

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

48th Annual Writers' Festival

April 4th - April 5th





agnesscott.edu

141 E. College Avenue
Decatur, GA 30030

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Letter from the Editor

This year's Writers' Festival Magazine spurs from the ideas of demolition and construction. Writing is a process that involves blueprints, planning, building, and even breaking down and starting fresh when the foundations don't pan out. Like all of the wonderful works found within these pages, this magazine itself has gone through many iterations. Hardhats in hand, we waded through the rubble with our incredible writers and helped dust off every word, line, and stanza, until, finally, we found ourselves standing amongst the glowing cityscape of writing which we humbly present to you. Welcome to our metropolis of creativity. We hope you enjoy your stay.

For the safety and comfort of our readers, the editors of the Writers' Festival Magazine would like to include the following trigger warnings: school shootings, sexual assault, pedophilia, child sexual assault, suicide, death, terminal illness, and abuse.

Warm regards,
Alex Fallon '20

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Send any correspondence or inquiry regarding the Writers' Festival Magazine to Alan Grostephan, Department of English, Agnes Scott College, 141 E. College Avenue, Decatur, GA 30030-3770.

Writers' Festival History

The Agnes Scott College Writers' festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's festival are Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Nikky Finney, and Gillian Lee-Fong '00.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected by outside judges as finalist entries in the competition. The Visiting writers make final decisions during the festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the first place finalist 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 Leocaida "Lee" I. Zak, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs Christine Cozzens, Eleanor Hutchens '40, Dorothy Addison '43, and trustees emeritus for their support. Thank you to Krista Clark for the magazine cover and interior art. Special thanks to Nicole Stament, chair, and the other members of the English Department.

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Poetry

Ícaro del Mar

Alejandro Lemus-Gomez, Young Harris College

Admit it, you hate it when your mother sings,
“Jumping the waves on a hot summer’s day
at the Beach Flower.” The old song
you two made when you were six, your hair still soft
like her blouse on the lawn chair watching
you both, alone, by the shore wading on waves
of Key West—stained glass teal—dancing
around you both, “El agua se mueve
because of the mermaids you read about,
and Poseidon is happy you are here.”
She was your storyteller, showing you
how your ringlets were like hermit crab shells
hiding crustaceans and secrets, spirits
and ancestors. She told you guppies turn
into dragons when they eat their “veggies”
and you—you ate it up. That’s why you hate it.
Because you believed it. The myths, legends.
Because sea salt always got in your eyes
when you swam out to find sirens, away
from her. And the salt always made you cry
and those tears always reminded you of why
she took you there. To forget what you said
about him, your blood father—a bearded
blur.

He visited when you were just three.
You remember the movie theater
he took you to, but not the movie.
You remember the airport, MIA,
how he said he’d call, but who got you
the toy plane from the stall next to his gate?

You assumed it was his gift, to make up
for past and future birthdays. And what was it
you said as you started to cry? “No hables de el,
that liar.” You don’t remember that either.
Your mother remembers and told you
when you were sixteen, and he finally
messed you on the internet. No call
though. She also remembers the toy plane
and how she bought it to keep you from crying.
Crying like you did when the wave crashed
onto your face like a horse’s gallop,
slamming you into the water, Ícaro
del mar, for swimming too far. You need it.
The song. To remind you how you both swam.

Teenagers

Emily Banks, Emory University

Before we were, we read up on
how it would be, devoured the stories

of girls whose tampon strings
came out of their bikinis at the beach,

or who, while talking to a boy,
noticed a spot of blood

on their white pants. Delightful horrors,
a carnival of bright lip glosses,

purses clamped to hide
the private things. We practiced:

spent allowances to buy condoms
from Genovese, smuggled them

upstairs to her room to fill
with water, blow up like balloons,

and challenged ourselves to wear thongs
from a bin at the dollar store all night.

Once, we bought pregnancy tests
and took turns peeing on them,

imagining with glee the nervousness
of watching for a line

that holds your future like a crystal ball.
We never felt sorry for the girls

we were playing, the ones who wrote
to magazines about their leaking water bras

and missed bleedings, who locked
their bathroom doors with shaking hands

and prayed for miracles, who must have, after all,
once been wanted.

Easter

Sarah Oso, Georgia Tech

Suppose Easter is rainy this year,
and you watch believers hurry
to cars after the closing prayer –
men, heads down and clutching ties,
ladies in pastel skirts, cardigans,
protecting Sunday curls
with white service pamphlets.

Suppose today's sermon is your first
since you left town, and your mother
hums something softly to herself,
asks you to take the long way home,
since rain is good for a soul.

Suppose you decide that you like the washed look
of storefronts, sidewalks, and the green
lanes of crabapple and dogwood, the way
the leaves flicker in the drizzle.

Suppose it's possible
to forgive yourself.



The crumble, and the ash

Lydia Abedeen, Emory University

Inspired by George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From"

I am from ash,
from the fires and the cigarettes still smoldering.
I am the bullets fired in a drive-by;
(Yesterday. The owner of the gun needed
Robitussin but my friend Diedra
said the bullet tasted like the earth,
like a person dying.)
I am from sharp sidewalks
that weeped a seven-year-old's chalk
dreams when it rained, that had a
part of me tethered to it, the piece of
dead skin I surrendered when I fell.

I am from fireflies
and fig trees, from tomato
sap and drunk honeybees.
I am from a place where
we eat dinner alone, but
never forget to say our
prayers, because
dying alone is still so lonely.

I am from Sabina and
Muhammed and Shafia
and people who are
seas away.
I am from my own history. My
parents tell me I am the only

one in the family with things
worth saying. Things left to say.

I am from *shutki bharta*,
chicken *biryani*, and *dhaal*. I am
from food I've never eaten, even
though people still say that I do. If anything,
I am from rice, the grains of rice left
stuck in the rice cooker, the
hardened beads crumbling to
ash.

In the end, it always comes back to ash.

My Mother Passed Her Genes on to Me

Srinidhi Panchapakesan, Agnes Scott College

So, the day I was born, the word “sorry” was born with me,
etched into my fingerprint,
woven into my DNA.

As I got older, “sorry” became less invisible.
You could see its letters outlined in my perfect curls,
you could hear it whispering in the background every time I spoke,
waiting for its chance to make an appearance.
If I needed to be alone, “sorry” was there, delegitimizing my needs one
by one.
If I explained my beliefs, even, “sorry” was there, covering for me
just in case my opinions weren’t valid enough.

Eventually, “sorry” started to take the form of people,
demanding me to respond with its name:

1. My grandmother when she told me I’d gotten too dark over
the summer.
2. The friend who told me my taste in music was bad (it isn’t).
3. My fifth-grade teacher who looked at the color of my skin
and asked if English was my first language (it is).

“Sorry” was always there, absorbing outside opinions
and making them my truths,
morphing my reality into nothing but one word.

I should have never listened to the people who made me think
“sorry” was a place I had to live.
“Sorry” was a pit-stop on my way to self-confidence,
on my way to realizing that each and every one of us is a gift on this
earth.

I was haunted by this one word, created to make me think I’m
insignificant.

This one word, born with me,
woven into my DNA,
etched into my fingerprint.

My mother didn’t fight back when she saw “sorry’s” letters spelled out
in her DNA,
so I’m fighting back against what I inherited from her
so I can look at my daughters one day and tell them that
I know what is in their blood,
and I know how to fix it.

How to Conquer

Shreya Pabbaraju, Emory University

Compass-eyed, claim this land that isn't yours,
This land peopled generations-deep,
with cattle trotting dales and valleys:
Say you have *discovered* it.

Rename this land, peopled generations-deep.
Plunder everything: our words, our food,
our tang. Say you have *discovered*
the cayenne, the caraway, the character.

(and burn your tongue on the spice.)

Plunder every letter! Our blood-riddled words,
dragged from teeth, writhing, sweat-doused,
taste like cayenne, caraway, character. Savor the smell.
Petal your prayer on our graves.

Drag us from our teeth, watch our sweat-doused
stories wither and blaze. Bury our truth like a body
in the burnt matter. Your prayers weed our graves,
uproot our idols. Melt and shape our history (metallurgy)

when our stories wilt. Tell them our truth, our bodies
in the meadows: brown, sun-lit, jasmine-braided hair—
our lives uprooted, idle. Retell this story when you beat
and blanch our tongues. You can knot them, but still

I dream of meadows, brown bodies, jasmine-braided hair.
I dream of cattle trotting the valleys, too.
This blanched tongue is one you cannot mend.
compass-eyed. claimless. This land that isn't yours.



My sister owns a pistol and other things I learned while I was home for the holidays

Joie Otting, Agnes Scott College

After my father left, she told him she would shoot him if she saw
him with another woman.

My sister, it's like she gathered up the sharpest pieces of both of our
parents' genes off the floor.

(maybe it's my fault I didn't leave her anything better)

The anger, the mood swings—

and then as she grew older she picked up the rest of herself off the
streets of Des Moines.

I always thought I'd move back here someday,

to be home, with my family, I always said.

But it doesn't feel like I'm home now,

trying to pick up the pieces of what's left of my mother.

I can't find myself at the bottom of a glass bottle of gin anymore;

these days I'm more likely to find it shattered at my feet.

I've found places to find love outside of the passenger seat of a
pickup truck,

or the back of a blue sports car filled with smoke.

I love my mother,

but I've outgrown my high school uniforms, and

I've found my home in another woman's veins;

memorized her pulse and forgotten my old zip code.



When You Pull Into Your Hometown

Jackson Newbern, Emory University

When you pull into your hometown and remember
what color the Citgo used to be,
know then that you won't be able to avoid driving
past places that make you shrink. Prepare
for a beardless chin, smooth, pale skin,
half-height, childlike feeling because
you will pass the Tech Solutions billboard, the exact one
you watched from the passenger seat as your Dad heaved
"Men don't wear *outfits*, Jack,
we wear clothes."
You will pass the school where you burst from a closet
onto fluorescent-lit, locker-walled hallways,
where two friends deserted you, and, sensing a pattern,
you pushed away the rest. You will pass
the Maple Street apartment where John
kissed you drunk and then stopped inviting you back
when he caught you watching him sleep.
You will pass the ginkgo trees on North Lakeshore,
explosions of yellow that under streetlights
made you sick of 2 a.m. dope trips and long for the sun. You will pass
cuts, scrapes, fuck-ups, put-downs, insults. They will curl around your car
like dead tree branches, imprisoning you
like the black fingers of the dead.
You will want to drive straight out of town
and back to where you came from. Don't.
That dark forest will always be just over your shoulder,
a cluster of black bulls looming on the horizon.
Instead, drive to South Creek and feel your grandmother
squeezing your little knee to point out the red birds, and when you spot one,
perch it on an ugly branch in the sky.

Drive to Callaway and see your mother on a bike in front of you,
your reflection in her huge sunglasses as she turns to smile back,
the shining leaves flying past you like stars.
Pass the pool you crashed into over and over,
you bundle of flailing, screaming joy held together by a blue life jacket
and your father's careful arms.
Project these scenes, overlap them like movie screens,
rose-tinted auroras that tickle you pink.
Dark branches will loom—and may never fall,
but if you're going to crane your neck,
look toward the part of the sky that's worth pulling over for.

**ARS FRENETICA.
(MOCK EXAMINATION ON
NECROMANTIC PRINCIPLES #4)**

Lyrik Courtney, Agnes Scott College

darkly;
darklier;
darkest.

*

wet deorc. i was a poignant dream once.
the pretty thing with more than marbles
between its teeth, more wax than water
on the wings, but the night unseamed herself
free of all her shadows & trapped my
sistren
in her lightless gulf; the empty stretched
over their eyes like fledgling down,
desperate to carve a home out of their black.

then there stopped being anything
meaning-full to say

& so
i grew—

to-ward-out
the sound—the mist.
white girlhood—with your mandibles

latched tight around the apple
of my teat—watch carefully my shipwreck.
it s dark & unruly daughters foam
at the bit for your bleeding. freed
of my skin, I dance atop the surf like
gxd, fleshfurs drawn tight across ochre
bone. there is nothing for you to discover
here. all of the world's old mysteries
untangle themselves for gorging
in the valley of my silver tongue

*

the darkisher dream is known
to replicate itself, unspooling atom
by atom like so much cotton thread
to lure out of it new shapes.
on the projector, a [redacted] is being paid
to condense this magic into a postcard's
worth of text. the professor: humming,
humming. and clap! unintelligible
shapes like radio static flutticking
from dust to light in this corner of
heavxn. whose body was it

first?

*

and clap! and clap! and clap! and clap!
and clap! and clap! and clap! and clap!
and clap! and clap! and clap! and clap!
and clap! and clap! and clap! and clap!
and clap! and clap! and clap! and clap!

like so.

*

harlequin dolls and their microphone
teeth, fingers locked tight in the
oil-slicked prairie beyond my skull.
the poltergeist in my sweater pushing
down on my sleeves to shrink us.
the other untethered, voice in booming
stereo—there. whose mouth collecting
& behind your gums. which mother?
everyone misses the principle question
on this test, everyone is made to stand
in the fire until their eyelashes melt,
run drills until the sun hooks its tongue
into the lake's suprasternal notch.

something about white water, the teacher

whispered to cue us, but i didn't hear. i was whole-hounding it,
sniffing the blight of my doppelganger out
from under the grasses.

*

*"the darkisber dream is known to replicate
itself, unspooling—in moments of
tebennen,—extreme duress how—milky
this curdling—into—string."*

lint?

Memory of Trees

Jabarey Wells, Morehouse College

“Lynched people don’t git no marker, he say. Like this something everybody know.”

- *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker

it is tradition to mark the dead. we record them. we remember them. we know where they rest. but all the dead aren’t given the same reverence. some are cursed to become a forgotten body. hung, mutilated, set aflame. their fate is to have everything taken from them. even death no longer belongs to them, or anyone they have loved. leaving turns into being dragged out. noosed neck, strangled into namelessness. memory as cold and vanishing as the blood that once coursed through the veins. death, made a noisy grand spectacle for the world,

then made silent.

branches, once again, become a graveyard. tree limb turned tombstone. name forever engraved into the rings of bark. each charred body becomes the tree. each ring marks a body laid to rest. intimacy with death is how the passing of time is measured. this mess of wood and leaves and blood become their memory.

and the tree remembers.

the tree was forced to stand and watch while one hundred hungry mouths closed in on it. that day’s meal like any other’s. blood, bone, flesh, heart. cooked to the satisfaction of those who feasted upon it. the hungry are never satisfied. the burning never stops.

