMAN

I actually don't drink it that often... not enough to care one way or the other how it tastes.

PASTOR

Well, this is very good coffee for someone who doesn't drink any.

WOMAN

Thank you. My husband made it this morning.

PASTOR

Yes. Your husband. Of course, of course. I saw him on the television with your son.

(pause)

A very handsome family you have.

WOMAN

Thank you.

*WOMAN looks around the room to avoid meeting PASTOR's gaze.*

WOMAN (cont'd)

Would you like some of your brownies?

PASTOR

Thank you, but I shouldn't. They're for you.

WOMAN

Please help yourself.

*WOMAN rises to retrieve a small plate and a knife. She sets to cutting the brownies.*

WOMAN (cont'd)

I don't eat sweets, but Jack and Jaxom will love them. Still, I don't want them eating the whole thing. So please, take.

PASTOR

Ma'am, you really needn't concern yourself with...

*PASTOR reaches out to place a hand on WOMAN's while she cuts the brownies. She recoils immediately.*

PASTOR (cont'd)

I'm sorry I surprised you. I should have...

*WOMAN has stopped crying as quickly as she began.*

WOMAN  
(snapping)

What...

(collected)

What...

(beat)

WOMAN (cont'd)

...do you want?

PASTOR  
(nervously)

My wife and I saw your story... your son's story on the news... and we....

WOMAN  
(interrupting, rehearsed)

On behalf of my whole family, I thank you for your concern. Your concern is very touching and appreciated. You should know this.

PASTOR

Excuse me?

WOMAN

It is with great appreciation that I can now include you amongst the community of priests, rabbis, strangers, politicians, cameramen, boy scouts, girl scouts, and block parties who have come to our door to express their condolences and leave us with a plate of something that I will throw out as soon as you leave.

PASTOR

That's uh... some speech.

WOMAN

Do you like it? The partners at work drafted it for me, but I revised it here and there. I wasn't... what's the word lawyer word for this... ah yes... *suitably agreeable* in my grief. The type who says *thank you* and *that's very kind of you* to offer

WOMAN (cont'd)

when a stranger calls to feature your son in some veterans' charity scam that plays infomercials on conservative news channels. The last straw came when some guy from the city council showed up with a proclamation to name a bench over at Cane Park after my son. There was a photographer from the paper with him to capture the looks on my face as he told us. You know what? They misspelled his name. They misspelled his name! Strunger! Have you ever met a man named Strunger? So you see Mr. Cane...

*WOMAN rises and moves to open the door.*

WOMAN (cont'd)

...as you didn't know my son either, and I am, in legalese, *emotionally fragile*, I think it's time that you people left me and my family in peace.

PASTOR

(understanding, soft and slow)

I know of the great sadness you speak of. My wife and I, too, once had a son.

*This reveal catches WOMAN off-guard. She stares at PASTOR for a few seconds, then returns to her chair, door shut.*

PASTOR (cont'd)

He was a very beautiful, beautiful boy. The most beautiful boy. He had been sick for several years off-and-on. Leukemia. It was always terrifying, but because he had fought it off before... the great sadness... yes, I suppose we thought he would do it again. The last time it came back very aggressively and suddenly. It was just last August. Within a few days he was gone...

(sighing deeply)

...yes, the great sadness.

*PASTOR starts crying and WOMAN walks downstage.*

WOMAN

(to audience)

Was I supposed to be the one comforting him because his was the greater sadness? At least Stringer had made it past kindergarten. This is what other people do! They see your life and only look for ways in which their lives can enter. And that phrase... the great sadness... the one he kept repeating... it reminded me of that Peanuts movie. Stringer had trouble with his "p"s and called it "punkin," as in "Mama, can we watch 'punkin' again?" I must have seen—and by seen I mean slept through while I kept Stringer on my lap—that movie thirty times one year, including weekly showings in the very non-Halloween

WOMAN (cont'd)

month of June. We still have the VHS tape, but the backing has come off from so many uses and the rough eagerness of Stringer's little hands to see if Linus, finally, is revealed to this time.

PASTOR

(collecting himself and speaking as if WOMAN were still seated in front of him)

Have you considered joining a support group? We have one you know, for people like you... like us.

WOMAN

(to audience)

I don't know why his question made me angry, but there was something incredibly accusatory in its lack of accusation. It felt as if he was both saying that I wasn't grieving enough and grieving too much at the same time... or maybe not the right way. He was saying that when you lose your son, you're supposed to throw yourself into a church and be around people like you who understand, where you cry in public and it becomes easier. Isn't that what everybody wants? And at these meetings there are always lemon bars because isn't there something metaphoric about life being bittersweet in that way? He was saying that you were supposed to be angry with god and ask the big questions no one in history had been given answers to without feeling patronized or cheated by the way it let the big man off the hook—but in a setting that called you back to your faith for no other reason than peer pressure or necessity. Believe me, I gave this support thing great thought.

(beat)

But he was also saying you don't sit in a house reading every section of *The New York Times* because the sports section alone will eat up an hour of your day, which is surprisingly a blessing with its opinions on matters that you don't care to understand. You'll look up the other meaning of ERA and drink up the cold and pointless significance of statistics, scores, and averages. These numbers won't mean much even when you understand them because you have no context to enjoy them. Other people will find the news of the Cincinnati Reds dropping a four-game series to the Milwaukee Brewers heartbreaking, but you'll gloss over it (and the dozens of other losses in various sports) with a small smile because you're able to handle such a thing without batting an eyelash—until you realize there's something metaphoric about this too.

(beat)

And when you close the classifieds and know there's a free tackle box if you want it over in Troy, New York (but you don't know where that is or what a tackle box is either), by then it will be

WOMAN (cont'd)

late enough to order in an early dinner for Jack and Jaxom because you were never a good cook—another thing that you tell yourself you're judging yourself harshly for, but still will make a note of in the ever-growing tally of ways you have failed as a mother. Even if you were a good cook, you don't have the energy to do it. You're not one of those women who lose themselves in hobbies in the name of distraction, instead opting to look over family photos because they make you cry, and that seems like the one thing you do correctly in the eyes of others. If you were that hobby woman, then yes, you'd probably take up French cooking or at least try to get through the day doing something productive. Maybe you'd write a bad romance novel to show your sister-in-law because she loves those things or a memoir you quit after four chapters because you have nothing interesting left about your life to say. Anything, finished or not. But you reason with yourself that if you were that sort of woman, you'd be the sort who attended that church meeting.

(beat)

I know that he wasn't saying any of that. Stepping outside of myself, I could see the young father—as in dad—crying over my kitchen table as a person. I pushed the napkin holder toward him. He took a napkin and thanked me...

*PASTOR is performing the actions to an invisible WOMAN.*

WOMAN (cont'd)

And then continued to speak about the significance of the group in his own life. But I couldn't hear him. I became focused on the soiled napkin moving in his gentle hands. I watched him bunch up the napkin and then unfurl it like waves at the shore. Each time he did so there were more wrinkles in the fabric. Then he'd twist it into a strand and untwist it the other way. Sometimes he'd ball it up, then flatten it. Sometimes he'd wrap it around his wedding band, then let go. The more he played with it, the more the napkin shed confetti to the floor. Finally! Something to clean, I thought. But then I became frustrated that I had let an uninvited person into my house who was making me clean up after him. After he had destroyed that napkin, he reached for another.

*WOMAN sits across the table from PASTOR. Her hand lunges at his and stops him from taking another napkin. They stare at each other in silence for several moments.*

PASTOR

How the great sadness works in each of us can be a mystery.

*PASTOR rises and lets himself out.*

Scene 5

*At Rise: A dog dressed as an Italian race car driver passes across the stage in a child's electronic car. The car wheels a sign that reads "buzz cut." As this happens, the SOLDIERS/stage crew take down the kitchen and erect a living room that consists of a sofa, chairs, and coffee table. JACK and WOMAN sit on the couch but at opposite ends. One reads, the other watches television. JAXOM runs into the room holding a letter.*

JAXOM

I got another letter!

WOMAN

(to audience)

The Buddy wrote to Jaxom specifically as part of a pact they made to write to the other's little brother in the event that one of them died.

JACK

Well, who's it from?

WOMAN

(to JACK, spitefully)

Who else would it be from?

JAXOM

What did you say, Mom?

WOMAN

Nothing. Absolutely nothing honey. Open it up and read it to us.

(to audience)

After the last letter where the Buddy wrote he'd kill! as many towelheads!!! as he could in revenge so that Jaxom need not worry about getting even, Jack and I began to confiscate the letters before Jaxom discovered them. They arrived every month or so. But every now and then things just have a way of slipping under your nose, now don't they?

