



*Agnes Scott College* ● *46th Annual*

# WRITERS' FESTIVAL

if you want to  
change the world,  
pick up your pen  
and **write**.

-martin luther king, jr.

46th Annual

Writers' Festival

*April 6 & 7, 2017*





Agnes Scott College  
141 E. College Ave.  
Decatur, GA 30030  
[agnesscott.edu](http://agnesscott.edu)

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The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's state-wide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's festival are Claudia Rankine, Patrick Phillips, and Kayla Miller '11.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the Festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the Emma May Laney Endowment Fund for Writing, the Margaret Guthrie Trotter Fund, and the Ellen White and William Wyeth Newman Writers' Festival Prize. We wish to thank President Elizabeth Kiss, Vice President for Academic Affairs Kerry Pannell, Eleanor Hutchen '40, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. Thanks to Ellaree Yeagley '18 for the magazine's cover art. Special thanks to Willie Tolliver, chair, and other members of the English department.

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the greatest rules of  
dramatic writing are:  
conflict,  
conflict,  
conflict.  
- james frey





# The Book of Life: a conversation

*Christell Victoria Roach, Emory University*

## Characters

**W.E.B. Du Bois**, the historic black intellectual, racial theorist, writer, activist, exists in his own purgatory, reading a book. Du Bois in his immortal figure resembles his appearance in his late 40s, however his wisdom slows his speech. The book Du Bois is reading in his purgatory follows black life before Du Bois was born, during his lifetime, and is never finished being written. Each day is a page in Du Bois' book.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates**, the popular black writer of present day, and the present narrator of Du Bois' book who opposes respectability, sees history as the gateway to change, and is challenging the post-racial rhetoric that America (and Du Bois' book) has taken on.

## Setting

Initially, Ta-Nehisi Coates is sitting at the back-corner table of a boisterous café with small tables and no Wi-Fi in Manhattan's Morningside Heights. But in Coates' daydream, it transfers to an empty space (purgatory) that most of the play takes place in, before returning to the café table.

## Act 1. Scene 1.

COATES

(In Coates' head, he is taken away by the thought.)

Every layer of this earth, down to the inner core, is a circle of hell for the black body. What if this life, this body, the crust on which we walk, is just our first circle limbo?

(Coates sips his coffee and stares at the black liquid. He lifts his hand to the brim and stares at the colors of his skin and drinks.)

COATES

We weather a circle as our bodies get buried into this earth. When a white body dies, often they cremate them – that is the only hell the body knows as the body is being transitioned... The black body gets buried, for time to push it past the circles of earth.

(Coates dips his finger into the coffee, slowly sinking it further into the drink, his face held in a tight grimace.)

COATES

If there were a hell, I wonder how many circles a black man would get? I can only entertain the idea of a Hell if it means that the white body gets to feel what the black body has felt for generations. *Hell for ancestral fear that put black parents under terror. And hell upon those who shatter the holy vessel.* Perhaps Dante had a missing circle... the black hole that swallows Hell entirely because *perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist*, and, therefore, there is no punishment necessary for the white body. "The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The Typhoon will not bend under indictment."

(Coates arrives in an open space. It is a white space wherein he feels his black body profoundly. The white open space is abrasive, uncomfortable, and he immediately wants to pull back from the daydream (if that is what it is). Then Du Bois appears and Coates is confronted with all his ideas that conflict with Du Bois.)

## DU BOIS

(Du Bois is in a sort of purgatory. Du Bois is sitting at a desk, reading a large book in front of him. He has been doing this since he died. He is reading and making edits in the margins, and then he loses his place and, puzzled, he looks up at Coates. Words continue to appear on the page, but Du Bois is not paying attention to it. He studies Coates. Coates is standing about five lunges away from the desk. The air between them is dense and makes the whole space seem constricting. Coates is amazed both to see Du Bois, a dead man, and that a book is being written before his eyes.)

Ah, I see.

(Du Bois sits back in his chair, crossing his arms.)

## COATES

(Confusion washes over Coates' face as he shifts focus from Du Bois, to the book, and back to Du Bois.)

What are you doing here?

## DU BOIS

Actually, I think the question is what you are doing here, son. I've been sitting here reading this book ever since I left Ghana.

(There is a knowing calmness over Du Bois, yet his face does slightly give off surprise.)

## COATES

What book is it?

## DU BOIS

It's the book of life –

(Coates sighs and rolls his eyes, uninterested.)

No, sir, I think we've all had it wrong.

(Coates raises his eyebrows, in a sarcastic "tell me about it" face. Sitting up, Du Bois cleans his glasses and stares at the book as he speaks, in wonder.)

This here book is about the souls of black folk. It begins with exposition from African history, follows the rising action of slavery, and what is peculiar that I believe I've begun to understand is that it climaxes repeatedly –

(Coates swallows a laugh. Du Bois gets up and walks over to Coates with the book.)

– look, it climaxes at the invocation of the slave trade, the revolt of slaves in the West Indies (1500-1600), the Revolt in Santo Domingo (1522), the Revolt in Mexico (1530)...it climaxes at the war between the British and the Maroons (1655-1738), the Revolt in Haiti (1691), in Barbados (1692 & 1702), the Second Revolt in Haiti (1718)... at the American Revolution (1755), the French Revolution (1789), the Revolt of Toussaint L'Ouverture...

(Coates takes a step back, overcome with Du Bois' breathy enthusiasm. Du Bois walks away with the book in hand. He is consumed by his understanding and, for a moment, forgets Coates is there. He is spelling out his conclusions with his body, moving in total excitement and freedom.)

You see, the book always has a falling action of white-washing, always the conquering of blacks in some form of inhumane triumph. It climaxes at places important to the black timeline. It climaxes at the end of the slave trade, the Berlin Conference, the end of slavery in the U.S., at the Pan-Africanism Movement, hell, even at the Black Nationalist Movement with that trunk-head Garvey; with the NAACP, at the new Negro Movement... the white wars are falling actions falling off the tip of a climax. It climaxes at the invocation of Jim Crow, segregation, the pass-system in apartheid-Africa, at the presence and muscle of the KKK, at the Vietnam War, the Anti-

Apartheid Movement, peaks at the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement, the Black Panther Movement, the segregation of schools, the release of Nelson Mandela, the Divestment Movement, the war on drugs, the Truth and Reconciliations Committee, the Rwandan Genocide, the election of President Mandela...the election of this black man in America, President Obama!

(Coates rolls his eyes again. Du Bois is back at his desk, hovering over the book.)

DU BOIS

You know, I could've made for a fine president myself.

COATES

Okay, I get it! This book you're holding —which I assume must be an awfully heavy book —it never ends!

(Coates takes the book from Du Bois and looks at it. His eyes race across the pages as he sees it for himself.)

DU BOIS

But what is odd is the pages today have all the indication of a movement of some sort – it is the highest the climax has ever been – but it has the dual presence of a climax and a falling action. This book has a plot line like an EKG, except it basically has Atherosclerosis, and right now this book is having a heart attack.

(Du Bois takes in a deep breath and walks back to the table to sit.)

COATES

What language is this written in?! How can you read this?! There's words in English, French, Spanish... what is this?!

(Coates speeds over to Du Bois and drops the book before him on the table.)

DU BOIS

It is its own black language. If you just read it to understand it, not dissect it, it makes sense. It speaks to you. What is also interesting is that there are so many authors, and it is written in this language that encompasses all languages, has no direct meaning, but implied general meanings. And you, my friend, must be this generation's author – or shall I say voice?

(Du Bois looks at Coates, expecting the confusion that washes over Coates' face.)

There are many authors, but the narrator switches every now and then. Once it was myself; that was an interesting experience. It has been Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston — the two of them in one room was worthy of note — James Baldwin, Maya Angelou; it has even gone as far back as King Afonso.

(Coates leans in to look at the book again, interested. Understanding washes over him, and he crouches in on it.)

For a while I had no visitors. There was the occasional change of dialect in the book from a few poignant writers, but no one made it here. No one made it here for a while because there was somewhat of a post-racial accent that limited the story. The tone now — your tone, I assume — is writing a climax in the tone of an exposition; it drops straight back to the beginning...

(A measured look washes over Coates, and he looks at Du Bois intently.)

Oh, excuse me, I'm W.E.B. Du Bois, and you've interrupted my narrative.

**Act 1, Scene 2**

The scene resumes in the same white space that is filled with years of history, like the Book of Life exhaled a breath of life. Coates is walking around the open space, thinking. Du Bois sits at the table, watching him. Du Bois looks and notices that his story has paused. He cranes his neck to see the last few words written... *Between the World and Me*.

DU BOIS

So, on today's budding movement that is tousling with a climax, it seems that language and bodies are pushing to matter. Your writing is so fixed on the flesh, the body. And these waves of young colored people are fighting, protesting for their right to their bodies, the right for their bodies to matter; the right for their bodies to be able to speak; the right for their bodies to be heard. The physicality of language is toying with the color lines that crafted it.

COATES

"I feel... a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infuses an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape."

DU BOIS

Ta-Nehisi, right?

COATES

(Coates stops walking, hearing his name being called aloud, and he looks at Du Bois.)

Yeah, that's my name.

(Du Bois nods his head and makes a note in his margin, an observation from watching Coates.)

DU BOIS

"Between me and the other world — your world — there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it." To the real question, which part of the black life matters most to salvage? Is it the soul? Or is it the body? I have been arrested in my pondering.

COATES

The body.

DU BOIS

I agree to some extent, but I believe it is what is inside the Negro that matters the most. The "Negro blood has a message for the world."

COATES

"There is nothing holy or particular about my skin; I am black because of history and heritage. There is no nobility in falling, in being bound, in living oppressed, and there is no inherent meaning in black blood."

DU BOIS

A body without blood is lifeless. Persons without culture are spineless. A voice without language is voiceless. Has your study of the roads in your body not led you to the blood that dates your travels?

COATES

(Coates walks up to Du Bois, unintimidated. He leans intently across the table, looking Du Bois straight in the eye.)

I sat at the knee of the river of blood, listened, and heard bones breaking, skin tearing,

bullets penetrate flesh, whips drag out hollers, branding irons searing on coals, African spirituals and blackening skin, hot box prayers burning with the absence of God, judicial branches hanging the voices by the barrel, red lines being drawn across urban wombs, and liquor leaving welts on my community, and I figured *Not that these things were bumps in the road along the way, but they were the road* and “what was required was a new story, a new history, a new road told through the lens of our struggle.”

DU BOIS

Nephew, hear me when I say that what you propose is significantly unoriginal!

(Du Bois shakes his head dismissively. He remains seated, looking back at Coates like a father to a tempered child.)

The wealth of literature, theory, activism, folklore, arts movements, and so much more attributed to black lives that can be tied together as a legacy of an African spirit; the spirit produces to preserve the *souls* of black lives. What is a body with no soul? I’m sure you’ve heard jazz: what is black music with no soul? If the sanctity is simply in the bodies, then there is no explanation as to why jazz music is tied to the black community. It is not just a physical product. We have tried to preserve bodies: “However this wealth [a resilient black culture] was obtained, and however pious the regrets at the methods of rape [excavation], there can be no doubt as to what became of it.” Though there has been brutality upon the body in every form, “this new strain of Negro blood,” African-Americans, must claim our struggles as our homeland, and America must recognize them, like you argued for in your ‘Case for Reparations’ in order for it to not have a hold over us all.

COATES

I reject that, Du Bois, and I’m not sorry about it. You’re preaching respectability with an ageist undertone. “Why – for us and only us – is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies?” Why is it that “most of us are forced to drink our travesties straight and smile about it?” “Why were only our heroes nonviolent?” “We did not choose our fences.”

(Coates pulls back from the desk, and continues to speak to the white space, as if the whiteness is an audience of listeners.)

*How big-hearted can democracy be? How many people can it actually include and sustain itself? That is the question I’m asking over and over again.* Because of the ritual desensitization and efforts to “disabuse me of my weaponized history,” *if I bring anything to the table, it’s the ability to synthesize all of that into something that people find emotionally moving.* I speak of the body, because everyone has one!

(Coates jumps.)

Getting them to feel the black body is my ticket to get them to see what they’ve done to it.

DU BOIS

(Du Bois shakes his head.)

By detracting the physicality of the soul through hopelessness, you are exposing the Negro spirit! Your linguistic invitation to touch the Negro body and remind the whites of his presence is a gateway to the souls of black folk, the chamber of the African spirit!

(Du Bois rises from his chair, leaning across the desk.)

You are questioning the very hands that you solicit for physical affirmation and that is a risk that may ultimately cost the African-American people, and the black world. What shall happen, if suppose, a white hand touched the African Spirit? Would he let go and die? Would he hold on and become possessed? Would he shy away from the memory of its felt? Would he be overcome and pass out? Or would he dilute it? Would he force it into the shadow of the sun? Or would

he take it? Would he extinguish it? – “behold the suicide of a race!” As black people, we are linked in the spirit. Though you may not believe in it, that does not mean you are not sacrificing something far greater than a body. The sacrifice of the spirit is inherently irresponsible, and limiting.

### Act 1, Scene 3

The scene opens to Coates sitting on the floor of the white space, while Du Bois is sitting in his chair. Coates' legs are up in a way that signifies he is only sitting to have control over himself, with his elbows on his knees. Du Bois is sitting, looking at Coates and observing him still. The book is on the desk, opened to the very beginning, and Du Bois begins to flip pages back to where his story stopped.

#### DU BOIS

(Once Du Bois arrives at his current page, he looks over to Coates again.)

In my lifetime, “I wanted to appeal to the past in order to explain the present. I know how unpopular this method is.” “The bright ideals of the past, – the physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands – all these in turn have waxed and waned, until even the last grows dim and overcast. Are they all wrong – all false?” Ta-Nehisi, thinking of you and your work, “So dawned on me the time of *Sturm und Drang*: storm and stress to your day rocks your little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is, within and without, the sound conflict, the burning body and rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings.”

(Coates drops his legs into criss-cross style, leans over, rests his elbows on his knees again and cradles his face with his palms. He is looking at Du Bois, trying to understand.)

“No, not that but each alone was over-simple and incomplete – the dreams of a credulous race-childhood, or the fond imaginings of the other world which does not know and does not want to know our power. To be really true, all these ideals must be melted and welded to one –”

#### COATES

(With a distasteful look stirring up on his face, Coates closes his eyes slowly, and then speaks with them closed.)

Respectability politics and the paralyzed black leadership... ha! You know, I and a significant amount of the black race were raised with expectations conjured up by you. All my life, I'd hear people tell their black boys and black girls to “be twice as good,” which is to say, “accept half as much.”

(Looking at Du Bois.)

You and your legacy demand so much more from black people that we become the shovels for the burial of our own strivings. “The fact of history is that black people – probably no people have ever – liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts.” And because of the toxic moral, you have given gateway for the white man to colonize our minds. Being “better than” black, is that being white? Why is it necessary to be more than who you are? You and others like you place so much value in the black man's ability to dilute his body to fit into these places. We are all *constricted, not by a tangle of pathologies, but by a tangle of structural perils*. “The plunder of black life in this country was drilled into this country in its infancy and reinforced across its history, so that plunder has become an heirloom, an intelligence, a sentience, a default setting to which, likely to the end of our days, we must invariably return.”

#### DU BOIS

Negro!

(Du Bois stands.)

“The ideal of fostering and developing the traits of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the

American Republic, in order that someday, on American soil, two world-races may give to each those characteristics both so sadly lack" is not a faulted ideal or theory, it is a faulted practice crippled by generational ignorance! Ta-Nehisi, don't you believe in the "talented tenth" in the inherent gifts of the Negro, in the promise of the Negro...

COATES

No...

DU BOIS

I believe they are gateways to create space in society for black people. In my day, the only way to prove our humanity, coming from the porch of slavery, and the three-fifths blasphemy... was to shock the hell outta whites. What's more shocking than for a white man to believe a former slave to "qualify" as white? This is civil resistance. Resistance that doesn't cost the body, because the whites are benefitting from it, and the Negroes are making a statement! They recognized this! "To acknowledge resistance as a mass phenomenon is to acknowledge the possibility that something is wrong with the system!"

COATES

Damn straight!

DU BOIS

(Coates and Du Bois both share a laugh of relief.)

Now, earlier you mentioned respectability politics. Yes, my theories in the past may've sounded critical, but perhaps they were not altogether for Negroes. Negroes were the only ones who were drawn to listen to me, and what they heard were passionate challenges placed on the Negro soul. But it was the resilient spirit that heard me challenging a system, ultimately. The spirit responded with Pan-Africanism, the NAACP, the New Negro Movement, and so much more. Linguistically, it was critical, but that was me speaking in a language that had to dig deep to "the striving in the souls of black folk" and force whites to see me because I'm speaking somewhat of their language. Show them your life matters by allowing the African Spirit, the black soul to improvise on white society—

COATES

"But the profits of that struggle and others like it are ours, even when the object of our struggle, as is so often true, escapes our grasp." All those falling actions in your book, they're white actions that infiltrated the stamina of black people. Why should we keep producing as offerings to them? Why is it that they must approve – that they have the power to diminish or silence us? "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage." Will the bullet penetrate our song, our poetry, and our colors? Why must we glorify our struggle?

DU BOIS

I am convinced we could argue for eternity, but what I really feel the need to emphasize is this: the most prized possession of the black body is the soul. You need to understand this. Tell the youth they can only tell someone their life matters if they show them. They shouldn't have to, but they must. "What have we moderns — I guess you, a contemporary — we the wisest of the wise to do with the dead past? Yet, 'all that tread the globe are but a handful to the tribes that slumber in his bosom,' and who are we, stupid blunderers at the task our brothers sought to do —

(Du Bois takes the book and places it on the ground to flip through pages of the exposition, rising actions, climaxes, and then he skips to where Coates' page paused.)  
who are we to forget them?"

COATES

Who?

## DU BOIS

Our ancestors. The “glorification of the struggle” is a reminder to persist in their efforts. As much as our art, our words, our resistance is hope and healing for Negroes, it is a continual opportunity for the empathy and awareness of whites. Ta-Nehisi, this book stopped when you arrived here. There is a movement happening that I know you can see and feel, but you must guide it into a revival. You speak of “the Dreamers” who have suffered, or sought the American Dream for years now. Wake them all up by showing everyone black lives matter – they will not simply be told anything that argues against the national rhetoric of “color-blindness” – and you’ve got to maintain the bridge between struggles. Reach over to South Africa, Pakistan, Senegal, Ghana, Haiti, Syria, anywhere where there are black bodies, or bodies that have been made black with the dye of oppression. We cannot fight our battles on our own. Black people have always had a spiritual unity through the diaspora. After you’ve articulated the struggle of today, allow for the international aid in pushing against that struggle.

## COATES

You said earlier that what I was saying was unoriginal. Although it was unoriginal, it was news to many people. Race is a social construct–  
(Du Bois interrupts him.)

## DU BOIS

–that has a latitude and longitude that stretches across every continent. It has different color scales, sciences, histories, and associations. It is a struggle that built America, but the struggle is not merely an American struggle. Ultimately, black lives simply do not matter without the soul. A war fought with bodies as bullets will inevitably be nothing more than a bloody war. What are they fighting for? Whites have always repossessed our bodies in the forms of societal bondage, but you must allow for our souls to continue informing their culture. You have dissected the struggle in you. Now you must define the struggle for all those who simply cannot understand. And on my thoughts of assimilation – your body can exist in harmony with whites without being threatened if they are allowed to see why it matters to them. Your skin is a textbook they never read as a child’s.

## COATES

(Jumping to his feet.)

But they do know this history! They were fed it with a silver spoon, in their big houses, and iron gates! *Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be ready for a history that isn’t white-washed.* You mentioned the movement, “Perhaps that was, is, the hope of the movement: to awaken the Dreamers, to rouse them to facts of what their need to be white, to talk like they are white, to think that they are white, which is to think that they are beyond the design flaws of humanity, has done to the world.” God damn BLUMENBACH!

## DU BOIS

(Standing a few feet away from Coates.)

Blumenbach.

## COATES

“Plunder has matured into habit and addiction; the people who could author the mechanized death of our ghettos, the mass rape of private prisons, then engineer their own forgetting, must inevitably plunder much more.”

## DU BOIS

(Du Bois closes the book for the first time in Coates’ visit.)

How does it feel to be a problem?



DU BOIS

“To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.”  
The body is death, and the spirit is life. I know I’m sounding redundant, but the promise of wealth is told in time. My body died on earth. Here in this place, between the world I know, and the promise I live for, my spirit is very much alive, waiting for the chapter that will allow me to go on to my promised land.

COATES

It is a strange sensation–

(Coates speaks to the whiteness opposite of DuBois.)

DU BOIS

a peculiar sensation,

(DuBois speaks to the whiteness opposite of Coates, while placing the book down.)

COATES & DU BOIS

“this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,  
(Both DuBois and Coates look at one another.)

measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro [COATES: black body]; two souls, **two** thoughts, *two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body*, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

COATES

Timeless words.

(Coates stretches, and looks at himself. DuBois walks upstage to his table. A spotlight shines on Coates as everything behind him fades to black. The scene changes back to the back corner table of the boisterous café with small tables and no Wi-Fi in Manhattan’s Morningside Heights.)

*How do I live free in this black body?* DuBois I have a question for you – DuBois! DuBois!

(Coates looks around the café. He looks out the window, and everything is moving. He takes a sip of coffee, closes up his laptop and walks off stage.)



**keeper***Robby Nadler, Georgia State University***Cast of Characters**

NATHANIEL/BOY:	13-16.
KEEPER:	30s. Handsome. Broad-shouldered. Gruff. A bear in a man's body.
DRIVER:	40s.
TEACHER:	50s.
MAN:	50s.
STUDENTS:	High school.

**Scene**

U.S.A.

**Time**

1930s.

## PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

*This play is a hybrid of live-action and pre-recorded footage. NATHANIEL delivers all lines to the audience. The rest of the production is displayed on three T.V./screens with each transition of location occurring on a different T.V./screen. All filmed scenes need to take their time as KEEPER will deliver his V.O. lines over the quiet moments filmed. While primary attention should be paid to the live dramatic elements, the filmed portions should be treated as slivers of insight (and ought to be filmed as such through indirect observation).*

*A SERIES OF SHOTS. NO SOUND.*

*(T.V. 1) Neighborhoods: the town NATHANIEL lives in comprises trailers and houses that all need a new coat of paint.*

*(T.V. 3) Town: Half the stores downtown are vacant, and the other half are going out of business.*

*(T.V. 2) Landscape: Dust and sand from the surrounding desert drops over town like a blanket. POV of camera with a dog in a front yard running up to attack. Dog pulls his metal link chain taut and barks.*

*All screens go black (Pause).*

*Simultaneously, all screens come on to reveal the inside of a living room decorated with religious fabric art, magazine cutouts, and torn wallpaper. A Lyric Studio C6 RADIO sits on a coffee table that is short in one leg (each screen broadcasts a section of the shot, i.e, T.V. 1 only depicts the stage-right portion. T.V. 2 should focus on the radio). By itself, the radio turns on and adjusts its frequency. "Nasty Man" plays in the background.*

*(T.V. 1) Living room: The sofa has cigarette burns in it and is disheveled as if someone has slept on it.*

*(T.V. 3) Kitchen: Dirty dishes are left under a dripping faucet.*

*(T.V. 1) Kitchen 2: Flies congregate on a bowl of overripe fruit.*

*(T.V. 3) Bathroom: A bathtub is filled with RED water, and something is swimming under the surface.*

*(T.V. 1) Hallway: Doors to bedrooms are ajar, but no one is inside.*

*(T.V. 3) Hallway 2: POV of camera shifts skyward as an ominous thumping from the ceiling emanates in front of the entrance to a pull-down attic.*

*All screens go blank (Beat).*

*Stage lights up. Song still plays.*

*(T.V.s 1 and 2) Children of various ages wait at a bus stop. NATHANIEL enters from stage-right and stands between T.V. 1 and 2. He wears a striped shirt and long shorts. A pair of BINOCULARS hang around his neck. No one pays him attention.*

*(T.V. 3) A BEIGE school bus shows up. The children climb on board (exiting the shot on T.V.s 1 and 2), and the bus drives off. (T.V. 3) A few children from inside the bus see him and make faces.*

*NATHANIEL walks off stage. Black out.*

*All screens switch over to show NATHANIEL, in various walking scenes, until he is at a road leading to the desert (T.V. 3). He keeps walking.*

*(T.V.1) NATHANIEL walks along the highway. Cars pass sporadically. Behind him a "Welcome to Arizona" sign stands. NATHANIEL travels through deserts, mountains, plains, etc. with scenes alternating on different screens. His clothes become dirtier and torn. Song ends and screens go blank.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

For his thirteenth birthday, Nathaniel Albert Goedicke gave himself the present he wanted for as long as he had the ability to want things by running away from home and giving himself to the lighthouse keeper.