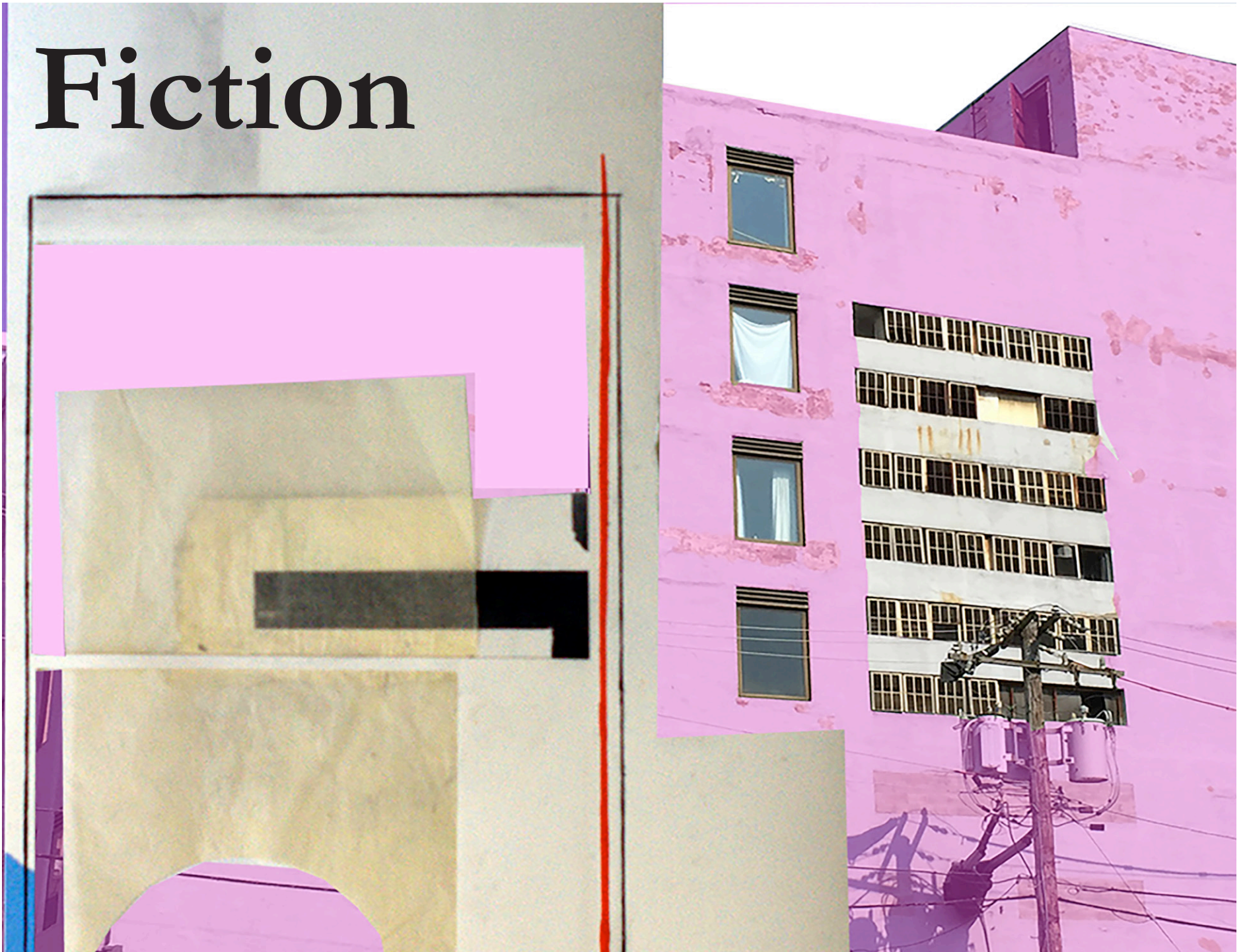
tree made dinner table. tree made accomplice. tree made holy. atonement for sin. tree made hand of God—or Grim Reaper. or whomever we deem responsible for being ripped away.

the tree wept. asks *why must i be made a deadly celebration?* the question is given to no one in particular. it festers. rots in the soil. grows ripe in the air. the odor of it does not infiltrate the senses of those who celebrate.

the tree attempts an interrogation of the body offered up as the evening’s sacrifice. the body’s response is silence. the body has no answers for the tree.

some trees seem familiar
they are wrapped in the skin
of my grandfather’s grandfather
brown, hardened, cracked, scarred
or,
they seem welcoming
arms reaching out
searching for a long-awaited embrace
or,
they look like a home
enticingly haunted
spirits littering the foundation

Fiction



Yellow

Rashah Neason, Spelman College

You sit underneath the Spanish moss tree in your front yard combing your doll's hair. You hear Mama on the porch talking to her friend Betty Sue about how glad she's going to be when you stop playing with dolls, especially in public. You smile at your doll, with her big button eyes, stringy red hair, and yellow dress. She's been your friend for a long time. Mama goes in the house to get another pack of cigarettes. Daddy's in the kitchen working on work with Betty Sue's husband Ernie.

"Joe, your daughter's out there playing with that doll again." He doesn't look up from his work.

"What you want me to do about it?"

"I want you to go outside and take it. The girl's seventeen years old; she need to be out with friends or somethin'. I knew she was different, but by god, I thought she would grow out of it."

"You keep her locked in here all day, who is she going to go out with. Now I'm workin' Shirley go back on the porch," is all Daddy says. Mama walks out of the kitchen with a cigarette dangling from her mouth and a pack in her hand. She sits in her chair on the porch, next to Betty Sue, and stares

at you. After a long and slow drag of her cigarette she calls out,

"Little girl, it's Friday night, don't you have some friends you can go hang out with?"

You shake your head no, never taking your eyes off your doll. You know that she knew you didn't have friends, besides your doll Mary, and the sunflowers (but she didn't know about them). You do like to ride your bike, so you ask Mama, "Can I ride my bike?" She nods with an eye roll as you run to the shed Daddy built to get your yellow bike. You like the color yellow, it's like the sun, happy.

It's the beginning of Fall, your favorite time of the year. The leaves are all around you as you ride your bike down the road. Everybody always say that this is the saddest time of the year, cause everything's dying and all. But you think this is the time when everything feels most alive. There's a field that you like to go to everyday. It's a field of sunflowers surrounded by trees. That's where you play pretend, with no one around to watch. Sometimes you imagine yourself wearing a yellow dress to match the sunflowers, with your brown skin as the

seeds, and yellow petals. The sunflowers become your friends. The wind begins to pick up this time of the year, and this when your friends like to really dance. You start singing your new favorite song, "Ain't That a Shame" by Fats Domino, you heard on the radio some weeks ago.

You made me cry

when you said goodbye

Ain't that a shame

My tears fell like rain

You hum the rest of the song, forgetting the lyrics. You're bumpin' and jumpin' as the wind continues to move through the sunflower field. They sway, you sway, you twist, they twist. You're so caught up in the moment that you don't realize someone walking towards you.

"Hey, what you doin' over there?"

You jump, and then freeze, too scared to run and too sad that someone caught you in your secret spot.

"You don't have to be scared. I was just passin' by on my bike and saw somethin' moving down here."

You look at her yellow skirt, black heels, white top, and her sandy brown curls that barely touch her shoulder. You don't speak and you don't do well with strangers.

"You know you're a good dancer. Me and my friends love that song by Fats Domino. They play it all the time at the parties."

She smiles a lot, and talks to you like she knows you.

"Where are my manners, I'm Nellie Gene. I live right down the road by the church. I ain't never seen you before. Do you go to Greenland High?"

You shake your head no.

"Well what's your name?"

Your throat tightens the more she talks to you, but finally you say, "Bonnie."

"Where do you live, Bonnie?"

"By the moss tree."

You watch as her eyes become bigger.

"You're Bonnie, the one who they keep locked away. I thought you were made up or somethin'."

You stare at her. You make a fist with your right hand and dig your nails deep into your palm. Why won't she go away?

"I was on my way to a party, you'll like it. There's a lot of dancin', wanna come?"

"No," you say, louder than what Nellie Gene expected.

"Okay, can I join you here? Look like you havin' a ball." She gets off her bike and begins to hum the song and then she sings the next part that you don't know.

"You broke my heart when you said we'll part

Ain't that a shame

My tears fell like rain

Ain't that a shame"

You watched her. She had a voice like the birds and was moving so much that after a while you couldn't tell the difference between the sunflowers and her.

"Come on, dance with me Bonnie!" She grabs your hand, and you let her. You start to move your feet, and twist your hips like hers.

"There you go, you got it." She kept singing, and finally you join in. You both begin to dance so crazy that you both collapse on the ground exhausted. As you lie on your back next to Nellie Gene watching the clouds roll by you ask her, "You know who you look like?"

"No Bonnie, who do I look like?" She smiled.

"You look like my friend Mary."

You picture your Mama rolling her eyes in this moment.

"Is that right? Well I'm going to have to meet this Mary."

You hop up off the ground, run to your bike, and pull Mary out the basket.

"Here she is!" You've never smiled so hard in your life, and you've never introduced anyone to your Mary until now. Nellie Gene gets up from the ground, brushes off her yellow skirt, and extends her hand to Mary.

"Well I'll be. You're the prettiest friend I've ever seen, it's so nice to meet you Mary!"

You look at Mary and then at Nellie Gene, it's like your doll came to life. But then you pull Mary away from Nellie Gene and put her back in the basket as you think about what Mama always said. Folks ain't gonna be nice to you unless they want something from you, and people will take advantage of a girl like you. You've heard this your whole life. You just never had the chance to meet anyone that's not family or friends of family.

"Bonnie, you just have to come to the party at my house tonight. There's gonna be lots of dancin' and singin', and it won't be a lot of people."

"I don't like a lot of people," you tell her.

"I know. But It'll be fun, you can even bring Mary, and I won't allow anyone to touch her."

For the first time in your life, someone your age wants to be your friend, wants to take you dancing, and to a party. You tell her okay, and she hugs you so tight that you forget how to breathe.

You hop on your bike and Nellie Gene hops on hers. You watch as the sky goes from blue to orange, you listen as the sunflowers whisper their goodbyes, and you feel the breeze that was once warm turn slightly colder. This is usually the time when you would head back from the sunflower field and go home. Daddy would be asleep on the couch with a drink in his hand, and Mama would be over at one of her friend's houses till the sky goes from black to a soft pink. No one will notice you're not home. Nellie Gene stops at a small wooden house with a big porch by the church, and hops off her bike. You do the same. You leave Mary in the basket, underneath her blanket for protection. Music, laughter, and the sound of moving feet buzzes around your ear. Is this what a party sounds like? The smell of something fried passes under your nose. Is this what a party smells like? Nellie Gene sees you still standing by your bike and she rushes over to grab your hand. You both walk in together.

"Hey, everybody!" Nellie Gene calls out to the people on the porch and in the house. She's met with a mix of "Hey Nellie Gene," "Where ya been Nellie Gene," and "Who's your friend?" You, you're the friend. You're the one they're talking about. She introduces you to everyone, and asks if you're hungry. Your stomach answers for you. You go to the kitchen to grab some fried fish and okra. Mama don't cook like this. Nellie Gene sits next to you on the porch. She talks and eat. You eat and listen. Her friends are talking about the latest dance moves, school, music, and movies. The sky is now filled with stars, and the party is just getting started. Everyone is starting to make their way inside to get to the dancing. Except for Nellie Gene, who looks like she's waiting for something or someone. At that moment a tall man walks up to the house. He's wearing a button-up shirt, pants, and shiny shoes. To you he looks like a movie star. Nellie Gene runs down the steps to hug him. "Oh, Silas, I got someone you have to meet." She pulls his hand up the steps and stops right in front of you.

"Silas, this is Bonnie, my new friend. Bonnie, this is Silas, my older brother"

He shakes your hand and smile. "Hi Bonnie." He has the same smile as Nellie Gene.

"Okay now you two sit and talk. I'll be

inside if you need me." She rushes away skipping and singing.

You don't know what to say. You've never talked to a boy besides your dad before.

"You go to school?"

You shake your head no.

"Me neither. I used to go, then I was in the army, now I work."

"Wow, you did a lot," you tell him, while looking at your black Mary Janes.

"What do you do?"

"Um, I ride my bike, and dance, and sing." You don't mention Mary because he may want to see her.

"I like to dance," he says.

You look at him and smile. "Really, you like to dance?"

"Yep, me and my sister dance all the time."

"Wow," you say, still smiling.

"We can dance right now." He stands and grabs your hand. You snatch it away.

"Okay, but I have to go to the bathroom."

"It's inside, I can show you." He grabs your hand again. This time you let him guide you through the house to the bathroom. He waits outside.

You overhear Nellie Gene ask Silas outside the door, "Isn't she neat, and so beautiful?" He agrees. You begin to feel something strange in your stomach but don't know why. You then overhear Nellie Gene go into the room next door. There's a hole in the wall by a painting you can see through into the room. She's in there with a boy.

"Nellie Gene, what are you doing?" It was the boy.

"What are you talking about?" She sits on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Why are you walking around the party with that freak?"

Nellie Gene looks upset.

"She is not a freak, don't ever call her that again!" She's no longer sitting on his lap. They're now standing in front each other.

"Look, I get the whole thing with your brother, the war, and him not being the same in the head like he used to be. But that don't mean you have to bring the basement girl to a party. You're my girl and people are beginning to talk."

"Oh, people are beginning to talk huh? Well those people can get out of my house."

"Look, I'm not trying to start trouble I'm just sayin'. It's enough that your brother is at the party, and always hangin' around us, but we don't need two retards to look after all the time."

She slaps him.

He slaps her, but much harder.

She tells him to get out of her house. He tries to say sorry and hug her, but she ran out the room.

You leave the bathroom and go looking for Nellie Gene. Silas follows behind you, not realizing what's going on. Her bike is gone by the time you make it outside.

Silas don't know what happened, but he do know you're upset.

"I'm gonna go look for Nellie Gene, you stay here okay?"

He nods his head and watches you as you hop on your bike and begin to ride away. You look back and see him walking into the house.

It's a small town so there's only so many places where she can be. You stop on the side of the road and pull back your blanket to check on Mary, but she isn't in the basket.

Water rushes to your eyes, and your knees start to shake, you sit on the ground and began rocking back and forth while counting backwards from one hundred. Ninety- nine, ninety- eight, ninety-seven, ninety... a hand touches you on the shoulder. You jump up and begin to run to your bike when you realize that hand was Nellie Gene's. You run back to hug her, and you feel her body relax against yours.

"What are you doing out here silly girl?" Her smile is still there, but it's starting to wilt like the flowers this time of the year.

"I was looking for you. I saw what happened with that boy, and I wanted to see if you okay." She grabs your hand, and pulls you through the woods until you both stop at a lake. The moon is shining off the water, and the wind is still tickling your ears. She sits, and you join her. "Boys are so dumb Bonnie, except for my brother, of course." She smiles at you and then continues,

"Me and that boy you saw me with been going steady for a while now. He think he owns me, but I'm done being owned. I really want to go to college, leave this town, and only visit on the holidays." She lays her head on your shoulder, and grabs your hand.

"Would you come with me Bonnie, if we left today?"

You nod your head realizing that that

feeling you felt in your stomach earlier wasn't because of Nellie Gene's brother, it was because of Nellie Gene. She lifts her head off your shoulder, looks at you, and smiles.

"We haven't known each other long have we huh, but it's weird ain't it, because I feel like I've known you for a long time. And already you're the closest friend I've ever had." She hugs you tight, you hug her back. She pulls back from the hug and looks at you with those round brown eyes. She moves closer to your face as you forget how to breathe, her eyes close, and she places her lips onto yours. You forget about everything, the moon, the sunflowers, Mary, as you close your eyes and mimic the movement of Nellie Gene's lips. Your lips remain connected as you begin to feel Nellie Gene move. You open your eyes and see her beginning to get smaller. Her eyes remain closed. Does she know she's shrinking, should you tell her? You place your hands in front of you in order to keep her from falling. Her eyes are now open, and black buttons replace her once dark brown eyes. Her sandy brown hair is more red. Her skin is lighter, and her freckles still remain. You blink once, and then twice, but no matter how many times you blink it appears that Mary is now the one in your hands, and not Nellie Gene. You're not sure what to do. Should you tell somebody, would they think you're even more crazy than they already do? You run to

where you left your bike and place Mary, no wait, Nellie Gene, in the basket and cover her with the blanket. You begin to ride, not knowing exactly where to go. The wind greets you again, and this time you ask for her advice.

"What am I supposed to do with her?" The wind moves down your arms until she reaches your fingertips, you can see the blanket move as she hovers over Nellie Gene. Your bike begins to move faster down the road, the sound of rocks, dirt, and wind becomes the song of your night. Your bike slows down, until you feel the wind guiding you to a stop. The wind whispers her goodbyes, and you thank her, even though you still don't know what to do. You look around to see where you are, and right in front of you on the other side of the road is the sunflower field. You hop off your bike, grab Nellie Gene while keeping her wrapped in the blanket to stay warm. Your friends, the sunflowers, are happy to see both of you. You yell hello to all of them, and of course even under the moon they begin to dance. You hold Nellie Gene in your arms as you sing the next part of "Ain't that a Shame",

"Oh well goodbye
Although I'll cry
Ain't that a shame
My tears fell like rain

Ain't that a shame

You're the one to blame."