*JAXOM tears open the letter.*

JAXOM

Dear Jaxom, every day I woke up and thank Jesus for making me an American. You have no idea how far that blessing extends. I imagine heaven is just like America but an entire world of it. Anywhere you go, it will always be a place of liberty!, freedom!, and family! Gosh, it must be

JAXOM (cont'd)

like every day is Christmas morning mixed with July 4th. Your brother is no doubt sharing a hot dog with Jesus, and one day we'll all be with him at that grand BBQ in the sky.

(beat)

I'm writing you specifically this time on some important business, Little Buddy. You remember Eli, don't you? I thought we lost him with Stringer in the ambush, but I found out he pulled through. That little bugger is as tough as your big brother was! But it turns out we aren't the only ones who miss Stringer. We tried to bring Eli back out on a mission, but he refuses to sniff. I don't need to tell you the United States Military won't put up with insubordination—whether it comes from a man or animal.

(beat)

But a dog is different than a person. If he won't sniff for bombs... well, let's just say the process for dealing with canine AWOLs is a lot different than the one for people. Because your brother was so close to Eli, I thought you might want him. They'll be fixing to get rid of him pretty soon, but I told them you'd take him in if it comes to that. There's a number at the end of this to call if you're interested. I don't know how long it will take for this letter to reach you, so I'd call right away. Remember, we never leave a fellow soldier behind! With the love of Christ, Buddy Canaan.

(to parents)

Mom...

WOMAN

Go to your room.

JAXOM

But Mom! You heard what the letter said. We have to call right away. What if they're about to put Eli down this very second!

WOMAN

It's two in the morning in Afghanistan. ELI is safe for the moment. I need you to go upstairs so that your father and I can discuss this.

JAXOM

Please, please, please. We have to! He's Stringer's! We can't let those towelheads take Eli too!

WOMAN

Jaxom!

JAXOM

It's what they are!

WOMAN

You're definitely not helping your case. If I can't trust you to behave like a normal human being,

WOMAN (cont'd)

then how can I expect you to take care of an animal!

JAXOM

Those *people* aren't even animals... they're the shit animals make!

WOMAN

Out of my sight! Now!

JAXOM

It's so like you to take the side of the people who killed your son over your own blood!

*JAXOM storms off the stage. Sounds of a person running upstairs and slamming a door are heard.*

WOMAN

Jesus Jack, are you just going to sit there all night?

JACK

That was the plan.

WOMAN

We need to talk.

JACK

There's nothing to talk about.

*WOMAN tears away the book or television controller and flings it across the room.*

JACK (cont'd)

Yes, Darling, you have my undivided attention.

*WOMAN starts to cry into her husband. He consoles her, not surprised.*

WOMAN

What are we going to do?

JACK

I must have missed the letter amidst all the catalogues. It's not a big deal. I'll double check next time.

WOMAN

(angry)

You think this is about the letter? Look at our son!

JACK

It's just a phase. The boy is angry. His brother was killed.

WOMAN

Jack!

JACK

Now, now... I'm not defending his language. I'm just defending his feelings. We all handle tragedy differently. Jaxom needs someone to blame. Black and white. Good guys vs. bad guys. You women understand the complexities of these things at a much younger age. It takes a while for us men to catch up.

WOMAN

Stop speaking to me as if I'm a child! This is not just some silly episode of anger. This is... this is...  
(to audience)

...serious. Very, very serious. Since his brother's death, Jaxom has gotten into some trouble at school. I can't tell you the full extent of it. The administrators turned a blind eye to it in lieu of what they wrote off as the grieving process, so there's a lot I don't know.

(beat)

I want to say that I noticed Jaxom's behavior had changed, that I took issue when he had a group of new friends he told us he was going to hang out with but never let us see, but I didn't. I thought losing Stringer would've driven me to smother Jaxom, but it was the opposite. It wasn't the fact that Jaxom looked like his brother—though that did make things hard—but having one son alive and one son dead is a limbo of motherhood. The part that you lose of yourself becomes a phantom limb that you feel whenever its pair is used. It's hard to admit it, but even being in the same room with JAXOM could ruin the day. How was I expected to go to a church group and tell all the parents there who were mourning their children that I couldn't be around my own child?

(beat)

It didn't seem like anything more than puberty at first. Maybe that's an excuse. When those friends gave him a buzz cut, I took it in stride because it wasn't blue hair, and most of the boys in the neighborhood sport the same clean look. That, and when I asked Jack what he thought about it, he said our son had been walking around with his new haircut for three weeks before I noticed. There were other signs that this was more than hormones at work, but they were easy to ignore, and what ground did I have to make accusations when everything they were buttressed by is what we in the business call reasonable doubt? It's so much easier to vote acquit. But I couldn't pretend forever...

*A phone rings.*

WOMAN (cont'd)

(to caller, groggy)

Hello?

CALLER  
(in tears)

Please, you have to make him stop! Please!

WOMAN  
(awakened, concerned)  
Hello? Ma'am? What's going on?

CALLER  
Please! You have to help my son. He didn't do anything. He's a good boy!

WOMAN  
Hold on. Who's a good boy? What's your name? What's going on?  
(to audience)  
She wouldn't name herself out of fear of retaliation against her son.

*An out-of-breath boy, KUMAR, who is Indian, darts onto stage and presses himself against an imaginary door. He tries to use his weight to keep it closed. He quietly prays to himself.*

JAXOM  
(offstage)  
We know you're in there, Kumar! We can do this the easy way or the fun way! You have until the count of ten to come out... one... two... ten!

*JAXOM rushes the imaginary door with several kids, all white, all with the same buzz cut. KUMAR flies forward from the rush. The boys lift him from the floor and throw him against the wall. He cries out. JAXOM pulls a pocketknife.*

JAXOM (cont'd)  
Now, now, little piggy. We can't have you squealing, now can we?

*KUMAR goes silent and still. Even the boys around JAXOM are taken aback by the blade's manifestation.*

WOMAN  
(to audience)  
She told me Jaxom cornered her son in a school bathroom, his hand squeezed across the boy's neck, and wouldn't let the boy go until he urinated in his pants.

JAXOM  
That's a good piggy.

*KUMAR's pants soak. When KUMAR is finished, JAXOM releases his grip on KUMAR, who drops to the ground like dead weight. The boys are all laughing and taunting KUMAR with names and phrases like "piss piggy" and "looks like the little piggy went wee wee all the way home."*

JAXOM (cont'd)  
Now stay in your filth like the pig you are.

*JAXOM and his friends are laughing as they turn away. KUMAR bows his head to cry. As the boys reach the door, JAXOM springs and grabs KUMAR by the collar with one hand, the knife in the other.*

JAXOM (cont'd)  
And if you ever tell anyone about this...

*JAXOM slowly slices the boy's shirt off.*

JAXOM (cont'd)  
I will come to your house and gut you and every little piggy who lives there. You understand?

WOMAN  
(to audience)  
I imagined my son with those other boys I had never seen, all with the same haircut, cornering this woman's son. And while only a few months ago I could never picture my son's head covered like a peach, I could effortlessly see him smiling as the yellow river ran down the boy's pants in some gesture of false evenness with the world.

*KUMAR rises and moves to WOMAN. His pants are drenched, and he's holding the cut shirt in one hand. With his other hand, he gently pats WOMAN on the shoulder. She turns to him slightly startled, but genuinely happy. She crouches to meet his face, rubs his cheek, and then takes both of her hands to his. She squeezes them and nods. KUMAR exits the stage.*

WOMAN (cont'd)  
The saddest part was that this woman didn't blame me for anything. I wanted her to because I blamed myself. Just say it. Somebody finally say it! But no, she just wanted me to save her son. That's all she kept repeating the whole time on the line... she thought I could do that.

JACK  
The boy just needs something in his life. Something to pull him back in. Maybe we should consider getting Eli.

WOMAN  
We can't reward him with a dog for acting out.

JACK  
We're not rewarding him. Think about it.

WOMAN  
It's out of the question. You're allergic to dogs!

JACK

We'll find a way to make it work.

WOMAN

(to audience)

How could I have said no? Jaxom was right about one thing. Eli was part of what little was left of his brother in this world. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought that Eli might be a diversion from Jaxom's new friends and what else they might egg him on to do. I prayed that this new responsibility of taking care of another creature might help my son regain his sense of humanity. If nothing else, it would give me something to care for during the day.

(to JACK, with a sigh)

Fine. We'll get the dog.