*(T.V. 3) A Lincoln KB Victoria Coupe drives up from behind NATHANIEL and stops next to the boy. Stage lights up. NATHANIEL stands on stage and looks at the car for a moment, then "wanders in." He should be standing in front of T.V. 1.*

*(T.V. 2) DRIVER sits behind the wheel. He wears RED driving gloves. Camera angle should be filmed head-on such that it looks as if NATHANIEL is "sitting" next to DRIVER in the car. All of DRIVER'S dialogue scenes will be captured on this screen.*

*(T.V. 3) The Lincoln drives down the highway.*

DRIVER (P.R)

This is an odd place for a kid to be, don't ya think?

*NATHANIEL shrugs.*

DRIVER (P.R)

Don't you have school or something to be at? Where's ya Ma?

*NATHANIEL looks down at the space between his legs and might be crying. The DRIVER adjusts his mirrors.*

DRIVER (P.R)

So where is it you're heading to? Brownsville? Clarabelle? Travis City?

*NATHANIEL shrugs again.*

DRIVER (P.R)

What's wrong with you, boy? If you want something in this life, you have to ask for it by name.

Can't ya talk?

*NATHANIEL sinks his head again and tosses it side-to-side. They drive in silence for a bit. What*

*appears to be blood oozes from inside DRIVER's gloves.*

DRIVER (P.R)

Now ain't no shame in that. Shit, your only problem is that you weren't born a woman.

*Blackout and all screens go blank (Pause).*

*(T.V. 1) DRIVER drops NATHANIEL off on a highway near the ocean.*

*(T.V. 3) When NATHANIEL closes the passenger door, a bloody hand print is on the outside of the window. DRIVER drives off.*

*Stage lights up. NATHANIEL squints to see something in the distance.*

*(T.V. 2) He walks toward it while T.V.s 1 and 3 go blank.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

It took him almost three months to walk and hitchhike from the small town in Arizona he lived in to the coast of Maine.

*All screens show NATHANIEL walking past different lighthouses. On stage, NATHANIEL peers through his binoculars and drops his head in disappointment. Scenes should continue well after NATHANIEL exits the stage. Lights out.*

*Stage lights up.*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Even then, it took him another month until he found a lighthouse with a green flag, the symbol for a free keeper, waving atop. It was difficult to knock because his hands were badly sunburned, but there was no doorbell.

*NATHANIEL appears gaunt. His clothes are tatters. With his binoculars, he sees (T.V 3) a lighthouse with a GREEN FLAG atop of it waving in the breeze. He smiles and limps to the (T.V. 2) door. (T.V. 1) Large waves crash into the rocky shore.*

*(Still T.V. 2) NATHANIEL's fist knocks and waits. KEEPER answers. Facing the audience as if they are KEEPER, NATHANIEL offers his arms. (Still T.V. 2) KEEPER looks at him with confusion.*

NATHANIEL

I've come to give myself to you

KEEPER (V.O.)

And with those words, the boy collapsed under the lintel.

*Stage lights up. NATHANIEL wakes up naked in a small bed. He finds a set of clothes folded on a nightstand. They are too big for him, but they are better than his ragged, old set. As he puts them on, the audience watches (T.V. 1) NATHANIEL in a POV shot find the bathroom. He sees his face in the mirror, the first time he has seen himself since Arizona. He runs the tap; the water rushes out cold and RED before turning clear. He furiously paws at his face. It will take a week to get off all the dirt. Over the sound of the faucet, he hears "Love Me or Leave Me" on a radio.*

*(T.V. 3) NATHANIEL follows the music from the bathroom to the kitchen, which takes him down, slowly, the lighthouse's serpentine staircase at its core.*

*Blackout (Pause).*

*Stage lights up. The same kitchen table scene being broadcast from all three screens is also constructed center-stage (as with NATHANIEL's house, each screen on shows a section of the entire shot. KEEPER is contained to T.V. 3)*

*KEEPER sits at a table, eating an orange— segment by segment— with a paring knife, and reading a newspaper. Without looking up from the newspaper, KEEPER addresses NATHANIEL.*

KEEPER (P.R.)

Go back home.

*NATHANIEL, standing stage-right, shakes his head.*

KEEPER (P.R.) (CONT'D)

You need to go back home. We can call your parents from town.

*NATHANIEL shakes his head.*

KEEPER (P.R.) (CONT'D)

This isn't a game, kid. You need to leave.

*NATHANIEL shakes his head. Before KEEPER can speak,*

NATHANIEL

You have to keep me. You turned me away three times, and I've refused to leave. You have to. You put up the green flag. It's the code.

*KEEPER finally looks up from his newspaper.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

The keeper turned red and put his hands over his face as it slowly dawned on him what had just transpired. The code was meant for women, and he had hoisted the flag hoping for a wife. He wasn't picky at this point. Any woman would do. But a boy? He had never heard of a man— much less a boy— invoking the code, but there was nothing stipulated in the code to allow him to turn the boy away.

*NATHANIEL approaches the table on stage with hesitation, one hand held onto his pants to keep them from falling. The FRUIT BOWL mesmerizes him.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

He looked at the bowl of fruit: oranges, bananas, apples— fruit that had once bored him with their ubiquitous presence in the kitchen back home— longing for a piece. He hadn't eaten much on his journey.

*KEEPER sees the boy staring at the fruit and nods. NATHANIEL reaches for a RED apple in one hand, a GREEN in the other, and alternates colors with each bite. NATHANIEL eats in silence for a short while,*

KEEPER (P.R.)

(SOFTLY)

You'll go to school.

*NATHANIEL stops his meal to consider this point.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

Nathaniel hadn't considered this. He only planned so far as to what would happen once he reached the lighthouse. Possibly he would do some light, spousal chores, but for the most part he envisioned himself hand-in-hand with the keeper as they spent their days looking at the ocean. Still, the demand was reasonable, and according to the code, all reasonable demands had to be met in order to stay at the lighthouse.

*The boy nods.*

KEEPER (P.R.)

You'll also work. This job is meant for two people, for a family. I can't afford to take on an extra person and not have you contribute.

*Blackout and all screens go blank.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

Perhaps the juices from the Granny Smith hit him, or perhaps it was the word “family” referring to him. Nathaniel’s lips puckered and, again, he nodded.

*A school bell rings.*

*Stage lights up. BOY, now sixteen, sits in a desk toward the back of the stage. (T.V. 1) TEACHER begins to take attendance. (T.V.s 2 and 3) Students respond when called, alternating the screens when a new name is read. These images should continue (silently) during KEEPER (V.O.).*

TEACHER (P.R.)

Martha Abramson?

STUDENT (P.R.)

Present.

TEACHER (P.R.)

Clara Collar?

STUDENT 2 (P.R.)

Present.

TEACHER (P.R.)

Douglas Cook....

KEEPER (V.O.)

But in the years that followed, the boy lost his smile. School was rough. He didn’t do poorly, but no one spoke to him. Not even the teachers.

TEACHER (P.R.)

Rebecca Ferguson?

STUDENT 3 (P.R.)

Present.

*TEACHER’s voice stops like the effect of heart that stops beating. She looks up from her roll sheet and out into the sea of students. BOY raises his hand from the back of the stage. TEACHER sees this and returns to the roster. POV of TEACHER checking off BOY’s name.*

TEACHER (P.R.)

Jacob Henry?

*Blackout and screens go blank. NATHANIEL exits stage.*

*(T.V. 2) BOY walks down the hallways of the school, which blur into the sidewalks of the town,*



*which blur into the aisles of a drugstore.*

*(T.V.s 1 and 3) Everywhere he goes, people stop their conversations as he passes and stare at him toward T.V. 2. BOY hangs his head and does not acknowledge the town around him. This entire sequence of shots loops to give the impression of many days passing.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

News that the boy had been the one who had taken the lighthouse keeper's code spread through town, and everyone sympathized with the keeper, who was bound to such an unfortunate coupling. In fact, no one in town spoke to the boy. He knew that they wanted to if only to say the meanest things to his face, that they probably did say those things when he wasn't around, but, according to the code, it was also forbidden for the town the keeper served to speak ill of the code taker.

*All screens switch over to a scene of a general store (each screen captures a different perspective of the shot with BOY being contained to T.V. 2). Townspeople engage in conversation and move about the store. BOY walks in, and the store goes dead. He hands a list to MAN stationed behind the counter and waits while those around him stare/lose themselves in the rest of the store.*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

After school, the boy would go through town on foot to buy supplies the keeper wrote on a list and left him every morning on the kitchen table. There was no refrigerator in the lighthouse, so food had to be bought daily. He also bought soaps, kerosene, rope... an endless restock to keep the lighthouse going. Careful not to antagonize anyone in town as he did his duties, the boy stopped speaking entirely.

*(T.V. 1) MAN begins to ring up the items. A sharp PING is heard after every input.*

*(T.V. 2) BOY sets a coupon for fifty cents off detergent on the counter. (T.V. 1) The man paws it off the counter behind him. The item is rung up at full price.*

*(T.V. 3). A substance that could be blood begins to coat the inside of the cash register's window. More and more spreads with each ping.*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He developed an intricate sign language of pointing to express his needs and managed to find answers to his questions on things such as cash register displays. What he couldn't convey—say a can of corn advertised cheaper on the store's window than what he was charged—he ignored as life's small battles not worth waging.

*Stage lights up. BOY sets the shopping bags down on the kitchen table, center-stage, and begins to unload them through the entirety of the scene.*

*(T.V.1) BOY sprints up the stairs to the lantern room.*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Because autumn was stirring, the days were shrinking. It didn't leave the boy with much time to prepare...

*(Sharp static sounds like a radio losing frequency.)*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

...was his favorite time of the day.

*(Static)*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

For all the silence that...

*(Static)*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

... the quiet high above the town, his face reflected over the background of sky and sea in the large mirrors....

*(Static)*

*(T.V. 3) BOY cleans the mirrors of the lighthouse's lantern with the GREEN FLAG that has been worn through as a rag.*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

... it was in those moments that he turned around to the expanse that went on past what he could see, and in that unknown he smiled to himself with the knowledge that in it lay whatever this life would send out to reach him. There was nothing of that possibility in the desert he came from.

*(T.V. 1) KEEPER rises from bed naked while (T.V. 3) NATHANIEL lays out all the materials and equipment for the night's watch. He stops to indicate he hears a sound.*

KEEPER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And then he would hear the keeper below turn on the shower. The only interaction the boy had with the keeper over the years would be if they squeezed past each other on the narrow stairs as the keeper began his shift and the boy ended his duties. The chances of this happening were small, but he greatly...

*(Violent static and then the sound of a bulb burning out; afterward, all diegetic sounds on screens are muted until further noted. Characters should take great precaution to maintain silence in the real world.)*



*Blackout and all screens go blank.*

*(T.V. 3) BOY carries down the lighthouse stairs a dirty dish and utensils to the kitchen. He leaves them in the sink and opens a book to begin his studies. A CLOCK on the wall reveals the time to be 7:00 P.M.*

*(T.V. 2) At 9:00 P.M., BOY closes his books and prepares a large meal. He serves himself a plate of the food and leaves the rest on the wood stove.*

*(T.V. 1) The bedroom CLOCK shows the time to be after 10:00 P.M. The bed in the room is unmade. BOY strips off his clothes and collapses.*

*(T.V. 3) KEEPER stands on the lantern room catwalk looking out on the ocean that pulsates with a GREEN beam of light rotating on it. He heads to the staircase.*

*(T.V. 2) KEEPER serves himself the rest of the prepared food on the once dirty but now cleaned plate. In lieu of the plate, he leaves a list of new things to buy. He moves back to the staircase.*

*(T.V. 1) BOY wakes up, dutifully makes the bed, and then inches into the bathroom. As he does, the bedroom CLOCK behind him reads 5:00 A.M. A RED substance spreads from the ticking second hand.*

*(T.V. 3) In the kitchen, BOY sees the list and folds it into his pocket. Next, he prepares another large meal. When he is done, he eats a small plate for breakfast and scoops some food in wax paper for lunch. Again, a large share of the food is left over for KEEPER.*

*(T.V. 2) KEEPER looks out at the ocean from the lantern room. It is still dark enough so that the rotating RED light can be seen thrown against the water. He turns to the staircase to indicate he hears a sound.*

*(T.V. 1) BOY closes the lighthouse front door and walks with a book bag away from the lighthouse.*

*(T.V. 3) KEEPER snuffs the flame in the lantern and heads downstairs. Smoke rises.*

*All screens switch over to a repetition of BOY's days at school, the general store, and the*

*lighthouse (there is no order to this, and each screen offers the audience a different vantage of the routine. Throughout it all, BOY never sees KEEPER (though elements of KEEPER pop into the shots). BOY's clothes change to indicate new weather. One shot involves his heavy brown bag carried from the general store breaking at the bottom and spilling its contents onto the snow. Another shot features BOY standing on scaffolding to repaint the lighthouse during fierce winds. Eventually, all these images blur and stretch, speed up and slow down. A GREEN light is drained from the images and all scenes in the montage appear in RED by end. Sequence should last at least five minutes.*

*Blackout and all screens blank (Pause).*

*Stage lights up. The entire kitchen is on stage. BOY throws wood into the stove and sets a frying pan on top of it. Near the window, he cuts onions, mushrooms, and peppers. Halfway through a white onion, he stops his chopping. (T.V. 1) POV of the camera shows one of the middle layers is RED. He looks out at the ocean for a while. Tears form in his eyes. He raises the large cutting KNIFE and gazes into his reflection set across the blade. (T.V. 3) BOY's POV shows his mouth tremble and spit out a word that is never heard.*

*(T.V. 1) A large wave crashes onto the beach. BOY repeats the word.*

*(T.V. 1) A flock of gulls take off for the sky.*

BOY  
(SCREAMING, OVER and OVER)

Nathaniel!

*(T.V. 2) KEEPER's hand, polishing the lens case for the lantern, stops mid-wipe.*

*(Static and the sound of wires being fused followed by a clear signal; afterward all sound is restored.)*

KEEPER (V.O.)

He hadn't heard the keeper's voice since the day the demands were set, and the voices he did hear were never talking to him. He had become a lighthouse amongst ships—in view of the traffic of the world but kept apart. And whatever happiness that was supposed to reach him, with each day he became more certain it had already sank to the sea's bottom. Having not heard his own voice in years, the boy began to call out his

his name to remember what is sounded like. It only made him cry harder.

*BOY returns to his duties by breaking three eggs into a frying pan already SIZZLING with vegetables and ham. (T.V. 1) The albumin comes out RED.*

*(T.V. 3) POV of camera focuses on the radio in the kitchen, which turns on and scans for a signal on its own. "Empty Bed Blues" plays.*

*All screens go blank.*

*KEEPER appears on stage and stalks his way to NATHANIEL.*

KEEPER  
(TO NATHANIEL)

Shhhhhhh.

*KEEPER pulls NATHANIEL tightly to him, one arm wrapped around NATHANIEL's torso and the other forcing NATHANIEL's gaze skyward. This is both violent and kind, sexual and paternal. Both now face the audience.*

(TO AUDIENCE)

At first the boy is not sure if it is the pan or someone else making the noise, but before he can turn around, the strong grip of the keeper takes him with one arm close to the keeper's chest and covers the boy's eyes with the other. Nathaniel stands still. With the arm over his eyes, the force of the Keeper tilts the boy's head upwards, exposing neck. They stand like this in silence while Nathaniel breathes deeply for just longer than it feels comfortable to watch.

Even though the keeper drops the arm holding Nathaniel's body to his, Nathaniel doesn't attempt to run. The keeper reaches behind him with his free arm. Whatever end is coming seems reasonable.

*BLACKOUT.*

*Song still plays.*

KEEPER (V.O.)

Of course Nathaniel couldn't see it, but if he could, he would've seen the long albatross feather the keeper pulled from the part of him tucked in the back of his pants. Nathaniel could only tell it was soft and seemingly endless in length, and the keeper slowly drew the feather back and forth across the boy's neck, slowly let the boy's head relax into the keeper's chest and let the boy go.



# Transmission: A play in one act

*Andie Weaver, Young Harris College*

## CHARACTERS

- EIRA 20 years old. She enjoys knitting and candles. She is ambivalent towards being warm, but she loves to warm up.
- GALE 21. Gale is extroverted. She has an affinity for reading and always seems as though she just stepped off the stage at a concert. She is a fire in a damp cave.
- RADIO A vintage radio. It sits on the bookshelf, the focal point of the set. It watches, but it isn't quite threatening, although something about it seems to teeter on the threshold of menace.

## SETTING

A dorm room and a snowy college yard.

## TIME

2015

## SCENE 1

*A box nearly the size of a room, with an opening facing the audience, sits stage left. Inside, it is decorated like a dorm room, a life-sized diorama. The outer walls are white. The inner walls are white, too, but covered in posters of Basquiat paintings, popular movies, papercut art done by EIRA, personal pictures, and Christmas lights. The two beds in the room have been pushed together against one wall, and a bookshelf stands beside them. The bookshelf is packed with books, as well as an array of small knick-knacks. Among these are a knitting set and a candle. A RADIO sits on the middle shelf. On the other side of the bookshelf is a window. There is a door on either side of the box. The one on stage left leads to the BATHROOM, and the one on stage right leads OUTSIDE.*

*Stage right is an empty college lawn with a bench.*

*Along the back of the stage, crossing from stage left to stage right (even behind the box), is a white screen. Different scenes will be projected onto the screen throughout the play, but currently, there is a black background interrupted by lighted windows and street lamps. The lights range in shades of blues, whites, and oranges. They all float at different levels, the street lamps occasionally forming a row, the windows occasionally forming an irregular checkerboard. They represent different buildings and lighted areas around the campus. You cannot see the ground or the buildings, only the lights. It's as if the world is entirely composed of these lights in the blackness. They are above, below, and all around you, but so is the blackness.*

*AT RISE: EIRA and GALE lie cuddling in their pajamas on the bed. GALE appears to be sleeping, but EIRA stares at the ceiling. She shifts occasionally, although she tries not to disturb her girlfriend. The RADIO is on.*

## RADIO:

...a cold front coming in from the west. A predicted snowfall for Marlowe, Raymond, and Houston counties. As many as six inches predicted to hit the Marlow-Raymond area tomorrow. Be

careful out there, folks! We'll have the updated list of closings for you tomorrow, but until now, let's move on to our report on...

*Mist begins to flood in from stage right. It fills the floor of the lawn, obscuring the lights. The scene is only a white blur, now. Nothing in the world is real except for the box, illuminated by the Christmas lights. If Eira tried to pierce through the ceiling or the doors to escape her claustrophobia, she would find nothing, or maybe she would suffocate. The white mist continues to press the stage into nothingness around the diorama.*

GALE stirs. She opens her eyes slightly.

GALE:

Snow? (EIRA nods. GALE adopts a pathetically celebratory demeanor and throws her hand up in the air.) No school! (Her hand flops back down. She is asleep again. That was quick.)

EIRA:

You're asleep? Again? (GALE does not respond. EIRA speaks with a tone of playful antagonism.) What if there's actually school tomorrow? You won't be awake for me to tell you. (Still just silence.) You'll miss it. Then you'll fail. Then you'll flunk out. (GALE begins to snore loudly, like turning the volume up. She is messing with EIRA.) Then you'll get pregnant and I'll have to drop out of school and start work to support you and our children. I can't get a job with an art degree. I'd have to be a hooker. Do you want me to be a hooker, Gale? (GALE snores even louder, but devolves into laughter. She kisses EIRA, then falls back asleep. EIRA smiles, but then stares back up at the ceiling.)

RADIO:

...large amounts of snow coming your way, folks...something is coming...something is coming... something is coming...

BLACKOUT.

## SCENE 2

*AT RISE: The mist is gone, except a blanket of it on the lawn. On the projector is a scene of snowy trees and buildings reminiscent of a papercut illustration. EIRA sits on her bed, covered in a knitted blanket, her laptop perched on her legs. A lit candle burns on the bookshelf. She raises her hands to the keyboard, holds them there for a few seconds, then drops them to her sides. She stares at the ceiling. Silence.*

*The door bursts open. GALE stands in the doorway in snow gear. She shakes snow off onto the floor.*

GALE:

You gonna sit in here doing work, all day?

EIRA:

I really have to write this essay. It's due in two days.

GALE:

Eira, it's a snow day! Have some fun. (GALE looks at something on the bookshelf, and it seems to strike her.) Did you take your meds this morning?

EIRA:  
Shit.

*GALE moves to the bookshelf, grabs a bottle of pills, and tosses them to EIRA. EIRA takes one.*

EIRA:  
*(Silent for a moment, then, quietly)* I think I'm quitting these.

GALE:  
*(Stops.)* Are you kidding?

EIRA:  
Gale, I'd really like it if you wouldn't do that right now.

GALE:  
Do what?

EIRA:  
The whole skeptical thing.

GALE:  
I'm sorry. But I just...do you really think you're doing well enough to quit?

EIRA:  
I think I will be, once I quit.

GALE:  
Eira...

EIRA:  
Gale?

GALE:  
I...I just don't know if that's, like, how it works. Is it? I mean, you know more about it than me, so stop me if I'm –

EIRA:  
You are. *(Pause.)* Please, Gale, I just need you to support me in this.

GALE:  
*(Hesitant)* Okay. *(Pause.)* What's your essay about?

EIRA: Nothing, yet.

GALE:  
Oh. *(Another pause.)* You should come hang out outside. It's beautiful out there.



EIRA:  
I wish I could. (*Silence.*)

GALE:  
You need to set an alarm for when you...nevermind.

EIRA:  
What were you going to say?

GALE:  
Nevermind. I forgot you decided to... Nevermind. I'm sorry.

EIRA:  
Why do you want me to be on meds so badly? It's not your illness.

GALE starts a sentence, then stops it. She starts another one and stops it, too.

EIRA:  
(*Tired*) I don't want to talk about this. How's the snow?

GALE:  
(*Adjusting the volume on the radio*) The snow is beautiful. Chad knocked me right in the face with a snowball.

EIRA:  
Fun.

GALE:  
Yeah. Almost as fun as last year, when Lauren fell face-first into the snowman. (*Silence.*)

GALE:  
Will you at least come outside for a few minutes?

EIRA:  
If I take a break at all, it will be for a sculpture.

GALE:  
But there's snowwww.

EIRA:  
Airy water. Who doesn't love it? (*GALE looks hurt.*)

GALE:  
I think it would be good for you to get out. And...there's snowwwwww.

EIRA:  
I'm going to make a sculpture.

GALE sighs.

GALE:

Will you at least come to lunch?

EIRA:

I don't really feel like it right now.

GALE:

I'll bring you something. Okay?

EIRA:

Thanks, but no thanks.

GALE:

*(Whipping around.)* What's wrong today?

EIRA:

I just have a lot on my plate, okay, Gale? I'm not hungry and I hate the snow. *(Silence.)*

EIRA:

I'm sorry.

GALE:

*(She is indignant at first, but softens, placing a hand on EIRA's shoulder)* I get it. What's your sculpture gonna look like? Another tree one?

EIRA:

I'm not sure yet.

GALE:

*(Kissing EIRA on the cheek)* I'll bring you back food.

*EIRA nods as GALE exits to the lawn. She treads through the snow and exits stage right as EIRA looks around. She gets up and begins searching through a pile of clothes on the floor next to the bed. She spots something under the bed that strikes her and crawls underneath, leaving only her bottom half visible. She pulls it out, examines it, and then flops back onto the bed with it. She grabs an X-Acto knife from the bookshelf and opens the book to a random page. She cuts at it as the lights dim, and the candle remains lit. BLACKOUT.*

### SCENE 3

*AT RISE: The mist remains on stage right. GALE treads across it with a to-go box. EIRA sits in their room, admiring a small paper sculpture of abstract lines. GALE opens the door.*

GALE:

Oooh, what's that?

GALE:  
Oooh, what's that?

EIRA:  
My latest therapy session.