You sway, she sways, you spin, she spins. Finally, something inside of you tells you to lay her down on the soil, you do, while keeping her wrapped in the blanket to keep her warm. You place fallen petals around her, and give her one last kiss. You wave to your friends goodbye, asking them to watch over her before you go. You run back to your bike and ride home, allowing for the wind to wipe away your tears. When you arrive home the inside is dark, no one knew where you were, everyone's usually caught up in their own world so you never take it personally. You hop in your bed and allow for your mind to wander. You never thought about the future, but your mind keeps going back to what Nellie Gene said about what she wanted for her future. It got you thinking about what you want for yours, and even though this is the first night you sleep in your bed without Mary, you fall asleep with a smile on your face.

The next morning the sun is shining so bright that you just know this is going to be a good day. Mama never liked to make new clothes for you since she would always say that no one would see you anyhow. But a few months ago, you made yourself a yellow dress with an old curtain while she was out one night. You never wore it, it

never seemed like the right time. But today, today the sun is screaming for you to wear it. And you do. Usually your hair is always in two braids, but today you take them out and allow for your hair to be free. Mama always wants to straighten your hair, but you never let her, and Daddy always has to chime in to take your side.

“If she don’t want her hair straight then let her be Shirley.”

“Fine, that’s your daughter walking around here lookin’ like a nappy-headed wild woman.”

You always thought your hair looked like a tree when it was out. You walk into the kitchen with an extra bounce in your step. Daddy looks up from the newspaper and smiles, “You look pretty baby girl.”

You smile, and go out the door to sit under the moss tree. Mama comes out the house and the cigarette dangling from her mouth almost falls out when she sees you. She goes back inside and asks Daddy, “Joe, what’s wrong with her?”

“What you talkin’ about now Shirley?”

“She don’t have that doll in her hand, and where did that dress come from, and by god that hair!”

“I don’t see a problem.” He puts his newspaper back up.

Mama comes back on the porch and just watches you. Betty Sue walks over from next door to join her. Their eyes don’t leave you as you sit underneath the moss tree, watching a ladybug crawl over your Mary Janes. You sit there for a minute before you hear the tires of a bike stop next to you. You look up and see brown round eyes and a huge smile staring back at you. You hop up, give Nellie Gene the biggest hug, and she does the same.

“Come on, silly girl. Grab your bike; we have a lot of exploring to do.”

You run to your bike, and wave to Mama and Betty Sue. This time you don’t ask her to go. The cigarette that was dangling out of her mouth is now on the porch floor as she watches you ride off on your bike. You both allow for the wind to push your bikes down the dirt road. You both glance at each other and without saying a word, lyrics begin floating out of your mouths,

“Ain’t that a shame

My tears fell like rain

Ain’t that a shame”

Your voices become the song for the morning as you both sing out to the world. And somewhere deep inside, you just know the world is singing back.



Hello Family

Bella Braxton, Agnes Scott College

When it rains, We cling together. The water fills in all the holes and all the cracks, leaving no room for pride. We see no dirt or grass or rock, only stars. There are so many stars, like ants, but the stars keep more distance between them.

What would We be without each other?

After floating for days We reach a new place, a precipice looking over a desert with smooth sand going on and on, and We stand, waiting.

“Should We go down?” one ant asks. Nothing is said, but We understand, We climb down to the gritty sand, dirt filled diamonds. There are more stars in the sky than grains of sand on earth. There might be just as many of Us, Our glittering multitude.

This is solid ground to make a home in. Building Our new home feels more like remembering than creating. This is where We rest, this is where We eat, this is where Our children grow and become.

We dig down deep until it is dark and cold. We can't see each other, but We know who We are. In this darkness, We sing Our song:

One new home in new ground

Looking up, digging down

There is so much world left

We will soon see the rest

As Our children will grow

We will preach what We know

And Our efforts will show

They decide where We go

“morse,” I hear, “We need food, foragers to go out. We think it is time for you.” The ants around me rock back and forth. They stare at me and I stare back, until We understand.

When I crawl out of Our home it is quiet and dark. I hear electrons dancing around protons and neutrons. I see stars that died years ago.

If I had wings, I could fly up there with them and watch through a telescope what We did so many years back. I could see War 58: jaws ripping arms ripping legs.

It was brilliant, like a super nova, all those spectacular endings.

The sand can't go on forever. There are plants, there must be water. I heard a story once, of rain that fell but never touched the ground. It dried up in the air and the grass turned brown. That is a butterfly story, told to caterpillars.

At the edge of the sand there are thin trees breaking through dirt. They curl around themselves and hold each other up. The further into the forest I go, the larger the trees get. In the branches of the largest one is a small wooden house half-covered in vines.

The door is bright red, like those flowers that grow. I walk underneath and inside it is warm.

“Hello,” I say. “Hello.”

She looks up, a human with yellow-white hair. “Oh, no, not again!” and she stomps dangerous clumsy steps over to where I am.

“There's nothing for you here,” she says, just like I knew she would. I look around just to see. “What about that?” I ask, and I point to a smashed blueberry under a short yellow table.

"That's mine," she tells me, "look around— Everything is." I look around at dirty stacked up plates and crumpled tissues and green emeralds dangling from silver chains.

Do colorful flowers and colorful rocks mean more?

I look at her eyes: blue, like blueberries, like the hottest stars. And before I can tell her I understand, and before I can leave, another ant comes under the door.

"rowe," I tell her "there's nothing for Us here," but rowe goes running under the table and picking up the blueberry and running out. Like it's so easy and so right.

When the bright-haired human sees this she breathes harder and harder, like trying to get enough air to shout, until she runs out of breaths to breathe. When she falls, and we stay there together, I watch her eyes moving under her eyelids and I sing Our song:

The people dream like ants do not
And they cannot control their thought
The humans trust the way they feel
So what they know is never real

The world is bent by human hands
A world they never understand
But We prevail, the many Ants
We know of stars and dust and plants

Going back under the door, I see Our moon. Maybe We have come to that place where Our sun never rises. Our sun is only a small star, small and close, like Us. During the war We fought so hard to protect what was Ours that We forgot to protect each other.

I might be dreaming, but I see more ants coming. I'm not dreaming. They stop.

"Go back." They say, and I look at them, all of their twitching jaws and frantic eyes and shiny armor, red, like the coldest stars.

"I'm looking for food. Our family lives in the sand," I tell them, and they look at me, my bending legs, my sagging head.

"Go back to the sand," They say. "We live in the dirt."

"You can come to the sand, We all can."

"We don't want the sand. There is nothing there."

"I only need a little. Some small berry or seed."

"Go back, then. Look in the sand."

When the sun makes the berries, what makes them Ours?

When the red ants turn back and march through the dirt in a cluttered swarm, They chant Their song:

Family We must protect

Guard the children

Guard the nest

Keep the food

And keep it fast

Before the ruin

We will last

We will keep

Ourselves so safe

So We survive

Through time and space

I do what the red ants said and go back through the forest, running, at first, as fast as I can. I slow down under the cover of the

twisting trees. I see smooth rocks that look white and clean like Our moon.

During War 58, We took shelter behind rocks. We lived among the rocks and We knew every one. The other ants were out of place and out of breath and out of luck.

The rocks, like the sand, seem to go on forever, but after some time I reach the edge. There, I see a small stone house. The door is green, like grass. I walk under it.

Inside, there is little light. There are candles glowing. A human with orange hair looks at me.

“Hello.” My voice fights through shifting air to reach him.

“Hello.” His voice does the same.

We orbit each other like binary stars.

He blinks many times in a row. “My wife told me she dreamt of seeing an ant in her house,” he laughs, “an ant like you.”

“Your wife with almost white hair? You don’t stay together?”

A big laugh falls out of his big body.

“Together? This is my house. She has her own.”

I stare at him and he stares back. I don’t understand.

The biggest stars have the shortest lives.

I go back under the door, back where I came from. I run back to the sand as fast as I can.

Is all life extended family?

When stars are born they start as a huge cloud of helium and hydrogen. The gravity pulls it all together until the temperature and pressure in the middle is so great that the atoms lose their electrons and the nuclei fuse together. The mass converts to energy, the light that We see.

Isn’t that like Us?

What force could be so great to pull Us all together and let Us give off light enough to reach through time and space to some small ant or human not lucky enough to be a part of anything big enough to matter?

Before I see Our home, rain starts to fall. Blue rain. And Our sun starts to rise.

Some stars die in splendid explosions, some become black holes. Some stars die quiet deaths in the sand.

The rain weighs me down, bending my back towards the core of Our earth with heavy drops. I let it lay me down on the ground, and I whisper my song:

Goodnight dirt, sand, stone, and trees

Goodnight ants, humans, and bees

Goodnight deserts, ponds, and seas

Goodnight berries, nuts, and seeds

Goodnight sun and moon and me

And hello family

This Town

Amaris Ramey, Georgia Gwinnet College

I would relive last summer if I ever had the chance to. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I liked the heat- no, not that. My back would get too sticky from staying outside and cleaning the drain in the pool. Sweat always stuck to my t-shirt and I didn't want to take it off in front of people. But the 90-degree weather was killing me, and I was dripping from the humidity.

I tried pulling my shirt over my head, but every time I did, I could faintly hear the kids in Mr. Walter's sixth grade class yelling out to me. I was running outside on the court with a basketball tightly gripped in my hands.

Hey fat ass, give us the ball!

I dribbled it away quickly. My legs rubbed together, and my breathing became heavy. *Just one more shot*, I thought. *One more and then they can have it back.*

I was running fast, but my mind wandered to the chocolate cake that my mom left on the counter. I begged her for a piece before I got on the school bus and she promised that I could have one if I ate all my vegetables at dinner.

While I was running, I was imagining the

gooey icing on my hands. The cake would be so thick that I would need milk to gulp it down. But then, the image of cake flew from my mind and I was on the ground, in the fetal position with the ball still in my hands, covering my head as Jeffrey Edwards was punching me in the stomach. When I picked myself back up, I screamed at him.

What was that for?!

For being fat. That's what!

So, the t-shirt was staying on. Just in case someone remembered.

The summer is always great, because you aren't forced to talk to anyone, like your teachers, or the kids in the hallway. There won't be any empty hellos or fake goodbyes. Nothing is mechanical. No one bothers you about your SAT scores or what you want to be when you graduate. It just gets to be you doing your own thing. My thing was cleaning the pools at Grander County Rec.

It sounds like a stupid job, I know. But my sister complained about me not working. It was only her and my dad putting food on the table now. So, the rec was good for me. My manager, Charlie was nice. He told me

he had to pay me under the table though, for *business purposes*:

Isn't that illegal?

Look kid, you want the job or not?

I said okay and walked back home.

I got a job, I said walking into the house.

My dad looked up from his newspaper and put his coffee down on the table. He squinted his eyes a little and said a simple, *okay*. I shrugged my shoulders. My sister, Tina, was pouring cereal into her bowl. She walked over to me and smiled. Then, she punched my arm.

Ouch, what was that for?

She shook her head. *Just cause you look like a teddy bear, Georgie, doesn't mean you gotta act like one. It's about time you got a damn job.*

Tina always said that I was too soft, because I wasn't a yeller like her. She got away with it though. She was skinny and pretty and I was ugly and fat. No one wanted to hear a fat guy yelling. Tina had curly hair that fell a little below her eyes and whenever she walked by a crowd of people, they would stare at her in awe.

Yo Georgie. Yo Georgie!

That's all I would hear walking home from the pool at night. All the guys who hung around the rec wanted a chance with Tina, and they tried to talk to her through me. Especially Rodney. He was the tall one with the beard. He got in a lot of trouble at school. I told Tina that he asked about her and she rolled her eyes.

You can tell Rodney to fuck off.

O-kay.

Actually, tell all your little buddies to leave me alone. Don't you think that's a little sexist? Making friends with the boys who fetishize your sister? Jesus, what kind of person are you?

I passed her a beer from the refrigerator.

They're kinda nice.

She took a sip.

Yeah, til they try to drown you in the pool.

Maybe Tina was right. Rodney wasn't all that nice. He had a different girl with him everyday and his deep voice would boom whenever he spoke. But there was Eli and Danny. They were cousins and lived at Danny's mom's house for the summer. They would come up to the pool right at 9:00pm and sit outside, blasting loud music. Sometimes they would offer me a cigarette

or tell me I was pretty *alright*. But they never asked me if it was okay for them to be there, except for Eli.

I guess so.

That's what I told him, and he nodded his head at me. And sometimes on Tuesdays when his friends were at work, he would stop by and say hello while he paced back and forth singing out loud, even though he had on headphones.

Yo, Georgie, you know this song?

I don't think so.

Yeah, why not? Don't you ever listen to records?

No, I mostly just read.

Then, Eli would shrug and tell me that reading is stupid, and I would go back to putting the leaf net down in the 4 feet and his singing would get louder and louder. Sometimes, it made my head hurt. But I never told him to shut up, not even once.

The pools were working me too hard. I didn't have enough time to myself, let alone to clean any of my clothes. I would get home at 12 a.m. and Tina would stand by the door waiting for me to walk in.

You are sixteen! Sixteen! I'm not gonna keep washing your fuckin' clothes.

No one said you have to.

Okay. Fine. I won't. Then you'll run around town being stinky! Goddamnit Georgie, you could at least give me money for the washing powder. That shit is expensive. EXPENSIVE.

I handed her five dollars. She put her hand out for more. So, I reached in my back pocket and handed her three more.

What about tax?

I'm not made of money, Tina. I handed her some change. Then, I opened the door to head back out and Tina demanded to know why I was leaving. *You just got home!* I closed the door to drown out my sister's voice and let my feet hit the cold concrete. *Just one mile,* I thought to myself. *You just have to run one mile.*

But I couldn't. I stopped after a few feet and chugged water down my throat. The moon was shining brightly on me.

Shit Georgie, you tired already? I looked up and saw Eli with a smile on his face. The left side of his mouth was a little higher than the right.

I don't like running.

So why do you do it?

Cause I'm fat.

Eli shrugged his shoulders and took a

cigarette out of his pocket. He lit it and let out a long blow. *What's wrong with being fat?*

It's not healthy.

He laughed. *Neither is smokin' a pack of cigarettes a day, but you don't see me tryna give that up, do you?*

I shook my head, no.

Alright then.

I kept walking, being careful not to stumble on the sidewalk that was coming up. It looked like an entire earthquake happened down there. One trip and you'll fall under the ground. Eli passed me the cigarette, but I shook my head.

Where are your friends?

He laughed and took another puff.

I don't hang out with them every waking hour you know?

I asked him where he was headed and he shrugged his shoulders.

You don't know?

He stopped and looked at me and said that I ask too many questions.

Sorry.

Don't be sorry. Just be you.

I nodded my head even though I didn't understand what he meant. The streets were clear and although we were only a few blocks from my house, I never saw it this way- it seemed so much more beautiful at night.

You cleaning tomorrow? I shook my head. *No, I asked Charlie for an off day. I've been getting tired. At first it was just cleaning the pools, but now I'm the goddamn janitor for the rec.*

A smile creeped up on Eli's face.

What?

Nothing. We're here.

I looked up and saw a sign that said *Geno's Pizza*. I looked over at Eli as he put out his cigarette and walked through the doors of the parlor, ignoring the *closed* sign. I walked in behind him and saw a man with a friendly face look up at us and smile and yell out Eli's name.

Eli walked over to him grabbing his hand before giving him a hug. The people washing the dishes in the back yelled out telling him hello and the lady sweeping the floor hugged and kissed him. The floors were tiled and slightly worn out. The smell of warm bread floated around the room and the tables were set up nicely with a flower in the middle of each one.

Guys, this is Georgie.

Hey Georgie!

Eli walked closer to me and asked if I had ever been here. I shook my head to say no, even though that was a lie. I went with my mom once. It was three summers ago, before she was sick. But that wasn't something I wanted to tell Eli, not at that moment.