(yelling upstairs)

Jaxom! Your father and I would like to speak with you!

JAXOM

(offstage)

I'm not negotiating with terrorists!

WOMAN

(to JACK)

I'm having second thoughts.

JACK

Patience is a virtue, my lady.

WOMAN

If I had any more virtue my picture would be hanging in the Vatican.

(to JAXOM)

Your father and I have made a decision about Eli.

*The sound of JAXOM's door swinging open and him rushing down the stairs is heard. He pops his head out tentatively from behind a stage wing.*

JAXOM

Oh.

WOMAN

In light of your recent behavior, your father and I have decided...

JACK

(interrupting)

We're getting a dog!

*JAXOM dashes over to his father and they embrace. WOMAN looks at the scene—more than slightly annoyed.*

JAXOM

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Dad!

*JACK clears his throat.*

JAXOM (cont'd)

Oh yeah, thanks Mom.

(pause)

So when does he get here? Can I change his name? Can I take him to school?

WOMAN

Not so fast, Jaxom.

(glaring at JACK)

What your father left out is that there are some conditions for you to meet.

JAXOM

For me? What sort of conditions? He's my dog if I want him. Buddy said so.

WOMAN

Sweetie, Buddy thinks people used to ride around on dinosaurs.

JAXOM

I don't get what you're saying...

WOMAN

Just because Buddy said we could adopt Eli doesn't make it so. We need to call the number in the morning. Maybe Eli got better or someone else adopted him.

JAXOM

OK, so we call. And if we can get him, we get him. End of story.

WOMAN

No, not end of story. I have... your father and I have noticed some changes in you since your brother's passing.

JAXOM

His name is Stringer, not brother, Stringer!

JACK

Kiddo, you're not helping your case here.

WOMAN

Dear lord... fine... since Stringer's death, we've noticed a change in you.

JAXOM

So? What did you expect to happen?

JACK

A bad change.



JAXOM  
Yeah... so what do you want? For me to walk and clean up after Eli? Fine. End of story. Can we please call now?

WOMAN  
Those aren't the conditions.

JAXOM  
You mean I don't have to walk and clean up after Eli?

WOMAN  
Those are givens.

JAXOM  
(scared)  
Oh. So what are the conditions?

WOMAN  
First things first, you come home directly after school.

JAXOM  
But Mom, that's when I see my friends!

WOMAN  
And after being in the house for eight hours, don't you think someone will need to take Eli out for a walk?

JAXOM  
What about you?

WOMAN  
(to JACK)  
Well I can see that this is my dog, and, personally, I'm not looking for a dog...

JAXOM  
(interrupting)  
OK, OK. I'll come home right after school and walk Eli. Then what?

WOMAN  
Then you're not allowed out of the house until your father or I make sure that your homework is completed.

JAXOM  
Mom!

WOMAN  
You're failing three subjects at the moment. You're lucky we let you out at all without a dog.

JAXOM  
Fine! Then can I see my friends?

WOMAN  
Yes... but only in the house.

JAXOM  
What? Dad! This is blackmail. You can't let her do this.

JACK  
Sorry kiddo, but I'm staying out of this one.

WOMAN  
No, it's extortion. I'm not saying you can't see your friends. I'm just saying that you have to bring them over to the house. I don't see what the big deal is.

JAXOM  
Big deal? Having my friends hang around my lame house in front of my lame parents? Just shoot me now.

WOMAN  
Then it's settled. No dog.

JAXOM  
Fine! Don't be such a drama queen.

WOMAN  
And that's another thing! If I ever hear a word come out of your mouth that disrespects another human being again, I will ship you off to a Catholic school in France so fast that the nuns will have their rulers out before you turn around.

JAXOM  
(challengingly)  
Oh yeah, what kind of word? Give me an example.

WOMAN  
(slow and calculated in a manner neither JAXOM nor JACK have seen before)  
Do not test me.

JAXOM  
(timid)

Fine.  
(pause)  
Is that it?

WOMAN  
Your hair.

JAXOM  
What about my hair?

WOMAN  
I don't like it. Grow it out.

JAXOM  
Seriously? This isn't Nazi Germany. It's just hair.

WOMAN

Those are the conditions. Take 'em or leave 'em.

JAXOM

Don't I get any say in this?

JACK

I believe you get a dog.

JAXOM

(sighing)

Whatever. I'm going back to my room to enjoy the last days of my freedom.

WOMAN

(calling after JAXOM)

And if you should happen to change your mind on any of these conditions, I think it will be easy to find someone who wants to take in a trained bomb-sniffing dog. One of your friends perhaps!

### Scene 6

*At Rise: A dog dressed as a pilot sits in an airplane that is rigged to wires. As it slowly passes the stage, it takes with it a sign that reads "shit!" As this happens, the metal frame flies down into place. WOMAN, JACK, and JAXOM stand facing the door, their backs to the audience. WOMAN turns around to address the audience.*

WOMAN

(to audience)

Sifting through paperwork all day for a living, I thought there'd be more to the process, but it was easy. The Buddy was right. They were preparing to put down Eli now that he refused to sniff. Another body was being sent this way, so they offered to ship Eli on that plane too if we paid for the transit. And then he was here in less than a month.

*WOMAN turns around to join her family. The sound of the hydraulic gears running plays as the metal sheet lowers. Several coffins are at the foot of the plane, draped with American flags. SOLDIERS move past the family to attend to the coffins. After some minutes (do not rush this), JACK pulls a soldier over.*

JACK

Excuse me, we're here for a pickup.

SOLDIER

To claim a body, sir, you need to...

JACK

(interrupting)

No, not that sort of a pickup. A dog. We're here to pick up a dog.

SOLDIER

(confused)

I'll go ask on board and see what the situation is.

*The three of them watch the SOLDIER enter the mouth of the plane and disappear. After a few moments, JAXOM gets apprehensive.*

JAXOM

Dad, what if Eli doesn't like me?

WOMAN

Of course he'll like you.

JAXOM

But I was reading up on the internet and found stories of dogs that don't like their new masters because they miss their old ones.

JACK

It'll be fine. Just wait and see.

*Calling from the depths of the plane.*

SOLDIER

(offstage)

Hey, come back here!

*A black Labrador runs onto stage and makes way for the family. He stops before them and sizes them up.*

JAXOM

(tentatively)

Eli?

*The dog jumps on JAXOM and begins to lick him. WOMAN begins her monologue. As she does, the metal sheet flies up and the soldiers arrange a car with WOMAN driving, JACK in the passenger seat, and JAXOM and ELI in the back, playing.*

WOMAN

(to audience)

I'm now convinced dogs can know things we don't, like how a family is related. It's probably a smell thing. As soon as Jaxom wrapped his arms around Eli's back at the airport—and Jack started sneezing—you could see Eli light up, tail wagging. I also knew something inside Jaxom relaxed the way a blind man confidently reads the sky for rain.

JACK

You know, I assumed Eli would have been a German Shepherd or something... you know... more ferocious.

JAXOM  
That's an attack dog, Dad. And those are  
Belgian Mali-no-i-s.

WOMAN  
Malinois. It's French.

JAXOM  
Uh, yeah. That word. For bomb-sniffing dogs,  
they use Labradors because they have the best  
combination of smell, temperament, and agility. I  
read it on the internet.

(to ELI)  
Don't you boy?

JACK  
Achoo.

WOMAN  
Bless you dear. See, this is what I was afraid of.

JAXOM  
Afraid of? Mom! You can't give Eli away! We just  
got him! I did everything you asked me to do!

JACK  
No one... achoo... no one is giving anyone away.  
We'll find a way to make it work.

WOMAN  
First thing when we get home...

JACK  
Achoo!

WOMAN  
...you need to give Eli a bath. We bought some  
shampoo that's supposed to help relieve some of  
your father's symptoms.

JAXOM  
(to ELI)  
You hear that boy? When we get you home,  
you're getting a bath. You love baths, don't you?  
Of course you do. Labradors were bred as water  
dogs.

WOMAN  
(to JACK)  
If only he spent half as much time learning his  
French as he did his dog biology....

JACK  
Achoo!

ELI  
Shit!

WOMAN  
(to JAXOM)  
Jaxom! What was our deal about your  
language?

JAXOM  
But I didn't say anything...

WOMAN  
I distinctly heard the word...

JACK  
Achoo!

ELI  
Shit-eater!

*Brake sounds. The car stops. Everyone turns over  
to ELI, who is sitting up, panting, smiling. The lights  
slowly go down.*

ELI  
Pussy-killer! Shit for brains! Faggot Launcher!  
Willow-cock! Towelhead! Towelhead! Towelhead!