GALE:  
It's beautiful! (*She kisses EIRA on the cheek and hands her the to-go box. EIRA takes it tentatively and stares at it.*) I was talking with Chad about maybe doing a music project.

EIRA:  
A music project?

GALE:  
Yeah, like how he has a band? He wants me on backup vocals for one of the songs!

EIRA:  
That's really cool, Gale. I'm really excited for you – I mean that.

GALE:  
Thanks! (*Examining the sculpture*) So what did you make this out of?

EIRA:  
Some book I found under the bed.

GALE:  
(*A moment of hesitation*) Wait, what?

EIRA:  
A book I found under the bed?

GALE:  
What book?

EIRA:  
It just said COMMUNICATIONS on the side. I figured it was a used textbook you didn't want.

GALE:  
Oh, no.

EIRA:  
Wait, what? 'Oh no' what? We keep the ones we don't want anymore under the bed, right?

GALE:  
Shit. I needed that one. It must have fallen under there when I put my bag down the other day!

EIRA:  
Gale!

GALE:

Come on, Eira, can't you at least apologize?

EIRA:

Apologize for an accident?

GALE:

Yes!

EIRA:

I'm sorry that you left your book under the bed. (*GALE scoffs and turns away, placing her head in her hands.*) What?

GALE:

That doesn't mean anything. You don't get to apologize for what I did, Eira. Apologize for what you did. That's all I want.

EIRA:

I didn't do anything.

GALE:

Oh, my god, I have an essay due next week and I needed that...oh my god.

EIRA:

Okay. (*Beat.*) I'm sorry that I cut up your book.

GALE:

(*Still lamenting*) I was going to reread that this break.

EIRA:

I said I was sorry. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry for being an asshole about it in the first place. I really am.

GALE:

(*Eyeing the sculpture, first with pain, but then with resolution.*) Your sculpture is beautiful.

EIRA:

Thank you. I got the sides wrong, though.

GALE:

It looks. . .fine.

*Suddenly, the wind picks up. More fog rolls in from stage right. It envelops the papercut trees and curls its way around the diorama again. GALE turns on the radio.*

RADIO:

...potentially dangerous conditions for Marlowe. Luckily, the university campus is closed today, as well as most of the businesses around the area. Be safe, folks!

GALE:  
Great.

EIRA:  
Well. At least now we don't have to argue over my going outside.

*GALE turns to her.*

GALE:  
Jesus, Eira. Really?

EIRA:  
What?

GALE:  
You've been a jerk, today.

EIRA:  
Excuse me?

GALE:  
I said you've been a jerk, today.

EIRA:  
I...okay.

*Both are silent. EIRA picks up her laptop again and begins typing. She hits backspace frequently. She tries to maintain an air of stoic and collected anger, but her pain and disappointment in herself is visible on her face. GALE moves over to the candle and lights it. She stands, facing the bookshelf for a moment. She stares at EIRA for a while before speaking again.*

GALE:  
Do you remember last winter? (*EIRA continues to stare ahead at her laptop.*) Do you remember walking with me around campus and then sitting on the bench together? (*No response. GALE continues.*) We'd just started dating. Do you remember what you promised me? (*EIRA is trying even harder to remain semi-composed.*) Do you remember what I wrote on your arm? It was the weekend after you...(*She moves on.*) You said you felt useless and stuff. I wrote, "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future." That *Lord of the Rings* quote. I had already told you about Jen, then, and all the shit she did to me. Look, Eira, I'm not...I'm not saying you're doing the same stuff that Jen did. You're not manipulative or abusive or anything. I know this is unusual for you and I appreciate that, but I'm just...you said, "I won't let that stuff..." the depression and stuff... "affect how I treat you." You promised me that. And, like...I mean...can you see what I'm saying?

*EIRA flops backward onto her pillow, still attempting to maintain the stoic front. She does not respond, nor does she look at GALE. GALE stares at her, waiting for a response. When she doesn't get one, she nods, turns, and heads out the door. She disappears into the suffocating white – all we see of her is a silhouette – and EXITS stage right. EIRA turns her head to the door only after it's shut. The lights dim, but the candle stays lit.*

RADIO:

...officially classified as a blizzard...It's like the apocalypse, out there, folks! Everybody stay safe – what is it, the uh, joke about the bread and milk? Well, I hope you in the Marlow-Raymond area have already gotten yours – lots of wind to come your way. It's advisable to stay inside, as we will be witnessing decreasing visibility as the evening wears on. There's practically nothing out there – just snow and wind pressing down onto this room, this one room – that's all there is, this room. Time doesn't exist, and the sky is being eaten alive by the snow. Nothing and no one outside this box exists. Nothing you do will change that. No one can hear you. If you were to burst through the ceiling or the doors in a desperate attempt to escape the claustrophobia or find a loved one, you would instead find nothing. Perhaps you would even suffocate. The white mist obscures all lights, all sound, and all familiarity.

BLACKOUT.

#### SCENE 4

*The mist still encompasses the stage. EIRA sits on her floor, staring at the candle, which she has set in front of her. She checks her phone.*

EIRA:

Gale, where are you?

RADIO:

No one but you is anywhere. You are alone in this room and in the world. It's heavy, out there.

*EIRA stares at the radio, then checks her phone with more urgency.*

EIRA:

Gale, please...I'm hearing things.

RADIO:

...something is coming...something is coming...something is coming...

*EIRA stares at the radio again, then around the room, even at the ceiling. She looks very lost.*

RADIO:

Nothing exists beyond these walls. Just snow and white mist and suffocation. It's pressing down, and you can sure feel it. Don't leave your pets outside!

EIRA:

God, can you at least be less cryptic?

RADIO:

How are you going to get out of here?

EIRA:

What?

RADIO:

Out. Out of here. How will you get out? There's no way out.

EIRA:

There's a door like right there.

RADIO:

But beyond it, there's only white. There is nothing.

EIRA:

It's just a blizzard, dude.

RADIO:

Where is she?

EIRA:

Gale?

RADIO:

Where has she gone? Why can't you hear her? She's in the abyss.

EIRA:

Thanks, Radio. I can always count on you when I feel down.

RADIO:

You'll suffocate out there, folks. Don't try this at home!

EIRA:

What if I threw you out there?

The RADIO is silent for a moment.

RADIO:

I don't appreciate that.

EIRA:

What do you appreciate? You're a radio. Why is this happening to me? Gale, please come back...

RADIO:

You know what I want.

EIRA:

I really don't. *(In a frantic, sing-songy voice, looking at the door and at her phone again)* What is happening to me?

*EIRA tries to call GALE. GALE does not pick up. EIRA throws her phone down.*

EIRA:  
Goddammit, Gale!

RADIO:  
...something is coming...something is coming...something is coming...

EIRA:  
That's great. I'm super happy for you.

RADIO:  
In the thrift store.

EIRA:  
What?

RADIO:  
In the thrift store.

EIRA:  
Are you talking about the thrift store where I got you?

RADIO:  
In the thrift store.

EIRA:  
Gale and I took that shitty car with the broken radio to a concert during a tornado watch. We had to buy you before we left. That was...really dumb.

RADIO:  
I don't say this a lot, but it'd be pretty dumb to try and drive out there tonight, folks! Keep your loved ones close and indoors!

EIRA scowls at it.

RADIO:  
Now would be a great time to wrestle with yourselves – resolve those inner conflicts, figure out who you really are. Who are you? Can you tell? Can you see it through all the snow? Through all the nothingness?

EIRA:  
Seriously?

RADIO:  
Everything is serious. You're serious about warming up. You can't warm up unless you're cold first. You knit, and you knit, and you try to block out the cold, but you can't get warm.

*EIRA sticks her fingers in her ears.*



RADIO:

Where is she? You know what I want, Eira. I know what you want.

EIRA:

Then please, for the love of God, tell me.

The RADIO devolves into static. EIRA switches it off. She lies on her bed and stares at the ceiling as the lights go dim. The candle remains lit in the middle of the floor.

BLACKOUT.

### SCENE 5

*AT RISE: The mist is, for the most part, gone. The lawn is illuminated, covered in a snowy blanket. The paper cut-out trees are back on the projector. The lights are dim in the diorama. The candle is still lit.*

*GALE sits on the bench, reading. She stops every once in a while to stare off into space, until she shakes it off and refocuses. Eventually, she decides to check her phone.*

GALE:

Jesus, Eira. 5 messages?

*(She opens them. The lights come up in the diorama and EIRA sits up in her bed, facing the audience, looking very upset. She begins to speak the messages out loud, but the voice from the RADIO comes out of her mouth.)*

"Are you safe?"

"Can you text me back?"

"Gale."

"I'm really sorry for not talking to you about today. And for lashing out at you. I know I promised you I wouldn't do that. Please just respond saying you're alright? I'm worried about the storm."

"Gale?"

GALE:

Storm? *(She gathers her things, sighing.)* Ugh. Are you serious? *(Pause. She stands.)* Hold on, Eira.

*The lights dim on GALE's side of the stage. They remain up on EIRA'S. EIRA walks over to the RADIO and switches it back on.*

RADIO:

And we're back, folks! Everybody alive, out there? Of course not. The sky is being eaten alive by... something...is coming...something is coming...some-

*EIRA switches the RADIO off. She opens the curtains and checks the window, expecting to see the blizzard outside. Instead, she sees a flurry of snow and the papercut trees. She steps back, confused.*

EIRA:

But I thought...

*She switches the radio back on.*

RADIO:

...something is coming...

EIRA:

You said there was a blizzard. There's not a blizzard.

RADIO:

...blizzard conditions...decreased visibility...

EIRA:

Look, you weird fucking existential radio, spill it!

RADIO:

...more on that later, but for now, we have a national forecast...

EIRA:

Goddammit. (*She switches it off. She puts on her coat and boots and opens the door. Standing in front of it is GALE, carrying her stuff. She was about to knock.*) Gale.

GALE:

You okay?

EIRA:

Are you?

GALE:

Don't evade my question. (*Softening*) Yes, I'm fine.

EIRA:

I'm really sorry, Gale.

GALE:

I know. I'm...really sorry, too. I shouldn't have blown up about the book thing. It really was an accident.

EIRA:

You don't have anything to apologize for. I mean, thank you for apologizing, but...I've been pretty awful today. I'm sorry, Gale. I do appreciate you trying to cheer me up. It...means a lot. I don't want to be another Jen.

*GALE steps inside. She shakes the snow off her boots, removes her wet outerwear and socks, and sits on the bed.*

GALE:

What was that about a storm?

EIRA:  
The...the radio said...I thought...nevermind.

GALE:  
Are you okay?

EIRA:  
I think so. (*She switches the radio on.*)

RADIO:  
...flurries coming your way this evening. Temperatures in the low thirties to upper twenties – get that bread and milk, folks! (*Cheesy laugh.*) Now for your five-day forecast...

EIRA:  
I'm going to set an alarm for tomorrow morning. (*GALE stares at her.*) So I remember my medicine.

GALE:  
You gonna call the doctor about quitting?

EIRA:  
No.

(*Awkward silence.*)

GALE:  
Because, like, I support you if you do. I think it's–

EIRA:  
Gale, I'm not quitting.

GALE:  
Okay.

*They are together for a moment, and it is quiet. EIRA moves close to GALE, drifting near her for a moment, and then they embrace. A kiss. The lights dim. The candle remains lit.*

RADIO:  
...these words from our Weather Survival Experts: If you get wet out in the snow and feel the beginnings of frostbite setting in, remove the wet item of clothing. This is why wearing layers in the snow is ideal. It is essential that you're able to take off a wet sock or shirt and still have enough coverage to stay warm, as the moisture will start to cool your body, increasing your risk of frostbite. It may feel cold when you take off that wet glove, but remember – you have to cool down to warm up!

*BLACKOUT.*









there is no  
greater agony  
than bearing an  
untold **story**  
inside you.

- maya angelou



## Francis Jones Public Library

*Stacha Diehl, Young Harris College*

I get away with a lot of shit. I like stashing all these different books under my desk. They're mostly books about Colorado and Alaska, places with snow and life. Since the summers here range from wishing you were dead, to actually being dead, I like to imagine a blustery palace to soothe the heat. I work here, so the books aren't technically stolen, plus I can just mark them down in inventory as "missing," then blame the disappearance on the homeless men that'll come in for air conditioning.

I'm an educated guy. I don't have time to read romance novels like some of the women that come here. They always walk in wearing their Gap sweaters and just stare longingly at the covers, as if that long haired man will jump off the cover and pounce on them. Honestly, I know how sad they are. They're just stuck living their boring lives and they don't even try to read what I read. I read philosophy and adventures. Like I said, I'm an educated guy.

My office space is the furthest from the front desk. I requested that particular spot so that I can leave whenever, or take naps. I think my boss knows I like to sneak out, but she'd never question me. Today, she is hanging out near my desk more often than usual. She'll do that occasionally. She always wears these super tight dresses in that old lady cheetah pattern that don't match her flat, fried-orange hair. She walks up to me swinging one of those keychains that the library hands out for free around her long skinny fingers. It wouldn't surprise me if there were long red nails on the tips of those fingers, but today she went for a subdued peach. Not her style.

"New girl's coming in today, Brian," she said in a thick voice. I wasn't sure why she had to come in here just to tell me that, especially because I was nervous she'd see all the Red Bull cans on the floor that had mysteriously missed the trashcan. Then, she added that this new girl would have to share my desk space. She looked me up and down and said to grab a chair from the basement while she briefed me on the newest employee of the Francis Jones Public Library.

My boss opened the door to the damp basement, then she bent over real far to fix her sandal, even though the strap probably wasn't even messed up. This caused the cheetah print to fade as the dress tightened around her ass. Women just dig me, I guess. I had that watered down Brad Pitt look going for me. On our way downstairs, she told me this new girl was hired out of good connections. Apparently her dad is friends with one of the guys on top around here, so they let her work even though we don't need anyone. But that's because I'm probably worth the work of five employees. On our way back up the cool metal stairwell, she told me, "Don't worry, I met her in the interview. She'll only be here for the summer, and I doubt your work will be compromised." The way she emphasized "work" made it seem like she was either mocking me, or probably still flirting.

About four hours into the day, this plain, moon-faced teenager with frizzy brown hair walks in. Nothing about her looked interesting, except maybe her glittery gold eyeshadow that had kind of fallen down and landed on the top of her cheeks. She reached out her hand and I saw that she had a cheap, plastic, glittery ring on every single finger. All different colors. She must be quite popular around arcades, or wherever those things are even from.

I expected her to be a little shy, but instead she belted out, "Hello, my name is America and I am so pleased to be working in such a grand building!"

To be honest, I thought the introduction was a little funky, so I chuckled. She was way too eager, especially because I'm not one of those snobby, formal type of guys. I like laid back and easy. I put my hands on my hips to indicate I was not going to shake her hand, but smiled a bit to lessen the blow. Her hair was in a ponytail so high it almost touched her forehead, and her dress was a wrinkled mess leaving her body shape ambiguous like a cloud. I could also see a stain that resembled old ketchup on her collar. Everything about her was plain.

Right after the introduction I went straight to my desk and did my best to avoid

eye contact. But for some reason, she wouldn't stop hovering over me. I don't think she understood that she was my coworker and not my subordinate. I wasn't here to teach her the job.

Despite my obvious reluctance to associate myself with her, she followed me around all day. Even when I was clearly busy. She never stopped asking meaningless questions like,

*Where did you go to school? Do you have a girlfriend? Why not? What book in here is your favorite? Do you like summertime? What's your favorite ice cream? What type of dogs are your favorite? Have you ever tried sushi? Would you be shot into space if they paid you? Do you like music?*

It was all about enough to make a guy like me want to scream. She looked about fifteen, so I guess fifteen-year-old girls don't have all that much else to talk about. But still, I don't know why she couldn't have at least tried to ask me more thought provoking questions.

By her third day of work, I sent her to do all the little tasks that I loved avoiding. This kept her occupied. I made her reorganize all the shelving in the children's science fiction, and then go all the way up to the sixth floor to make sure the classic literature was in order.

However, no matter how many times I would assign her these boring jobs, she would come back almost in a better mood than when she left. She'd want to talk about what she would eat for lunch, or which movie to see with her friends that night. Almost as if some sort of light pink bubble was around her at all times. It was sickening.

After a full week of dealing with America, I decided to check up on her jobs, to make sure she was performing decently. Needless to say, I was shocked at the discovery. Despite her constant enthusiasm, none of the books were in order. Rather, they were almost purposefully shuffled around. I even found that some of the books were missing, with no mark of being checked out. I mean, I'm an easygoing guy, so it's not like I really cared about the shape of the library. But I've been here way longer than her; I couldn't let her destroy my reputation.

I walked right into my office to discover America sprawled on the floor, playing a game on her phone. The phone was making a noise like bubbles popping as she was almost inside the cave of my desk, with this hot pink lipstick outside the lines of her mouth. I noticed that she was only inches away from my book collection. Her eyes suddenly pointed at Thoreau's *Walden*. I don't think someone like her would understand someone like him. She caught my eye and grinned. Before I could even bring up her sloppy work ethics, I already knew what was coming.

"So, I see here you're quite the book collector," she said without letting any of her previous childishness drop. I rolled my eyes because she definitely wouldn't comprehend my books. I explained to her in the simplest terms that those were *my very most important collection* and that she *better not touch or move them*, because that would make me *super angry*. She didn't respond, only continued to lay on that disgusting floor. I ended up being too distracted by her behavior to mention the disorganized shelves.

After that incident she started purposefully trying to mess with me. She got pleasure from getting under my skin. I could feel her watching me as I discovered children's fiction in the Civil War section, or F. Scott Fitzgerald in the comic books. Seeing as I am at least ten years older than her, she probably found it all hilarious. But I can see how immature she is, and I know that she'll regret it when she's older. Like the one day, I happened to walk into my boss's office to find America in a fluorescent blue, fuzzy sweater saying, "I just think it's weird, these little squeaky noises have been happening and I hear them in the corner under the desk and I swear I've seen mouse poop under there, I just think you should really consider checking it out under the desk or maybe just deep clean it, for safety."

My boss nodded and gave the smile she gives to the customers that complain about missing pages in books, and said, "Thanks, sweetheart. I'll tell Brian to check it out for



me," then nodded towards the door.

There weren't rats in my office. And she knew damn well there weren't. But the idea of my boss finding my books, and me losing the one sanctuary I have, would be somehow entertaining to her. Thank god my boss is bad at her job, I never heard another word about it.

America also enjoyed emptying all my cigarettes in the trash and replacing them with little pieces of broken pretzels, or curled up notes that said meaningless crap like, "Smoking KILLS," and "Crack is WHACK." Or she would just be sitting there in my chair cackling loudly as she read dumb teenage girl books. She also left little Sharpie drawings all over my desk. She drew this giant garden then put all these little people inside. They looked like trolls and I hated them. There were days where I just wanted to cut off those annoying frizzy pigtails and flush them down the toilet.

About a month after seeing her obnoxiously tacky face every day, I decided to go into work a little later than usual. I deserved time to myself. I slept in, took a long shower, slowly drank some coffee then got in the car. By the time I pulled into my favorite parking spot by the birch tree, the usual visitors were already there, visible through the giant glass windows. They sat motionless, hunched over their favorites. I walked right through the heavy doors to get to my office, when I noticed something wrong. My chair was pushed way back into the corner. I got nauseous thinking about what that chair protected.

Sure enough, when I ran to the other side of my desk, my box and the infamous book collection was gone. My brain went fuzzy, it reminded me of the time I found my goldfish dead in his bowl. All that remained was a single copy of "How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever Puppy." I don't even like dogs. I knew it was her because she's the only one desperate enough for attention to completely ruin someone's life.

Of course, bitter and angry, I flung myself right to my boss's door. I realized just how genius America's scheme was when my arm was stretched out, about to touch the doorknob. Of course I couldn't tell my boss about my stolen books, because they weren't supposed to be in my possession in the first place.

The absence of the comfort that my books provided led me to be puzzled by my surroundings. I had a plain white desk with a few miscellaneous objects. The only interesting thing about it was the obnoxious drawings that America created. And the walls all of a sudden became aggressively beige. I was uncomfortable. I walked to the third floor, which is my least favorite because there are no windows, so the atmosphere is stale. But it suited today. And there she was, consuming a fun sized pack of M&Ms on the green vinyl chairs. Except I wasn't even mad, more like confused. I sat down in the ripped chair next to her. I asked if I was a boring person. She promptly said, "Yes," then slammed a red M&M in her mouth. I sat there silent, and she did the same for once.

Every day after that, I would come into work and find a new book sitting where my old stack used to live. I guess she'd arrive ten minutes or so ahead of me. First it was just bizarre things like the *Kamasutra* or a biographic novel on some guy that built cars. It was almost a game. Despite my initial reaction of annoyance, it soon became my guilty pleasure. I would become excited on the way into work, wondering what would be waiting for me that day. I was ashamed that I was giving in, making myself weak. But I guess spontaneity didn't hurt. As long as she didn't know I was happy, then I was still in charge.

One day I came in and there was a guide on moving long distances. And then the next was a massive map of the Pacific Northwest. Then, newspaper listings for employees needed in Montana and Oregon. I was intrigued because they were just like the books I read, except they made me actually see myself there. Across the country didn't have to be pictures in a book. I could visualize a little apartment with a view of Mount Rainier, and me sitting with my long blonde hair secured by a wool cap. My lanky body would be perfect for snowboarding. Maybe I could even climb the mountain one day. There was a bubbling inside of me, something new



and weird.

I guess I have to admit, she's not as naïve as I once thought. She still spills soup whenever she brings her own lunch, and wears horrible clothes. But she has interesting ideas. Like she was telling me about this ninth grade drawing class she was in and how she got to draw different album covers. Or how this one time she learned how to sew her own pants, but then halfway during math class, the seam popped in the butt and her Hawaiian print panties were on display for everyone to see. She could really make me laugh, and when she'd tell some of those stories her frizzy hair would bob as she gesticulated and made up different voices. I'm not saying she was "cool," but she wasn't as terrible as you'd think.

The most intriguing aspect about her was that she didn't seem to care that much about me. Even though I was wiser, the stories I told her about myself always failed to be as interesting as hers. Like last week, she completely tripped over her shoelaces, which she insisted on wearing untied, and just got back up. She didn't even get embarrassed even though she knew I saw her.

And another day, she was wearing this sweater with white tassels hanging from her sleeves. They looked like ribbons that she had just tied to her arms, which was dumb when she was just standing there. But then, she ran down the grand staircase and she looked like some kind of angelic swan. I mean not that I consider her a friend, but something in me thinks she deserves to have a happy life. Which is more than I can say for most people. Plus, it must take a lot of guts for a kid her age to be so abnormal.

She even attempted to give me life advice. We were trying to organize the magazine rack when she read the cover of some cheap magazine aloud, "Jennifer Aniston Admits Biggest Life Regrets." She likes reading that kind of crap, so she asked me about my biggest regret. I told her I didn't know, that my life was lived with absolute lack of disappointment. She told me I had my head too far up my ass. America doesn't understand adulthood, but I let her think she was right.

Yesterday was her last day of employment. I can't say I enjoyed her working here, because I like my independence. But I guess I can say I enjoyed her company occasionally. The final book she left under my desk was some kid's book on how to "follow your dreams." I thought it was funny because there was an old gray haired man on the front of it, so why would anyone want life advice from him. The pictures inside were poorly illustrated girls becoming ballerinas and men in hardhats standing in front of buildings. I read it, even though if anyone were to ever see me looking at such a book, they'd probably think I had lost my mind.

This morning was a little empty. There wasn't an overwhelming stench of onions coming from her little green lunch box, because there was no America there to eat lunch. I guess it's pretty sad when someone that I don't even particularly like was my source of entertainment for the day. Even though she didn't read Nietzsche like me, she still found ways to be noticed. Like I said, she was interesting for company, at least.

And no, I'm not in Washington or anything right now. But I'm going to get there one day. I might even start saving the money soon or Google how to get a moving truck. One of the books America left back in July even had a little checklist for people like me that want to move cross country. It even had a beautiful brunette woman smiling and holding a suitcase on the cover. I could see myself next to that brunette woman, sitting by a fire as she cooed over my knowledge on Hemingway.

I don't think I'll ever see her again. Mostly because pretty soon I'll be among huge snowy mountains. But I know I'll think of her often. I mean, I would have come to the conclusion to leave on my own eventually. But I guess I can give her partial credit for speeding up the process. Will she think of me? Nope. But she'll be an adult one day, and that's when she'll realize how much influence I had on her.