There was music blasting in the parlor. The sounds were new to my ears. The lady sweeping the floors grabbed my hand and started to dance with me while laughing so loud that I could see the cavities in her teeth. I swung her around and her hips swayed with the music. She told me that I was a good dancer and I smiled at her.

Eli was standing on the tables drinking beer and singing loudly. His eyes lit up as he jumped from table to table, making some of the silverware fall on the ground. I felt my body light up with each jump he made. And then I felt my stomach explode and I ran to the bathroom to throw up the pizza and three beers.

My head was spinning, but the music was still playing, and Eli was behind me laughing. *You got a weak stomach, Georgie. I thought you fat kids could handle alcohol better than the rest of us.*

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and took a swig of water. *What's wrong with being fat, Eli?*

I looked up at him and the smile on his face widened. And then I threw up again. But it felt good, letting all that shit out.

Every Friday, Eli and his boys would head back to Rodney's place and I would go home and change out of my sweaty shirt and Eli would wait at Geno's for me.

How did you meet Geno? I asked him that while he was in his bed with his feet propped up. I was sitting in the chair next to him.

I used to work for him every summer when I visited down here.

Why aren't you working this year?

Cause things get complicated sometimes. He turned up the radio that was on the floor a few feet away from us and took a swig of beer.

My mom and I went to Geno's before, I said.

Eli nodded his head and told me that I never talk about her.

She died last year. She never talked about me being fat. Eli got up from his bed and looked me closely in the eyes.

If you ever want to talk about her, you can. I said okay and Eli smiled softly at me.

Damn, do you hear that?

I shook my head.

Eli picked up the radio and brought it closer to my ear. I could hear the vibrations slightly touching my skin. The music was soft at first, barely grazing my ears. But then it boomed, and the singer's voice glided carefully across the instruments.

What do you think when you hear it?

I shrugged my shoulders and told him that it reminded me of colors.

I never thought of anything like that. What color do you see the most?

I don't know, I think I see blonde.

Eli chuckled and laid back on his bed. His eyes started to drift, and I asked him if he was okay. *Yeab Georgie, I'm okay. It's just that blonde isn't a color.* Then he closed his eyes and the sound of him breathing was soft. I knew after that night, I could listen to him sleep forever.

It had been two months since I started working at the pools and once Labor Day hit, the pool would be closed until the next summer. I only had 34 more days of work left, and then school would start again, and I would go back to being ignored by everyone.

Georgie, how's work?

It's just work, dad.

Think you're gonna look for another job?

I don't know, dad.

Tina nudged him, to tell him to stop asking questions. I was grateful of her for a moment. She got a job too, but she wasn't waitressing or anything like that. She was working in an office, filing paperwork for lawyers. I looked her way.

You've got a real job, Tina.

Tina sighed and said that every job is real and to stop discrediting myself. I said okay and then I slipped on my shoes and started heading out the door. *You're always running off somenwhere these days Georgie, I never see you.*

Yeab well, keep your eyes open then Tina.

She laughed and told me to lock the door behind me. I ignored her and started running again. This time my feet felt lighter as they hit the ground. When I got to the rec, I walked in and the cashier at the concession stand waved at me. She told me I was looking nice these days.

Yo Georgie!

It was Rodney. He was sitting on the in a chair and motioned for me to come over. I asked him how he was doing and he said that he was pretty alright, just waiting for the summer end. I sat back in one of the foldable chairs and carefully opened my sunglasses so that they could cover my eyes.

Do you know where Eli is? Rodney smirked. *Nah, I should be asking you that question. You're who he hangs around now a days.* I stayed quiet. Rodney folded his towel and popped open a soda can.

I heard that you're seeing my sister sometimes.

Rodney looked up at me. *She told you that?*

I nodded. *Yeah, she said she likes you even though you're not really her type.*

Yeah well Georgie, you can't help who you fall for. I thought about that for a minute.

So, what if you don't want to fall for them? I asked carefully.

Rodney put his soda can up to his mouth slightly before looking at me in a serious way. He told me that you only have two options. *You either go with it, or get the fuck up.*

I looked ahead to see a couple holding hands near the deep end. They fell into the pool together and her shrieks made him laugh and they were in the water kissing as if they weren't afraid of drowning.

Now, here is the part of the summer that I don't like as much as every other part. Suddenly the breeze starts to kick in and you're stuck having to bring a sweater with you whenever you leave the house.

This part was the worse because that

meant that school was close to starting again. Eli stopped getting so drunk at *Geno's* and ended up helping clean up by sweeping the floors and washing the windows. I would go with him every night and help him scrape the gum from up under the tables while he complained that he hated living with his cousin.

Well, why don't you just get your own place?

No point, I'm moving back in with my mom next week. Smmer's almost over, you know?

So, I asked Eli where his mom lived and he said in Greensboro, which was a three-hour bus ride away from here. He told me it wasn't too bad, that maybe he'll enroll in the college over there, start doing something with his life.

Yeah, well, I'll miss you.

He took a sip of beer and passed it to me.

Don't sound so defeated.

So, I said okay. And he said okay and we went back to his aunt's place, using the side door and this time when he fell asleep, I felt a tear fall down my cheek because I couldn't find the right words to say goodbye.

I left early that morning, and I started running so fast that I lost my breath about 15 times, but it didn't matter as much anymore. And before I knew it, the summer

was gone and Eli was gone too.

He packed his bags and Rodney dropped him off at the train station. The only thing he said to me was *Have a good school year, kid.* So I tried to, even though everything felt different.

I still managed. I got too busy to think about anything else. I was cleaning tables at *Geno's*, staying up late to do my homework and joining book clubs at school. I felt fine for the most part, but sometimes a song would play, and I would miss Eli all over again.

He invited me to his graduation. It had been almost a year since I last saw him.

I saved you a ticket.

So, I agreed. I took my dad's truck to Greensboro and I had a panic attack on the highway. I picked out a card because I didn't know what you were supposed to bring to a graduation. I saw Rodney and Danny, but I hid myself in the back row, so they wouldn't notice me.

Eli made a speech because he was part of the top ten percent. He was funny, and people laughed at the jokes that he made about skipping class, drinking, but still coming out on top. *I think that's the best thing about us. No one thought I would get this diploma-hell, not even me. But you can't control your destiny.*

Destiny always wins.

The crowd stood up and clapped for him. I hung around for a little bit and I saw Eli standing next to a girl. She put her hair behind her ear and their laughter filled the room. I looked up and Eli was waving at me. I waved back, and my heart raced and he invited me over to where they were.

He introduced me to his friends. There were four of them. A girl with strawberry blonde hair, who stood the closest to Eli and looked at him lovingly. A boy with an afro, and twins who shared the same pixie cut. One of the twins smiled at me when I told a joke that wasn't funny, and she slid me her number before we walked to the parking lot.

We all crowded into Eli's mom's small apartment and turned on music while Rodney passed out beers and we munched on nachoes and I got lost in the music. Eli and the girl with strawberry blonde hair, Malissa, were dancing and Eli's hands were around her waist. The seven of us seemed like a large crowd in the tiny living room, so I slipped out while they were dancing to catch my breath.

I started strolling down the sidewalk and stopped at an empty bench. I sat down and put my head down as the breeze hit my face. I could smell the rain that was coming.

Yo Georgie.

I turned around and I saw Eli. He was standing with a cigarette in his hand. I nodded my head at him and he sat down next to me. *Why are you out here all by yourself?* I didn't say anything.

It's a party Georgie. A parttttyyyy.

A laugh escaped my mouth and I asked Eli if he was drunk and he just smiled. *Cassandra really likes you. You know that's one of the twins? Kept asking me who the big guy was. She said you've got a cute smile.*

I twiddled with my fingers and kept my head down. Eli's hand grazed over mine and he carefully squeezed it. *Strangers still make you anxious huh? I feel that. I get the same way sometimes too.*

I could feel the tears filling my eyes. But I kept breathing, to try to stop them.

You never called Eli. It's been months and you never called.

Eli sighed. He told me that things were just getting busy for him.

I love you Georgie, I really do. I just can't love you the way that you want me to. Eli removed his hand from mine.

How do you know how I want to be loved? I asked in a whisper.

Eli stood up and took out his phone

and placed it on the bench. And the familiar sound of soft music started to play. He reached out for my hand and he began to dance with me, softly and carefully.

I think the sky looks blonde tonight, Eli.

I looked at him and he held me tightly.

Yeab, Georgie. It always does in this town.



Plans for Dinner

Courtney Reed, Agnes Scott College

There was a tear in her stockings, a single rip that seemed oddly cool against the warmth of the office that surrounded her. Too many bodies were pressed into this small space. Warm pungent breaths that smelled of cigarette smoke and spearmint mouthwash fanned against her neighbor's cheek as they typed away for nothing from nine to five each day. Relentless hands made small corrections to things that had been corrected by those sitting in the same seat a decade earlier.

The shrill buzz of the light overhead echoed past the constant chorus of keys played by different composers putting together their messy concertos. Yet, all she could hear was the ringing in her ears as she glanced down at the small patch of pale, reddened flesh that should have been covered by the sheer black material stretched taut over her ever thinning frame. The clock on her desk ticked away the seconds that would supposedly turn into hours, but that was before she knew that twenty minutes could steal a lifetime. She had agreed to this, had seemingly said yes, even if the words had sounded so distant from her shaking lips that she had been certain that he had actually said them.

She had to admit that the tear was rather small, barely noticeable unless you really looked, but the longer she sat typing, the more she felt the seams unraveling and popping against her sensitive skin. Each moment exposing her more and more to the chill that echoed from her spinal cord down to her toes. She had said yes. Her chair squeaked as she shifted, her skirt rustling as she crossed her legs to try and cover the facts that pounded her skull into a sharp, aching migraine. Water. That should help, but she sat stuck to her chair, worried that if she stood, the material would rip straight past her knee following the path of those eager calloused hands, and she found herself typing once again, mindlessly filling out form after form. She could still hear the heavy tone of expensive leather against tile walking up behind her. She could still feel the icy tendrils that screamed down to her stomach as a hand rested on her shoulder. She could still taste the bitterness of copper as she clamped down on her tongue to try and keep her focus.

A promotion. From Ivy League graduate to what? What would her new title be? Could she put it on her resume? Perhaps under special skills, or next to the already

existing overblown phrase of "Executive Administrative Assistant." She could already see the words forming in her mind, the thick black ink on the page phrasing eloquently how being pushed against the cool glass as her stockings ripped meant she had communication skills and was an expert in personal relations. A promotion. That's what it was.

Her husband would be so proud, mostly relieved if it involved more pay to fill the anxious mouths that waited for her at home. She would have to stop by the store after work to get new stockings, maybe grab a gallon of milk as well. The phone rang at the desk beside her and the chorus paused for a moment as forty-four eyes glanced to their right before twenty-one melancholy musicians began again as though they had never stopped. She timed her own to the ticks of her very own metronome, four per every beat, sometimes three if she allowed herself to relax into a waltz.

The overweight woman with an obsession for purses big enough to contain her appetite tapped her heel in the cubicle to her right. To her left, a young man exhaled a heavy sigh every few minutes, allowing the whole office to know that this was not

where he had planned to be after getting a piece of paper that was supposed to make his life easier. This all added to the concert that she willingly performed in, her smooth taps one of the few consistent sounds in the otherwise boringly chaotic music that echoed off of the white walls. She should probably grab some eggs as well if they were still on sale, perhaps even start a list on her way to her car. Why had she said yes?

An hour, then two, passed and still she typed, glancing to her right any time the phone rang, the ripped seams become an afterthought as she pondered what to make for dinner. Something that could become leftovers would be nice, even if the children groaned and her husband huffed. The squeal of a chair across the office marked the one who had been watching the clock with eager eyes that day. Probably the new intern with long legs, and black skirts that rode above her knees, just an inch too high to be professional. Perhaps she had a date that night, or something at home that craved her attention more than the fluorescent screen that flashed with automatic impatience. Squeal after squeal sounded, soft murmurings exchanged, some even pointed towards her, but still she typed. Maybe she could fry chicken for dinner tonight, maybe she should stop wearing stockings.

Would her husband mind? This

promotion of hers, it was incredibly cliché, but bills still needed to be paid and if she closed her eyes it wasn't all that bad. Perhaps she had been asking for this all along? The soft whoosh as the blinds were drawn shut, a husky chuckle that was a song of its own and might have been attractive in any other situation, and his hands, efficient in a way that almost seemed cold, calculating each movement as though they could change the fate of her world. Maybe they could? Perhaps they already had.

Snap. Another seam tore away from the others as she shifted to her right to grab a pen, her already aching frame growing more tense as she did her best to make even her inhaled cause no movement past her waist. She should make a pot pie for dinner, or perhaps a roast that she could turn into sandwiches. Would her husband mind? He hadn't touched her in months, it would be a year soon if she remembered correctly, not that it was ever very memorable. Sloppy kisses with rushed movements to make sure that he finished before the kids got home, and still she had to make dinner, their loud voices ignoring her plea for a moment of silence as they rushed in one by one, getting taller every day like disobedient weeds.

Her typing slowed as she looked up to see the office around her eerily quiet, the only concert continuing was her own that

battled with the merciless ticking of the clock that told her she needed to be leaving soon. She needed to stand. To grab her purse, smile at those she may pass, and then leave. Go home. No. She needed to make a list, go shopping, get new stockings, or a longer skirt. Greet her husband as though the only thing on her mind was whether the top of the piano had been dusted.

Would he mind? Did she want him to notice? To see that her hands shook as she chopped onions or to feel that she flinched when his hand rested on her shoulder to tell her that their son had failed another test or that the neighbors were letting their grass grow too high. It was never anything important, but what was created throughout his daily ritual as a stay-at-home father. Would he see the bruises that lined her thighs that night when she changed into the thick cotton of her pajamas? Would he even care? Should she care? Bills needed to be paid.

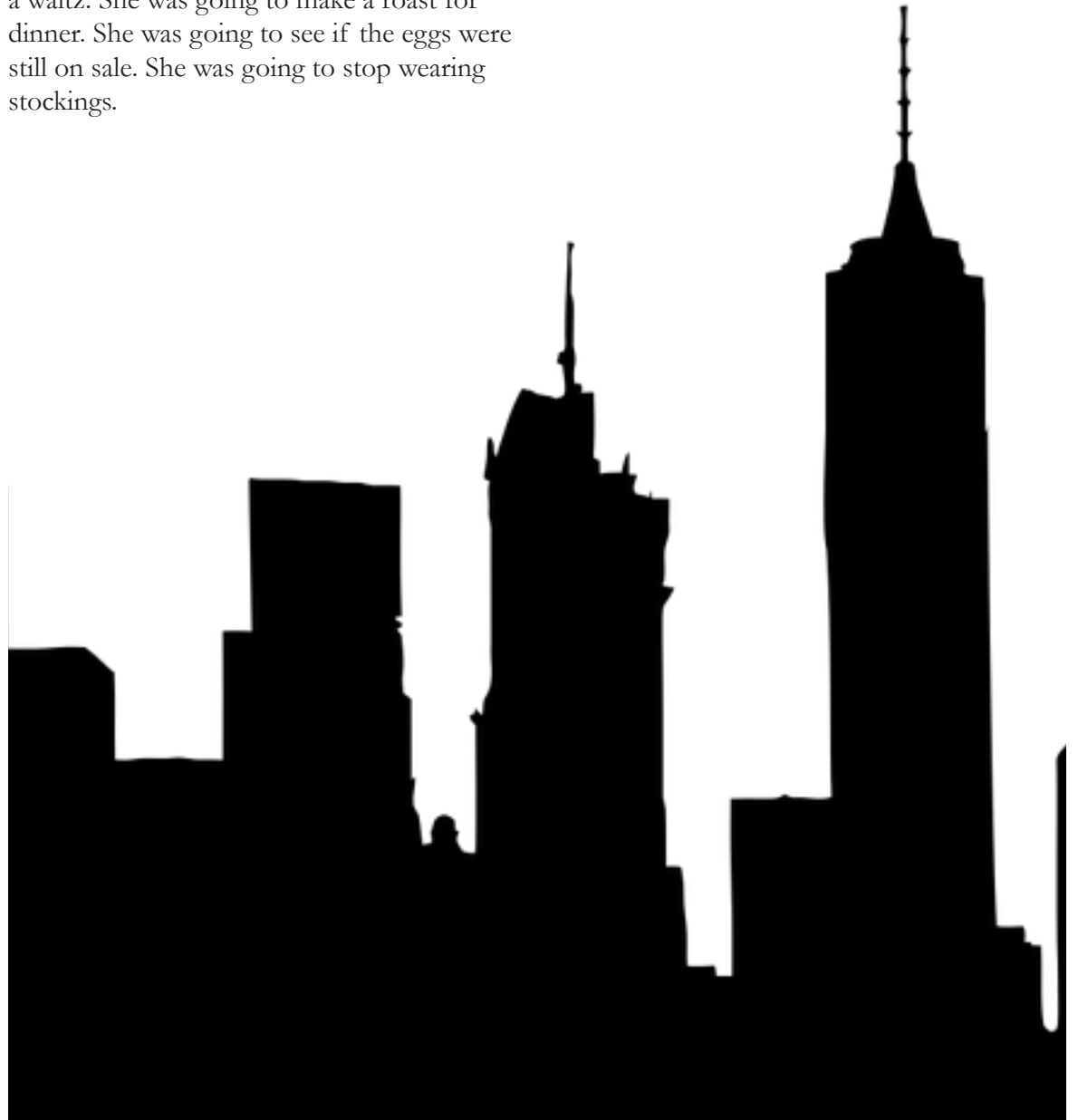
She stood, her steps growing smaller as the tear ran up her leg, exposing more and more of what had been delicate flesh, but was now simply an efficient tool to achieve customer satisfaction. How far could she be spread before her cries grew too loud? Snap. She was going to make a roast tonight, it would make good sandwiches for tomorrow if she grabbed some of the bread from the

overpriced bakery that her husband loved.