*End of Act I*

# Pathways

Zoe Katz  
Agnes Scott College

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

JAMES TAYLOR: 19 years old, a high school graduate.  
SARAH STEWART: 17 years old, a high school senior.  
EMILY GREENE: 17 years old, a high school senior. Also provides the female voice in the first scene.  
DAN WELLES: 19 years old, a high school graduate. Also provides the male voice in the first scene.

### Place

A small town in Georgia

### Time

Late Fall

## ACT I Scene 1

Setting: An empty stage.

At Rise: JAMES and SARAH stand downstage, with their backs facing the audience. Two voices speak from offstage. These voices represent adult figures in the community.

### MALE VOICE

Private Taylor was loved by many. His friends, his fellow soldiers, his community. And while he leaves behind loved ones, who will miss him dearly, memories of light, laughter, courage, and honor will remain. Let us pray.

### FEMALE VOICE

Focusing on your grades is what is really important. Remember to think big! Harvard, Yale, Stanford--these are all in your reach if you work hard and dedicate yourself!

### MALE VOICE

How was practice? What did your coach say? If you don't work hard and dedicate yourself, then the scouts won't pay attention. You need a sports scholarship.

### FEMALE VOICE

Why did you get an 84 on your economics test? You can do so much better. I'm taking your phone away until your grades improve.

### MALE VOICE

If you don't go to college, you better get a job. No way you're just sitting on your ass.

### FEMALE VOICE

I think you're getting too attached to this boy.

### MALE VOICE

Why do you want twenty dollars? Make your own money.

### FEMALE VOICE

Darling, we just want what's best for you.

### MALE VOICE

Why don't you do something with your life? Focus on the future.

### FEMALE VOICE

Focus on your future.

(Blackout.)

## Scene 2

Setting: A park bench.

At rise: JAMES is sitting on a bench center stage. He holds a letter in his hand.

### JAMES

(sarcastically)

24,320 dollars per year. Isn't that great? That's the cost of tuition. They accept me to their school,

JAMES (cont'd)

and then they tell me what I'd have to pay. They should have told me before this! There's no way I can afford to go there. I'll be in debt until I'm dead! I wouldn't have even applied if I knew it was that much.

(beat)

They always tell you that college is the next step after high school, that you have to go to college. In order to be successful in life, college is absolute. They say you should start thinking about college freshman year of high school. Well, I graduated last June, and look where I am. Taking a "gap year" and hoping to get into some overpriced school in the fall--it's embarrassing.

(beat)

I mean, how am I supposed to pay a tuition of 24,320 dollars per year? They didn't offer me any scholarships, and it's not like the government's going to help. My mom is a secretary, part-time, and my dad--well, he's between jobs right now, but it's not like he isn't looking. Neither of them went to college.

(beat)

I talked to a recruiter yesterday-- an army recruiter-- and he said that I could get an education while serving. He talked a good game, I have to admit. I mean, it's always been an option. My brother, he joined the army right out of high school, but he didn't make it home. It was an IED or something.

(beat)

But that doesn't mean I can't join! Maybe I should join! What do I have to lose, if they're offering to help me get an education? It sounds logical, actually. And then the recruiter talked about all these careers through the military. He suggested engineering, and I always liked working with my hands.

(beat)

Also, I bet I could make good money if I was in the army. We really need it at home. I've got a little brother, and he's really smart. I don't want him to be in the same situation I'm in. He needs to go to college. He's too smart not to. And it would get my dad off my back about doing something with my life. Lately, we've been getting into a lot of fights about that. He doesn't like that I procrastinated on applying to college. He regrets not going to go to college. He says so every day. He says I shouldn't make the same mistakes he did.

(beat)

There's a problem. See, I've got this great girl, Sarah. She's incredible. Smart, funny, hot. Really, really hot. She's a genius. We've been dating for a year and nine months, and I really, really like her. But, she's a year younger. She's a senior this year. Her parents are loaded, her dad owns a construction business, and she works hard, so

JAMES (cont'd)

she'll get in anywhere, no problem. This school actually, the one that I applied for? It's right near her top choice school. We planned it like that, so we could get an apartment together. But if I'm going to go into the army, I don't know how long I'll be gone, or where I'll be going. What if she doesn't want to stay with me? She might not be happy about it. She probably won't be happy about it.

(SARAH enters stage left and runs to JAMES.)

SARAH

James! I have got so, so, so much to tell you about today.

(SARAH hugs JAMES. He kisses her obnoxiously)

SARAH

Oh my god, I got stuck talking to the librarian, and you remember how he goes on forever and ever and talks so slowly, about the most boring things, and I was like, I really just need this book, thanks. And then he talked for, like, another ten minutes!

JAMES

Oh god, that sounds so boring. I do not miss high school. Wait, did you hear about that accident on the highway today? Some guy wrecked his car. They had to amputate his left arm.

SARAH

That's terrible! Is he hurt really bad?

JAMES

It's okay, he's alright now.

SARAH

Oh my god, your jokes are terrible.

JAMES

I think I'm pretty funny.

SARAH

Trust me when I say you're not.

JAMES

Okay, you don't understand my comedic genius. Hey, tell me about your day.

SARAH

It was alright. I bombed an econ quiz. You should really help me study. Maybe tonight? We haven't spent any time together in forever.

JAMES

I'd help you, but I don't think we'd actually get any studying done.

SARAH

No... we probably wouldn't, but it'd be fun! Maybe I'd gain something by the power of osmosis. Didn't you do really well in econ last year?

JAMES

Uh, no, I did well in physics. I almost failed econ. I mean, I barely passed with like, a seventy or something.

SARAH

And that's why you're bumming around this year, right?

JAMES

Right. Hey, speaking of which, I got accepted into that four-year I finally applied to.

SARAH

They accepted you? James, that's so great! I'm so happy for you! So the gap year was no problem?

JAMES

Nah, I just made something up about working with Habitat for Humanity, and they let me in, no big deal.

SARAH

You built your brother a treehouse. I don't think that counts as Habitat for Humanity.

JAMES

No, it probably doesn't. But they believed me, so I guess I'm in the clear.

SARAH

James, this is really just so fantastic, and it'll be close to me next year, right?  
(A beat. JAMES is quiet.)

SARAH

Wait, what's wrong?

JAMES

What? Nothing's wrong!

SARAH

Well, you're not as excited as I thought you would be. You said that if you got accepted, you'd treat me to a whole year's worth of burritos.

JAMES

It's just that the school included the tuition in the acceptance letter, and it's a lot more than what it said on the website.

SARAH

How much more?

(JAMES hands her the paper.)

SARAH

Oh, that much more.

JAMES

Yeah, that much more.

SARAH

Well, what about community college? We talked about that, right? Maybe if you transfer, it'll be less expensive.

JAMES

Sarah, I told you. I don't want to be one of those losers who goes to the community college here, lives with their parents, and works two part-time jobs.

SARAH

Well, I went to community college this summer, and I'm not a loser who works two part-time jobs.

JAMES

Yeah, well, you went for fun, not for your entire education.

SARAH

I'm not saying it'd be your entire education--

JAMES

(interrupting)

I'm thinking about joining the army. You know the recruitment office? By the grocery store? I went down there today, and... the guy said I was perfect for it. They'd pay for my tuition, and I would go to basic and then go into the reserves. Or... you know, get shipped to a base somewhere. Do drills and stuff.

SARAH

...I don't think that's a very good idea, James.

JAMES

What do you mean?

SARAH

I just... don't. I mean, do you have all the information? Do you know how long you would actually serve?

JAMES

I'm not stupid, Sarah. I asked questions, and he gave me the answers I needed, all the answers I needed.

SARAH

Wait, are you asking for my opinion on this, or are you telling me your decision?

JAMES

I don't know.

(JAMES and SARAH are quiet.)

JAMES

Listen; I have to pick my little brother up from football. Text me, okay?

(JAMES kisses her on the forehead and exits left.  
SARAH is left alone. She's thinking.)

SARAH

I know he has problems with money, that his family isn't very wealthy, but the army? Does he think that will solve all his problems? I would think--considering his past--he would want to stay as far from the army as possible.

(beat)

I didn't know him yet, when his older brother was killed. It was a couple years ago. I think... I was almost twelve and he was thirteen. There was a huge memorial service for his brother, and there's a picture of him up by the principal's office at school. Every time I see it, I think about James. I thought he would... resent the army or something. I'll support him, of course, with whatever he wants to do. I'm not some girl that's just dating him. It's safe to say that I really, really like him. I love him.