I told her before she walked out the door yesterday that I didn't think she was half bad. This took a lot of guts considering I really wanted to hate her. She just shrugged like I was the last person on earth she wanted to talk to and said, "I know."



## French

Robby Nadler, University of Georgia

The problem is they market that shit all wrong. Become cultured. A useful skill in life. What kid, who's really just playing pocket pool in the back row, is going to concentrate on the pluperfect when magical boxes drop Google Translate and endless porn into hands? So yeah, I'm calling you a faggot if you stick around. None of that crap about being able to whisk a girl to Paris and impress her with how you can converse with the locals. No chick ever saw a loser in a beret and striped shirt handing out flyers at lunch about some stupid club and said *Wow, that makes me wet*. So stop peddling this crap if you want to teach high school boys how to roll "r"s off their tongues like burning cigarettes.

Tell them straight up they're fucked if they're not smart. Computers are going to replace half the world. The only jobs they'll get are the ones where human dexterity is cheaper. Folding clothes. Cutting trees. Making sure people are in the right lines. That's what I do: airport security. Is \$7.25 an hour overpaid to repeat that no beverage containers are allowed past this security checkpoint? If you say no, then just count the fucktards and their pile of confiscated water bottles on any given day.

Does knowing another language solve this? Fuck no. But you tell those kids that when they're restacking personal items bins that have been strewn around the checkpoint like some scavenger hunt—because who gives a shit about minimum wagers if you've got the money to fly—that there will be a day. And on this day a woman you don't know will come running up to you in tears as if there's a live shooter in the terminal, and she thinks your measly fourteen hours of unpaid weapons training will save her. But there's no gun. And as she pounds her fists into your two-day-worn uniform, you realize she's not scared but desperate. Pleading.

And though you want to help her, really, it's not your fault the first words that come out of your mouth are *Ma'am, what seems to be the problem?* How in the beginning when she opens her mouth to sing her grief, you think it's just the sobs, but then it dawns on you she's not slurring. She's not even American. Only later—much later—will your boss fill you in on what the translator they eventually tracked down told him: she is a former refugee from the Dominican Republic of Congo. Family murdered. Herself raped and tortured. And in that airport? A mere layover. But while waiting for her connection, she hears the loudspeaker announce a name— an unusual name, her long-thought-to-be-dead-in-the-war-but-no-body-was-recovered sister's name— to report to Terminal D because her plane is about to depart. This crying woman, who wasn't even in the same terminal (and never would have made it in time anyways), is begging you: *Tenir l'avion! Tenir l'avion! Tenir l'avion!*

And the only thing you can do in this moment is feel embarrassed, not because you cannot help this woman, but because this woman is causing a scene. And none of the sons of bitches around seem to understand a word she's saying either, so they're no help. It's just you and her and the memory of those three weeks in French for Beginners where you sat two rows behind Miranda Kerr and would raise your hand to excuse yourself to the bathroom and rub one out while imagining her pouty lips on your dick. That is until the school board decided foreign language was no longer a requirement for graduation, and with your counselor's blessing, you transferred into shop to finish the semester.



## Vapor Waves

*Ashlyn Rebel, Mercer University*

We were young, wild, bold, brave, reckless, impulsive, invincible, loud, immortal, powerful, triumphant, laughing, shouting, speaking in temporal tongues, flying past neon signs that sparkled and died like the multitudes of stars, pointing, grinning, dancing, pulsing, shifting songs, blending decades, rapping, joking, singing, swerving, moving, breathing, passing the vaporizer between the front and back seats like alcohol, inhaling, exhaling, filling the car with so much smoke that the road seemed to disappear before us and so did our destination. We looked bad.

We were going to Wal-Mart, and we were going to return a broken futon, and we were going to do it without a receipt, and Sean wasn't going to leave until he got his money back, which he deserved, and we were going to stand there for an hour and a half to argue with an impassive man in a special blue Wal-Mart vest named Geoffrey about Wal-Mart's return policy, and that was the extent of our bad, so all I did was look through the smoke at the strip clubs and think about the poor women who had maybe ended up in that situation because they had to, not because they wanted to. Sean moved the truck into the left turning lane, and I looked over my shoulder at the futon in the back, the frame tied down by a one-foot bungee cord and the mattress held down by a belief in some physics principle that the air would go over the top of the truck and miss the mattress by an angle that may or may not have been too narrow for the interstate, which we avoided for that reason.

But we went to the wrong Wal-Mart, so then we had to go on the interstate and AJ and I looked over at the back of the truck and prayed that the mattress hadn't gone flying out the back and hit some other driver in the windshield, causing him or her to have an accident and sending Sean and maybe the rest of us to jail. But Sean was laughing, and he asked if the futon was still there in a way that said he hoped it was but that he also would have been okay if it wasn't because it would have been funny as long as it didn't hit anybody, and we said it was, so he described in a funny way how it would have been if it had flown out once he hit the accelerator and took off down the interstate, and by the end of it we were all laughing so hard that it may as well have flown out the back in our minds. That was how we would remember it. It was all very surreal. It was all very real.

Kyle pulled out his vape and inhaled, exhaled, filling the car with the sweet-smelling smoke of piña colada. I don't know why he chose that flavor. I guess there was no reason not to. He passed it back to AJ, and the two of them shared the vaporizer for a while until Sean wanted to try it and blew smoke across the dashboard. It looked beautiful. It looked like art. It looked like the dangerous sort of art that fogged up the dashboard until you couldn't see out of the windshield, which is exactly what it did for me. It blurred the little orange lines on the front of the dash until we could have been traveling at a hundred miles an hour, two hundred, three hundred. Here it is: It wouldn't have felt any different.

Sean laughed and said he could when I asked him if he could still see the road. We didn't know yet that he had already lost one of his contacts and wouldn't find it again until hours later, when he admitted he had realized it long ago but didn't want to freak us out. He just looked at his dashboard and grinned. "Look at this," he said to Kyle, laughing, "look at it. Look at my dash. You can hardly see it!" And it was really funny, the way he said it, so we all laughed again. Then Kyle took a breath and blew the vapor out with a face he knew would kill Sean, and it did, so he repeated it until Sean was driving entirely on the spirit of the intention of a destination, face turned toward Kyle's, bright and vibrant with laughter, eyes shining with some emotion I hadn't seen in a while. We all were watching Kyle. We all were laughing. He looked like a dragon on cocaine. He looked alive in the wildest sort of way.

Part of me wanted to be like them, to share in the vibrancy of life, to cautiously touch my fingers to the cool metal of the device, inhaling, exhaling, sighing, smoke flowing like milk out of my mouth, my nose, my lungs, my chest, my soul. But I didn't. I wasn't them. And I feared becoming addicted, dependent, clinging to this thing even when they weren't here. They were not vapor to me. AJ offered me the vape and I refused, breathing the foggy air instead and pretending that that was enough to be like them.

Here it is: Everything in the world is, in some way or other, like waves of smoke. We went into the correct Wal-Mart and spent an hour and a half arguing with an impassive man in a special blue Wal-Mart vest named Geoffrey about Wal-Mart's return policy, me leaning against the engraving machine, Kyle leaning against the wall, AJ sitting on what looked like a shopping cart without the cart until an employee came and took it away from him, Sean standing at the counter with his sharp jawline and shoulders cocked in the way that right people have to stand so that wrong people can understand that they're right. You don't get to be right if you don't strike a certain pose. The problem was that Geoffrey was striking the same pose in between the breaks where he hid in the back room and tried to figure out how to spite Sean and make everything more complicated than it had to be so that Sean would have to settle for less than he deserved.

We were there for an hour and a half. That's how long it takes to make a right person pretend that they are sort of wrong and accept a gift card worth the value of the futon, plus tax. Then we went back home and turned around and immediately drove back in a last-minute decision to see a midnight movie, the cab filled with smoke, neon signs flashing by, truck pulsing with the force of the bass that we could feel in our chests. We looked bad. We looked like three typical college guys up to no good, plus one bewildered girl who may or may not have been dating one of them in the eyes of a stranger and who had really fallen into a deeper kind of love with all of them that seemed like it resembled a taste of what love felt like in Heaven.

Here it is: Young, wild, bold, brave, reckless, impulsive, invincible, immortal.

Here it is: Rushing, flooding, aggressive, powerful, blinding, overwhelming, throbbing, loud.

Here it is: Warm, gentle, seeing, consuming, triumphant, pulsing, powerless, close.

Here it is: Smoke.

Here it is: Thick, white smoke.

Here it is: That lasts.

My roommate had once called them a terrible name as a joke after she had first met them, trying to look cool to her new friend, and I have never forgiven her. I haven't spoken to her since, even though I should, even though she didn't mean it, because I hate her for it. They looked like three typical college guys up to no good. I know that. But they weren't. They were three atypical college guys with an upward gaze that no one else could see. They were three atypical college guys who were fully alive.

We saw *Hacksaw Ridge*. Sean and Kyle made the decision, I think. I don't remember much. I do remember AJ standing at my side as we handed in our tickets and walked into the movie theatre and sat down, Sean on my right, emptiness on my left, and I remember flinching at the blood, the gore, the life snuffed out of living bodies, flash, snap, like that, smoke, vapor. I remember seeing Sean's arm out of the corner of my eye and wishing that he would at least jump or something so that I wasn't alone. I remember wishing he would be afraid of war. I remember wishing he would understand now why I had voted for a candidate that I didn't like and who wouldn't win so that I couldn't hold myself responsible if they were sent to war. I remember wishing they all would. I remember jerking backwards into my seat as I watched my friends torn apart by bullets on the screen. I remember Sean's arm staying still every time I moved. I remember AJ leaning over to make sure that I was all right and grinning and saying my name to catch my attention, and I remember grinning back and giving him a thumbs-up because his face was here in front of me and not on the

screen. I remember a taste in my mouth that was always there when I was watching a war movie and that was never there any other time. I remember sharing popcorn with the guys and Sean holding the bag and tipping it to the side for me so that I didn't have to reach too far to grab some. I remember them telling me to eat.

And then we were back on the road, 2:30 in the morning, flying down the interstate, minds reeling with the weight of the movie and talking through it to say that it was a good movie, it was such a good movie, definitely in Sean's top three of all time, and *Saving Private Ryan* was really good, but so was this, so it was definitely up there, and they had all teared up at some time or another and maybe even at multiple times during the movie, it was just that good. They hadn't stopped vaping. This was the first time they had ever done this, and now they were finding other things they could use to make the smoke thicker, whiter, bigger, lasting. They had carved into a sweet potato two holes with a switchblade and a pencil and they stuck the vaporizer in one end and breathed in through the other and so much smoke came out that it didn't matter how many times they did it, it was always an occasion to yell and laugh and shout and say that there was so much, there was so much, it was just that impressive, and it was a sweet potato, a freaking sweet potato, and they were vaping out of a freaking sweet potato, and Kyle would exclaim this sentiment over and over again in disbelief and hilarity when they had later parked the car outside their dorm and sat there in the dark, talking about love and relationships and vaping.

Kyle always had the most. Sean was new to this, and AJ was young, and he and AJ usually had about the same, but it didn't even matter with the sweet potato, because it made so much smoke that it consumed everything. Sean coughed often when he vaped. The entire car had turned white, and they turned the A/C on and the vaporizer heat down and then continued to vape through the sweet potato, the freaking sweet potato, which Kyle was already starting to repeat, blowing vapor onto the windows at the people in other cars who were passing by, smoke blurring the lights along the sides of the highways.

Kyle was quiet now. The vapor had energized him early on and now it had stilled him like the tides, pulling him back into pensiveness as he turned over and over again in his mind the question he was about to ask. We were silent because we already knew.

"Say there's a war." He talked like someone from the twenties or forties might have talked, according to the movies that said they spoke with a single corner of their mouth pulled back in a smile, eyebrows arched, hands open and gesturing forward, eyes sparkling with the knowledge that they had found the thrill of life and that whatever they were about to say only added to it. He talked like that, in enticing fragments that pulled you into consideration of whatever he was about to say, mischievous in a way that wasn't mischievous at all. He just looked that way.

He tried again. "Say there's a war. Like—you know. Would you guys enlist?"

I don't remember their responses. I think it's because I don't want to. I think that they said they would, or that someone said maybe, or that someone didn't respond, and I think that Sean made a joke or a reference to a movie or something, and I think they debated whether "jarhead" referred to a Marine or an Army soldier.

Kyle was still serious in the cheery way that he was always serious. "I would. I definitely would. I think I'd join the Air Force." His eyes were bright. His mouth was still pulled back in a smile, eyebrows arched, eyes searching the car, landing on me, stilling, softening, realizing.

I didn't see him.

I saw myself hovering on the edge of a chair after one of them didn't come home.

I saw myself sitting at a kitchen counter, trembling, forcing myself to come to grips with the fact that I would never be able to see him face-to-face again, thinking back and forth to our days in college, in our youth, back to this night when he said he would enlist, back to that day in September when the draft caught him, back to the man who sat up and screamed and

killed them both, back to the still arm next to me, back to the thumbs-up, back to the popcorn and him telling me to eat, back to the smoke filling the car, back to piña coladas, back to sweet potatoes, back to immortality.

I saw myself tipping the chair.

I saw one of them bent over in grief as he buried the thing he loved.

I saw one of them losing that thing in an even worse way, because she was still alive, she just wasn't his.

I saw one of them sitting alone in a bar, head in his hands, not drinking a thing, wishing that he had gone to war, wishing that he hadn't, wishing that he knew which was true.

I saw our friend, who had stayed at his dorm to study, who never cried, years later, sobbing about something I would never know, because he also never spoke about anything that was hurting him, sticky redness covering his helpless hands as he tried to save something that had never been his.

I saw myself writing this story, trying to capture everything that was unfolding before me.

I saw hurt that had no words to express it.

I saw myself losing my child before she even had a chance to breathe, sliding from me too early in a pool of blood that spilled across the living room and left stains that wouldn't ever come out.

I saw my daughter dying in a car accident at age eighteen because her driver would never be as good a driver as Sean was, feeling the road, riding on intuition, seeing past the white smoke flooding his dashboard and obscuring everyone else's vision.

I saw them all sitting in their dorm room, playing war games, laughing, shouting, cheering, cursing, dying again and again and again.

I saw myself losing them.

I saw vapor.

The car was quiet now. Kyle had leaned back against the seat, silent, pensive. From somewhere in the car that I couldn't pinpoint, I could hear the shudder of anxious breathing. The smoke was still present in the truck and curled around our faces. I could feel it now, fogging the glass, filling us, surrounding us, leaving us.

Here it is.

AJ offered me the vape again, and this time I took it, curling my fingers around the metal, startled by its weight and temperature. I don't know what I expected. AJ showed me how to do it. It was all very surreal.

Press the button. Breathe in. Breathe out.

It was all very real.

I closed my eyes and inhaled, exhaled, neon signs flashing by, Sean's hands fixed on the wheel, Kyle's head tilted back, eyes shut, mouth slack, AJ's gaze fixed on the road ahead, music pounding, lyrics gone, smoke filling the car, our lungs, our minds, heart beating, chest aching, mind racing, hands still, quiet, comfortable, young, wild, bold, brave, reckless, impulsive, invincible, immortal, vulnerable, cautious, frightened, breathing in, breathing out, moving, watching, feeling, sighing, listening, sparkling, pulsing, diving, occurring to me in waves the thought that I could live in this moment forever.



## The Drive South

Sarah Boudreau, Young Harris College

Kate wanted to read the Facebook status again, the one she had memorized in the seven hours on the road since she threw a change of clothes and a toothbrush into her backpack and jumped into Jase's car. That's where her phone was, propped up in the cup holder, attached to its charger like an umbilical cord while she and Jase sat in a Waffle House, unable to reach it, unable to read those words for the hundredth time that night. While Kate thought of Facebook, Jase's mind lay elsewhere. He searched his memories, trying to find the path that had led him here.

When Jase and Kate hit a storm in the middle of the night, they sought asylum and coffee at a random exit in North Carolina, finding a boarded-up gas station and the Waffle House. Now, looking through the slightly fogged window, they couldn't make out the letters on the big yellow sign for the rain, which hurled itself against the pavement.

Neither Jase nor Kate had been in a Waffle House before and were mildly surprised by its contents: the blocky electronic jukebox, the batter oozing down the waffle irons, the dingy grey floor angled neatly into a drain so it could be hosed instead of mopped. It was empty, save for a small family sitting at the counter. After Jase and Kate settled at a booth by the far window, a weary waitress placed silverware in front of them and complained about working long hours. When they put their order in—two coffees and two hash browns: one covered and one smothered and capped—she informed them that the cook was out taking a smoke and she wasn't sure when he'd be back.

When the waitress left, Kate locked eyes with Jase and said rather than asked, "What if they don't let us into his room at the hospital."

Jase said he didn't know and Kate, drawing from her experience watching medical dramas with her mother, suggested that he was in the ICU. Jase bit his cheek as his mind went to what TV doctors said about patients in there—"We lost him."

He wanted to say that to Kate, to put on the voice of a saddened, dutiful doctor. Instead, he said, "I don't think they let non-family members in there."

"Well, maybe once he's out of the ICU?"

"I don't think we can just ask at the desk," Kate said. "Wouldn't that be, like, against FERPA or something?"

"Then we're fucked."

Neither one had wallets cushioned enough to pay for a hotel room while they waited for word of Ben's health. One semester deep into their freshman year of college, a road trip like this—from their Philadelphia suburb all the way to Ben's college town in Florida—was enough strain.

Kate wished, like she often did, that Ben hadn't moved away for school. Or, at least, that she and Jase had gone with him. They were supposed to, ever since their trip to Orlando in their junior year of high school, a trip for band that had required months of fundraising. That was the trip, Jase often recalled with glee, when Kate's breakfast made a guest appearance as she puked it up on Space Mountain. She had been queasy for the rest of the day, and Ben had bypassed the rides to walk around with her. He had convinced Jase to begrudgingly do the same. As they strolled through Magic Kingdom, dazzled by the wintertime warmth and by the glamor of Disney World, they made a pact to go to college in paradise. Of the three, Ben was the only one to return to the state.

"So they *might* not let us in his room. What are we supposed to do, turn around?" Jase said.

"Maybe that's our only option."

Jase's face crumpled into a frown, but he said nothing. He thought back to the Facebook status, too, the one that had spurred him to action.

"Prayers urgently needed," Ben's mother had written. "Ben is in the emergency room after taking too many of his pills."



His mother never used—and she would never use—the word overdose. They knew that she wouldn't dare say the phrase "suicide attempt" either, but Kate and Jase were sure that's what it was. A rushed exchange over Facebook confirmed it. Yes, he was still alive, yes, Ben had finished finals, no, his roommate found him unconscious in their dorm room, yes, the family found a last minute flight out of Baltimore and would arrive in Florida around midnight, no, she can't talk anymore, she has to go, goodbye.

Kate's fingers itched for her phone to check one more time for any news at all, good or bad. Jase fidgeted, his eyes sweeping the restaurant.

"What I don't understand," Jase said, "is why you'd bring a baby to a Waffle House at two-thirty in the morning."

Kate said nothing, staring at Jase's fingers as they plucked packets of sweetener from their plastic box, reorganizing them in a pink-yellow-pink-yellow pattern.

Jase waved his hand to get her attention. "Hello? The baby? You don't think that's weird?"

"Oh. Yeah, irresponsible," Kate said, tilting her head to look across the restaurant.

Her eyes took a bleary moment to focus on the family of three that sat at the counter. The baby, just old enough to sit up by itself, wore a onesie the exact color of the oversized pastel yellow t-shirt Kate wore, one that bore the name of her college. The baby's mother wore fleece pajama bottoms, their pattern something cartoonish but too matted to decipher, half-tucked into a pair of cowboy boots. The mother's camisole didn't quite cover her back, revealing the clasp of a neon purple bra. She obscured the man who sat next to her, who Kate assumed was the baby's father, but Kate could see a camo ball cap and half of a dark-haired head bobbing along to a voice that sounded like chewing tobacco.

Jase saw that the baby had turned to stare at him, and for a fleeting moment he wanted to lock eyes and see who would blink first. He shook the idea from his head. He noticed that both the parents and the waitress all looked to be his own age, only about nineteen or twenty. He suddenly felt overdressed in his polo and cargo shorts.

"I wonder why they're here," he said, his voice low enough for only Kate to hear. "What brought them here, to this Waffle House, this late at night, during this bad of a storm."

"They might ask the same thing about you," Kate replied.

If the waitress had sauntered back to their table and asked in her sweet tea drawl what he, a Yankee and future yuppie, was doing here, Jase wouldn't have had a response. He didn't know why he was sitting in the booth of a Waffle House in The Middle of Nowhere, North Carolina on his third day of winter break. He didn't know what processes of the brain had caused him to jump into his car five minutes after hearing about Ben, pick Kate up by the curb of her parents' house, and head south. His circuits had been fried with adrenaline and fear.

While he drove, focusing on the unfamiliar interstate before him, he couldn't stop thinking about how he hadn't visited Ben sooner. They had always agreed that they could either go to a mediocre school nearby, or they could go to a mediocre school in the Sunshine State, and Ben was the only one with the courage to follow through. Jase had felt his throat tighten; in the three months of Ben's first semester alone, Jase had never visited him. Why, he thought, did it take a handful of sleeping pills, thrown back after a Statistics I final, to bring him to see one of his best friends?

Jase tried to picture visiting Ben in the hospital, but all he could imagine was anger. He imagined that if by some miracle they were let up to the hospital room, Ben's mother would take one look at the pair and she would scream. As he thought about it, he remembered that she had intense, frightening eyes, eyes that would fix on Ben like an interrogation lamp. How dare they show up now, now that it was too late? They could have helped Ben before he tore up his insides. She would push them out the door and people would stop in the hallways to stare as she admonished them for having the guts to show up. Jase would sob his sorriness, but she wouldn't listen

to him.

Even worse, he imagined, Ben would be angry. He would be conscious, lying in his hospital bed and surrounded by gently beeping monitors. Ben would take one look at Jase and begin screaming his lungs raw about his massive betrayal. Jase's yelps of apology would be drowned out by the anger and the panicked beeping of the machines. He would flee from the hospital, and he would end up giving Kate his keys, too distraught to drive.

Jase didn't say any of this to Kate, of course. They didn't speak much on the ride down. Instead, in the passenger seat, Kate blasted music from the speakers. She wasn't sure what to play. At first, she played music from their middle school years—Disney channel stars and gimmicky pop—but singalong songs felt cheap. She felt the pressure of choosing appropriate music, and she wished Jase would let her drive. After Ben had tapped the bumper of Jase's elderly Volkswagen against a curb in their senior year of high school, Jase was more cautious with his keys. He swore you could see a dent on the front fender, but Kate never could, and as they drove, this struck her as petty. They ended up listening in silence to the discography of a woman who crooned quiet songs, the albums blurring together, Jase and Kate sometimes nodding as if actually listening to the words.

Jase yearned for the jukebox that sat behind the family at the counter. He had never played anything from a jukebox, but he still felt a tug of nostalgia, as if tapping the touchscreen would bring him back to a nonexistent '80s childhood.

Jase and Kate watched the baby pound its meaty fists on the counter before Kate tried to resurrect the conversation.

"Why do you think they're talking to the waitress so much?"

"They must know her."

"Well, yeah, but how?"

Jase paused, a smirk curling his mouth. Making up stories like this was a favorite game of theirs, riffing off one another to spin a life story worthy of a soap opera. Ben usually began the game, giving everyone a fatal flaw or a family curse. Jase preferred a more subtle approach: "They were all friends at Nowhere Special High. The waitress and the girl sat next to each other in homeroom freshman year and hit it off."

"Wouldn't they know each other already, in such a small town?"

"They knew each other's names, but that's it. Waitress's dad owns the bait and tackle shop," Jase decided, "and the girl's dad hated his guts because he messed up his order once or something. So they never talked."

Kate nodded, stroking her chin as if running her fingers down a magnificent goatee. She offered her contribution: "Baby Daddy didn't show up in the girl's life until sophomore year, when he asked her to his junior prom, and since he had the biggest, loudest truck to go muddin' in, she said yes."

"He treats her alright and doesn't cheat, so she never had any reason to break up with him. He knocked her up at the end of her senior year of high school and now everyone figures they'll get married."