Trumpets, perhaps the sharp clang of a cymbal. The city made its own concert within its chaos. The moment she left the forced chill of the building's pristine lobby to enter the humidity that engulfed her like an unwelcome embrace, the soft taps from her metronome strained in her memory, ushering her to turn back and fall into its lull. She took a breath, exhaling in rhythm to this new song that surrounded her, and forced herself to step toward the mayhem, ignoring the seams that irritated her skin with each chafing movement.

She reached her car with only a single woman glancing for a beat too long at the remaining seams clinging onto her thighs. As she settled into the cushioned seat that seemed to be much too close to the steering wheel for her to drive comfortably, she shoved the material down. She kicked her shoes off with little thought, her body reacting on its own as she forced the sheer black strands to fall into a puddle by the brakes. She hadn't realized that her breath was now exhaling in erratic pants, a slight sheen of sweat covering her forehead. Her trembling hands gripped the steering wheel and she closed her eyes, shutting out the blaring sounds of the musicians around her, and focused in on the consistent taps of her mental metronome. The beats relaxed into

a waltz. She was going to make a roast for dinner. She was going to see if the eggs were still on sale. She was going to stop wearing stockings.





*Now forward. Step on the string. Good.
Another step. Stand still on the string. Now
backwards. Nice. Another step. Keep going.
Forward. On the string. Good. Another. No, no, no,
don't trip over...*

Directing her daughter's footsteps on the hardwood floor, Wen sees herself and her friends jumping over a similar string loop linked by yellow rubber bands in a narrow cement alley between six-story apartment buildings eighteen years ago.

Every day when the last school bell rang, the girls would grab their backpacks and stride out the school gate. They would always run into their favorite alley where no middle-aged men ever came by, yelling, "Niang kai. Niang kai," in Shanghainese because the kids blocked the way.

When all preparation was ready, Tiger Ting would start the game. Counting steps or chanting ballads, the small girl hovered

When Will You Love Me

Yuxin Zheng, Agnes Scott College

over the rubber band loop from one side to the other, showing off her "single hops," "double hops," "slides," and "diamond hops." With a casual "ha, too many mistakes today," she would end her performance and walk to the side to coach the other girls.

"Forward. Forward. Step on the string this time. Backwards, backwards! Don't let the string trip you over, no, no, no, turn the other way around..." Tiger Ting would always shout at the clumsy Wen, just as Wen is instructing her clumsy daughter in their living room.

Now after eighteen years, Wen still remembers that she hated jumping the rubber band, but had just nothing better to do after school. If she had all the toys and electronics as her daughter does today, she would never choose to sweat outside. That is why earlier, she was puzzled when Lili came into the study with a picture on her tablet and asked, "Mommy, can we play this game together, please?"

"Uh? Why? This game is really hard, baby. Why don't you play with the drone daddy bought you last week? Or the flute I bought you." Wen stared at Lili for a few seconds before turning back to the pie chart

on her computer screen.

"Mommy, please, let's do something different. And Ms. Liu says that for our local history project, we can choose to talk about traditional alley games."

"Um, good." Wen noticed a wrong number on the chart.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, yes. I'm listening... But wait, Mommy is working."

"Mommy. You want me to have good grades, right?"

"Um, sure."

"Then you can help me."

"Wait, wait, okay... What did you say?" Wen fixed the number. The chart looked perfect.

"You need to teach me this game."

"Uh... Okay. But only thirty minutes." Wen glanced at the time on her computer screen. "You need to understand that Mommy has work to do. There is a big meeting on Tuesday with really, really important people..."

"Okay, I got it. Thank you, Mommy."



So, baby, the first thing is to make a string linked by small rubber bands. We need about thirty of them. Do you know how to connect rubber bands? No, no, no, not in this way. Look, pass one band through the other, and pass one tip through the hole on the other end. Stretch it. Now they are connected.

Wen is surprised that Lili cannot tie two rubber bands together. What does she do in her arts and crafts class? No more rubber band basket weaving? Or rubber band bracelets? Didn't Kang teach her how to make those little popsicle stick cars driven by rubber bands when he was a freelancer and stay-at-home dad? How can Kang not have taught Lili?

When they were still dating, Kang once bragged to Wen that he would spend hours adjusting each rubber band on his skeletal car when he was a kid. "I wish kids these days could have something like that, you know, not doing homework every day or hanging out with electronics," he said, "They should go out, have fun, just like us ten years ago. You know, that time, all the boys got so crazy about making rubber band cars and competing whose car ran the furthest. So

much fun. Of course, I always won..."

"Yea, you crazy boys." Wen laughed. Back then, boys in her class would sometimes come to the girls and beg for two or three rubber bands because their parents would never allow them to waste both the rubber bands and their time for homework. So, when Shang, the quiet boy always doing homework in his seat, asked Wen if he could have some rubber bands, Wen's first response was "Uh, you also want rubber bands?" She had never thought that he played like any other boy.

"Don't bother, don't bother. Never mind what I said. Thank you," Shang said. Small drops of sweat were struggling to cling on his pale face. He seemed to be running a fever.

"No, no, no, it's fine. I didn't mean that. I have a lot of rubber bands. Um, how many do you want?"

"Thank you. One, two or three... Actually, can I have five? Thank you..." One drop after another, sweat slid down along his sharp cheekbones.

"Um, sure." Wen reached for the box of rubber bands in her backpack. "One, two, three, four... Here you go, there's ten."

"You don't have to give me so many. But thank you, thank you very much."

"No problem. Tell me if you need more."

Wen didn't know that he would take her words seriously, but he did. Three days later, he came to her seat and asked if he could have another fifteen rubber bands.

"Um, sure." This time, she gave him twenty rubber bands and received five more "Thank you" in return.

Fifteen rubber bands? To Wen, he seemed to be the same boy only doing homework and never playing with anything. Does he collect rubber bands as a secret hobby? She wondered as the boy walked back to his seat with a handful of giggly yellow worms squeezed in his bony hand.



Look, baby, we have a long string of rubber bands. Now we tie the two ends together and make a loop. When mommy played with friends in middle school, two girls would circle the loop around their ankles and stand on two sides. But since it's just the two of us, let's use two chairs. Put the loop around the legs and pull the chairs apart till the string is tight. There we go. Now, let me teach you the footsteps. But um...give Mommy a minute first...

Wen takes a deep breath and tries to recall the footsteps. Although she played the

game for years, she has never truly mastered it. Whenever Tiger Ting sighed when the lottery placed Wen into her team, Wen knew that she was not good at the game. Nor has she been truly good at anything, as her parents had almost convinced her over thirty-one years:

“You think you get into top ten because you are good at studying? No. It’s just luck. And anyways, elementary school is easy.” “Your art teacher says your painting is good? No. She is just nice. Don’t get distracted by drawing. You know, high school entrance exam is coming up.” “Can you really go back to your dorm by yourself? At least, let us walk you to the bus station. You cannot protect yourself.” “Are you going to take the manager job? I don’t know if you are good enough. Think more.” “A baby? You are having a baby? Oh, don’t worry! I know that you won’t be good at taking care of your baby, but we will help you!”

For years, when her civil servant parents over-worked day and night to provide everything for her life, Wen was busy fighting a constant battle within herself. She questioned herself ten thousand times if she was dumb but “just lucky” in every possible situation. If she was, why had life been so partial to her? If not, why had her parents been so sure that she was for the whole

time? Either way, she knew that she would be hurt by the answer, so she sealed all the questions in her diary and left them unanswered.

A few years ago, she ventured to flip through her diaries and ended up using a whole box of tissues. She cried not only out of pity for the writer, but more out of amazement that she could survive into adulthood. That night, memories came back to her page after page, becoming clearer and clearer in her blurred vision. When she got to the last page, she saw the thirteen-year-old girl again, leaning against the kitchen door and shivering as she eavesdropped on her parents.

She heard her mom’s voice again: “Do you know what that drunkard did to his children? I heard from Mrs. Wang today. So, so, so, so, so terrible.”

“What happened? Calm down,” her dad said.

“Oh my, that poor boy and his crazy father. It’s so terrible.”

“What happened?”

“You don’t know? That boy of poor Mrs. Feng. I forgot his name. Maybe Chang? Lang? Shang? It’s Shang, I think...”

Shang? Wen leaned her body closer to the door.

“Yes, I remember, it’s Shang. That poor boy got beaten up by his crazy father. The

old drunkard was drunk, of course. Poor little Shang got beaten from top to bottom, bleeding everywhere, half dead...”

Bleeding? Half dead? No, no, are they talking about the Shang that I know? Is it him? Is that why he didn’t come to school these days? Wen almost wanted to vomit.

“Poor boy, but why...” Her father tried to say something when he got cut off.

“Oh, I don’t want to say anything bad, but still, I just want to say that the boy was stupid. You know what he did?”

“Wh...?”

“Mrs. Wang said that the stupid boy tried to strangle his dad with a string of rubber bands, like the string that the girls play with, when his dad was sleeping that night. Rubber bands! What was he thinking? Oh my, is that family poor to the point that he couldn’t even find a hanger or something else?”

Rubber bands? It is Shang then. Definitely. But try to kill his father? Did I hear that? Wen’s hands turned ice cold.

“Honestly, I don’t blame the boy for wanting to get rid of his father. You know, that man spends his nights beating his wife and his days asking her for money. But it’s just that the boy is stupid... Wait, did you hear anything outside? Where is Wen?”

Outside, Wen tried her best to hold her breath, but failed and let out a loud sob. Fortunately, she managed to hide into the storage room before her mother stuck her head out of the kitchen door. When the door closed again, Wen sneaked back.

“Let me tell you, don’t let our girl know. What can I say... that girl has a good heart but is stupid, too. Once she finds out, you’ll see her running to Feng’s place immediately. What can she do? Sometimes I just don’t know how to protect her...”

Suddenly, tears gushed out of Wen’s eyes. She ran into her room. Locked the door. Threw herself on her bed. When her nausea ebbed a little, she pulled out her diary and started writing. Then she stopped and stared at the screaming Chinese characters on the page.

Word by word, she read the last line again. As floods of bitter liquid fell over her lips, she used all her strength to cross it off and buried the mess with a dark, thick layer of ink. She threw away her diary and never touched it again until she gathered everything and moved out of her parents’ old apartment for college.

When she finally re-opened the page years later, vague marks imprinted on the next sheet reminded her that the line had something to do with “rubber band,”

“strangle,” “parents,” and “MYSELF?”



Um, of course you can play with rubber bands in other ways. You can make a basket, a bracelet, or a car... But why? Are you tired of jumping rubber bands already? Baby... If you truly want to learn something, you really, really have to spend time with it.

Wen doesn’t understand why Lili loses interest so fast. Twenty minutes ago, Lili was keen on learning the game, but when they took a break just now, she asked if there is another way to play with rubber bands.

It is not the first time that Wen gets upset. Two weeks ago, she even complained to Kang,

“Lili is so difficult. I have been trying my best to give her everything she wants. And I say praise to her and encourage her. And I grant her so much trust and freedom. Just like how the education experts say. Not like how my parents brought me up. But I don’t get why it’s not working. She’s never satisfied with anything and keeps asking me for more and more. I just don’t know what

she wants...”

“Calm down. She’s just a child now. Everything should be fine in a few years,” her husband said, “By the way, what do you think about the music summer camp I found? It’s not that I want to get rid of our daughter, don’t get me wrong. But the company is going to have a crazy summer. Sending her to a camp is good both for her and for us.”

“Right. Right.” she sighed. “Uh, why is it so hard to be a parent?”

In fact, now as Wen is trying to be as patient as she can to teach Lili a lesson, the same question is circling around in her mind.

“So, Mommy, can I use rubber bands to make bracelets?”

“Uh, well, you could...” Wen says, “But listen...”

“Then I will make one for you, and one for Daddy.”

“Why?”

“Mommy, if I make a bracelet for you, will you wear it every day? Even when you are working?”

“Sure...”

“What about Daddy?”

“Maybe...”

“Good.” Lili’s cheek looks like a cherry blossom. “And Mommy, can you also make one for me? So that we can spend time together even when you are working and I am studying... Mommy, I know thirty minutes is almost up, but it’s really fast, right? Please...”

Wen looks at her daughter extending a handful of yellow rubber bands to her. She does not know why, but through her daughter’s fleshy pink palm, she sees Shang’s bony hands squeezing the yellow bands and pulling a string around his father’s neck, as well as her own hand marking down angry Chinese characters on the page. Looking at the three hands, she is chilled that they look alike. Her heart aches as she tries to understand why the hands are all so delicate and so desperate. After a long silence, she looks at her daughter and says,

“Baby, forget about time.”



Country Ham

Kristen Scoggins, Young Harris College

Wake up time is at 7:30 a.m., officially, but the old timers here at Sandy Knolls Assisted Senior Living Home roll around closer to 5:15. They hitch up their walkers and power chairs and fight their way to be the first in the sitting room to be served breakfast. Yes, they know breakfast isn't served until eight, but Geraldine Jones says *that the early birds get the best worms* as she rolls past on her glitter embellished scooter. Sometimes Maureen Little "forgets" her pants during her morning dressing so that she can get the seat right next to the serving table. The best cuts of honey ham and eggs over medium are too good for the likes of Janis Walker, who sleeps in until nine thirty nearly every day.

I tell them sometimes, "It's not a race, ladies. Please, take your time." One day I'm afraid there'll be some sort of collision, a twelve-wheelchair pileup right in the middle of the "highway" that makes up the Alzheimer's and Dementia floor.

A cacophonous sea of, "Don't move my chair" and "Get out of my goddamn seat, Shirley Nichols." It's always a competition with this lot, with anything and everything.

Who is the first to get to breakfast? Who is the first to get to bingo? Hell, I'm almost certain Whitey O'Hare has a deadpool going! These old folks aren't above betting on who's gonna die first.