(beat)

Maybe I could ask my dad to give him a job. He owns a construction firm, and James has always been good with his hands. He likes to take pens apart and put them back together. He does it constantly while I'm trying to study.

(beat)

He has this thing about being helped though. Like, two years ago? He got a stress fracture from track, and he had to be on crutches for a couple weeks. He wouldn't let me help him with his books or anything. James insisted on doing everything himself. We weren't even dating yet. We were just friends. I was like, 'Shut up stupid. Just let me carry the stupid books.' He was like, 'No, come on, I'm a manly man, I can carry them.' He's just so stubborn.

(beat)

I remember when he asked me to be his girlfriend. We were at the park studying. Well, we were supposed to be studying, but we were just talking about--I don't know, about everything. School and sports and whatever. And then I tried to kiss him, and he pulled back all of a sudden. And I was so scared that I had misread everything, that he didn't actually like me. But

SARAH (cont'd)

no, it turns out that he just wanted to kiss me first.

(beat)

And then, I said, well, I don't let boys kiss me if I'm not their girlfriend; and he laughed, and said, well, would you like to be my girlfriend? And I kind of made, like, a squeaking noise? And then he laughed again, and kissed me. He's really stubborn like that.

(beat)

It's just that joining the army is a big decision. I just hope he doesn't rush into anything.

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

Setting: A yard.

At Rise: JAMES and DAN are tossing a football back and forth.

DAN

I don't know how you're gonna join the army.

JAMES

Well, I sign a ton of papers, and then they tell me where to go, and then I'm in the army.

DAN

(sarcastically)

Naw, really? Tell me more. Maybe I'll join up, too!

JAMES

Hey man, you're the one who asked.

DAN

You seem set on it. What's Sarah think?

JAMES

I told her I was thinking about it.

DAN

Thinking about it? You sound pretty sure. How are you gonna break that to her?

JAMES

I don't know, man. Look. I didn't ask you to hang out today so we could talk about my relationship problems.

DAN

Fine. Listen. I don't know about you, but I'd be worried about going away with the army and leaving Sarah behind.

JAMES

Why? She won't cheat on me or anything. She's a good person.

DAN

Yeah, I'm sure she won't cheat... on purpose. It's just that you'll be gone, and she won't have anyone to bring her flowers on Valentine's day or take her to prom.

JAMES

So what, she'll be lonely?

DAN

Yeah, and then some dude who's still in school will move in on her. And they'll go to prom as friends, but prom night--

JAMES  
(angrily)

Jesus, Dan, shut the hell up.

DAN

I'm just saying! When it happens, don't say I didn't warn you.

JAMES

That's not going to happen. Will you just-- will you just throw the damn ball?

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

Setting: Sarah's bedroom.

At rise: SARAH and EMILY are sitting cross-legged from each other, a plate of cookies between them.

SARAH

Ah, yes, my world famous break-up cookies reappear, because, once again, I am the best friend ever.

EMILY

I need them. I mean, we were together for three months! He wasn't great, but he meant a lot to me!

SARAH

Yeah, you say that now, but in a couple of weeks you'll realize just how much of a jerk he actually was. I said it from the beginning: he didn't treat you right. You've really got to stop going after the losers.

EMILY

Well, I'm bored, and they're fun! I've got straight A's this year, and I already got into Duke. What else am I supposed to do?

SARAH

Maybe you should get a hobby or have more

SARAH (cont'd)

meaningful relationships.

EMILY

There's no use in talking to you about boys. You've got James. It's like you've been blinded by love. Makes me wanna gag, you and your perfect relationship.

SARAH

Well, nothing's perfect. He told me he was thinking about joining the army.

EMILY

A soldier boy! Hot.

SARAH

Emily.

EMILY

I'm just saying that objectively, your boyfriend is very attractive, and his attractive qualities will only increase in a military uniform. Substantially.

SARAH

Emily! You're not allowed to talk about how hot my boyfriend is in front of me.

EMILY

Oh, come on. He's not going to actually join the army.

SARAH

I don't know. He seemed pretty serious about it.

EMILY

James the Jokester? Voted class clown? He's anything but serious. It's like a complex teenage boys have. We learned about it in my psych class. These guys, they think they have to be ultra-masculine and shoot stuff, so they play football or do steroids or--join the army.

SARAH

Don't be ridiculous. That's not a real thing.

EMILY

It is too. You can look it up. Just tell him to get a job as a volunteer firefighter or dress up like Captain America for Halloween. It'll probably fix him right up, and then he doesn't have to go.

SARAH

You're full of crap. And besides, it's not a complex he has. He's doing it so he can go to college and have a job. It's legitimate. I'm just not so sure.



EMILY

God, if y'all break up, then there's no hope for the rest of us.

SARAH

Wait. Who said anything about breaking up?

EMILY

Well, do you want him to join the army?

SARAH

No, not particularly.

EMILY

But he wants to join the army, correct?

SARAH

He said he was thinking about it.

EMILY

Sarah Stewart, do not kid yourself.

SARAH

Okay, he seems pretty set on joining the army.

EMILY

Well, that's a fundamental difference in your relationship. I'm sorry, but it's probably not going to last, unless you change your mind, or he decides to not go. And let's be honest, he's not going to change his mind. You remember when he was injured? All you complained about was how stubborn he was.

SARAH

Look, I'm here to give you relationship advice, not the other way around. Now eat the damn cookie.

EMILY

You know another thing I'd be worried about?

SARAH

Please, enlighten me.

EMILY

What if he finds the girl of his dreams in the army?

SARAH

I am the girl of his dreams. He's told me.

EMILY

If he's a billion miles away, and you're here, he could cheat, and you would never even know.

SARAH

James would never cheat on me...

(a beat)

Would he?

EMILY

Well, I don't know. I'm not in y'all's relationship. I'm just saying, you should make a claim on him as soon as possible.

SARAH

What do you mean by "make a claim?"

(Blackout.)

Scene 5

Setting: A park bench.

At Rise: JAMES sits center stage.

JAMES

Well, I did it. You're looking at Private James Taylor, U.S. Army. The recruiter said, 'Son, we're glad you joined. We need good men like you in the army.' I leave for basic in two weeks. I'm going to Oklahoma. I've never been to Oklahoma before, but it's like the recruiter said, every day is an adventure with the army.

(a beat)

I took Sarah out for breakfast today. Biscuits and coffee. I meant to tell her, I really did... she just started talking about her sociology grades, and I got distracted thinking about how pretty and smart she is, and then... and then next thing I knew I was dropping her off at school and kissing her goodbye and... I hadn't told her shit.

(beat)

And then I was at school, getting my transcript and diploma copy to bring to the recruiter's office, and I saw my old principal. He asked me what I was getting my transcripts for, and I told him that I was joining the army. He said he was really proud of me, that it was a good thing to do for my family and my country.

(beat)

I don't think Sarah gets it. All her problems are... Look, I like her, a lot, but all her problems are a little immature. She's just concerned with school, and me being there to take her to winter formal and prom. And grades. And college. And school. I have to think about my little brother, and my mom and dad. I kind of think it's because she's an only child. Whatever. Never mind.

(beat).

I'm gonna take her out to dinner, somewhere really nice. That's when I'll tell her. And maybe I'll get her flowers or something. I should probably get her flowers.

(Blackout.)

Scene 6

Setting: An Italian restaurant.

At Rise: JAMES and SARAH are sitting at a table,

*across from each other. They both have a glass of water, and a basket of breadsticks are between them.*

SARAH

James, you didn't have to take me out. What's the occasion?

JAMES

Well, I like to take you to nice places.

SARAH

James.

JAMES

Okay, so Olive Garden isn't the epitome of nice. But you have to admit--they have the best breadsticks in the world.

SARAH

I'm sure a real Italian restaurant would beg to differ.

JAMES

You're very funny, but I happen to know the other day you were craving Olive Garden fettuccine, and I aim to please.

(SARAH is quiet. JAMES sips his water.)

SARAH

Would you break up with me, if you joined the army?

JAMES  
(choking)

What? No, of course not! Why would you think such a thing?

SARAH

I don't know! I was talking to Emily, and she was saying that you might meet the love of your life if you joined the army, and you would break up with me to be with her.

JAMES  
(quickly)

That's crazy. Of course I wouldn't--Sarah, I'm dating you. Why would I--and Emily she's--  
(A beat. JAMES clarifies.)

I would never do that to you, Sarah.