"But," Kate said triumphantly, "she's been madly in love with the waitress for years."

"Ooh, does Baby Daddy know?"

"No, but the waitress knows, deep down inside, even though she'd never admit it. When the girl and Baby Daddy get married, it'll break her heart and she won't know why."

"God, that's depressing."

Kate smirked. "And so the girl convinces him to go to Waffle House in the middle of the night whenever they can afford to, just so she can talk to the waitress even a little bit. And the waitress always drops everything to pay attention to her, even when two college kids show up in the middle of the night in a massive rush to get down to Florida, and when they ask for coffee and

hash browns, she'll stand at the bar and gossip instead of putting in our goddamn order."

"Not bitter or anything, are you?"

"She could at least bring out the coffee," was Kate's curt response.

And with that, they fell into a lull, absentmindedly watching the baby as it stared up at the waitress with eyes as glazed as their own. They sat like this for several minutes, their stasis only broken by the arrival of another customer. He wore a scowl in his eyes, perhaps because water dripped from his hair into his face. When he took off his blue slicker that sweated raindrops, they saw a handgun on his hip in a tidy, black holster. Nobody else seemed to notice the weapon, and Kate and Jase exchanged concerned glances. The waitress called out that she would be with him in just a minute and went back to her conversation—something about a mutual friend's problems with a promiscuous fiancée.

The man sat down on the opposite side of the Waffle House, ignoring the sign that politely requested that booths be reserved for two or more customers. Jase wondered how often Waffle Houses were robbed, but then he figured that if one was to commit armed robbery, one would probably not sit down first. The man studied the menu.

"Now," Kate said in a low voice, "why is *that* guy here?"

"Waiting for his date," Jase replied. Kate snorted but said nothing, and the two resumed their silence for a few moments as their minds slid back to Ben.

Kate suggested that going forward, they should talk to Ben every day, at least over text. Jase agreed, but he didn't look her in the eye.

"I just don't understand what we did wrong," he said.

Kate comforted him, told him that there was nothing they could have done. They had just talked to him two days before, and he'd given no hints of unhappiness aside from the stress of his classes. They mused that it was the finals that did it. "You know how grade-centric he is." The two resumed their vigil over the Waffle House. The man with the gun pulled out a cell phone and scrolled, his back hunched over his table. The baby swayed, staring into the distance. It rained on.

After a few minutes, the man with the gun slid out of his booth and headed to the jukebox, smoothing a one dollar bill in his hands as he walked. Slightly jealous, Jase motioned for Kate to watch the man as he stared at the screen, and Jase wondered aloud what song he would choose.

"I hope it's Britney Spears," Kate said.

When the first chords rang through the restaurant, they both recognized it as AC/DC, but when the chorus kicked in they realized that the man with the gun had chosen "Shoot to Thrill." They exchanged panicked glances, but the others didn't seem to notice or care about the man with the gun, even if Jase thought he had a shifty look in his eye. Kate and Jase supposed that this was the kind of thing that just happens in the south, or at least in Middle of Nowhere, North Carolina. After their brief burst of concern, they slipped into sleepy stasis again.

Kate couldn't help but hope that after his ordeal at the hospital, Ben would take time off school so she could visit him at his house. She could help, and the idea of that made her swell with pride. If she were physically there, she could fight off the creeping sadness that swallowed him. Or perhaps she couldn't stop him from being sad, but she could definitely stop him from acting on it. She imagined diving across Ben's bedroom to slap away a blade or another handful of pills, and how the clatter to the floor would sound like victorious applause.

Jase said, "Do you really think we couldn't have stopped this?"

"God," Kate said, "I don't want to talk about this again."

"Shouldn't we have visited earlier?"

Kate set down her cup of coffee. "It's only been three months and he moved, like, twelve hours away. Come on, what did he expect?"

Jase's eyes narrowed and his mouth set into a thin frown, and she backpedaled. "I didn't mean it like that."

He shook his head and fiddled with the sugar packets again. The two sat in silence. The rain continued to pound on the glass, demanding to be let in, and now thunder cracked like an echoing bullwhip across the sky.

Jase sighed. "Do you think we're ever gonna get our coffee?"

Kate snorted. She wondered what would happen after they finished their coffee and hash browns and piled back into the car. She imagined driving south, the rain letting up as they worked through the angry blots of orange and yellow on the weather radar. Dawn would blind her in the passenger seat a few hours before they arrived, and when they pulled into the hospital parking lot and opened the doors, fast food wrappers would cascade to the ground. They would walk bow-legged stiff to the front desk—do hospitals have a front desk?—and Kate imagined a grim woman in a starch-white uniform looking up from her computer to say that Ben couldn't accept visitors and I'm sorry, but you have to go home. Maybe they would sit at another Waffle House and stare into their cups of coffee for an hour or so, dreading the twelve hours on the road back home.

Maybe in that Waffle House, their waitress would move quickly, for it was only now, after serving the man with the gun, that she made her way to Jase and Kate's booth with her pot of coffee. Somehow, the pleasantries of "Thank you" and "Could I get some cream, please?" brightened them, and they realized that they could speak to each other again.

Jase said, "We're going to have to go back home, aren't we?"

Kate said, "The traffic won't be bad going back up north. Not at this hour, at least."

Jase nodded.

In the back, the cook returned from his break and the waitress began to argue with him, their words obscured by the sound of the rain hurling itself at the glass windows. As the sky rumbled, he returned to the kitchen, muttering to himself as he slammed a pile of hash browns down and scraped them back and forth on the grill. Before the smell of potato could hit their noses and give them hope for the meal ahead, a clap of thunder killed the lights and extinguished the jukebox.

Someone shrieked, either the mother or the waitress, but the baby made no sound. Kate thought that this was a scheme by the man with the gun and that she would hear shots at any moment, but when her eyes adjusted she could see that his face, lit by the blue-white light of his cell phone, was just as alarmed as hers.

The hiss of the grill faded, and without the sound of the jukebox, a deathly silence settled on the Waffle House like a blanket. It felt as if a mass of white noise had been suddenly cut off, and perhaps it had—had the heat been on, making noise? Had there been an exhaust fan above the grill? Neither Kate nor Jase could remember, but despite the storm outside, everything somehow seemed quieter. Every rustle of movement, every squeak of wet shoe sounded out of place, as if disturbing something, and for a brief moment nobody made a sound. The waitress broke the silence: "I've got some candles in the back!"

The cook grumbled that he could never cook food by candlelight. Jase wondered how often the power failed in this little North Carolina town, if the waitress came prepared. He watched her set a series of tea lights on the counter after some blind searching and bartering for use of the cook's lighter. The waitress smiled in the warm light.

"Y'all are welcome to sit over here," she called.

The man with the gun moved over to sit next to the camo-capped father, but Kate and Jase stayed at their table. It felt odd to stare now, to gawk at the young couple and their baby who stared mesmerized at the candle flames. Kate busied herself with her coffee, thinking about how they were truly stuck now, with no way to pay their bill and no way to get their food. Jase thought about how uncomfortable it was to be in a Waffle House that couldn't function as a Waffle House;

they might as well be waiting out the storm in an out-of-order public bathroom. Both of them thought that at this moment, they could not speak, as if it would break a spell and the waitress and the family and the man with the gun would know that they had been telling stories about them, molding a fantasy, mocking their lives. To speak would be filled with enormous shame.

When they told the story later, neither one of them was sure how long they sat there alone in the dark. It was long enough to finish their cups of coffee and long enough for the man with the gun to tell a dirty joke that made the others roar with laughter, Jase snort, and even made Kate stifle a smile.

“Are you guys doin’ alright?” the mother called out to them. “Must be cold in the dark over there?”

Jase and Kate looked at each other, both of them daring the other to speak while too afraid to break that silence that hung in the darkened corner of the Waffle House. It was finally Jase who did, calling back that yes, they were doing just fine, not scared at all.

“Why don’t y’all come sit over here?”

The waitress had poured herself a cup of coffee and raised it welcomingly towards them. They looked at each other again, unsure if they should sit with the strangers who made them feel so guilty, but they couldn’t think of a reason to decline the invitation. By now, their eyes were adjusted to the tealights on the counter, but they still walked carefully over to the counter and sat down next to the baby.

The father leaned forward and for the first time Jase and Kate saw his face, a kind face with big, brown eyes, and he introduced himself and his family—he was Tommy, this was Savannah, and the little one here is Cheyenne, and where are you two from? He continued the small talk for a while, they all did, but the others could sense that Kate and Jase were weary and didn’t press them to speak more.

No longer did they live in their heads and wallow in their guilt, and when the lights flickered back on and “Shoot to Thrill” resumed, they cheered with everyone else.

They stayed quietly at the counter as the cook fired up the grills again, and after they scarfed down their plates of hash browns and drank their last mugs of burnt coffee, they over-tipped the waitress and slipped out. Their eyes were drawn to the gun at the man’s hip, but they tried not to gawk.

It still rained, but a quieter rain that didn’t hurt as it hit skin. Jase tossed Kate the keys, and after adjusting the seat and the radio dial, she backed out of the parking spot. The buzz of the radio made a different kind of silence, and they pulled on the highway. The pump of the windshield wipers smeared the green and white glow of the exit signs on the road south.



## Fossils

*Soniah Kamal, Georgia State University*

Everything important in my life will have happened by the time I was born. By which I mean my parents—Hippo and Bird— will have grown into adults who will have found each other and loved each other and all the rest of the sparks and plugs that went into the making of me and my brother. When I think of the odds of two people coming together, of parts fitting parts perfectly enough to make another human being, I'm star struck.

It's like a starburst, I would say, a human being born, except it can get bloody at the end which was how they found my brother's body, a bloody mess like the pot of paint with the face of a smiling five-pronged star on it (Star Bright Paints for Happy Fingers) my brother had once forgotten, open, on the wooden picnic table in the garden after an evening of helping me finger paint. The wind had knocked the life out of the pot, and Bird had discarded it in the trash.

(But we never could scrub the red out the veins of the wood)

Trash is part of our lives, kitchen towels to kitchen towels, dust to dust and also, in my big brother's case, blood to blood. I try not to think of him and I wonder if he's hovering in the sky, somewhere, a super-star in a firmament of stars, trying not to think of me. Two souls—above and below— not thinking of each other, which is also a way of thinking of each other. Negative space, the existence of which I came to revere later, much later, at art school.

When I was moving into the art school dorm, my brother would have been twenty-five. When he died, he was fourteen. I was seven. Every year since then, on his birthday, we plant a candle deep into his favorite caramel cheese-cake. I blow out the candle: my brother, a plume of smoke perfuming the rooms. Bird takes out the candle and drops it, gently, with the other birthday candles into a gallon-sized ziplock bag as if he's going to live forever and the bag needs to be big enough to contain his forever birthdays. We'll cut three slices of cheesecake. Bird, Hippo and I will eat them silently. The remainder of the cake will go into the fridge, cold storage where uneaten bodies go. Late that night, so late, Hippo will discard the stiffening cheese cake into a grocery bag and take it to the outside dumpster. The Bird will have yet another glass of wine as she stands on the back deck, the scent of the melted birthday candle wax lingering on her fingers as she stares into pine trees. Occasionally a star winks through the tops of the wind worried trees.

Negative space in so far that a brother who had a room, a place at the table, a nickname I gave him (Gorilla), one he gave me (Starlight), a life, just disappears and his clothes appear, like starbursts, every so often from the innards of a wash hamper (black t-shirts because that was the only color he would wear because he was becoming a cool kid and cool kids, back then, wore only black), or from the trunk of the car (one of the many jackets kept there in case the weather turned without prior warning), or from the seams of the sofas (a sole sock that he'd been searching for a while before saying 'whatever' and giving up).

Hippo and Bird—we, my brother and I, named them that—because that's what our parents were, a big cozy father who sat as if he would never get up again and a wee mother who'd flit around unable to rest in one place for too long. When my brother died, Hippo and the Bird forget their places, forgot who flitted, who sat, becoming one, becoming the other, becoming each other, slowing and hurrying until they met each other

midway, fossilizing their loss in each other.

Lost, though lost is too small a sentiment for why they left me behind when they went to search their souls in search of my brother.

It wasn't their fault. It wasn't mine. But guilt free is just negative space.

\*

He'd changed seats with me on the TwirlaRide at the last minute because I wanted to sit on the inside. I was seven. He was fourteen. When his harness failed and he went down, took a dive, the ride was still going up, me on the inside, up and up and up, where the rest of the stars sparkled though it was day-time so we couldn't see them. But my brother had told me they were still there.

The stars were always there.

"Scared, Starlight?" my big brother said smiling at me as we'd strapped our harnesses into place.  
"Don't be."

✠

## Hotwire

Olivia Murphy, Berry College

When our mom gets nervous, she organizes. With glaring afternoon light on her face, she currently stacks bills in descending size on the grey marble countertops, weeding out old receipts to throw into the impromptu recycling bin that's a plastic bag hanging off the knob of the silverware drawer.

My sister and I sit on a leather couch across the room, scrolling through our phones for distraction. We're twins, fifteen, Jay and Robin. Always been our mother's "*baby birds*." It's relevant to note that it's been nine years since we've seen our father – who's been in and out of prison for more things than we know or can recall – since today will be the deliberate break of that streak.

A few months ago, we spotted another manila envelope labeled *SENT FROM A STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY*, marked to her instead of us like they normally were, and somehow we knew it was time. Our parents did the legal sparring that divorced parents do behind closed doors, and court-ordered unsupervised visitation was to begin on July 14th.

Last night, we sat in the basement after Mom was long asleep and looked through old photo albums to prepare. It was a kind of studying, we thought, since the house had been scrubbed clean of pictures of *good old Dad*. The photos were faded like Goodwill couches but there we were, smiling, perched on daddy's shoulders. Little pink and blue baby blankets in our cribs. Wearing our Easter finery at brunch after church. At Disneyland on Christmas eve. The picturesque.

"And please, Robin, no *provocative* clothing choices," Mom says as she sprays water from the attachment to clean out the sink, "I don't want him objectifying you."

"Objectifying?"

"Yes. You have to remember this man is ill."

"I know," Robin murmurs, looking away from her phone long enough for me to notice her eyes shooting daggers toward the floor.

"I'm sure he's going to want to talk all about his new wife and kid. She's not more than ten years older than you, you know. Poor thing."

After the kitchen was impeccable, Mom shuttles us into the car. We look like we're headed to traffic court, modest and polished. Robin mashes her lips together to continuously relish the slickness of her lip gloss. We're headed for a mall food court; public, so that mom can "stick around" while skulking through Williams Sonoma out of sight.

"You guys know that if he does anything that makes you uncomfortable, even a look that makes you feel strange, just text me and I'll be there. It doesn't even have to be a complete text. You can just send me a letter. Like a Q," Mom says. We've heard all this before, since she gave us our "safety phones" when we were eight.

"Mom, I don't think it's going to be that bad," I say.

"I'm just taking precautions," Mom snaps back. "You never know what *plans* he has." Shivers ran through each syllable.

"We understand," Robin says, with a hard stare to silence me. The trees whiz by monotonously.

It's a Sunday, and the mall is hectic with the usual types. The insect-like choir of chatter rises and harmonizes like a cloud of noise, and we feel anonymous.

"Well... this is where I leave you."

"Are we supposed to find him *ourselves*?" Robin says.

"He sent me a text earlier and said he would wait for you guys near Sbarro. Does about an hour or so sound okay?"

"Can't we just call you when we're finished?"



"Yes. That's fine. Be safe, and remember not to give out too much personal information."

"Why not?" Robin asks.

"Do you really want him showing up at our house? At your school? Adding your boyfriend on Facebook?" Mom lowers her voice as she speaks, and Robin and I lock eyes before rolling them.

"Let's just get this over with and make it fast. I'm here if you need me."

We'd never admit it, but seeing our father again was like spotting a celebrity for the first time in person. The feeling is odd. It's like a hologram, or catching a rare animal in a place where they shouldn't be. A tiger crosses an Atlanta sidewalk. Our yard, with real flamingos in it.

He is gaunter than any picture had depicted him; his frame scarcely fills up the plastic dining chair he's sitting in, eyes outlined in deep purple bags cast down at the table... nearly menacing. His clothes hang off his body, clearly cheap: cream-colored waffle shirt, cargo shorts, decrepit New Balances. With his right index finger, he spins his flip phone around in circles on the gray gradient table.

"Hi," we both say in unison. I can't help but wonder if he misses hearing when that happens.

"Hey!" he says, half-standing and gesturing toward the other two chairs. "Please, sit down, or do you want to go ahead and grab something to eat?"

"Food would be nice," Robin says. It is also quite relevant to note that there is no small talk adequate enough for a nine-year absence. We wait in line at Sbarro in silence, each of us occasionally flashing a half-smile if we catch eyes. The oily smell of pepperoni carries over to our table.

"So how's school these days? You're in... eleventh grade?"

"Tenth," Robin corrects him immediately.

"It's good," I take the reins, "we're in a few classes together still, which is always fun."

"Very cool. What're your favorite classes? Robin, you still doing some writing?"

"A little bit," she lies (she writes all day), "and we really like Statistics." Second lie.

"And Jay, I heard you're in football?"

"Yes, sir."

"What position?"

"Middle linebacker." The truth.

"Nice...." he pauses, and the silence settles down like white fog under the skylights. His eyes flicker over us.

"You guys dating anyone?"

"No," we say in unison again. Lie count is up to four.

In another lull, Dad exhales, and we all rise to throw our plates into the trash and stack our trays above it. He starts weaving around the courtyard and eventually the lower floor of the mall, letting his feet shamelessly scuff the tile as he walks.

"I bet your mom takes you guys shopping all the time, doesn't she?"

"A bit," Robin says.

"So this probably isn't much fun for y'all," he says. I want to agree. The sincerity is refreshing. "And not much for me either since I don't have the money to get you anything."

He continues, "If I say we could do something *really* fun, would you promise not to tell your mother?"

Some shrill voice inside me thinks *now we're talking*.

Next thing I know we're following our father out to the parking lot. He examines each car as he walks by it, flipping a few door handles to reveal they're locked.

Robin picks up her pace to catch up to him. "So, what are we doing, again?"

"We're going to go on a little joyride," he says. Devious as a kid with a BB gun.

"You're...."

"Stealing a car? No, just borrowing. I swear it won't be more than five minutes."

We're silently manic at this point, yet some invisible force keeps us following him. Genetics?

"How—" I'm brusquely cut off.

"The trick is to find one that looks real old, somebody who probably wouldn't care less if their ride went missing for a little bit."

I don't see how this is too realistic, but I buy it.

"What if you get caught?"

"There's no security cameras here." He gestures skyward with one hand, repressing a smile, checking another door. Truth.

"What if mom sees?" she whispers to me, the kind that sounds like a miniature scream.

"She won't," I mouth back, catching a flicker of a devil in her eyes.

"Aha!" Dad says in a low voice. As fast as a bird wing flaps, he's inside this old burgundy thing. I see him unlock the rear doors and I get inside. I motion for Robin to do the same, and she slides in next to me across the cigarette-burned beige leather seats. I can't quite make out what Dad is doing, but he's got a pocket knife out and he's fiddling with the ignition. The car starts faster than I thought was possible. He laughs and pulls away; the music on the radio is sung in Spanish.

Dad lights a Marlboro Red and lets his whole arm hang out the window.

"It looks more natural this way," he says through choppy laughter, whipping around the perimeter of the mall.

We crank our rear windows down as well. The wind that comes in is like pure heaven in July, turning our hair into blonde chaos. Robin's curls stick to her lip gloss. Our driver is speeding recklessly and even hops a curb or two. This is our father. This may look strange from the outside, but what can I say?

As we're just about to our original parking spot - or at least as close to it as he can remember - his phone starts blaring some staticky default melody.

"The ol' ball and chain," he chuckles, answering it. "Hey darlin'.... Mhm... Sounds good, be there in a few." The phone clacks shut.

"My wife Amy's here to grab me, so I'm gonna have to roll out. I brought some stuff for you guys though, if you want to wait around for a minute."

We emerge from the borrowed Buick back into the sticky heat that bleaches the world white. Dad's car - this one a bit nicer, nearly suburban - waits for him around the corner next to a man-planted tree buried in pine straw and mulch, jetting out from the concrete of the parking lot like a sad oasis. The silhouettes of two passengers are somewhat visible behind the tinted windows, one adult and a wiggling child.

Dad taps the trunk of the car and it pops open soon after. He retrieves two fairly small gift bags, out of the car which sag at the bottom. Blue for Jay and pink for Robin.

"You can open them now or later, it doesn't matter. It's not much, just some treats until the next time I see you two?" He trails off.

His mystery wife rolls down the window to wave and suddenly, he beams. She really is quite young and pale, with a face heavily shaded by drugstore makeup and more than a few piercings glinting in the sun. The child leans out the passenger window, arms outstretched for his father, babbling on and on.

"Hey buddy," Dad coos, turning away from us to wave at his son, then back around. He continues: "Until then?"

"Until then," we say, in unison again. Truth.

Mom's white Honda rolls up to the mall entrance a few minutes later. Two caramel macchiatos are in the backseat cup-holders waiting for us. She's got Bon Jovi playing.

"So how was it?" Mom says, her nails tapping the steering wheel as we sit at a red light.

"Uneventful," I say. Five lies.

When the car roars up again to accelerate, we rifle through the gift bags as quietly as possible; it's just trinkets, pens for Robin and athletic socks for me, pictures of his new kid, bags of M&M's. But it's something.

Mom replies, "Probably for the best." She raises her eyebrows at us in her rearview mirror.

"I thought the same thing," Robin says. Six.









writing **nonfiction** is  
more like sculpture,  
a matter of shaping  
the research into  
the finished thing.  
- joan didion



## How to Make Ma'Ma's Biscuits

*Anastasia McCray, Agnes Scott College*

In the Thompson family, cooking is the domain of the assigned womenfolk. Therefore, after some 50-60 years of habitual chores and routine labors, when my Ma'Ma' says, "No, I won't be cooking this time around," the words that do not follow—"It is now *your* turn to cook."—are very much heard. After all, she had been cooking since before she hit double digits in age, and if her granddaughters didn't learn the way she did—straining over a hot stove to hear directions from an ailing matriarch—then how would we ever get the food to taste right? It's a mortality thing for her, when she must have realized that it is nearing time for her generation to be returned to dust, and for us, my sister-cousins and I, raised so closely together by her in such small increments, who had to realize that we must take her place. It is a coming of age of sorts, then, when the eldest of us learned how to make Kool-Aid just shy of too sweet without measuring cups, or when the second eldest started to seriously contemplate the logistics of Ma'Ma's famous macaroni and cheese. And even I, more McCray than Thompson by virtue of my miles-removed mother, cannot escape the pull of duties of the womenfolk, so I take up the task of learning how to make her biscuits with a recipe older than written language itself. For this, I need: flour, shortening, baking powder, sugar, butter, buttermilk, a decent-sized bowl, and clean hands.<sup>1</sup>

1. I fill the bowl halfway with flour, or until I feel satisfied, then add a teaspoon of baking soda, and top it all off with sugar enough to fill the palms of a small child. I mix it all with my hands because this is akin to the fieldwork Ma'Ma' was pulled out of doing as a child, when her mother got sick and she began to cook for her family. I don't need to imagine an illiterate child-her working a furnace as an oven in a shack in a field in the backwoods of New Jersey. Neither she nor I are that child, anymore, and this oven is new.
2. When the mixture is satisfactory, I begin to add in the shortening. It will stick to the flour-baking powder-sugar combo until it is a sad, crumbly mess like multiplying cells. They are building blocks with little in common with the end product, but I have been built out of too many burned bridges to know that they don't have to begin as ash to become so. Ma'Ma', too, was used to creating life from the most misleading building blocks before this recipe was half as old as I am, now. I can only hope to create something this time, rather than burn.
3. As soon as most of the flour-baking powder-sugar combo has been molded enough to make tentative bread, I pour in the buttermilk. It smells like soured milk and has the consistency of hot chocolate with too much chocolate and large chunks of bread trapped in the sad mixture from when the bread fibers fell under my fingers, as a child. As much as it pains Ma'Ma' now, she knows as well as any good cook that any baked good worth its salt need more than just sweets to hold it together. The same is true with life, after 23, 24 years of being a grandmother to 17 grandchildren that wander off all too soon and find themselves reluctant to return to the nest; that bitter buttermilk just might be the only glue that keeps it all together.