Old folks still got personality, see? Same person as they always were, they just have more greys and more wrinkles. We got nice ones who knit sweaters and pinch our cheeks and tell us how we remind them of their "grandbabies." Folks with rosy cheeks and cute, toothless smiles. Then we got the mean ones. The "get off my damn lawn" types who bite and kick and scratch and cuss like sailors. Minds too far gone to care about who they hurt.

It's Mrs. Gladys Harriman that's the most vicious. No one's sure whether it was the Alzheimer's that made her mean or if she was just always this way. Always wearing a frown, always ready to hurt some other little old lady's feelings or mine. Her meanness is the reason her family doesn't visit her anymore.

Five years ago, her granddaughter, Marion, brought her newborn baby for a visit. We rearranged the whole sitting room so that they could all sit down and talk with each other, fawn over the new little girl if

that was their fancy. Right in the middle of lunch, Gladys stood up and dropped the baby on the floor. The little one was okay, don't worry, but that was the last straw for the Harriman clan. They never visited again.

The bacon is burned this morning. The smell of the charred bacon reaches my nostrils as I amble in. Twelve minutes late, still half taken with sleep, and my eyes drooping with tired, I hear their argument as soon as I enter the French doors near the front desk, before my eyes take in the sight of two figures hunched over the hotplate.

Gladys and Lyman Green are fighting over a wizened slice of ham. Like it's a piece of gold or some sort of precious gem.

Lyman Green. A small man; skinny with a cherubic face and a poorly-executed comover. One of the residents that always greet you with a smile and a kiss on the cheek, if you allow him to. My supervisor says he fought in WWII, but I just can't imagine that a man so darling could ever even pick up a gun, much less kill anyone.

His family visits at least once a week. Sometimes his living children, sometimes his grandchildren and their kids. Piling through

the front doors carrying cakes and macaroni paintings, they stay for hours just to tell stories and make him feel like he isn't alone.

Mrs. Gladys likes to pick on him because he's not the type to fight back. He just hunches over, turns his eyes to the floor, and takes her lashings. *I'm a gentleman*, he says, *and gentlemen don't yell at ladies, no matter how mean they are.*

They both have a fork stabbed in, almost right in the center of the meat. The slice is barely big enough to hold both utensils. The old broad yanks her fork backwards and Lyman reciprocates as I draw nearer. Gladys has a white-knuckled grip on her weapon. Lyman has his own gripped in his entire fist.

The new girl who helps me with the old folks, Carla May, looks to me once I am in earshot.

Me, the veteran here, the expert in how to diffuse a Gladys-level situation. Carla's arms are straight and stiff at her sides, dark eyes wide, pleading for my help.

"I don't know what to do with her, Rita." She sounds as if she's on the verge of tears. "The last time I tried to get her to behave, she nearly broke my nose."

I silence her with the raising of my finger and drop my purse at her feet. To diffuse the bomb that is Gladys Harriman, you have to be calm. Carla has yet to learn that wisdom.

"Mrs. Gladys?" I try to keep my tone soft. "Mrs. Gladys, can you tell me what's going on this morning?"

She does not acknowledge me, but Lyman turns his eyes to me.

"She's already had *two* pieces, Rita, *and* eggs." He emphasizes *two* with the widening of his eyes. "I haven't even gotten to eat anything yet."

"Well, it isn't my fault you got up so late, you *crybaby*." Mrs. Gladys' shrill squeak of a voice interrupts. She finally turns her head to me. "If he was *really* all that hungry, he would have gotten up *early* like the rest of us."

She continues with a sneer, "The rest of us are always up early while he stays in his room and sleeps that morning away. He doesn't deserve this piece, Rita."

Her nose is stuck up high in the air now, as it usually is. A cruel little beast. Round in the cheeks with sharp features. Small deep-set eyes and a beaklike nose. Like a mean-looking garden gnome. Ones that you're just a little afraid to go near after it gets dark.

"Mrs. Gladys," I begin my reply, "don't you think it would be *nice* of you to let Mister Green have some breakfast since you've already eaten some? You know, we'll have plenty of lunch for you later on this evening."

And she scoffs! As if I've taken the Lord's name in vain. "Well, maybe I don't want to have to wait until lunchtime."

Bitch.

I don't think she has a nice bone in her entire body.

Again, she pulls the ham closer to her, silver weapon scraping across the metal bottom of the hotplate. The sound grinding past my eardrums. Like the sound it makes when a nun scrapes her nails across the surface of a blackboard. It makes me wince, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

Then she moves her fork up out of the ham and brings it back down just as quickly. Right into the wrinkled, spotted skin on the back of Lyman's hand.

He lets out a holler, eyes growing wide as he tries to pull back his hand, but the fork is stuck in too deep. Gladys holds the utensil tightly in her grasp and digs it deeper into his skin.

"Gladys, stop that right now!" The volume of my voice draws the attention of the tables surrounding us. Prying eyes of little old women leaning towards us trying to collect as much as they can for gossip later. At lunch they'll talk about how this old bat lost her marbles before breakfast was even over.

I lunge forward, nearly tripping over my own feet. Taking Gladys' stabbing hand in my own and, as gently as I can, I pull the protrusion from Lyman's hand.

Mrs. Gladys' fork comes away bloody and with the squishing sound of metal as it's pulled from meat. "What is wrong with you?" *Like a mother scolding an unruly child*, "That was uncalled for Gladys. Why would you even do something like that?" I finally drop the fork onto the plate with a heavy, metal *thunk*.

"He should have gotten up *earlier*, Rita. Instead of being so lazy." There is a sort of half-smile on her face as I pull her away, unafraid that she may turn her claws on me to scratch or lean down to bite at my hands. I turn her away from the scene by her arm, then turn my eyes back to Lyman. His hand, now bleeding, pulled in close to his chest. There are tears forming in his eyes.

Carla is exactly where I left her. Standing with a shell-shocked look in her wide, bovine eyes.

"Carla?" Her eyes meet mine. "Can you please make sure Lyman's hand isn't broken or something? Instead of standing there like a fucking moron?"

She accepts the command without hesitation, but moves dumbly over to where Lyman stands. Taking his injured appendage in her own hand and leading him away from leering crowd.

I return my gaze to Gladys, sitting in her chair with hands crossed in her lap. Like she's unaware that she's done something wrong. It sounds as if she's started to hum a tune under her breath, something light and perky.

"Gladys, you listen to me, right now," I begin. "There was absolutely no reason for you to do that." My adrenaline high has yet to subside. My hands still shaking, my voice is not the tone that one ought to take with an elder. Her eyes do not meet mine, yet I continue.

"Mrs. Harriman, that was *assault* and I'm gonna have to call your daughter *and* the police. You broke the rule, Gladys."

There's only one rule for the residents at Sandy Knolls, and it's absolutely no fighting with each other. Petty verbal arguments are, of course, unstoppable, but there's a zero-tolerance policy towards physical violence between residents, you see?

Residents who fight are required to leave the facility. The last time two broads put their dukes up and had to leave was my first year working. Dolores Kincade and Odelle Patrick. Twin sisters.

"My daughter pays very good money for me to be taken care of here." She takes a haughty tone, still refusing to meet my eyes. "This facility can't possibly say no to my money."

Before I can reply, Carla calls out to me.

"Uh, Rita? I think something is happenin' to Mister Lyman. He's holding his chest and he, uh, he don't look like he's breathing too good." Her voice is laced with panic.

When I look at them, Mister Lyman looks pale. His eyes wide and red from his tears. He looks sort of like a fish does when it's beached. Mouth opening and closing in rapid succession as it fights to catch its breath. He's pulling at the neck of his shirt with a still bleeding hand.

"He's having a fucking heart attack, Carla!" And I rush over, tripping over my bag and a cane as I go, until I'm beside him.

"He might be having a heart attack, Carla."

I rush, "how long has he been like this?"

"I don't know, Rita. I turned away to look at my phone for just a minute," her panic rising, "and when I turned back he was like this."

"Your phone? What the fuck is wrong with you, Carla? I asked you to see about him!"

I do not wait for a response. I have no time. Mister Lyman crumples to the ground at my feet.

“Carla, go call 911.” I hear only the sounds of her hurried feet striking the carpeted floor, then the muffled sound of her voice.

All eyes are on us now, as I fall to the floor beside him. They rise from their tables and amble over to the edge of the room where I sit beside him. Unaware of how to help him.

“Rita?” His voice is barely audible. He reaches for my hand, grasping at it weakly.

“Mister Lyman, let me go to my purse. I have an aspirin that you can take.” I try to loosen my hand from his, but he grips tighter.

The look in his eyes looks like fear. It worsens when I move to leave him. Slowly, he seems to be fading away. The brightness in his eyes is ebbing away like the changing ocean tide.

“Just stay here,” he pleads.

“Don’t leave me, please.”

“Carla? Carla, how far away are the EMTs? I think he’s going to die!” I am frantic.

I hear no reply. Just the growing voices around us. *Is Green really about to croak? Is he going to be okay? What’s for lunch? Do you know? What’s all this yelling commotion? I just don’t think a lady should curse like that. Back in my day ...*

“Mister Lyman, you got to hang on, okay? The ambulance is going to be here soon, I promise. Okay? Can you hang on? For just a little bit longer?” Squeezing his hand, shaking it urgently.

But his eyes are already drifting to a close. Until I can no longer see the whites of them. Small noises continue from the back of his throat as he tries to catch his breath, until those noises stop too. And I’m left alone.

Alone. Still clutching his bloody hand. From outside, I can hear the gentle sound of approaching sirens.

Tonight, at dinner, the old ladies at table six will talk about how the old bat lost her marbles at breakfast and how Mister Lyman had a heart attack and then dropped dead after she stabbed him over a piece of ham.

Tomorrow, they will gossip about how I, Rita Maynard, quit my job after watching him take his last breath.



The Facade

Jada Mosley, Spelman College

I remember the first time I feasted my eyes on him...

I was in tenth grade. My parents had just officially divorced. Actually, let me take y'all back a little bit. When they initially separated, I was 10, and my dad moved back to Atlanta to be closer to his family. Each mile felt like an individual stab in the back. But, I now know he NEEDED to move back. He NEEDED his family. I just wish I could have understood then what I know now. The subconscious feelings of betrayal and subtle animosity lingered for years, until one day it just clicked, and made sense. Back then, I couldn't comprehend his burning desire and rooted loyalty to essentially... his identity. Now I praise him for it.

As a kid, he swore nothing could entice him to move away. But along came Naomi. You see, he loved his city, but he was IN LOVE with my mother. He allowed her wanderlust to de-root him, moving him across the country to Baldwin Hills. When we moved to Cali on a leap of faith for my mother's career in entertainment law, for lack of better word... we were broke. My mom was just finding her footing in the industry

and my dad was jumpstarting his own career in sports management with dreams of opening his own practice. Both starting off at the bottom of their food chains, both hindered by their "otherness," (a more formal, less blunt way of categorizing their struggles as African Americans fighting to be seen in corporate America for their capabilities and not their appearance). They both excelled exponentially. We'd made it, right? Wrong.

Somewhere along the line the love was lost. Lips became disregarded, fiends for "just because" kisses. The bed transformed into a cold battlefield, creating a war between their inner devout love and their negligent human shells. The overall atmosphere of our house... shifted. Almost as if there wasn't enough love to fill the square footage of the immaculate house we built as a family. I mean honestly what's the point of having everything you could possibly want and need in life, if when you look into your soul mate's eyes you see... nothing... where you used to see paradise, peace, and serenity. All in one glance. The love was lost. Or better yet, misplaced. Could have been found, with effort, with which they seemed to excel in in all categories but rekindling their love. I

once read somewhere that throughout your marriage you fall in and out of love as you mature as a couple... there's something... beautiful... something so pure in the simplicity of re-falling in love with the same person despite their flaws, interests, or shifting appearance. So, for the life of me I couldn't figure out why they gave up so quick, but maybe it wasn't for me to understand... it wasn't my story.

My mom met, fell in love with, and married her career, forgetting to tell my dad. She was married to the money, literally. He felt... neglected, but what does that even really mean? The African American woman in today's society is expected to balance so much. Not only are we the most oppressed group in the United States, but we are expected to hurdle obstacles and dive into the toxic, white washed pool of corporate America. Not only are we forced throughout life to be independent, but expected to be emotionally and financially reliant on a man. We are obligated by our communities to be strong and direct but also expected to be delicate and sensitive. You know, "womanly." Nobody wants the "Mad Black Woman." Raised on the importance of supplementing the household income,

but careful, not too much because you may demasculinize your king. Oh, and how could I forget, God forbid you aren't able to fill your womanly "duties" of taking care of, managing, cleaning, and cooking for the household, which is a challenge we are more than prepared to take on, but cut us some slack here and there. Most importantly, don't forget you are a Queen to the King, the Eve made for Adam from his rib. We are desired to fill the void a man cannot attain on his own. You are his therapist, his peace of mind, his emotional safe zone in a society that deems any other emotion than anger from an African-American man as taboo. You're home base. But Queens need stability too.

My mom was tired. She was losing herself in the motions of life. And my dad felt neglected. Where was the woman he fell in love with? The love was misplaced, and they both forgot how easily it could have been found. One could only imagine the pain of seeing a stranger in someone who used to be your best friend. Your everything. So he left.

Luckily, I didn't have to go through this alone. I have two siblings, my older brother Naveen and my younger sister Nyla. We spent our summers and school years in the world's largest tug-of-war between Georgia and Cali. My sister was always mature for her age, just a mere two years shy of my

ten. She was always able to comprehend the situation. I assured her if she ever wanted to talk, I was always here for her. I always want her to know I'm here for her. But much like me, she keeps her feelings bottled until they explode on a canvas or sketch book. She's extremely artistic. A skill that I wish I'd inherited. Her and my mother paint these beautiful elaborate pieces that leave me at a loss for words. My dad and I are creative as well, but we're slick at the tongue. We have a way of finessing our feelings onto a sheet of paper in spoken word or poem form. And its definitely a finesse. We have the ability to be emotional but detached at the same time. It's really a talent if you ask me, a blessing and a curse all in one. Naveen on the other hand, ball is life but we'll touch on that in just a sec.

Anywho, Nyla once paralleled us to dogs, caught up in a messy breakup. There, going through the motions, but not allowed to express how they're impacting us. Dogs. And oddly, I couldn't agree more. I felt muted. Wasn't old enough to have a say, but wasn't young enough to inappropriately display my emotions.

Fast forward to the year I met my insanity.

My tenth-grade year. It was my first full school year in Atlanta. Before then I would spend summers with my dad and go to camp in Piedmont Park as a kid. So needless to say,

I was the new girl. Indefinitely. I hated the thought of being the new girl. My brother was only a grade above me, so at least we'd be struggling to meet people together, right? Wrong. Naveen was a basketball protégé. He already had the rest of his high school career mapped out and offers from around the country, so he never had any problems making friends.

Anywho, back to this entity.

Like I said, I first feasted my eyes on him at my brother's season opener. I came with my Dad, but I had a lap full of AP homework so I never intended to watch the game. When the home team came out, the lights dimmed until the gym was almost pitch black. I couldn't see my homework, I had no choice but to watch. They were so dramatic. Check this out, they had spotlights in the school's colors beaming from the ceiling to the players' bench illuminating the team's starting five. The cheerleaders gleefully flipped from the gym entrance to the home team's side, creating almost a runway running perpendicular to the bleachers. They equally split the team and lined up parallel to each other, anticipating the announcers first call. A player not apart of the starting five (I like to call them

benchwarmers) stood at the end of the runway with his back turned to the home side bleacher. (This is kind of hard to explain, but I'm sure most of you have been to a high school basketball game.) I was all too familiar with this. Each player is going to have their individualized handshake and the crowd goes wild, blah blah blah. (Anddddd Nowwwwww introducing your Southside Panthers. Standing at 6'5", nationally ranked shooting guard Naveeeennnnn Waters.) So let me get this straight, I will love and support my brother until the day I die, but of course they put him first. Everyone does. Our school districts always were chosen based on the caliber of the athletics program. My sister and I were after thoughts.