SARAH

Okay. I know. I just, I don't know why I would believe Emily. She's always... Emily.

JAMES

Yes, she is.

(JAMES and SARAH are quiet. JAMES picks up a breadstick, eating it.)

SARAH

I think we should have sex.

JAMES  
(choking)

What?

SARAH

We've been dating for a really long time. I think we're more than ready.

JAMES

Have you been talking to Emily? Just because she's--you know--doesn't mean that you have to--you know--rush into anything you don't want to do.

SARAH

Don't be, like, awkward about this. You always say we should be mature and talk about everything. Also, Dan gets around just as much as Emily does, so you can't say anything.

JAMES

Yeah, but where did you get the idea to talk to me about sex? Like, this is literally coming out of nowhere.

SARAH

I know you had sex with your last girlfriend. Before me.

JAMES

What? No, no I didn't.

SARAH

Oh my god, don't pretend you didn't. She told the whole school, practically.

JAMES

Okay, but I should have waited. Until I met the right person. Because she definitely wasn't.

SARAH

Am I the right person?

(A beat. JAMES is quiet.)

Never mind, I shouldn't have brought it up. Forget I said anything--

JAMES

(interrupting)

Yes, I think you're the right person.

SARAH

So, we should!

JAMES

Yes, we should. After you turn eighteen, and graduate high school. I don't want you rushing into anything.

SARAH  
You're not in charge of me.

JAMES  
Sarah, we're talking about having sex. Your virginity!

SARAH  
Yes, my virginity. My choice. And it's a conversation every couple should have.

JAMES  
Couple. Relationship. Sex is like a two way street, and if I'm not willing to do it, then we won't do it. Trust me. I have experience in this situation, at least, more experience than you do. We should wait.

SARAH  
What, you don't want to have sex with me? You're a guy. I know you've thought about it.

JAMES  
No, Sarah, that's not what I'm saying. Have I thought about it before? Yes--of course I have. That doesn't mean we should do it!

SARAH  
Why not?

JAMES  
Because I'm leaving. I was going to tell you this morning, at breakfast, but I got distracted. I went down to the recruiter's office today and finished signing my papers. It's... official.

SARAH  
I can't believe this.

JAMES  
I leave for Fort Sill in two weeks.

SARAH  
So soon? Where's Fort Sill?

JAMES  
Oklahoma.

SARAH  
Oklahoma?

JAMES  
Oklahoma.

(Blackout.)

### Scene 7

Setting: DAN and EMILY's bedrooms.

At Rise: DAN and EMILY stand downstage,

opposite of each other. They're talking on the phone.

DAN is talking to James, and EMILY is talking to Sarah, though we never hear the other side of the conversation.

DAN  
So telling her didn't go the best then?

EMILY  
Oklahoma? That's so far away.

DAN  
She asked you to have sex with her? And you said no? Are you stupid?

EMILY  
Well, if he's signed the papers then I don't think you have a say in the matter.

DAN  
Is she pissed?

(a beat)  
Yeah, sorry, that was a stupid question.

EMILY  
He said no to having sex? Is he deaf? Is he gay?

DAN  
So are you gonna break up?

EMILY  
Well, why are you talking to me about this, and not him?

(Blackout.)

### Scene 8

Setting: SARAH's bedroom.

At Rise: JAMES and SARAH are sitting on a bed. They are kissing. SARAH attempts to progress further, when JAMES stops her.

SARAH  
James, I--

JAMES  
--I don't care, Sarah. I said we should wait, and you agreed.

SARAH  
But--

JAMES  
--you agreed. I said I didn't want to, not yet.

SARAH  
James, you leave in three days. Am I supposed to take that sitting down?

JAMES  
You can stand up.

SARAH  
Very funny.

JAMES  
I can be funnier. What do you call a traveling priest?

(a beat)  
A Roman Catholic! Get it? Or, hey, what did one hat say to the other hat?

SARAH  
You're not funny.

JAMES  
Let me finish this one. It's hilarious.

SARAH  
Fine. What?

JAMES  
'You stay here. I'll go on ahead.'  
(A beat. SARAH ignores him.)  
Sarah, I don't want to fight.

SARAH  
If you don't want to fight, stop being a jerk.

JAMES  
It's only one--

SARAH  
--one thousand, and eighty-eight point three nine miles away.

JAMES  
I've made my decision. I've signed the papers.

SARAH  
Change your mind.

JAMES  
That's not a concept that the U.S. Army understands. I can't just change my mind. Once the ink is dry, it's a done deal. Besides, you said you would support me.

SARAH  
But I--

JAMES  
You said you would support me, Sarah.

SARAH  
That was before. That was before you actually

SARAH (cont'd)

signed the papers. Before I realized you'd be leaving me so soon. I didn't know you'd be gone for this long!

JAMES  
Come on. Let's not do this. I don't want to leave in a fight.

SARAH  
You got accepted, though! You got accepted into college! James, you can go! You can stay here!

JAMES  
I can't pay! Sure, I can go. Sure, I'd do fine there, but I can't pay! You know my reasons! This is my only chance to get an education. I can't afford any tuition, even with scholarships! Everyone else understands. They say they respect my decision. They say it's honorable! It's only my damn girlfriend who can't get over herself to let me do the right thing!

SARAH  
I didn't mean--

JAMES  
You don't think this is hard for me? Do you think that I want to leave my family?  
(a beat)

Leave you?

(a beat)  
Go to Oklahoma? Trust me, Sarah, nobody wants to live in Oklahoma.

SARAH  
I know.

JAMES  
(exasperated)  
Then why are you making this so hard on me?

SARAH  
I'm going to miss you.

JAMES  
Well, duh, I'm going to miss you too.

SARAH  
No, let me finish. I know you say I don't understand, but I'm going to miss you. A lot.

JAMES  
I get that.

SARAH

You say that I'm immature. You say that you're going away, and you say I'm lucky to stay here, that I'm lucky that my parents can pay for my tuition. I don't feel very lucky, okay? My dad offered you a job--

JAMES

We've discussed this. I don't want to talk about it again. I told you.

SARAH

Well I don't understand your problem. Why didn't you take the job? My dad would have paid you good money! You could have worked for a year, or done two years at community college and then transferred when you could get scholarships! Just because you didn't get a ton of financial aid, doesn't mean you can't use it at all! I outlined all these plans for you, and you just ignored them. James, you ignored me! You jumped at the chance to go into the military! All you care about is courage and honor! You just want to prove yourself!

JAMES

You're treading on really thin ice here. Watch yourself-- I'm warning you. I don't want to fight with you--

SARAH  
(spitefully)

You want to be just like your brother, don't you?

JAMES

Jesus Christ, please, just shut up. You--

SARAH

Oh, don't you dare. Don't you dare turn this back on me.

SARAH (cont'd)

JAMES

Fine, you brat! You're younger than me. You don't understand the responsibility I have! You--you have no right! You have no right to say anything about my brother! Sarah, I-- I can't believe you--

(JAMES begins to exit stage left.)

SARAH

Sure, just leave. Don't give me any explanation. Just walk away, like you do with every fight.

JAMES

You want an explanation? I didn't take your father's job offer because I don't take handouts. Unlike you, I find honor in working for what I want. I care about courage and honor, sure, but those

JAMES (cont'd)

are important things to care about which is more than I can say for you. In fact, I hope you don't miss me, because you can consider us over.

SARAH

James--wait--

(JAMES almost leaves the stage. There is a moment where both realize they have gone too far. JAMES then continues to leave stage left. SARAH leaves stage right.)

(Blackout.)

Scene 9

Setting: JAMES' and SARAH's bedrooms, respectively.

At Rise: JAMES and SARAH are on opposite sides of the stage from each other. JAMES is packing clothes and other random things into a duffel. They are each on the phone.

SARAH

Emily, I've tried to call him to explain. I've left, like, ten messages and sent a hundred texts. He won't respond. It's been, like, two days, and he leaves tomorrow.

JAMES

I'm so pissed, Dan. She said she'd keep her word, and then she starts yelling at me like she has any say in the matter? This is my life, not hers.

SARAH

I really need to get these outlines done. I can't stop thinking about him. Maybe I'll just try calling him again. Just one more time. I'll call you back, Emily.

JAMES

Hang on, Dan. It's Sarah.

(a beat)

I'm just gonna--

SARAH

Voicemail, of course. James, I shouldn't have said what I did. It was wrong... please, can we just talk? I know you have your phone on you. You're never without it. They don't let you have phones in basic, you know.

(a beat)

Okay, I probably shouldn't say anything about basic. Just call me when you get the chance, okay?