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<sup>1</sup> There are no increments. Ma'Ma' learned by fumbling through a lack of communication from her mother, just months removed from death, and a smell like metallic sickness and sunken skin circling the ceiling. Everyone else was in the fields, then; I expect my own aunts and sister-cousins to be at work, now. Cooking with the nearly-dead deserves to be done in silence and solitude, anyway.

It is not flour and sugar and chunky, soured milk, now; it is *dough*. How thankful will she be for it in a few years?<sup>2</sup>

4. The mess of ingredients should begin to look like actual dough, now. I take my fingers, again, press them into the fold, and bring all those sad crumbs together to make one, gray brick. Some may wonder how so many tiny pieces can come together to form one giant mass of something that makes sense. It is only the makings of an unborn child, not yet ready for the world.
5. I preheat the oven to 350°. It presses at the back of my mind like slow moving anger every time I think of my father, Ma'Ma's son, that I do not talk to, building at my core and circulating in my veins like blood behind titanium skin. There is no outlet, not even with Ma'Ma' behind me telling me to let it go, placating me with a story about the sister-in-law who once slapped her outside of church service. She remembered the snap of her new necklace—a gift from my granddaddy—more than she did the sting of her sister-in-law's hand, and the woman never did it again. Ma'Ma' doesn't understand that I am a cheap imitation of her mold, that there is no ingredient of forgiveness in my being, or maybe she simply doesn't want to. It is only the lack of an opening in which to channel all this heat through that causes it to swell, ripe and useful, to cook the biscuits with.
6. I section the dough off, piece by piece, and roll them in my hands until they make neat, little balls. Not all of them will be perfect—some less than others—but all of them will face the insistent press of my knuckles as they are flattened into the tray. I imagine that Ma'Ma' must think of them as us grandchildren lying side by side on the living room floor. She makes space in the house for everyone, even when there is none, until the heat from the oven pops a few out of place, misshapes others, and leaves "space" as foreign a concept as "perfect."<sup>3</sup>
7. When I am done filling the tray with dough, I stick it in the preheated oven for 25 minutes. Later, I raise the temperature to 400° and leave the biscuits in for another five minutes. They should come out nice and golden, as long as the timer is set right and I don't forget to check up on them.<sup>4</sup>
8. I brush butter along the tops. It always surprises me how the end product always looks well tended and cared for, but then again, no one else will know that some biscuits got a little more flour to their bits while others were left with the buttermilk. They'll only really know by the taste, and maybe not even then, but just in case, I'll have memorized the recipe to make another batch.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Not very. It is one thing to put so much effort into your own creations. It is entirely another to see the imitation work from those just under you slip away from your mold. Ma'Ma's children had 17 chances to get it right, but no matter how much love or consternation they were soaked in, no one and nothing ever comes out as perfect as her own makings.

<sup>3</sup> The less-than-others can be left out for the children who, like me, will section them off piece by piece, savoring the taste of biscuit dough like salty cotton candy. They will not think about the pieces they separate from the whole, how it will be like their futures when they sacrifice their own pieces to the Thompson whole. They're too young to know what it feels like to be excluded from the tray. They have yet to be cooked, and those sectioned off pieces never will be.

<sup>4</sup> Everyone inevitably forgets that there is a batch in the oven. Maybe it's the first, maybe the fifth, but it will be forgotten. Once, Ma'Ma' didn't know that there was bread in the oven. She and the rest of the





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Thompsons (save one) showed up nine days and two separate hours of travel late, crossing into hostile McCray territory to examine the goods, only to resignedly proclaim, “Yep, this one’s ours,” after one good look. Just remember that the biscuits have to come out, whether anyone is ready for them or not.

<sup>5</sup> Don’t think too hard about this. After all, practice rounds don’t really matter in the endgame, and as long as you can accept the forever-shifting mold, nothing can disappoint you. It’s a mortality thing, except biscuits will never again be flour, even when the rest must be returned to dust.

# Felling

*Emma Sachs, Agnes Scott*

The trees around our house are all falling. Not all at once, that would be easier. A deafening crash and all is done. Instead it is slow, as once a month or so another one topples over. A chainsaw isn't needed, just a pushy breeze, a layer of ice, or a summer storm. They are all dead. Filled with termites that have hollowed them into shells. A pile of blocks a child has built, tilting and fragile. The first fell in the middle of the night, blocking the gate and the garage door. The second, across the driveway, scraping the paint from Mother's car. The third in the backyard, cracking a few of the patio stones. And the fourth fell forward, kissing the edge of our house like it was taunting us. It reminded us how easy it would've been to crash through the front window, to land on the dining table we need use, to let all the cold air in.

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I am ten when Brother visits for the first time since I have outgrown my booster seat. He looks different than the boy in the pictures that sit in stacks on wooden shelves I am not allowed to touch. None of the photos show Brother smiling, not in the oldest one taken back when Carter was still president, where Father and Brother and the other woman stand by the "Welcome To Alaska" sign, not in the candid shots of him sitting stiff-limbed at Father and Mother's wedding, not the grainy one taken in the beige hospital room where he holds my infant body for the first time. Now, though, Brother smiles wide, tobacco-yellowed teeth pushing out from between his lips as he calls me "Sister." I notice the wrinkles feathering out around his eyes, the way he never quite closes his mouth, the tiny brown blood stains on the thighs of his pants. He tells me that his job is dangerous, flaunting it, the way a young boy might show off a black eye. As if he is not a man old enough to be my father. As if he needs my approval.

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Felling trees is an expensive chore, but killing trees is much more affordable. For a quarter of the cost, we hire Brother and his friends, smelling of leather and beer, to top the tree. The day they come, Mother takes me to the movies. She says it is so that we don't get in their way, but I know the truth. It must not be easy to be hated in your own home. I see how Brother watches her, the woman Father married second. Mother is the one Father chose, not the other woman. The other woman was married because Brother was born and left before Brother graduated second grade. Mother is the woman who made him all the more the bastard son. So I do not fight her, and we see two movies in a row, and I let her pick both. We run from one end of the theater to the other. Popcorn spills from our paper bags onto the bright purple carpet. Neither of us stop to pick it up. Once home, Mother says she hates the tree, the way they cut off all the branches until it looks like two ivy-covered fingers reaching skyward. Father says it looks like a peace sign. I say nothing, but I watch as two birds swoop low overhead. They must be looking for their destroyed homes.

The summer after, once disease has had time to settle into the trunk, Father walks barefoot into the backyard everyday to poke at the tree with a metal rod meant to hold up a beach umbrella. He watches as beetles the size of my thumb push their way their way through the holes he makes.

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When Mother's mother dies, just a few months after I am born, they take a pine tree from her house. It is tiny, still in its flimsy black plastic container from whatever garden shop she bought it from. Father is the one who plants it in our yard, next to the driveway in the only spot of sunlight he can find, shovel pushing under the grass that has just began to grow green again.

Mother does not watch, instead she scrubs the kitchen tile again. She says that cleaning is what blocks out the thoughts. She says that having a baby and losing a mother are two of

hardest things in the world, and that doing them at once could kill someone. She bathes me once a day, sometimes twice, until my skin turns dry and red. Until Father tells her to stop.

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Brother tries again to explain just how dangerous his job is. He rubs two lines along his thighs where the harness sits. He cuts down big trees, he reminds me, not the saplings that knock against power lines, the ones so tall you can't see the top. I do not think he is brave, as he hopes me to. Instead I can only imagine him swinging aimlessly from the top branch, like a kite whose tail has gotten all tangled in the leaves. One tug of the string and he would fall.

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Brother does not return until all but one of our trees are gone.

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When the second tree, the one that blocked the driveway fell, only a few weeks after the first, Mother said it was if they were trying to trap us in. Blocking the driveway and the garage door. Keeping us captive. This, at the time, was a happy thought: all of us trapped together, drinking iced tea out of wine glasses, reading stories on the kitchen floor, listening to the sound of rain hitting against the bark of the tree barricade around us.

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Brother sends a birthday card to Father four months late, or maybe eight months early. He writes in a red pen that is running out of ink so that the page is covered in indentations and scribbles. All that he manages to actually write, though, is his name, scribbled at the bottom. There is no "love" attached. I pretend not to notice. Father pretends not to care.

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The Christmas that one strand of lights will no longer fit around the ever fattening pine, is the same year Mother tells me to stop calling her "Glass Mommy," saying that it makes her feel fragile. I do not tell her that I call her that because she *is* fragile. Instead, I push my thumb against the skin above her elbow, to see a purple bruise begin to bloom. She swats my hand away. Later, I can hear her in the upstairs bathroom crying, where she runs the faucet to mask the sound. There is, I decide, more than one way to be fragile.

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The third tree falls while I am at summer camp. I do not notice it at first, only the way the backyard is filled with sunlight. Brother says that if we cut up the wood he will take it away, use it for his stove. Father lets me use the handsaw when Mother is not home. I cut uneven slices of bark and wood. I count the rings until I lose track and give up. The tree is old. Once we are finished dismantling the tree, Father tells Brother to come anytime to pick it up. Mother makes nice dinners all week, hoping that he will drop by and stay for a meal. She says that if she cooks it, he will come. Instead, Brother shows up two weeks later, in the middle of the night. He leaves the car running, high beams still on, while he loads half the wood into the trunk. After, he falls asleep in the backseat. When Father finds him, he brings out a paper cup filled with coffee. Mother makes oatmeal and eggs. Brother does not stay for breakfast.

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The only tree left is the pine tree. It is safe for now, the trunk thick, the branches short. In the winter, we pull on our boots and push out past the driveway to brush the snow from the lowest branches, so that the weight will not crack them. Once, when we wait too long to find a Christmas tree, Father suggests cutting the pine down. It is mostly a joke. Instead, Mother drives us all two hours to a Boy Scout tree stand in West Virginia. The whole ride home the branches stab against my back and neck, leaving little lines of scratches like tiny fingernails lines across my skin.

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Brother stops cutting down trees the year I turn sixteen, when he severs a tendon in his left hand. He moves from North Carolina to Alaska where he gets paid to fix broken TVs in a hotel on an island filled with more bears than people. After three months he stops calling, and after six he moves back into Father's house again, with two new dogs and handful of frown lines he has collected on the way.

When he moves in, Mother says the word "temporary" like a prayer, every time he leaves the room. She spends most of her time in her bedroom, sorting through baskets of baby clothes that have filled her closet for years. She no longer makes dinner, and stops calling Father by his name. Father buys her a new necklace, and replaces the slipcovers on the couch, and takes the lock off their bedroom door.

Brother buys me paperback books from the thrift store. He says I need to read more, but his smile is less forceful. He no longer draws out the "S" in "sister." His glow is fading, the beetles and termites hollowing him out. I couldn't see it then, but now, I wonder how I didn't notice the tell-tale lean. The weakening of his branches. One good gust of wind, and he was bound to fall — to crash through the front window, to land on the dining table we never use, to let all the cold air in.

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## Red Velvet

*Olivia Murphy, Berry College*

When John Fuller gets to work, he parks his car down the street or around the block and slips in through the black door. There, his dressing room is waiting. He does his makeup first. Foundation evens out his complexion. Lip stain is dabbed into his cheeks and the tip of his nose to give him a rosy glow. His bushy white eyebrows are groomed with white mascara. The rest of the products, he says, have names he can't remember. For the finishing touch, he combs out his snowy beard, sprinkles it with white glitter, and hairsprays it in place. Transforming into Santa Claus, arguably the world's most beloved mythical character, is a routine he has down to about twenty minutes.

The night's suit is chosen based on the event. Nicer photo shoots call for special-ordered beauties with especially plush red velvet folds. For a parade, something lighter and cheaper suffices. John favors Party City for these occasions. Regardless, the white fur trimming the neck and wrists is always thoroughly fluffed before he makes his entrance. Gloves come last. They're always elbow length to prevent any skin from showing. Regardless, he wears a white Under Armour ensemble underneath because it simply "gets hot under there."

For John, it was nigh impossible to avoid becoming Santa. His hair faded to white at 22, and his beard soon followed. He's of average stature – albeit a bit plump – with naturally rosy cheeks and crinkly blue eyes shaded by thick white brows. His coworkers in Delta's IT department affectionately nicknamed him "Santa," and naturally, he was advised by another veteran Claus in their ranks to take the next step: Santa School. John cites a conspicuous lack of motives for his decision to enroll. He says he "just ended up doing it." Retirement was on the horizon, after all.

The Professional Santa Claus School in Denver, Colorado is a four-day affair over Labor Day weekend with an optional 38 weeks of preparatory activities. Prospective Santas are flown out, put up in local hotels, and left to prepare for a crash course on becoming the most lovable holiday character worldwide. Festivities start with a meet and greet over light refreshments. According to John, a lot of men interested in working as Santas are retired military looking for a vocation that's light and enjoyable – since it's nearly impossible to make a full-time living off of the seasonal gigs. Classes are held pertaining to the most significant aspects of Santa work, beginning with the history of the character and progressing into how to work the most popular types of "gigs". For photoshoots, students are instructed on how to sit kids on their knee, subtly shift their legs toward the camera at the best angle, and keep them smiling long enough for the flash bulb to go off. This, according to John, gives you hallucinations after a while. Typical Mall Santa work. Home visits from Santa involve games and activities to keep parties lively, and the right and wrong ways to give a present. "They even bring in reindeer," John laughs in recollection, "so we can learn how to handle 'em and all that. They're real dangerous animals, after all."

The appearance is debatably as important as the behaviors that follow it. Santas must have a consistent amicable demeanor. The voice drops to a bellow. The "ho ho ho's" must be rehearsed. Conversation topics are taught like charm school, and ensembles must be impeccable; Santa School even provides opportunities to order high-quality, brand-name, red-velvet Santa suits.

"Personally though, I don't mind the higher-end ones at Party City if I'm in a pinch," John says.

The cosmetology of the role is a taught skill as well, including lessons in makeup and bleaching any non-white beards as pure as snow. bleaching any non-white beards as pure as snow. Some men need "belly boosters" to appear more authentically chubby.

"I fortunately don't need one of those," John laughs, "and I don't need a fake beard

either. I'm actually a member of the International Brotherhood of Real Bearded Santas. We all talk online and have meet-ups sometimes."

Once training is complete, Santas are shipped back from whence they came with a textbook in hand and the ability to make magic. Plus, marketing advice.

According to John, a good reputation can bring unpredictable opportunities. Surprisingly, Facebook is the most popular and competitive forum for advertising Santa services and building a business. Getting a name out there. Some highly sought-after American Santas are even recruited by events in Asian countries and paid to travel across the world for appearances. John himself works with a program called "Talk to Santa" which allows families to pay for a block of time to chat with Santa through Skype. He uses a custom backdrop to masquerade his home as the North Pole. Programs like these benefit children who may not have a way to see Santa otherwise, or just need an extra dose of the holiday spirit.

"My favorite event, though," he says, "has to be this one in Gainesville, Kentucky; I mean. They put me and my wife up in this hotel on the Ohio River.... she plays my Mrs. Claus sometimes you know, thinks it's fun. And it's a real nice hotel. We can see the trains rolling through town, which I've always loved. We like to joke that it's the Polar Express."

In Gainesville, John works with underprivileged children at a community Christmas party, handing out presents and giving them someone to talk to. He helps them to see the value of staying out of trouble during the brief conversations they have while sitting on his knee. His greatest pride was the moment he influenced one boy struggling with academic and social challenges to not drop out of high school. Many kids John encounters are living with special needs, too, which create challenges and makes holiday spirit even more appreciated. To John, that's the real value of his work – making a positive impact on children who may have scarce role models otherwise.

"So what makes a good Santa to you?" I ask toward the end of our conversation.

He replies, "Well, the jolly ones."



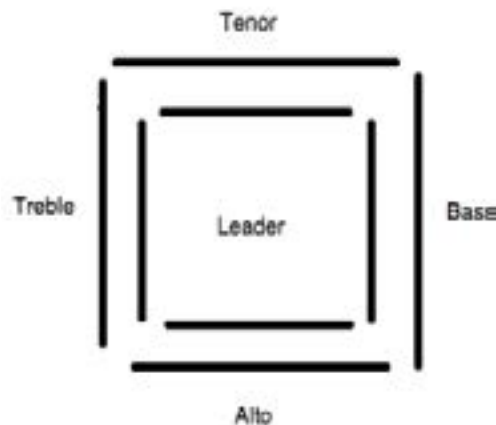
# If You Can Hear Your Neighbor, You Aren't Singing Loud Enough

Lauren Godfrey, Agnes Scott College

The sound did not carry, it hauled. Did not float, it launched. Did not ebb soft or flow loud: the sound was a tsunami that shattered me. The sound of a group of singers reached the bottom of the stairs in Emory University's chapel building, and I paused on the first step, savoring the sound made by human voices joined in open chords and parallel fifths and undiluted passion before eventually climbing the stairs to stand outside the chapel until singing stopped.

I had arrived an hour late to the *Sacred Harp* singing, which wasn't a problem, but having expected a crowd that I could slip into surreptitiously, I became nervous upon finding that the group actually numbered in the thirties. In a silence between tunes, I crossed the chapel's threshold and picked up a *Sacred Harp* tunebook from a cardboard box on a plastic, collapsible table. As I searched for a seat, ending up in the tenor section by mistake, the group began singing an unfamiliar tune. This was not a surprise—I had only ever attended two or three singings several years ago and, in any case, the *Sacred Harp* includes at least five hundred songs. Unable to hear the called page number in my frenzy to pick a seat, I croaked out notes at random that might fit into the chord until the song ended and the next leader took their place in the center of the hollow square.

This event was not a performance, nor was it a rehearsal. Participants would refer to the gathering at Emory as a singing. In his book *The Story of the Sacred Harp 1844-1944*, George Pullen Jackson, a champion for *Sacred Harp* research during the 1970s folk revival, writes that Sacred Harp music "is not listener's music. It is *singer's* music." The hollow square of a singing has four walls made up of four voice parts: tenors, the melody carrying section; altos, mostly women who sing slightly higher than the tenors; trebles, comprised of women who sing even higher than altos and men singing an octave below; and basses, almost exclusively men due to the part's low range of notes. The leader stands within this space and faces the tenors.



Soon after my arrival, a young woman who looked no older than sixteen assumed the role of leader for one or two songs. "One forty-eight at the top," she called, directing the group to a tune of her choosing, most likely one of her favorites. She readjusted her one-handed grip on a red hardcover tunebook as the singers surrounding her flipped to the page in their own books, and she stiffened her free arm into an L. An older man in the front row of tenors growled through a short spectrum of notes before settling on one which he sang as a *la*. Everyone else matched his pitch then rumbled and slid their way to a different *la* or a *fa*.

The only instrument here is the human voice—the sacred harp. Unlike other a

The only instrument here is the human voice-- the sacred harp. Unlike other a cappella traditions, there are no pitch pipes or starting notes played on a nearby piano because the specific notes on the pages don't matter. One person, called the key-heister or pitcher, chooses a starting pitch for the tenors, and the other sections use this note to find their respective starting pitches. *Sacred Harp* singers don't adhere to a song's written key signature but sing in a key of convenience, a range of notes that is neither too high nor too low for those in attendance. It's a rough sound, this tuning, because the singers don't search for their notes under their breath but sing *fortissimo*. If you have ever heard a highland bagpiper preparing their instrument, the peculiar sound of harmonized notes escaping at random as the piper fills the bag with air, you have an idea of the sound coming from this chamber of people. Once pitches have been found, hardly a breath separates the tuning from the singing.

At Emory, the leader swung her free arm up and down, chopping measures in half as the group sang through the song, one verse through with syllables and then from the beginning with words. At the end of the song, she returned to her seat. A man in the bass section called out a name from a sheet of paper, prompting a middle-aged man to assume the position of leader, call out a page number, and start the whole process over. These singings exhibit democratic qualities I have never witnessed in other musical traditions. Structure exists around the singings: someone needs to organize the gatherings, another person needs to take notes, someone else needs to spread the word. Within a singing, however, every person who wants to lead gets a chance to stand in the center. This musical tradition developed much like America itself, and around the same time. Scots-Irish and English immigrants brought their customs and traditions across the Atlantic with them, including singing schools. Leaders of Protestant denominations created singing schools to make written sacred music more accessible to those with no formal musical training. While those who started singing schools probably had righteously democratic reasons to spread the joy of music, motivation likely also came in the form of appalling congregational singing. Imagine you are with a large group of people, all singing from the same book, and the enthusiastic, older gentleman behind you isn't the only person off key; every person is singing the wrong notes at the wrong times.

Often, a pastor or preacher taught psalms during a service by first singing a verse himself and then inviting the congregation to repeat it with him. This method did not lend itself to a cultivation of vast repertoires, however, so singing schools set out to teach the musically illiterate to read. Most singing schools used a four syllable solfege system. The seven syllable solfege system gained more of audience, appearing on the walls of elementary school music classrooms and spilling from televisions playing *The Sound of Music*: Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do! The four syllable system used by singing schools looks rather different: Fa Sol La Fa Sol La Mi Fa!

New England singing schools eventually incorporated a new method to help their students understand written music. Instead of every note-head having the same, circular shape, every syllable got its own shape.



For someone like me, someone who learned to read music at a young age and continued to advance her practice throughout her life but never got around to taking a course in music theory, shape-note singing is just unfamiliar enough to intimidate. Upon first encountering a shaped note, I reacted with fascination and bewilderment because the different shapes are cool but they must not really make any difference. I was at Old Time Week of the Swannanoa Gathering, a musical summer camp held at Warren Wilson College outside Asheville, with my parents and the younger of my two older brothers. He had recently plunged himself into traditional American music which entailed, greatly to my annoyance, teaching himself fiddle techniques at home on a violin that he



violin that he had, until that year, used solely at school with the high school orchestra.

Even though I had no interest in traditional American music, my parents refused to leave me behind, so I signed up for the only class that seemed relevant for a veteran of school chorus and church choir. The shape-note singing instructor, a man with a prominent belly and a short, white beard, wore overalls to most if not all of the classes that week, and I adored him. He told the class beautifully crafted personal stories, and he expressed such reverence for shape-note singing that I came to appreciate shape-notes by the end of the week. Truthfully, the odd notation continued to throw me each time we sang a new song and I definitely cheated by recalling tricks I learned from years of formal singing.

I didn't disregard the method, though, because singing is mysterious to me. I have no idea how I can think a note in my head that I then turn into sound without even a second of searching. If a choral director tells me to pop a note out of the top of my head, I know what to do. A director once said "I want you sing this duet with Bryn. Your skin voice will blend well with her bone voice." This distinction does mean something, though it is difficult to articulate. Singing has a lot to do with intuition and monitoring internal sensations, like the slight buzz in my forehead that comes from singing in a head voice or the rumble in my sternum from singing in a chest voice.

Shape-note singing, I think, depends on a singer's willingness to tune into their own body and trust that the next note they sing will be right, and the next, and the next, especially at the first few singings. There is a reason for the peculiar notation, the shapes giving common intervals (third, fourth, octave) a visual dimension, but a person does not need to understand even that much music theory to sing from the *Sacred Harp*. It's a bit like spatial awareness: if you are in a pitch black room, you will stretch out your arms and walk slowly but still trip over or bump into a few things. Eventually you will get your bearings, though. Eventually, you will have an idea of the space between the wall and the couch or the table and the wall.

Most people wait until they can deftly maneuver these intervals and any tune thrown their way before consenting to lead the group. At the Emory singing, I longed to stand in the center of the square and a man, who seemed to have organized the event, even asked me if I would like to lead. "No, thank you though," I squeaked out with a nervous smile. He smiled back before walking away in search of another leader. Leading is a lot of pressure. Leading means keeping tempo and, even though nobody hears anyone but themselves, a leader wants to at least appear self-assured. I watched the man move to another person and she looked about as startled by the question as I had felt.

Having too few people willing to lead is a problem that comes up at many singings, particularly the smaller, less established ones where there are fewer participants. Some churches, mostly in the South now, put on local gatherings twice a month or hold a regional gathering once a year. These events attract people like me, people fascinated by the idea, but they also have a large constituency of regulars, people who grew up on songs in the *Sacred Harp* and itch to lead their favorite tunes at each singing.