As my dad viciously cheered, suddenly I had an urge to pee. So I got up, sidestepped to the end of our row, and headed down the stairs towards the exit and to the bathroom before I peed on myself. As I was coming down the bleachers, they called his name.

"Standing at a whopping 6'3", the number one point guard in the region Jeeerroooooommeee 'Ice cold' Winters!"

Corny. By this time, I was at the bottom of the bleachers and he was at the end of the runway. We locked eyes. It was quick, but we definitely locked eyes. It was almost calming, even just for a split second. Sounds corny, but it felt... familiar. Like the

announcer said, he stood at about 6'3, toned, thick, with big brown eyes with the world's longest and thickest eyelashes, thick hair cut into a fade, with waves that (I hate being corny) would make you sea sick. But what captivated me the most was his smile... He had a crooked smile that stopped me in my tracks. As my eyes quickly explored his face, I noticed a single dimple on his right cheek. As he dapped up his teammate at the end of the runway, almost in slow motion I noticed his left arm was tatted from his elbow and disappeared under his uniform, so I assumed it stretched across his back. Mind you our eyes were still locked. As he broke my gaze and turned away to head back to the bench, anticipating his next teammate, one of the beams caught his diamond earring. Damn.

Nah, Nina. He's an athlete boo. You don't need those problems. So I escaped to the bathroom. I relieved myself and went to wash my hands. From day one, I always found it alarming the amount of mirrors this school had. Like damn, who likes to look at themselves THIS much? I looked up from the sink, locking eyes with myself, and I couldn't help but wonder what he observed about me. Was he awing at the curve of my hips, or the curve created by my lips? Did he notice my dimples or find himself wondering whether my lower back was dimpled? Did he notice the gravity resistant thick to my hair, or the dangerous thunder to my thigh?

Essentially was he gazing at my beauty... or daydreaming about my booty.

By the time I made it back to the game we were up twelve to seven. I picked my books up, but who was I kidding? I wasn't about to get any work done. He moved across the floor so elegantly. The ball almost seemed like an extension of his body, flowing from his fingertips in sync with the rotations of the ball in between bounces. He commanded attention when he was on the floor. He was both a leader and a team player. He knew how to assess when to take charge and when to take a step back and blend with the team. I liked that. He was passionate, driven... You could see it in his eyes. And I don't know if I was delusional... but every now and then he seemed to search for my eye contact.

Nah, come on Nina, this isn't a fairytale.

Ninaaa... Ninaaaa...

My dad was calling my name. There was a situation at the office that needed his immediate attention. I instantly felt my eyes roll to the back of my head. That means I have to ride home with my brother. 1) I have no idea how he passed his drivers test, so you know how that is, and 2) he never goes straight home after his games... and considering it was a Friday night, I prepared myself for the worst.

I couldn't control the urge to watch this essentially stranger play. I couldn't believe myself... over my homework? (I'm very serious about my future). Never in my life would I have pinned myself to be that cliché girl crushing on a ball player... who probably didn't even know I existed. Yet I had already analyzed him, knew his entire name and everything! My best friend back home Charlie and I used to laugh at these kinds of delusional girls. The ones who feened to be with a ball player for the image, clout, and popularity. But this felt different.

I had to force myself to leave the gym and wrap-up my homework in the hallway. I knew once that final buzzer rang, by time my brother showered, changed, and came to the parking lot. So it was vital I finished my homework, because I planned to actually attempt to enjoy myself tonight.

After I wrapped up the last problem of my calculus homework, there were two minutes left in the fourth quarter. My brother's team was up by eleven, so it was safe to say they won. As I walked back to collect my books into my backpack, I overheard a group of girls in Naveen's grade talking about who was going to be the designated driver for the big party tonight.

I figured I had about thirty minutes until my brother was ready to head towards this party, so I planned to get cute. Theoretically,

I wanted to step out, you know, pop out or whatever. Be a girl for the night. During the week, I'm so focused on school work and working. I hardly got the time, let alone had the effort to get all dolled up. This could be fun, right? Let me let y'all in on a secret... I have this tendency to let my mind race. Sometimes my thoughts multiply so exponentially and I get carried away. It's so easy to get lost in the translation of pressing thoughts and subconscious worries. A simple task to create and stress about endless complex scenarios that most likely will not happen. It's as if I'm an innocent bystander in the midst of the constant battle between the left and right side of my brain. It's easy to feel... alone. Even surrounded by people, because not only do they not know your mind is racing, but they could never comprehend its stops or destination. And as I am completely engulfed in my thoughts walking down this hallway with my books weighing down my backpack, I passed a mirror and it stopped me dead in my tracks. I was in no condition to pop out to a party. What was I thinking? I had on distressed black jeans and a burgundy, long-sleeved, faded Harvard shirt that hung off one of my shoulders. My eyes flashed to my feet and I had on my classic black and white vans. My face was a distant stranger to makeup and best friends with half a palm full of coconut oil, and a few swipes of Carmex.

My eyebrows were freshly threaded (which I could work with) and my curly fro was all over the place. Perfect.

Luckily enough I had gym that semester. That paired with my irrational fear of spilling something on my clothes midday and my indecisiveness on what to wear to school everyday, and my locker should be a goldmine. So I escaped to the girls' locker room praying that when I grabbed that door handle it wouldn't betray me and not open. But it did. Thank God.

It was really dark, scary almost, like a scene in a high school scary movie or a mass killing. There goes my mind again. Nevertheless, I NEEDED to find that light switch because my phone flashlight was not going to cut it. CLICK. Them damn motion censored lights almost gave me a heart attack.

I put the combination in my lock so damn fast, I had to get out of there. My clothes damn near fell out the locker. Damn Neen, gotta clean out your locker soon. I settled with my three-quarter length sleeve, black bodycon dress (shows off my curves, girl), my thigh-high burgundy boots, and gold-accented jewelry I had in my locker from my birthday. Nothing major, just a choker, watch, and my nose ring (which I never take out). I collected my curls into a messy bun and allowed a few loose spirals to

gracefully hang in the back, girl look at you tryna show out. My face was still bare and I had about fourteen more minutes to work with, so I grabbed my travel makeup out my book bag and tried to make sum shake. I'm no pro, but I get it done when it comes to makeup. I dabbed on a little shea butter toaster foundation evenly across my skin, filled in and concealed my eyebrows, and created 2 dramatic wings with my eyeliner. Set it off, boo. Put some light glittery eyeshadow in the corner of my eyes, slapped on some of my faithful Carmex and called it a day. I had a burgundy lip stain at home from NYX that would have set this outfit off, but hey considering the circumstances... I was lit. There was an exit from the locker room that lead straight to the parking lot, so I packed up my original outfit and headed towards my brother's car.

Do you believe even after all that time I spent getting ready, I still waited at the car for fifteen minutes? Once Chatty Cathy laid eyes on me waiting at his car one would assume he'd have an attitude, you know, "Oh great, Dad's making me bring my little sister along to the party," kinda thing. But my brother actually had the opposite reaction. We were pretty close, and he's always so insistent on me going out meeting new people. He was afraid of me becoming an antisocial home body (which I was on the verge of becoming and strangely okay

with). As he approached the car he screamed "lookkkk atchuuuuu, you must have heard about the party, you ready?" So we hopped in the car, entered the address, turned on some old school music and headed straight there.

Pulling into the neighborhood of the party, the sudden realization that I'd have to navigate the party alone shook me to my core. I wasn't a party person, who was I kidding? Why am I here? Is it too dark and far to walk home? Or how long could I wait the party out, pretend to feel sick, and order an Uber back home?

No, Nina, you can do this. As I attempted to navigate the dark journey from the car to the house party with my brother, I could hear the music growing louder. Here we go. It's strange. You'll come to realize I'm a walking paradox. I'm oddly social and unsocial at the same time. I love interacting with people, but that initial first contact is always so awkward for me. Like what do you say to a stranger? There are so many different types of people in this world... How do you gage where a conversation should go off after an introduction? What do we talk about? Then comes what I like to call the shallows, those who only want to talk about how good they look, social media, and ask you "wyd" every ten minutes. Basic. Let's talk about the universe, different realms, your

favorite books, shit systematic oppression anything.

As we approached the door, we heard a whistle.

"That's all yours?" said one of my brother's teammates.

Gross. These guys act like they don't see me everyday in school. Do I fly that far under the radar? Am I that overlooked? Not gonna lie, I feel shallow for saying this, but they kinda gave me the ego boost I needed before walking into this party. Before I could even fix my mouth to respond to the disrespectful connotation that any man could own me to be able to say "that's all yours" like I'm an object, my brother interjected my thoughts and yelled back. "This is my sister, try her if you want to. She can verbally handle you herself, but I handle situations much more... physically, ya feel me?" He was right... I could have handled it myself.

As soon as we opened the door everybody yelled, "NAVEEEENNNNNN," and instantly ran up to him to dap him up. I just kinda slipped off to the kitchen. For a party that just started it was extremely packed, and steamy. Literally weaving through the crowd, with my body pressed against stranger after stranger, forced to inhale the secretions of adolescents who have not yet grasped the idea of deodorant.

In the short distance from the front door to the kitchen, I kid you not, my butt was groped at least four times. Animals. I was starving, luckily they had just ordered a pizza and punch to go with it. Perfect because ya girl was about to pass out. Two slices, three cups of punch, sixteen minutes and a fake conversation with some girl in the kitchen about her hair later, I was ready to dive back into the party.

I would have told the girl bye, but she was so busy talking about herself I don't even think she'd realize I left, so I walked away. I noticed it was hotter than before and, believe it or not, there were more people than I remember. I'm no stranger to the party scene. My best friend back home Charlie and I went through our party phase a little earlier than most. We got the opportunity to experience and outgrow it within a year's time. But for the sake of socializing and fitting in I'm willing to revisit the old me.

Needless to say I knew my way around the dance floor, and was, for lack of better word... efficient at dancing. As I walked onto the dance floor, Juvenile's "Back That Azz Up" was just coming to an end. Classic. And the intro to "Body Party" by Ciara was coming on. No more than fifteen secs into my two-stepping someone grabbed me to dance. As the song progressed and we

engaged in what my generation calls a slow dance, I started to feel lightheaded and loose. My wide hips swerved on his pelvis to the beat of the song and wound in sync with the melody of within Ciara's voice. By then he had grabbed me closer. It seemed to be consistently getting hotter, and the stranger I was basically dry humping started to get handsy. About three-quarters of the way through the song he attempted to slip up my dress with his grimy hands and I ripped myself away from him. He snatched me back. The sudden motion had me in a dizzy whirlwind, my body felt weak, and it wasn't until then I realized that punch wasn't just punch. How could I not notice? Why was my vision so blurred? Everything seemed like it was moving in slow motion, but fast all at the same time.

He was still grabbing at me. Does he not understand basic human interaction? Let me go! I ripped away from him one more time and made a dash for the bathroom. I busted in and closed the door behind me. It was dark. The bathroom was pretty large and with the combination of the lack of light, not being familiar with the lay out of the house, and being impaired, I couldn't find the light switch. A sense of fear took over my body. I didn't know what to do and I could hear footsteps coming down the hall, so I climbed into the shower and closed the curtains. I had my head in my knees praying

nobody found me. My fear lied somewhere between not wanting to be embarrassed and safety precautions.

The lights switched on. Someone stumbled in. His shadow was fairly large. He was drunk beyond imagination, and I wasn't feeling so hot myself. As I listened to this stranger pee, I couldn't help but overthink about the possibility of him finding me and what could possibly happen. Especially in a locked bathroom with a drunk girl in a bathtub. I always did this thing where I crossed my fingers as if luck spurred from the action of my crossing extremities as my mom would say. But I am a very spiritual person, I believe what you put into the universe comes back to you, and I needed my good karma now more than ever.

He finished and left. The lights went back out. I still couldn't bring myself to move, so I texted my brother. But who was I kidding? I can barely hear myself think over this music let alone hear a single chime. What do I do? The door swung open again. I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE! Each person I encountered put me into further danger. The lights came on. The boy was of a large build again and as he loosened his belt my phone went off... he immediately stopped. The tub was adjacent to the toilet and he turned his focus on my safe haven. When he paused in front of the curtains, I

had a knot in my stomach, and in that split second I came to the conclusion that no matter what I was not going down without a fight. As the curtains slowly revealed the human on the other side, I couldn't believe my eyes.

It was Jerome. He smiled at me and said, "Feelin' like a bubble bath in the middle of the party?" I chuckled. Yes, chuckled and it sounded just as goofy as you expect it to. He reached for me and I flinched. He held his hands in the air to signal that he came in peace, but I still wouldn't let him help me out. In a drunken stammer, almost ripping down the shower curtain and falling on my face, I made it out the tub. He just looked at me. It was quiet. Then he smiled and told me he like the way my dress accentuated my curves and that the way my curls escaped my bun and twirled to the nape of my neck was poetic. I opened my mouth to respond to his random, almost lyrical complements, but then I ran to the toilet as vomit shot out my mouth. As I'm hurled over the toilet sure I've ruined my chances with this man, fully anticipating him walking out, he kneeled next to the toilet with me and whispered in my ear, "They spiked the punch, but don't worry. I'm here," and not only held my hair, but took it out the band and began to run his fingers through it, almost massaging my scalp. Who is this man?? When I came up for air and wiped my mouth, he let my curls

fall and hang, as he would say, "poetically" in my face. I reached to tie it back up and he stopped me mid-motion by grabbing my arm. "Don't hide yourself, I see you."

Before I could stumble on my words in disbelief at this man's finesse of the tongue, the party's music shut off. All I heard was my brother screaming, "If I don't find my sister in thirty seconds, I'm raising hell." I turned to Jerome, took a sharpie out my purse, and wrote my number on his hand as if we were in a 90's movie. I then realized I hadn't said anything since we encountered each other, and this man was talking to me based off my body language. Needless to say, I prayed he'd use my number. I ran out the room, and my brother snatched me up. The music turned back on and we headed home.

Thousands of text messages, endless late-night calls, hopeless-romantic dates, tons of rejuvenating kisses, an abundance of heart filling love, two basketball seasons, a pregnancy scare, high school graduation, and two scholarships to two separate schools within the same city later and here we are, sophomores in college more in love than I ever imagined the first day I saw him. We're a team. What I lack, he possesses, and vice versa. He knows what I'm thinking before I can put it into words. I can tell his mood by his body language, because the Pisces in him won't allow him to properly

communicate his emotions. I am his rib and he is my backbone. We complete each other. FOUR YEARS. Without him I do not feel whole. He is the first one I want to talk to in the morning, and I am the only one he tells his problems. When I have good news, I am most excited to tell him. FOUR YEARS. Our families have integrated at this point, and marriage has begun to be a topic of conversation at family picnics. FOUR YEARS. His kisses are like remedies on the worst days, and when he holds me, I feel like nothing in this world could harm me. He is home.

LOL. Now we all know it's never truly that simple. I don't refer to this man as my insanity for nothing. All my feelings remain true, but our journey was nowhere near a fairytale.

Let me tell y'all how it really went.



Nonfiction

ami beshi kotha boli (I talk too much)

Lydia Abedeen, Emory University

On March 26, 1971, West Pakistan launched a military operation in East Pakistan against Bengali civilians, students, intelligentsia, and armed personnel who were demanding separation, eventually resulting in the nation of Bangladesh. According to Bangladeshi sources, two hundred thousand women were raped, and over 3 million people were killed. These women were deemed as “birangonas” (war heroines) by the Bangladeshi government after the war, but are to this day ostracized and their stories are ignored.

—Tarfia Faizullah, *Seam*

inspired by Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*

There comes a span of time in the early mornings when the sky bleeds.

You may see it, sometimes; you're driving to work, your eyes bruised from lack of sleep, and the sky splits open, the sun rises, bleeding crimson, then orange, then pink, then blue. The sky heals itself, right in front of you.