(a beat)

I guess I'll just hang up, then.

JAMES

Dan, I don't know what to do. She won't stop

JAMES (cont'd)  
calling me. Or texting me. Jesus, she won't leave me alone. I feel like an asshole. We got into this huge fight--

(a beat)  
Maybe I shouldn't go.

(a beat)  
I'm doing the right thing here, Dan. I know I am. I just wish she could see that.

(Blackout.)

Scene 10

Setting: A bus station.

At Rise: JAMES and DAN enter stage left. JAMES is holding a duffle bag, dressed in fatigues.

DAN  
Okay. Here we are.

JAMES  
We're really early. You probably didn't have to speed out of the Waffle House parking lot-- the bus doesn't come for another half hour.

DAN  
I know. You're here for a reason.

JAMES  
Thanks, man. I really feel that. I'm here for a reason on this earth, to protect and serve my country.

DAN  
No, not that, idiot. Ignoring your big head, Emily and I talked, and we decided that you and Sarah are being ridiculous. She's bringing her here, and you two are going to apologize to each other.

JAMES  
Dan--

DAN  
No excuses. I don't want to hear anything about her betraying you or whatever BS you came up with to make yourself feel justified. You're a stubborn piece of crap, and yeah, she was kind of rude, but you were also pretty insensitive to her feelings.

JAMES  
So what, I should just say sorry?

DAN  
You should both say sorry. Which is why Emily is bringing Sarah here to meet you.

JAMES  
And you two came up with this behind our backs?

DAN  
We were honestly just tired of you guys complaining.

JAMES  
Or you cared about my feelings.

DAN  
No, we were literally just tired of you two complaining.

JAMES  
I'm gonna give you a hug.

DAN  
No, please don't. That's really not necessary--

(They hug, DAN is obviously uncomfortable, but the hug is sincere.)

JAMES  
I'm gonna miss you, dude.

DAN  
Yeah. I'll miss you too. Be safe, okay?

(DAN exits stage right. SARAH and EMILY enter stage left. JAMES stands oblivious, holding his duffle and looking at his phone.)

SARAH  
Are you sure he'll be here?

EMILY  
I'm sure. Look, he's right over there.

SARAH  
And you're sure he'll want to make up?

EMILY  
I'm sure. More like make out than make up, actually.

SARAH  
Emily.

EMILY.  
Sorry.

SARAH  
Thank you for doing this.

EMILY  
You're welcome, sweetie. Good luck!

SARAH  
Wait, where are you going?

EMILY  
I've got a date!

SARAH  
A date? With who?

(EMILY winks, and then crosses downstage to where JAMES stands.)

EMILY  
She's all yours, Taylor.

JAMES  
Thanks, Emily.

(EMILY turns to leave, but JAMES catches her arm.)

JAMES  
I mean it. Thank you.

EMILY  
It was nothing, really. Be safe, okay?

(JAMES and EMILY hug, and EMILY exits stage right. JAMES turn to SARAH, and they walk slowly to each other.)

SARAH  
James.

JAMES  
I didn't know they were going to do this. Some friends, huh? We'll probably thank them in ten years.

SARAH  
I don't want you to go away, leaving a fight. I want to apologize, James. I was selfish, and I was emotional, and I let my own sadness become anger... and clearly that didn't work out.

JAMES  
(hugging SARAH)  
Jesus, Sarah, I'm going to miss you so much. Maybe that's why I was angry, because you kept throwing my mistakes back in my face, and it hurt. A lot.

SARAH  
I'm going to miss you too, and we can write.

JAMES  
I know. I'm sorry. I love you.

SARAH  
(slowly)

SARAH (cont'd)  
I love you too.

(Blackout.)  
Scene 11

Setting: Ten years later, at a restaurant.

At rise: JAMES and SARAH stand downstage, opposite each other, addressing the audience. As they speak, they are dressing to age themselves. SARAH is pulling her hair back and putting on glasses and a blazer. JAMES is buttoning up a dress shirt and tying a tie.

JAMES  
We broke up that Christmas.

SARAH  
It's okay. Don't worry! We were on separate pathways.

JAMES  
It didn't make sense to stay together if our lives were heading in separate directions.

SARAH  
We tried to remain friends for a while, but we eventually drifted apart. I graduated, went to college, got a degree in journalism. Then I moved north and started working as a reporter. I don't know what's next for me. I'll probably take some bigger assignments and then maybe work on a book. I like not knowing what's next.

JAMES  
I got what I was promised-- an education. And pretty soon after I got my degree in mechanical engineering, I quit. The army didn't really suit me after all, but it certainly helped me achieve my goals. I traveled the world for a bit, much to my mother's dismay. Then I moved west and started a company with some of my army buddies. Things are going well, and I'm looking forward to what's next.

SARAH  
And James?

JAMES  
Sarah?  
(SARAH takes a seat at a table, and opens a laptop. She begins typing.)

JAMES  
We haven't seen each other in ten years.

(JAMES notices Sarah and crosses upstage to her table)

JAMES

Excuse me. I'm sorry. You probably don't remember me, but--

SARAH

James? Is that my James? Oh my god!

(They hug. It's awkward.)

SARAH

Sit down. I was just typing up some notes. It's so great to run into you!

JAMES

I thought you wouldn't recognize me. I mean, how many years has it been?

SARAH

Ten? I think? Maybe ten and a half?

JAMES

Well, you still look as great as ever. What brings you to Houston?

SARAH

I'm working on a piece. I'm heading back to Boston in a few days, though. What about you? Last I heard you were stationed in Brussels.

JAMES

For a few years, but Europe didn't really suit me. It was quite the adventure, though. Now I do private security contracting for some rich neighborhoods around here. I like that just fine.

SARAH

Like what, you're a bodyguard?

JAMES

No, I design and sell home security devices, actually.

SARAH

Oh, wow, that's great!

JAMES

Yeah, so I'm here, right now, although my company looks like it'll be expanding across the sunbelt pretty soon.

(A beat. They've run out of things to talk about.)

JAMES

Do you get back home often?

SARAH

No, not much anymore. My parents retired to Florida a couple of years ago. Sometimes I go back to the university for alumni events. Actually, last time I was on campus I saw your little brother!

JAMES

Really? He didn't mention anything.

SARAH

He probably didn't see me. He was in the library studying for finals. I was just sneaking in to say hello to an old professor of mine, and I spotted him. He's gotten so handsome.

JAMES

Yeah, he'll be graduating with a public service degree... not this May, but the next. God, I haven't been back home since Dan and Emily's wedding. I can't believe you missed that, what a crazy party.

SARAH

I know! I was in California! But you should see their kids. They are seriously adorable.

JAMES

Trust me. I've seen them. Dan sends pictures. Lots of pictures.

SARAH

Well, I should get going, I have a meeting in half an hour, and traffic in this city is insane, I don't know how you manage.

JAMES

A shame. It was great catching up with you!

SARAH

Yes, it was.

JAMES

Wait--do you want to get dinner with me? Tonight? Around seven, maybe? I know this really awesome Mexican place. Their burritos are out of this world. I was just thinking that we could catch up some more and--

SARAH

(interrupting)

Dinner at seven sounds good! Want to pick me up outside the Hilton?

JAMES

That sounds great.

(Blackout.)

CURTAIN



# The Armband

Joshua Sharpe  
Young Harris College

## Characters

JESSE: A boy of about 17 or 18. He wears a t-shirt and jeans.

CHERYL: A white woman in her mid-to-late 30s. She wears a dress reminiscent of a technicolor paper bag with front pockets.

NEWSCASTER: Can be played by anyone with a projecting voice. He is not present onstage, but recorded and played over speakers.

## Setting:

The present.  
CHERYL's bedroom, in an Atlanta townhouse.

(JESSE is folding laundry. A TV runs offstage right, the NEWSCASTER announcing. A closet is center stage, with a full mirror mounted on the door. The immediate six feet of wall on either side of the closet is plastered with "I VOTED" stickers and posters from various left-wing protest movements. At least one Vietnam-era "Baby Killers" sign should be up there, next to a "Shout Your Abortion!" sign. The bedspread may or may not be an Antifa flag.)

### NEWSCASTER

It's looking like our new mayor will be Mr. Dolan Crew, ladies and gentlemen! It'll take a miracle for Madame Bosworth to—

### CHERYL

(CHERYL runs past JESSE while holding a smartphone, as if to record video of herself.) This has to be a joke, I cannot believe this is happening! I'm literally about to fucking kill myself and I'm not kidding! You'd better fucking fix this shit right now!