Although tunes like “New Britain”—“Amazing Grace” rebranded—do exist between the covers of the Sacred Harp, the average tune consists of macabre lyrics. “There is a fountain filled with blood,” and similar phrases fill the pages of tunebooks, depicting a God and a dark world. These harsh words startle me still, but the people who sing the tunes cherish them for the memories and traditions they bring back. Several tunebooks from the late 19th century reveal a cultural shift towards gospel, often preferred by young people for its pleasant chords and uplifting lyrics. The *Sacred Harp* remained relevant, however, due to the mothers and fathers and grandparents who were not willing to leave the tradition behind.

The group I joined at Emory, though enthusiastic, probably had few lifetime practitioners of Sacred Harp music, and this place did not seem an appropriate venue for the sound of unrestrained voices in simple, tight harmony. A primitive white building somewhere in the backwoods seemed safest, somewhere the sound could dissipate into the trees, without any chance of disturbing the students on the quad in their coordinated lounge attire. The first snatches of sound I heard at the bottom of the stairs moved me, yes, but the woman in the colorful, long skirt whose three young children scrambled around the chapel did not sing for an audience. Neither did the young man in a black dress-shirt topped with an absurdly colorful bowtie. Neither did the older, bearded men, or the woman breastfeeding her newborn. A person does not experience a *Sacred Harp* singing until she stands in the middle of the hollow square, hears four parts weaving together in harmonies and disharmonies tighter than those found in most musical traditions.

I felt humbled and awed my first time leading a group. One of the last days at Swannanoa, my instructor invited me to stand in the center and lead alongside him. The sound shocked me because everything is different in the middle. Even those who sit in the front rows of their sections do not get the full experience—I would likely faint from prolonged exposure to the center sound. Elation and sorrow swelled within my chest and tears welled in my eyes as I sliced measures in half with my right forearm. For the first time, I grasped the way my religious friends feel in their places of worship, a sense of peace within unity. I felt as if I held every person, every treble and tenor and alto and bass, in my chest. For a few moments, I sang with their voices as well as my own.



## Coffee Conversations

*Anna Lachkaya, Agnes Scott College*

A white Honda honks its horn outside my apartment with one short “beep.” I run to the window and see my mother waving as she gets out of the car and walks around to the passenger’s seat. Shuffling through the porch screen doors, I drag behind the laundry bag and try to hurry. It is time for the weekend visit with my parents, an appointment I have kept until now at twenty-eight years of age. But first and foremost it is time for my Saturday coffee date with Mama. Around the car to the driver’s seat, I lean across, kiss my mother’s cheek, and take the wheel. “*Labrīt Mamīt*” (Good morning, Mommy). My mama works night shifts at the hospital nearby. Driving is my attempt to give her a nap and a short break.

*“Love is a choice.” My mother would often say this when I was growing up.*

*“If you can convince yourself you fell out of love, you can convince yourself you are in love.”*

*As the last remaining Indo-Europeans, Latvians were more traditional and conservative, but in modern times, only a few families practiced arranged marriage. My family followed the traditions of no dating and arranged courtship for religious reasons. And so my mother modeled the way for me and my sisters by guiding her emotions and choosing my father, just as he in turn chose her. When we moved to the United States, I was fourteen years old and already knew there would be no dating before marriage. At that time, I agreed with my mother wholeheartedly.*

My favorite coffee shop in Saint Paul, Minnesota, is Dunn Brothers. This franchise is scattered across the Midwest, with a couple more in Texas, but unfortunately not anywhere near or in Georgia where I live now. Each coffee shop has its own coffee roasting machine that smells like bliss. What makes the coffee shops interesting is that they cater from the local bakery in the area, and so the bakery items are a pleasant surprise wherever you go, made fresh each morning. This morning I see the scones, the muffins, the apple fritters, the croissants, Danishes, and a variety of cakes and doughnuts. My mind wanders. Today I will tell her among these friendly faces, I think, and try to keep my heart from racing.

*I was sixteen years old and it was April Fool’s Day when all my friends at work were calling their boyfriends and playing pranks. I worked second shift at Wells Fargo, and took a bus there right after high school classes ended in the late afternoon. This day, my hand flew over the calculator trying to balance the check drawer. My best buddy Maria was next to me and was leaving a message for her boyfriend. “I’m pregnant!” she said, hung up and burst out laughing. She coaxed me to join the fun, and I gave in and left a message for my parents that I had run away with an American and was now married. When my sister picked me up in the car later at night, she was crying. “How could you do this to us?! What will people think? We cried all day and then made peace with it and went to buy new bed sheets for your wedding night.” I couldn’t say a word as I sat next to her, horrified. I had forgotten to call back... When I got home I dropped on my knees in front of Mother, buried my face in her lap, and cried for forgiveness. “It is April Fools Day,” I tried to explain. She looked down at me, her face incomprehensible. “But you never lie.”*

To this Dunn Brothers coffee shop I dragged my mama after her nightshift for my once-a-week cup of espresso until this Saturday morning when I would break the news. But mostly, and this I could not have admitted to then, I wanted to get to know my mother. As the last of eight children, I felt like I never saw my parents growing up in Europe, because they were working two jobs to support the large family. And then one day after I had already moved out in my later twenties, I looked at my overworked, graying Mother, and realized how little I knew her. Now when she was working less and had just a few years left until retirement, I found myself past the parent-blaming stage. I wanted to hear her story and what her childhood was like. Had she ever fallen in love? I wanted to know if she had made choices she regretted, or laughed hard enough to cry.

I thought surely it will take us just a few months, but it is now more than two years later.

*"Why didn't you tell us Tim proposed to you?" I tried not to laugh. "I'm only 18 years old, Mama." I already felt behind my peers in maturity, and the idea of skipping dating and getting married so young now terrified me. Yes, most of my sisters did it, but something changed inside me in this country during high school. My mama said I had become Americanized. I now wanted to go to college. But that day I listened to her advice, nodded, and gave her more respect than I had given Tim. I may have called him crazy... I felt bad about that now. "You are supposed to say you will think about it and pray about it, and then discuss it with your parents." I promised her I would next time.*

We walk inside and stand in the long line. This coffee shop just happens to be across the street from Macalester College, and its students do not like to sleep in even at 6:45 in the morning. "Will you see if there's a table?" My mama walks off to the right behind the wall where the roundtables are scattered, while I look in the display case ahead to my left hoping my cherry cheese Danishes are still there. The smell of the bakery items makes me ecstatic and this terrible sweet tooth is probably the reason why I am now allergic to wheat. Soon I join her with the plates of Danishes, the napkins, the stir sticks, and run back for the steaming clay cups of coffee. We sit in silence in the midst of buzzing conversation, inhaling the aroma, the perfect extra hot temperature, checking out the newest art displays on the walls. Every time we come here, I admire and smell the Danishes, the twisted rounded dough, the cheese in the middle, the whole cherries scattered around.

*"You are twenty-five years old already. Papa has arranged for you to go back home this December." Sure enough, the day had arrived. "You said you will find someone on your own, and it hasn't happened yet. You said you will give it a chance at twenty-five." There was pity in my mother's voice this time. Deep breaths. I forced myself to nod, faced my father, and thanked him. Never disagree with your parents. I clenched my hands behind my back. Never disobey. A few months later I flew to Latvia and sat across from my auntie at the dinner table. The big plates with the tiny potatoes on them looked funny to me as I waited for my aunt to speak. "You have put on some weight." She said it gently, smiling at me apologetically. Did she not know I would raid her fridge during the night anyway? I had already decided to do everything in my power to sabotage this courtship. I knew what had worked in the past. One could either act immoral by introducing inappropriate topics at the dinner table like losing one's virginity, or swing to the opposite side of the spectrum and be religious. And so this time I chose to be holy. I quoted Bible scripture, frowned at his glass of wine, pulled back my hair severely, and refused to put on makeup during my stay there. The long skirts with shirts buttoned to the chin convinced him I must instead answer the calling to be a nun.*

The coffee must have kicked in because my mama starts to critique the paintings. I always thought she would make an excellent judge on one of those reality shows where people sing or dance. Honest and direct to the point of cruelty, but with a sense of humor, she makes me snort up my precious coffee. I am grateful Latvian is such a rare language and nobody understands what she is saying, because now she is in the middle of a fast paced stream of thought. "That huge house has too many bedrooms, and in America probably just as many bathrooms and only people with diarrhea live there." I watch her inspect each painting and make her comments. Sometimes she gets up to get a closer look, lets the air wheeze past her missing front teeth and shakes her head. "*Ka nav, tad nav.*" (literally: it is not then there is no). I suppose nobody would even need to understand the language to know exactly what she thinks.

*After my trip to Latvia at twenty-five years of age, for the first time in my life, I felt like my father had let me down. I always thought he was a man of principle; his standards unmovable. And yet he was willing to give me to a man in whom I could see neither kindness nor respect. "Can you understand the kind of future you might have had? You wouldn't have had to work!" But I want to work, I thought. I made myself small and still, awed by his thunderous voice and hard hands. There were only the coffee cups between us on the kitchen table, the only tie this morning. I looked down at them since I knew there was a beggar in my eyes. Let me go, I wanted to say. I'm too different to ever go back, I wanted to say. But I did not.*

The question “how are you doing?” is very much an American thing. It is not something I expected my mother to ask today. When I came to this country at fourteen, I was surprised that people would ask that question and keep walking. I once asked someone if she really wanted to know, took her by the hand, sat down, and proceeded with an honest examination of my day. Even when I knew that I had just violated a social norm, I still kept doing it. Too literal, they would say, you’re too literal! Back home people would sit and wait and allow the silence to open comments and conversation. Only specific questions are expected and only honest smiles. “What’s so funny?” They asked me on my last visit. “You have adopted the fake smile of a foreigner.” And I know now that I have.

*Just a few months before this coffee date, I had another discussion with my eldest sister. “You’re running into the wrong kind of men with all this salsa dancing. You need a nice Latvian man. Or any immigrant will do! They are the only ones here who are like us and who understand foreigners.” I could hear concern in my sister’s voice but I could not sit quietly. “Do you see any Latvians here?” I hadn’t met a single one who I wasn’t related to in all the years I had lived here. She knew I was in a relationship, but she did not call him by name or acknowledge his existence. Even after three years. And this time I did not remind her.*

I know this must be the day and being in a public place like the coffee shop is perfect. I start off slowly, stalling, sharing about my job, my school work. I can tell she can tell that something is on my mind, but she does not press. She finishes her coffee in one long gulp, cleans her plate by picking up every crumb with her finger, and dumps the napkins and the empty sugar packets in the dirty cup. And so I just say it, without looking at her, staring at the painting in front of me across the chairs and the varied faces. I reach for her hand. She snaps it away and I can see it is shaking. Her eyes fill with tears that do not fall because anger wins. She stares at my flat stomach and calls me a name. A razor sharp name. I watch her beloved face swim, clearing, and swim again, her image sharp and perfect.



## The Tao of Good Families, Bad Families

*Soniah Kamal, Georgia State University*

En route to my first day at my new school in Lahore Pakistan circa 1992 our car halts at a red light. My mother's fingers still on her wooden rosary. She turns to me. I know what she is going to say. And she says it: "Do not speak to any boy under any circumstance."

I want to snap "I know" but instead I nod and turn to look out the window. A flock of fist-sized birds fly from a phone wire and follow each other towards a drab sun. The sky is so polluted, it is more grey than blue. A roadside vegetable vendor is setting up woven baskets brimming with carrots, tomatoes, coriander, lemons. In the cool of the early morning dew, his wares seem as if they will remain this plump, this fresh, this firm until they enter some kitchen and meet some knife. But the cool morning is deceptive, for morning will melt into afternoon and it will get hotter and hotter and brighter and brighter until not even regular sprinklings of water can revive vegetables wilting on the roadside.

"Did you hear me?" My mother swats my knee. "If there is any hanky-panky, your father and I will disenroll you, studies or no studies."

I am nineteen years old and so far the only serious hanky-panky I have indulged in is speaking to boys over the phone. One boy was the brother of a classmate, another boy was another classmate's secret boyfriend's good friend. In other words these are not random boys who happen to fling their numbers at random girls as boys are wont to do in a segregated Pakistan.

That the boys and I were chatting about movies and music did not matter to my parents. As far as my mother was concerned, talking to a boy would ruin my reputation and thereby my chances of making a decent, respectable marriage—the reason d'etre, as my mother has reminded me since childhood, of any good girl's life.

My father, though he agrees with my mother about marriage, is big on education. Since we are British citizens it is assumed that once I complete high school, I will go to England for college. In Lahore, LHS is the only school which offers the 'A' Levels, an entry requirement of all British colleges. LHS is also co-educational. That boys and girls study together dismays my parents, but for the sake of my future, they have no choice but to allow me to apply. However, from the moment my mother opened my acceptance letter, she has only one mantra: I am not to speak to boys under any circumstances.

Now I say, "Not even if I'm choking?"

"I would rather," she says, "you die."

I do not mean to be insolent, but I cannot help rolling my eyes.

"Your father and I trust you to behave," my mother says as she swipes a finger under my eye and retrieves a fallen eyelash. "Please, do not betray us."

The red light turns green and we move on. Truth is, the last thing I want is let my parents down. And yet it seems I always inevitably do, at least according to them. For starters, in a culture where children are not even supposed challenge parental authority in any way, I constantly question my parent's wisdom: Where in the Quran does it say girls can't smoke and boys can? Where in the Quran does it say boys can go topless but girls can't? Where in the Quran does it say that my brother can have a telephone installed in his room but I can't, even though I'm nine years older than him?

Furthermore, I do not have a natural aversion to siren songtresses such as Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and Samantha Fox. This worries my mother to no end and she often remarks: Which good family will accept a Madonna-type as their daughter-in-law? My mother is far from impressed when I say that I might not accept such a prudish family. I tend to emulate the likes of Madonna, a fact that upsets my mother most of all since *everyone and anyone can see*

Madonna, a fact that upsets my mother most of all since *everyone and anyone can* see my supposed loose morals in my neon leggings, my tie-dye t-shirts under which I wear a black bra, my six earrings in each ear which I pierced myself, my bright-red, henna-dyed hair. In fact, one of the reasons my mother gave permission to me to attend LHS is because they have a uniform of sorts: the only colors permitted are unembellished khaki, whites and reds, and also no western wear for girls.

As our car turns into the leafy residential road which houses the home-turned-into-private-school, my mother begins one of her lectures on the 'Goods': good girls, good marriages, good families. I am not fond of any phrase which begins with the word 'good,' but I am particularly allergic to the term 'good family'.

*What is a bad family?*

But I have yet to receive a proper answer. All I get are baleful gazes and admonitions to stop asking stupid questions. Apparently I know full well what a good family is, because every Pakistani knows what constitutes a good family in Pakistan. Good family can refer to descending directly from Prophet Muhammed or at the very least from the tribe he belonged to, in which case class does not matter that much. Barring linkage to the Prophet, good family can refer to families who were once of noble lineage whether currently poor or rich. But most good families refer to the upper-middle-class and elite. LHS is considered a good school, which means it will have only 'good children' from 'good families'.

Our car joins a long line of cars inching towards a tall metal gate where a lean, elderly man peers into every car. When he pokes his neck through our car window, he tells my mother to call him Khan and that he is the LHS watchman. With his bright eyes, Khan drinks in my mother and me. Then, stroking his long orange beard, he assures my mother that she is not to worry, for, he says "It is Khan's God-given duty to keep a strict eye out for all shenanigans."

My mother beams at this unsolicited ally. She presses money into Khan's hand, and, even though Khan says there is no need, no need, I can see that he is pleased at this tip to spy on me. Later it will occur to me that this is how Khan gauges whether students come from a liberal or conservative family:

conservative family equals a tip

liberal family equals a laugh.

I am not the only student from a conservative family attending LHS. LHS is a relatively new school and, at the moment, boasts around sixty students. Of these sixty, approximately nineteen are girls and of these nineteen, only four are in my class. That is, in a class of twenty four, there are twenty boys and only four girls. All four of us, Farha, Abeer, Shireen and I, were classmates at our previous school. Of the four of us, only Shireen is from a liberal family. Shireen's parents have no objections to her speaking to boys over the phone or even occasionally having them over at her house. Admittedly, for Pakistan this is *very* liberal. Shireen is also my best friend, and admittedly, my parents have no idea exactly how liberal her family is. As for Farha and Abeer, their families are as conservative as mine. In fact, as we share notes, we discover that a) all of us except for Shireen's mom has tipped Khan, b) Khan has promised each of our mothers to keep us locked in his gaze, and that c) each of our mothers has forbidden us from speaking to any boy under any circumstances.

Farha, Abeer and I exchange dismay: Do our mothers really mean not a *single* word? And what are we supposed to do if a boy speaks to us? Are we to pretend we are deaf and mute? Or are we to be rude? Or should we outright tell him that we are good girls and that good girls are not to be spoken to? Shireen cackles with laughter at our conservative dilemmas, and next we know Farha, Abeer and I are laughing too, and in the next few seconds we are surrounded by boys who want to know what is so funny?

"Nothing," we say, "nothing is funny."

And there it is, before the first bell, before the first class, before the first day is

over, Farha, Abeer, and I have already transgressed. We are none the worse for it. And Khan is nowhere in sight. Our eyes meet and we agree: I won't tell if you won't tell.

\*

For the first few months there is nothing to tell. Sure, we have all made a good friend of one or two of the opposite sex which basically means we compare homework and class work and share a joke or two with a boy who is a friend. I have befriended a sweet soul with an acerbic tongue and a nervous laugh—Baz and I bonded over Chaucer in our English literature class.

Only Shireen has paired up. She and her boyfriend stroll along the LHS driveway, cokes in hand, oblivious to Khan's censure or the envy of other boys, and girls. I don't know about Farha or Abeer, but I am inundated with boys who have crushes on me which is what happens in a class of twenty boys and four girls. Seems almost daily that one boy or another pleads with Baz to let me know that they like me, really-really like me, and would I like to get to know them better, at the very least might I give them my phone number?

However while some part of all this attention is certainly the ratio of girls to boys at LHS, I'm also beginning to realize that being pretty can be a bane. Being pretty seems to imply that I will be stupid and most definitely boy-crazy. The fact is I've always been an A-plus student who, at moment, had zero desire to fall in love because in this country love is supposed to lead to marriage and I have no desire to get married yet. Also my parents have trusted me at this co-ed school and so not a single boy here, or anywhere as far as I'm concerned, is worth even a crush. Not the smartest boy of all, not the funniest boy of all, not the best looking boy of all who, by general consensus, is a boy named Jazz.

The first time I notice Jazz, Baz and I are sitting in the front lawn marveling over Chaucer's Wife of Bath and her many husbands. School has been in session for over two weeks when in walks this golden creature on crutches. (Later I find out Jazz had hurt his foot playing football and had been on bed rest). We watch as girls from Jazz's class swarm around him, the boys too. Baz picks at the acne on his nose.

"Damn he's good-looking." Baz laughs. "Why does God give so much to some and nothing to others?"

I spout some nonsense about how everyone has something.

"I bet," Baz says, "you'd go out with him if he asked you."

"I would not," I say and proceed to inform Baz that I am not one to be swayed by mere looks.

Khan passes by. He glances at Baz and gives me a look. I pretend I have not seen him. Every morning, the man peers into my car, tells my mother all is well, and grins at me when my mother without fail, presses money into his hands.

"I bet," I say to cheer up Baz, "Jazz has a really crappy personality."

A month later, Baz, having befriended Jazz over the ping-pong table set up in the quad, is happy to report to me that Jazz is a ridiculously nice guy and that—Baz is jittery with excitement—Jazz has been inquiring after *me*.

It is exciting that the guy so many of the girls have a crush on should be interested in me. But ultimately, I conjecture, as I sit reading in my usual spot at the far end of one of the brick boundary walls, I cannot afford to care. I am here to study hard so I can leave patriarchal Pakistan by getting into a good college abroad, and no amount of good-looking is going to derail me. Thankfully, since Jazz is a year senior to me we do not share classes and never have any occasion to bump into each other and, when we do happen to pass each other in the hallways, it so happens that we both quickly look the other way. So my surprise when one afternoon, when I have a free class and am sitting against the wall trying to make sense of John Donne and Metaphysical poetry, I hear a voice.

"Hello."

I shade my eyes with my palm and look up. Jazz is looking down at me. He's dressed in khaki pants and a white shirt. He's no longer on crutches but he's wearing a sneaker on one foot





sneaker on one foot and, on the injured foot, a blue and white flip flop.

I wish suddenly that I was wearing sandals prettier than plain brown chapels and that I'd painted my toenails. I adjust my white linen dupatta over my red kurta shalwar and wonder what he's making of the fact that I have six studs in each of my ears and a gold hoop in one nostril. My mother had been most distressed over my multiple ear piercings and nose ring. No one will marry you, she'd lamented, no good family will accept a girl who mutilates herself.

Jazz and I look at each other for a moment.

"You read a lot," he remarks.

He has such a soft voice, like velvet.

"How's your foot?" I squeak.

"Getting better." He smiles. "You're always sitting here reading."

"It's away from everyone so I can concentrate."

"I'm sorry, am I disturbing you?" He takes a step back.

"No," I say before I can help it. "It's fine."

"What are you reading?"

"A poem called *The Flea*."

"*Flea*?"

I say it's a love poem because I'm too shy to tell him it's about a man who is trying to get a woman to do it with him.

"I wish I could take literature," Jazz says. "I'm taking physics and chemistry instead. Have you read *Lord of the Rings*? It's a great book."

I shake my head and make a mental note to read it.

In subsequent conversations by the boundary wall, Jazz tells me that he also likes to sketch. He likes to sketch his versions of characters, for instance Aragorn in the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hamlet* from Shakespeare. Have I read *Hamlet*?

I tell him that *Antony and Cleopatra* is on the syllabus. I tell him *Antony and Cleopatra* are supposed to be like a grown up *Romeo and Juliet* because they too come to a bad end. All these love stories, I babble, come to bad ends.

I am aware of people watching us. I am aware of people wondering what we are saying. I am aware that Khan must be somewhere debating what to tell my mother.

Jazz squats next to me. I get a whiff of his musky cologne.

"Do you know," he says holding my gaze, "you have the saddest eyes I have ever seen."

Later Shireen will say this is corny. And had it been said in a tone, or a time, other than how and when Jazz said it, I would have agreed. But it was not corny, not to me, to me his observation was sincere. So sincere that I went home and studied my eyes in the mirror. Could someone see something inside of you that you didn't even know was there?

\*

It is Shireen who coaxes me into visiting Jazz at his house. She and her boyfriend are going to visit and surely, she says, I must be curious to see where Jazz lives. We drive into Jazz's neighborhood. His is a small house but in a nice part of town not too far from my own house. We park in the strip of grass outside his gate and enter. Jazz's house is furnished in blues and beiges. It smells of roses and cumin. Shireen and her boyfriend and Jazz and I sit at a ten seat dining table eating fresh fried samosas that the cook delivered on a silver tray. Did I imagine the inquisitive look the cook gave me? Huge blow-ups of Jazz's mother adorn most of her walls. I stir sugar into my coffee under her regal gaze. She is a sultry cross between Elizabeth Taylor and Winona Ryder. If I looked like her, I suppose I'd paper every wall with my image too.

Midway through our visit, Shireen and her boyfriend decide to leave for ice-cream. I find myself a lot annoyed with Shireen but also a little pleased to be alone with Jazz.

Jazz is only pleased. He wants me to meet his mother who is upstairs in her bedroom.

"Absolutely not," I say, absolutely sure that his mother will think I am a girl from a bad family to be visiting a boy at his home.

Jazz tells me not to be silly. I'll have to meet her sooner or later so why not just get it over with now.

We climb up a small flight of carpeted stairs and into a large landing with bedrooms off either side. His mother's bedroom is a flurry of white carpeting, ivory furniture, and wall to wall mirrors. She is sitting on a velvet prayer mat, her back towards the door. I can see her myriad reflections as she rises, sits, genuflects. We waited quietly, patiently for her to finish a seemingly never-ending Maghrib prayer. Finally she says the dua, runs her palms over her face, and turns around.

"Come in, come in," she says as she walks briskly towards Jazz and, standing on tip toes, plants loud kisses on his cheeks. She has a bit of a rough accent and a gnarly voice, as if her vocal cords are serrated, but I suppose, in some quarters, a raspy voice is sexy.

"Ammi," Jazz says, "this is Soniah."

His mother gives me a cursory hug and then motions us to follow her to her king size bed where she reclines against a hill of plush pillows. She beckons me beside her. I perch at the edge of an appliquéd bedspread, mesmerized by the fat diamonds snug on the slim fingers she's using to muss up her wavy, chestnut hair.