(JESSE pauses to watch as she runs by.)

### JESSE

Mom? Did you take some of my pills again?  
Mom!

### CHERYL

I'm literally gonna die, I need an ambulance,  
|—

### JESSE

Mom! He's just the mayor!

(CHERYL wanders offstage, blubbing to the camera. JESSE sighs, and continues folding laundry while CHERYL ad-libs a rant. JESSE then puts a long, green dress on a hanger. He curiously holds it up to his chest, then shrugs. He begins to put it down on the bed. Enter CHERYL.)

### CHERYL

Oh. My. God.

(She may sound out "God" like an angelic chorus.)

### JESSE

What's wrong now, Mom?

### CHERYL

Nothing now: this is perfect! I didn't know you were trans!

### JESSE

What?

CHERYL

Thank Gaia, She sent you just for this darkest hour! When did you start liking dresses? Do you wear my panties? Oh honey, they make the black rose ones in your size now, you'd look so cute in them!

JESSE:

What! Mom, what are you—

CHERYL

(She gives JESSE a crushing hug.)

I always wanted a daughter, and now I got one! Should I call you "Jessica" now? It's not too late for hormones, you know.

JESSE

What!

CHERYL

What kind of boobs do you want? A set of Ds will convince anyone of your true self!

(CHERYL pulls JESSE to the closet.)

JESSE

Mom, I'm not trans!

(Beat.)

CHERYL

(Warmly.)

Oh, honey. If you're worried about money, your father's alimony is more than enough to pay for it.

JESSE

Please don't bring Dad into this.

CHERYL

Why not? He told me who he was voting for.

(CHERYL releases JESSE, begins to pace in thought.)

Ha! I would love to see his face when he finds out that his paycheck is funding the very thing he hates!

JESSE

Oh yeah, he's such a hateful bastard, isn't he? It's not like his favorite employee is a flaming gay guy, no ma'am. What a bigot.

CHERYL

(Freezes, slowly turning to JESSE.)  
You've been to his office? When?

JESSE

Not his office. He invited me to lunch on Tuesday, remember?

(Beat.)

Oh yeah. You were at Starbucks with Aunt Jack.

(Sighs.)

Of course you didn't read my text.

CHERYL

I've told you *not* to speak to him, Jess—

(Pauses, mentally correcting herself)

—ica. That fucking white supremacist is vile, even more so after voting for that goddamn fascist pig!

JESSE

We've been through this, Mom.

(Counts off points with his fingers.)

The mayor's not a fascist, Dad's Korean, and I'm not a trans woman.

CHERYL

The fucker's a race trai—

(She pauses.)

Open the closet. Now.

JESSE

I'm not trying on your dresses.

CHERYL

Not right now. You're just about your father's dimensions, aren't you?

JESSE

(Hesitantly.)

Yes. Why do you ask?

CHERYL

One of his suits is in the back, about six down from the blue dress. Try it on.

JESSE

(He reluctantly obeys, enters the closet.

CHERYL partly closes the door, leaving it cracked a few inches.)

One, three, five—oh, you have to be joking.

Put it on!

CHERYL

Fine.

JESSE

(Audible rustles as JESSE changes clothes.  
CHERYL smiles to herself, smugly.)  
Why the hell is there a gun on the belt?

CHERYL

Don't mind that prop! It's part of the outfit!

JESSE

(Exits the closet, wearing a smart, black military uniform with a white, collared undershirt.)  
Can you tell me why you're making me wear this—

CHERYL

Where's the hat?

JESSE

The hat? What hat?

CHERYL

Never mind, I'll get it.  
(She glances at JESSE's chest, then left arm.)  
The tie's probably with it, too.  
(She ducks into the closet.)

JESSE

(Considers the mirror, standing up straight.)  
Spiffy.

(To CHERYL)

Was Dad a cop at some point? He never said anything about it?

CHERYL

Oh, it was actually a gift I sent him last week. He returned it.  
(She reappears, putting a black, police-style crusher cap on Jesse's head and fitting the black tie under his collar. She reaches into her pocket, producing what appears to be a band of red cloth.)  
Hold out your arm. No, your left one.

JESSE

(He obeys, then looks in the mirror again. Cheryl whips out her smartphone and takes a picture.)

JESSE (cont'd)

What the fuck!

CHERYL

Jesus, that's terrifying. It fits you a little too well.

JESSE

You sent Dad a Nazi outfit! Wait, what the hell did you take a picture for?

CHERYL

Well, I need to correct your internalized transmisogyny somehow.

JESSE

(Beat.)  
You're on meth.

CHERYL

We've got to hashtag resist that fascist Dolan! Don't you see that? You're like, the perfect point of intersectional resistance against the capitalist fascists: your father's pure Asian—

JESSE

How does that—

CHERYL

Your great-great grand aunt on my mother's side is African-Canadian—

JESSE

I thought she was Hawaiian?

CHERYL

I'm necro-bisexual, and your great-great-great-great uncle on my dad's side was quarter Sioux and half Jewish! And on top of that, you're trans! You're practically the Chosen One!

JESSE

(Beat.) "Necro-bisexual"?

CHERYL

Kink-shame me again, Jessica: this picture will be on Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram before you can say "Heil Dolan!", you goddamn Nazi!

JESSE

Are you out of your mind? What on—

CHERYL

And if you shoot me, I'll make sure you'll die in prison!

JESSE

It's a prop!

(He considers the mirror to examine himself more closely. His demeanor suddenly calms.)  
I understand, Mom.

CHERYL

(She calms as well, putting away her phone to hug Jesse.)  
Oh, honey. I know it's hard to give up your privilege. But together, our hashtag resistance will topple Crew and his fascist cronies!

JESSE

(JESSE retrieves his own smartphone from his pocket. CHERYL maintains the hug, and doesn't notice JESSE's actions. He taps the screen a few times, makes a couple scrolling motions, and finally speaks.)

JESSE (cont'd)

"We are Socialists, mortal enemies of the present capitalist system, with its exploitation of the economically weak, with its injustice in wages, and its immoral evaluation of individuals according to wealth instead of responsibility."

CHERYL

Yes! Exactly!

JESSE

Want to know who I'm quoting?

CHERYL

Sure!

JESSE

Gregor Strasser, of the National Socialist German Workers Party, circa 1926.

CHERYL

What?

JESSE

(Stands at attention.)

"The State reserves the right to be the sole interpreter of the needs of society."

(Beat.)

CHERYL

Did... didn't Madame Bosworth say that last year, before Crew showed up?

JESSE

Close! It's Benito Mussolini.

CHERYL

(Looks at JESSE, horrified.)

What!

JESSE

"Money is the jealous god of Israel, in face of which no other god may exist."

CHERYL

(She recoils.)

No. You're quoting Hitler now. Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

JESSE

(He grins wickedly.)

"On The Jewish Question," by Karl. Heinrich. Marx.

CHERYL

NO!

(She falls on her butt, backs up to the bed.)  
No. It's not true.

(She begins to weep.)

That's impossible!

JESSE

(Waves the smartphone.)

Search the Internet: you'll find it all to be true!

CHERYL

(She wails.)

NO! No!

JESSE

(He looks into the mirror again. Then, he removes the armband, hat, and gun.)  
Here. It fits you almost too well.  
(JESSE tosses the armband into CHERYL's lap.)

JESSE then goes back into the closet. The lights begin to dim. CHERYL weeps into the armband as all fades to black.)

END

# HONORABLE MENTIONS

## Poetry

Jess Vovk, "Lake Pontchartrain"  
Anna Sandy, "Mornings in Bed"  
Jess Williard, "Reason"  
Madelyn Rueter, "Stranger"  
Allison Dupuis, "Empty Tombs"

## Nonfiction

Jacquelyn Kraut, "Finding Silence"  
Alex Brown, "9/18/17"  
Alice Mawi, "A Handshake Between Two Worlds"  
Hailey Hughes, "Indecent Exposure"

## Fiction

Anna Lachkaya, "It Makes No Sense with Your Legs"  
Bianca Buschor, "Fish Sticks"  
Ellaree Yeagley, "Motivated Team Player with 3+ Years of Anti-Microwave Industry Experience"  
Emma Long, "Where She Left Me"  
Chloe Giorgianni, "Stolen"

## Plays

Sarah Mctyre, "Lunch Is Ready"  
Morgan Bilicki, "Oh Grow Up"  
Jack Padgett, "A Matter of Life and Death"  
Lewis Crawford, "Autumn Square"  
Lauren James, "Unzipping the Dress"