She asks me how I like LHS, remarks that Jazz claims I'm very good at literature, then says that she can see why Jazz likes me. I am warm with pleasure and embarrassment. She tells Jazz to tell the cook to bring her tea and a snack, then she grabs the remote control, switches on *Baywatch*, muses that Pamela Anderson has the perfect body, and, just like that, we are dismissed.

I find myself in Jazz's bedroom. Jazz's room is transformed into an icicle by the A.C. on full. On one side of the room is a dark wood dressing table with neatly aligned brushes, colognes and lip balms, and, on the other side, a wall-to-wall, ceiling to floor bookcase. Between the two, his ample bed.

I sit on the sofa furthest away from the bed. He starts pulling books he recommends off his bookshelf. I should not be here. The thought keeps slithering through my head and coiling around my heart even as I flip through *Lord of the Rings* and *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*. But really, I tell myself, why not since we are *only just good friends*.

It will not be until my third visit to Jazz's house that we declare it is Love. Immediately after the declaration, guilt grips my slipping, sliding heart.

*Do Not Speak to Any Boy Under Any Circumstance.*

*Do Not Betray Us.*

I can hear my mother loud and clear.

The truth is I'm not sure when I fell in love. Was it after Baz told me that I'd be a fool to not at least give Jazz a chance? Was it after Shireen asked me which Prince I was waiting for? Was it after I realized that I'd begun waiting for Jazz to interrupt my reading at the boundary wall? Or was it after he gifted me with a poster sized sketch of Hamlet reclined against a parapet with the 'To be or Not to Be' speech copied out on the side? Surely it is love which has me braving Khan's wrath when Jazz and I stroll the LHS driveway? Although Jazz soon wins Khan over by bribing him with more money than my poor, unsuspecting mother is forking over.

Mine is a never-ending guilt which will only end with a marriage or engagement, a prospect which would even now thrill my mother even though I am only nineteen. But Jazz has years of studies before him, as do I, and a happily ever after is very far away, and, though Jazz and I would joke about honeymoons and kids' names, we never discussed marriage in any seriousness.

Consequently, I'd return from Jazz's house only to curl up on my prayer rug and spend hours begging Allah for forgiveness. My mother would see me praying and

at my increasing piety, convinced that I was the perfect daughter.

\*

Calamity begins with Linda Goodman's *Love Signs*, a guide to matches based on astrology. I am Pisces, Jazz is a Scorpio. I am March-born, he is born in November. Along the way, I discover I am seven months older than him. This cannot be. After all some things naïve damsels take for granted: that the guy will be taller and older.

I constantly worry about what my mother, twelve years younger than my father, will think since in our culture good wives are always younger than husbands because, apparently, women age faster than men. My friends remind me that age is just a number, but I am having a hard time seeing it that way. It is only when my sister asks me to test her on the Prophet's wives for an upcoming exam, that Allah makes it okay: Prophet Muhammad's first wife, the wealthy widow Khadijah, was older than him by fifteen years. Whether they actually fell in love or they arranged their union purely for business' sake, for me their age gap gladly sets the precedence; I am older than Jazz and Islam had decreed that okay.

\*

It is a school night when I receive a telephone call from Assiya-- at this moment in time, a good friend of mine in whom I've confided about Jazz.

"I have something to tell you," Assiya says. "But first, sit down."

"It's okay. I know."

"You know!"

"Yup." I chuckle. "And it's very okay."

Assiya's breathing grows hot and heavy over the phone as if she can't believe she's just wasted her time.

"Frankly," she says, "I don't know how you are so okay."

I start to tell her about Prophet Muhammed and Khadijah and she stops me, her laugh laced with relief.

"Darling," she says, "age is the least of your problems." She hisses. "*It's his mother.*"

I imagine affairs, adultery, threesomes. I imagine drinking, drugs, divorce. I imagine lesbians. It's prostitution.

\*

That night, I lie cracked open in bed. The fan creaks above me in endless circles. Out the window, stars weave cobwebs in the pitch black sky. I try to even my breathing, but again panic pounds my every nerve.

I get up to pace.

If I was a good girl, if I had any honor, any sense of decorum, I would have immediately broken up with Jazz. If I was a good girl I would never have been with Jazz to begin with. If I was good, I would never have spoken to any boy under any circumstances. There is nothing that can make this all right.

"Are you sure?" I'd asked Assiya. "Are you absolutely sure?"

After all, it didn't take much in Pakistan for a woman to be labeled a prostitute. Being caught smoking in public could do the trick, or showing a bit of cleavage. But Assiya was surer than sure. In fact, it was her mother who'd identified Jazz's mother.

"But," I mumbled, "they live in a good area in a good house. They have to be good family."

Assiya clicked her tongue. Jazz's mother was not some street hustler or call girl. Rather her clientele was high end.

"Not that," Assiya added cheerfully, "it changes the fact that lower end or upper end, a prostitute is a prostitute."

That was that then—the verdict all civil society would pass.

"Poor you," Assiya said, "who ever thought you'd end up doing the breaking up."

I had to break up. There was no question about that. After all, my association with Jazz could have an impact on the fortunes of my friends and family. What had they done to deserve this? What had Jazz done?

My pacing was not helping me. I went down to the kitchen for a pack of matches. I went into the living room and fished out cigarette ends from my father's ashtray. My father who thought mere singers and models, actresses and air stewardesses qualified as prostitutes. My father who had kissed me on the forehead and told me he trusted me to never shame him. My father who worked long hours for a daughter who had done just that.

In my bathroom, I opened the small vent and began to puff the remaining life out of these lifeless cigarette ends. Assiya had said that her mother had said no one knew whether Jazz's father had married his mother. I sucked hard on a stale end remembering now that, when I'd asked Jazz here his Dad was, Jazz had mumbled something about him passing away? Or had he said 'was away'? I hadn't asked for clarification then because I hadn't wanted to be intrusive.

I tossed a cigarette end into the toilet bowl and pulled the flush. It refused to go down. I stared at the stubborn end floating in the trapped pool. The enormity of it hit me: my parents will not kill me; rather this would murder them.

In this case marriage would not save us from ignominy.

There was no redemption in marrying a prostitute's son.

In this patriarchal society only a man marrying a prostitute is regarded as a noble deed for only he is able to confer respectability.

I get on the prayer mat and grab my rosary: *Forgive me, Mummy. Forgive me, Daddy.*

\*

The next day, I did not go to school. I could not. My mother came into my room and took my temperature. I had a high fever. Her palms should have been cool and soothing against my forehead and yet her touch left me aching. She fed me medicine. She told me she'd tell the cook to make me chicken broth. I wished she would be horrid to me so I could hate her. Instead here she was putting cold cloths on my forehead. Why was she so conventional? So predictable? Why wasn't she the radical sort? The sort who didn't care what the world thought? But, when my father came to see me, my heart stumbled shamefully over its thoughts. I loved my father so much I would get a stomachache. When I was kid I used to think he was Prophet Muhammed, so morally upright was he. And here I was about to ruin him.

Later that day, I called Baz. I called Shireen. I could tell from Shireen's voice that even her parents would have reservations were she in this situation. Apparently Baz and Shireen had heard rumors. But they'd never considered they might be true and so had not thought it important to tell me. They were sorry. Sorry to have encouraged me. Sorry to have aided me. Sorry that I was going through this hell.

If this is hell for me, what then for Jazz who certainly had not chosen where and to whom he was born, anymore than, it occurred to me, his mother had. If anything, an uneducated woman, originally from Lahore's red light district, she'd done well, sending him to the best of schools, making sure he lived in a good neighborhood, giving him opportunities equal to all.

Did he know?

If he did should he have told me?

Could he tell me?

Had I been him what would I have said?

Finally, I fell asleep only to wake up when the muezzin called for the first prayer at dawn. I rose to pray. I thought of how my father always said that teaching me ritual was his and my mother's duty, but that in Islam there was no compulsion. That whether I prayed or

not, believed or not, blasphemed or not, it was between Allah and I. On Judgment Day, my father said, no one could intervene with Allah on anyone's behalf. Your actions will be judged by your intentions, Islam says. And my intention with Jazz was only pure.

In that early morning as I prostrated on the prayer mat and as the sun pushed itself into the sky forcing the grayness to part for swathes of clear blue, that was the moment I saw people as individuals rather than members of families good or bad. I would date Jazz for four years before we parted ways but that awakening was sown in me forever.









poetry has no investment in anything  
besides opennnness.  
it's not arguing a point;  
it's creating an environment.  
- claudia rankine





## Madame Clofullia

*Morgan Bilicki, Young Harris College*

A lady needs proper manners,  
     bearded or not. My parents grew  
     tired of hiding me, and sent  
 me away to learn, to charm,  
     to be poised and dainty in spite  
     of the hair – dark and full  
 like a man's, but softer, curling  
     above the neckline of my dress.  
     Yes, I wore dresses, long gowns  
 with lace and frills – mere rags  
     to show my form, the ornament  
     on my chin stealing all looks,  
 including Fortune's. I sometimes  
     wondered if my husband's fingers  
     twirled the tendrils of my hair  
 because it reminded him of his paint  
     brushes, the way he would rub  
     the fibers before starting a piece.  
 I attracted more looks than his art,  
     especially when the pregnancies  
     ruled out every claim that I was  
 a man. I started working for Barnum  
     and the rumors came back  
     after my hairy son was born,  
 my dresses hugging my figure again.  
     There was the court, the *is she*  
     *a he?* Ticket sales for my show  
 increased like the public opinions.  
     Three separate doctors examined me,  
     judging my body like livestock at a fair,  
 and in a way, I was. An unusual  
     specimen, my handler profiting  
     while I merely watched. Knowing Barnum,  
 he created doubt for the sake of the show,  
     hiring a man to speak against me, saying  
     I was not a worthy spectacle in his eyes.

## Persephone Shows All the Symptoms of PTSD

*Molly McDaniel, Agnes Scott College*

She still dreams about it, sometimes. It wakes her  
like a knife to the hand, blood anywhere

but on her throat. There is the red,  
not the taste but the feeling, and the childhood

river, its salt on the bottom, its fish like  
silver styrofoam bullets. Once, her hair

caught on a branch and the world  
went suddenly slow. She does not remember

who saved her—stifling darkness,  
a crushed wasp's shell, her shivering

body on a cement floor in a towel. And then  
he was everywhere, welcoming her home.

She thinks it happens every time  
someone writes another poem about her,

but she can't be sure. When she wakes  
there is her mother's perfume

and the glare of oil in the back of her throat,  
and she only realizes it was a dream

when she starts to cry. Because she never cried,  
not really—not when the soil closed on top

of her, not when the petals shook off their stems,  
not even when he came for her hands

## The Metric System

*Marlo Starr, Emory University*

This is a true story:

we learned to live with *them*,  
the spiders I mean, and they with us—  
watched them grow fat and shiny,  
mechanical in corners, spinning nests  
in our drawers. At night  
we listened while they hunted,  
their red hourglass bellies  
comical by then. When the preacher came  
past the truck line, my mother was smug:  
*Now he'll see how we really live.*

There are things that go unwitnessed  
not because they are hidden—  
no one looks twice at the surface.

The summer the lot filled  
with spray-stucco houses,  
I slept in a winter coat on the tiled roof  
and listened to the hum of neon lights  
in the distance, intimate with fear  
but no sense of danger.

**"My nana is not a fish"***Savanna Cingilli, Covenant College*

perhaps the river mistook  
her small body,  
hands, and feet,  
as a creature created  
or condemned  
to ingest its  
murky depths.

perhaps the river's current  
did not pit itself against  
my mother  
family  
mind  
heart,  
my well being.

my nana is not  
a fish.  
if any animal,  
a bird.

for birds belong in the  
sky  
not in rivers.  
made to sing,  
not gurgle dirty bubbles  
and mud.

"forced gills redeemed into  
heavenly wings,"  
my Irene bird sings,  
flying with hope-feathered wings.

## Abecedarian for a Revisionist History (November 9, 1989)

*Marlo Starr, Emory University*

Alone in the seafood factory, women  
bend over a fresh  
catch. All night  
dividing slabs, they go numb to the sounds,  
electric buzz, stutter of fluorescents, and the creep of  
fish-handler's disease swelling around fingerbones.  
Gray guts and gristle, a thousand open beaks, they  
hammer at heads,  
iridescent scales, shimmering particles fly, the growing pile of  
jettisoned bones. Why does it feel so much like  
killing when these carp, stiff with ice and rigor mortis, are  
long dead? Heaps on the conveyor belt tell a different story,  
make fortune's shape, she says,  
not unlike tea leaves, a providence that will justify their  
offering. Threadbare converts, young mothers and virgins, have been  
promised that nights of labor will  
quantify some measure in heaven,  
return glory to the  
Sea King, if they work until  
tomorrow's light. Breathing shallow, the odor  
ubiquitous, thick in their mouths and hair, and yet, how  
very small a sacrifice for so grand an empire. News comes of the  
Wall's fall, and the Sea King credits it all to his fish-maids. Their  
x-numbered days narrow to a moment, now forever  
young, kingdom come, the path to  
Zion paved with tuna and eel.

*(Note: The poem borrows and alters language from  
Keri Hulme's short story "Eyes of the Moonfish See Moonfish Pain.")*

## Blessed

Terrence Daye

*"The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance even as it receives."*

*-Between the World and Me, Ta-nehisi Coates*

My mother dealt like any man before her she dealt  
 on yellow days when our bodies were the only  
 sources of moisture we plucked  
 sprigs of magnolia out of our eyes ground  
 mortar and cinnamon into our skin to smell like something  
 not already rotten my mother worked a street  
 like no other I followed her an afternoon  
 when the yellow burned darkest and offset her  
 scent she passed less and less  
 for woman I saw her go  
 like any man top heavy and fruit  
 full I'd ask her *mama how*  
*do you eat a limoncillo*  
 she'd answer *mijo peel back the skin*  
*suck the inside*

## to you

Zachary Daily, Young Harris College

i thought of you once, on a red eye  
 from georgia to utah, when the aircraft  
 passed through a storm, and the pilot  
 didn't finish his warning before the plane  
 dropped (*fifty feet!*  
 they said), and my father had bruises  
 on his thighs, and my grandmother's  
 blouse was ruined, and i was bleeding  
 from my forehead, the drops blooming  
 in my cup of water

## Rinse

*Christell Victoria Roach, Emory University*

1.

Water has been most native on my tongue for some years now.

2.

In a dream, I am in a bowl as languages pour themselves into it, drowning everything. The brim is nowhere in sight, but tides gather from the ankles up. The whip of lips and breath is a water jet as I scream in an unfamiliar tongue. When the body is emptied of the last colonizing breath, my feet touch the seabed. Ocean in bowl. Skin is a weight unclasped. Here the blackness feels like a village. I walk to it, light wrinkling up my frame. The whiteness of the sun is an intrusion. The water swells into each ear, parts the lips as ritual; suddenly I am all water and part frame. The colony of the abysmal knows my name. The tower was Babeled as pieces of ocean, first. God did not like that they held currents in their hands, they said. Body limp as waterlogged dove, my feet tread water as I watch God.

3.

Pregnant, murdered, deceased, sickly, rebellious, injured slaves were thrown overboard. Sharks would follow ships like the *Wildfire* to spill their language into the blue.

– The Slave Deck of the Bark “Wildfire,” Brought into Key West on April 30, 1860

4.

I am on a glass-bottom boat with a friend, lingering in the bay. As she speaks of the case with the black boy, with the hood, I am staring at a clear sticker of a shark at the bottom of the boat. Her words are white noise chipping at my lips, and all I hear is wind passing over my ears. I try to drown her words. As she begins to speak of the girl who “must’ve had some sort of mental disorder” I lean over the side of the boat and cup my hands. A scoop of water to the face makes everything tingle differently than the sun whipping my skin.

5.

We are in Blue Springs walking up a road that feels like it is evaporating. The ground is unstable, and the heat frisks our bodies in waves. Messiah asks which part of the water cycle this is – I mean, which road – and I shake my head. We walk to the dock and overlook water so dark that it is not black. The lake sends ripples our way in knots, and I pause. Messiah is running back to the road screaming that they are alligators, and I feel that that has got to be some sort of profiling. As the lake-knots get closer to me (the dock is so close to the surface water, I feel I am standing on water) I see their shadows dissimilate. “Turtles!”

6.

When I was young, I learned how to play every sort of string game on Everglades field trips. Eventually I began to use river grass.

7.

Diana Nyad attempted to swim from Cuba to Florida and made it pretty far. I wonder if she saw any sharks. I wonder how many rafts made of Havana shanties were still falling, as she passed above them. I wonder if sharks ate the Afro-Cubans.

8.

It is 2016, and America is the country I was born in. I am American, the descendant of slaves. Yet for some reason water feels more like an embrace than English. I am convinced the ocean is our homeland, and I feel privileged to claim it as such. To say this water belongs to the diaspora.

9.

Dying whales are the elders our ancestors gave their language to. When they die, take the body as communion.

10.

"The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, came down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice": I was baptized with my eyes open. While underwater, I opened my mouth. Pastor pulled me up when he thought I was drowning. He began to speak in tongues, and for a moment all flesh in my mouth was bare. English possesses the sight, the mind. I brought handfuls of the water to my face, and the whole congregation watched. Pastor shouted, Amen! and the water in my belly began to stir.

11.

"A dead whale's body falls for decades before reaching the ocean floor. Whole colonies feed on this descent, sculpting a sharper outline, separating marrow from bone, an elegy unto itself."<sup>1</sup>

12.

I learned to swim similar to how I learned English. I was thrown in.

13.

Chicago in the winter is an empty glass. A bullet filled with water. Both are placed in the cupboard of a den. When the video is released, my roommates say, "Well why didn't he stop walking away from the police?" I come out of my room, turn off all the lights, and begin to drink from the tap. I was content to drink 16 glasses of water in tribute. The video was loaded and paused on my phone and I'd yet to watch it. I drink until I know I can spill.

While the sink is running I press play. The water jet hiccups as someone elsewhere is looking for words in water, too. In the gaps of the water I hear a rapid succession of bullets, and am full. My roommates sit at the island with their heads above water. Everything was still, silent, yet our silences crashed against one another. I leave the apartment with the water still running.

When outside, the lips I drenched in water are immediately chipped under the badge of the blue line. I walk, feeling the ocean in me part for speech. As I pass an officer the waves collapse against each other again. I stretch my neck as if idling above water, and walk in this way until I am floating among black bodies. Black winter coats greet me with statements on their chests. Someone holds a blow-horn like an oxygen mask and presses it to my face. I neither breathe in, nor exhale.

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<sup>1</sup>Gutman-Gonzales, Mandy. "Suture." 4 Poems. Hobart. 2014 NOV. 13, [http://www.hobartpulp.com/web\\_features/4-poems-15](http://www.hobartpulp.com/web_features/4-poems-15)

14.  
At age 10 I had to make a conscious effort not to swallow water. Sometimes I didn't even notice.

15.  
I am 11 and in a pool with my family. My father is skimming it with a net and my mother is floating. I ask her how she does this. She says she just does. Every time I attempt to float I sink. Upset, I pull her underwater and try pushing her feet to the ground. She only rises.



## My Mother's Child

*Anastasia McCray, Agnes Scott College*

They tell my mother she can only have a closed-casket funeral.

Two centuries of maggots feeding on  
rapiered through by some nice  
filthy Skinness, and she can't have an  
can't have a sea burial like my sister,  
under and I ain't seen her since. She  
behind the pickups until it explodes,  
and slave cheeks, send them pieces to  
President, I had a daughter, a son, a  
*had*, and you take everything." They  
body in a clear vase so she can see how  
nourish some snow white lily.

My mother tells them that—

my corpse in the street, raped body  
policeman's shoes after tiring of my  
open casket funeral. I tell her she  
neither. Those chains dragged her  
thinks maybe to drag my body  
swords slicing between slave ears  
Washington and tell 'em "Mr.  
child. Congress, I had, I had, and *I*  
burn me up, instead, send her my  
my heart ashes and brain dust now

—she don't need this reminder to know that her kids ain't nothing but fodder to teach  
them White kids that niggers ain't shit.

They tell my mother she can have no funeral.

## The Birthing Suite

*Christell Victoria Roach, Emory University*

Parsley was chewed to an accent when the bleeding started. If you are truly Caribbean, then you know this: we learned to swim through blood as preparation for summers. A woman is with child when her legs shoot through a dock and pearls of wine drip from her calves – if the catfish gather beneath her, it's a girl. Understand this: to wait in a birthing suite for a child is to amputate a limb each month and replace it with sand. *In a Sentimental Mood* began to pull at the mango in the sky, and all I heard was static falling out my chest. I plunged my hands into the toilet bowl in search of my baby. I did this several times.

\*

A woman travels down to the Keys to see her man, breasts colliding, thumping like a crate of avocados; stomach plump with gears, hair in a twist-out hours before shifting to an afro. He drove down I-95 to see his woman. We were at that point where intimacy was in longing for one another. I showed my face in the shadow of the sun. We joked that his fruit salad was practice for an emergency C-section. The wind snapped a palm tree in disapproval. It was hurricane season, and the storm was in my belly. We'd yet to come up with a name. Other than that, his gaze was a second skin worn in the season of the day. He picked me up and licked my collarbone. My breasts were mango halves as he sprinkled sugar over the bones we planted months ago.

\*

Elbows: searchlights making hands glow like molasses in water. He went to the market to get his wife some Nabs and cane sugar. This was a weekend without the kids. He came to the hostel twice before he arrived, used a vinyl to crack the door open like a walnut. Before he saw the face of static and blood, his hands were in the bowl, too. For a minute, we looked like the women who washed everything at the river. Forearms: beating sticks against the washboard brim. Hands diving and coming up clean.

Blood           pouring from eyes.  
We really lost           the baby.  
She           nowhere in touch.

\*

Somewhere in a childhood August, grape juice is in a glass tumbler. Hands that could barely fist an apple practice their signature. This moment is playing on repeat when I jokingly tell him to see if he can touch the baby. His hands squeeze down each arm, along the waist, and hold my thighs as if inspecting fruit. The Haitian woman at the market taught him how to touch avocados, and he has been doing this ever since. Aside this moment everything was summer. A child pressed a conch shell to his face and claimed to be drowning. Everyone was ninety degrees of naked. Black people wore colors that spelled their island. A girl was picking seaweed from her hair and her lover was rinsing her feet. Island boys at the corner were hustling colored sand.

Sand in our food. beach  
 in our pants. Sand in the sho-  
 wer drain, blood there too.

\*

Shells. Or possibly, pieces of sky hardened as the days passed – calcified. Fallen angels. Pieces of God we cannot gather enough of to feel holy. Clothes strewn up the boardwalk like a path for the horizon to follow. Watermelon knife dilly-dallying on a wooden cutting board. My heels are at the water's edge, and for a minute the spine is an open door. How granular. When he came, I felt that at any moment he would step into me, a wetsuit. He pressed his hands against my shoulder blades and began gesturing. His breath a spindle. His eyes burned glass out of everything they touched. I let him grow me wings. As he did this, I snuck small shells into my mouth and began to chew. At some point, surely they would press through my back, break through the skin, and produce a wing of glass and calcium. *I'm goin' down south where the palm trees shake at night...* He traced my body fully before turning me to face him. His face a midnight of waves; his eyes, beady black moons. *I found me a woman and she loves me oh so right...* His lips weave into bass strings, and he coils toward me. There are snakes in the mangroves all around us. There are bodies scraping shells against glass. Nothing clangs except the hour.

\*

When we rose there were shells all around us. The light was a shell against my eyes, and the doctors wore the conch's exoskeleton trying to be approachable. Their fingers were glass inside me. Surely they were cutting the baby. There was so much wind in the body it escaped the lungs. The baby was a conch shell banging against everything. All around me there was an ocean crashing against the monitors, waves of blood were flooding the room. He held my hand like a riptide, and I swam to him sideways. His face a barnacle. My hands scraped against it with blood. God was taking back my wings, pulling them from between my legs. Everything was collapsing into rising tides. By the door, a woman wore shrubs of berries. Her face was a prayer. I watched it crumble to a different dialect, before stilling.

\*

Everything swollen.  
 Each breath replaced by water  
 We lay like debris.

\*

The hospital bed: life raft for the unforeseen storm. She came out of the blue.