I wish it were that simple.

The very word “heal” reverberates, makes your skin glow with shimmer, swims beneath your skin like a fish that has never before seen the surface until it dies, weightens, rots—until health turns to hell and optimism turns to depression, oppression. When the sky bleeds you never think the morning is going to come. Sometimes you think you will stay stuck in that puffy-pink shade of healing, or bleed back into the crying crimson. I mention this because it was only during those times each day, as I sat at my laptop, recording my research and thoughts for this project, that I found my mind increasingly turning to sickness, illness, and promise; to the beginning of days, and the ending of pain.

For when the sky bleeds, it is not just the beginning of the past, but also its momentary return.

Immediately, the first thing that comes to mind is the rain, and the fever.

Spring break, 2018. Orlando, FL. It is nighttime, and the guests are just now leaving my house. I watch them go. It is cold outside, but, standing in front of my open front door, the scents of *dbaal* and *shutki* permeating the air, it means nothing—the

warmth wraps around me like a blanket, and my cheek burns like a furnace.

Only after my uncle had struck me had I felt the heat.

Shut the fuck up! You talk too much!

The guests are just now leaving. I look at my mother. She is smiling, but the exhaustion in her eyes betrays her. Her shoulders sag downwards. It is pouring overhead, and the two of us stand in the rain to bid the guests goodbye. My father and brothers stay inside, because that is just the way it is, has always been. I have had the flu for days. She had been preparing for this dinner for weeks, and yet, it took one question of mine to unravel it.

The guests are just now leaving the house. The men shoot me dirty looks. The women are too scared to. I feel light-headed. I haven't eaten the whole day, waiting hand and foot on these guests for the past eight hours. The rain soaks into my headscarf, cool against my feverish forehead. I want to curl up where I am and sleep.

It is freezing. The guests are almost gone.

My knees begin to shake. My mother has long since gone inside, but I stay where I am. I am not willing to face my transgressions just yet. The guests are almost gone. But my grandmother grabs my hand. I turn to hear her whisper.

Yes, it happened to me.

The night the guests left, my father came to talk to me at the dining table.

Mamoni, that took courage. But you have to realize that they aren't mad at you. They are ashamed.

I looked at him curiously.

Those were their mothers, their grandmothers. The unloved offspring of those unions are their sisters and brothers, their husbands and wives. They aren't mad at you. They are ashamed it happened. For how could they have stopped it if it had been coded in their blood?

My grandmother's sister also came to visit that day the guests came. A delicate older woman. Ninety years old. She held her hand in mine the whole time, her skin paper-thin. Of the matter, she only said this:

All I remember is the pain. Don't you know that they made us watch each other die? That they made us, made us, made us?

When they found her she was not about to wake.

Dhaka ports. Bangladesh, 1971. A rice farmer with skin the color of charcoal awakes to harvest the *bhaat* from his rice paddy.

My grandmother pauses to take a trembling sip from her milk *cha*. I look at her hands, wrinkles threaded like etched glass.

My hands were once smooth like yours, she tells me. But even then, they were wrinkled. Waterlogged.

The farmer found a pink sari, the color of bleeding spring shapla petals, unfurling in the water, seeping into the grass. Found a bruised blackandblue woman who remained enshrouded within the cloth like an afterthought.

A pregnant pause. Then I hear her murmur.

Honestly, Lidi. I would have let him do anything to me by then.

I looked at her, unsure.

If no one sees a wound, does it truly bleed?

Regarding the issue, my mother was quiet. She watches my youngest brother play in his high-chair.

Rape is genetic. It carries to every generation. Not just for Bengali women. The birangonas had their share, and they gave birth to unloved daughters and sons who were pestered by monsters who used their existences against them. Those people will give birth to children who don't know how to love because their parents didn't either, and will fall for people who'll abuse them.

My mother looked at me.

It's why nobody wants to talk about it. Because they refuse to believe it's important, even to this day. The birangonas aren't just those women. They're every woman, ever since then.

The next day. My grandmother flew in one of her old friends from Bangladesh, whose children live in Boston. One of her friends from the war.

I remember how frightened she was of everything. When I came to embrace her, she flinched. When my father came to greet her, tears sprang to her eyes. I remember how she watched my infant baby brother play in the shade of palm tree outside with a clenched jaw and even more clenched fist.

For this reason I did not take active notes while interviewing her. She spoke the same way I remember her, in a blur:

We didn't even know what was happening. They

asked me if I was a Bengali or a Muslim and I said both both they took us dragged us bruised us beat us like we were animals forced to feed from their hands we were sisters best friends sworn enemies and of course they hurt us hurt us hurt us and we fed from their hands. We'd betray each other for these men's fancies just to suck the mango sap from their hands. We were hungry but more importantly our babies were hungry my daughter grew inside my stomach like a hybee when she was born I cupped her in my hands the same hands she died in. But it wasn't me it wasn't me it was one of her fathers I think I say fathers because I never had sex with the same man. I say sex because by the time she was born I had started to want it, by then. To this day I remember the beating. They beat us the way the river runs don't you remember that old poem Lydia? The river runs that way, slithers this way, that is always the river's way. They dumped me in the river that day. But it didn't take me, and neither did my family. I could never conceive again. I am still repenting for my sins even to this day.

She passed away three days ago, as of typing this. They say there was a smile on her face. When they found her, she wasn't about to wake.

There comes a span of time in the early mornings where the sky bleeds.

You may see it, sometimes; you're driving to work, your eyes bruised from lack of sleep, and the sky

splits open, the sun rises, bleeding crimson, then orange, then pink, then blue. The sky heals itself, right in front of you.

Or maybe not. Maybe you lie in bed as the sun cracks the sky open, as it oozes orange, yellow, and gold, lightening into pink hues, then blue, you want to curl up and disappear. The sky heals itself, right in front of you, and yet you are still broken. You have been left torn into.

The very thought of healing reverberates, makes your skin glow with shimmer, swims beneath your skin like a fish that has never before seen the surface until it leaps, lightens, glows—until hell turns into health and oppression and depression turns to optimism. When the sky bleeds you always know that the morning is going to come. Sometimes you think you will stay stuck in that weeping crimson, but before you know it you've risen into that puffy-pink shade of healing, and you are. I mention this because it was only during those times each day that I found my mind increasingly turning to healing, love, and redemption; to the beginning of days, and the ending of pain.

For when the sky bleeds, it is not just the returning of the past, but also its ending.

Or so I say. After all, I talk too much.



Housekeeping to Adults

Elliot Trojanowski, Agnes Scott College

Housekeeping to Adults, please. Housekeeping to Adults.

That meant something bad had happened. Someone had shit or pissed on the floor, or a chair. Or maybe it went everywhere. If I were lucky, it had happened in the men's rec room or a patient's room. More likely, it had happened in the hall or in one of the public rec rooms or right outside my room. The culprit? Probably Miss Lola or Niva. Miss Lola was old and couldn't always make it to the bathroom, and I don't know about Niva.

Shit and piss became a daily part of life at the hospital. The place smelled of bodies with a hint of bleach, not strong enough to mask the smell. I don't mean to imply that Peaceful Oaks was a dirty hospital. It was clean, actually, thanks to housekeeping, but the bleach and antiseptic never seemed to do enough in the smell department. Regardless, bleach, antiseptic, and hand soap became my holy trinity. Never knowing when the next accident would strike meant always having freshly-cleaned hands and a nifty ability to sidestep the messes. My time in Peaceful Oaks was a terrible one, but with the soap and housekeeping, my week passed quickly.

Literal excrement wasn't the only mess

around. I was quite the little shit in my time at the hospital. No Sylvia Plath tragically crying facedown on a bed here. I have been like this all my life, but lock me up for a week and it really comes out. Did I full-on scream at my doctor and my mom because they wouldn't let me out of the hospital? Yes. Was I classist and snobby to other patients? Absolutely. Did I try to insist I was better than everyone else in that damn hospital? You betcha.

At 18 years old, I was hospitalized for a suicide attempt. It was neither glamorous nor tragically beautiful. At best it was pathetic and at worse it was pretty shitty.

I'm applying makeup and checking myself out in the mirror. My eyeliner is crap but overall, I look pretty cute. He should be here at about 8:00. I texted my boyfriend to let him know I was "going to bed early." That would give me an excuse to not text him back while I fucked his best friend. It was midnight and he still hadn't come. I gave him another call and went to bed.

When I woke up, I felt like shit. I saw my muscle relaxers on the counter and got an

idea. I wanted to punish myself for the guy not showing up. Maybe if I took enough, I could throw up or die or something. A bunch of pills later, I wound up in the ER.

It's August, but I'm shivering. Someone covers me up and I go back to sleep. I didn't take enough to die, but I've never been this drugged and tired in my life. The heart monitor feels weird on my boobs, and I'm thirsty, but I can't drink anything. People keep coming to my bed and asking me why I did it. I get transferred to the psych ER and I fall back asleep— not before checking my phone to see if the guy texted me. He hadn't.

I didn't try to kill myself just because the boy didn't show up. I had been searching for answers to a health problem all summer with no answers. I felt like I had no support. I was deeply depressed and not seeing my therapist. It was stupid and impulsive, but it happened.

I landed myself in Peaceful Oaks. In a word, it was shit. Besides the urine and feces that happened every day, the worst parts of life seemed to ooze through the locked doors, tainting the off white walls and coating the wooden hallways. Emotions that had been piled up in the corners were dusted off to

reveal a raw red surface. Not only did people cry a lot, but we were supposed to talk about our feelings and process them four times a day. Fuck that.

I wish I could convey what it's like to be truly suicidal. Not like "Aw, I'm so embarrassed, I'm gonna kill myself" or "Fuck my life." I read part of *Borderlands/La Frontera* where Gloria Anzaldua purposefully uses language to distance the reader from being able to try and be like, "Yes, I totally identify" if they aren't Gloria. I wish I could write a hospital language, a mixture of the scribble on the doctor's prescription, badly copied handouts on coping skills, copies of patient rights on the wall, and scrawls of notes taken with golf pencils too dull to cause harm to people. Somewhere in there is the language I would use to connect to those who have also been hospitalized.

Not everyone understands the language. Some seem deliberately ignorant— thank you woman who told me I was too young to have attempted. Others seemed barely literate in it, telling me with the best wishes that they would miss me if I was dead.

Hospital life was shit, no doubt about that, but there were some actually pleasant moments. Every afternoon there was quiet time, and I got the chance to sit in the

windowsill of my room that looked out onto the courtyard and read. For the first half of the week it was *Brave New World* and for the second half it was *Harry Potter*. Now, when my mind gets sucked into the horror of the hospital, I try to focus on reading, the main happy memory of the hospital, and the world is all right.

No one wants to talk about the hospital or suicide or mental illness. It becomes a taboo topic as soon as it's introduced. So much shame exists for patients, but how much of that shame is caused by the people who refuse to say anything supportive or otherwise to the survivors?

These days, I have a new language that I made myself. It is built on the foundation of words uttered from a therapy chair. The small print on my medicine bottles. My messy squiggles of mantras pasted to my mirror, wall, notebook, everywhere. It's a language capable of describing pain, but more often than not, it describes being okay. Not great, but okay.

Riding home with my mom, I tried to talk about the hospital. Mainly I focused on the happy parts, like art therapy and the puppy who came and visited on Friday. But my mom did not want to hear it. Shame surfaced

in me and I reflected to myself on what it was like to be free. But the shame still burned and it burned for a long time. My attempt was referred to as my "accident" or my "mental health day" months later.

As we pulled into a gas station to fill up, I went inside to pick out a treat. I stood in front of the candy aisle and decided on Peanut Butter M&Ms. The treat worthy of a recently-freed, no longer suicidal woman. They were the best shit I ever tasted.

A Will to be Grotesque

Elizabeth Wolfe, Agnes Scott College

*Scatter my ashes at Six Mile Creek,
Where the slickrock turns to greenglide.
Where the blue striders streak.
Drag Billy Mashburn's old johnboat
down the slope by the shore
as the sun dies and the moon climbs.
As light trails each dipped oar.*

*Scatter them there, where the ancient cans bleach.
Where the silt bed's green blanket
drapes the ten thousand things.
With the leaf's husk, with the pollen,
let them dust the cool creek,
and sink into that darkness
Where the great darkness sleeps.*

— Patrick Phillips, "Will"

"When I die, just dump my body in one of those Home Depot buckets on the back porch."

My father's voice would resound through the house as he said this, tipping his head to look over the back of our living room couch and out the glass doors that led to our sun-lit porch. His broad back would press against the leather of the couch as he did so, making it groan as he released his weight down into it. It wouldn't be uncommon for him to then fall sideways onto the straining piece of furniture, throwing his legs up onto its arm and positioning himself for a Sunday nap, his shirt lifting to reveal the pale skin of his side and stomach, which swelled a little from the string of beers he would drink each night.

This familiar scene flitted into my mind when the funeral home director asked my mother where we planned on having my father buried. I held myself back from blurting out, "In a bucket on the porch like he wanted." I could imagine my mother being disgusted by the crude suggestion and not finding it funny in the slightest. She would have likely been more embarrassed than repulsed, as she was by most of the

jokes that my dad and I had shared. As I had not spoken up about the Home Depot bucket, it was decided that he should be buried at Honey Creek Woodlands, a monastic nature preserve that allows for burials.

A week later, I would watch a pine box containing my father's body be lowered into the cool October dirt. He was untouched by embalming fluid, left bare to rot under the long, pale grasses that have since grown over the sinking burial mound. We left him there, the box sitting at the bottom of a gaping hole to be covered later by unfamiliar groundskeepers who never knew him. It felt so odd to turn away from him, the box exposed to the bright sun while he lay shut inside, surrounded by cool darkness.

I've never returned to visit the grave site. I feel no desire to stare at the ground and imagine him living. I can do that anytime, calling to mind memories of the way he lay prone on a medical bed in our guest bedroom. His skin hung from his bones as if it had been placed there carelessly, someone forgetting to pad it with the muscle, fat, and sinew that should billow underneath.

At the time, he seemed so close to

collapsing in on himself that it's not hard to envision him underground, the damp wood of the pine box falling in on him as what little soft tissue he had left sinks slowly in on itself, eventually falling away into rot. Most are sickened by the thought of their loved ones decomposing nastily and falling away into unrecognizable mush, but I feel oddly comforted by the thought that he lies under the ground, putrefying, decomposing in the way that he always joked he wanted. He has become a part of where he believed he came from.

Perhaps this is why I no longer like the idea of my corpse being destroyed in flames, turned into a handful of soft ash to be scattered to the wind. The more I encounter death, the more I wish to be dumped somewhere far from human eyes, out in the open and left to spoil. Decomposition will begin just minutes after I die, as my body begins to digest itself from the inside out. Millions of microscopic deaths will occur as my cells suffocate and my tissues deteriorate. My skin will become marbled with green and black, darkening the pinky-pale tone that tinted me in life. Under the beating sun, it will then blister and then in one grand explosion, my abdomen will burst, unable to contain the gaseous buildup that has been stretching it to the point of splendid eruption.

People are taught to be disgusted at the thought of death and decomposition,

resisting the thought of it or locking their loved ones in ornate boxes under a plot of land in which hundreds have been buried, feeling comforted at the thought of their embalmed family member resting peacefully, untouched by decay. It seems a bit odd to me, though, once you have been freed from life, to shut yourself away in death. In a grand casket, you might lie, nestled comfortably on satin lining and a voluminous pillow. It won't take long, though, for the leaking fluids your body creates to stain the silky fabric surrounding you.

Perhaps this fascination with beautiful burial boxes is the final desire to cling to life. Our spirits gone, our thoughts and pumping life having fallen silent, we cling to our last grasp of a physical life. It is easy to imagine life continuing on if our body seems to be simply sleeping on a luxurious bed. For many, though, the body will already have been damaged before death, ravaged by cancerous rot, failed organs, or disease-ridden tissue.

Imagine how glorious it would be, to rot willingly, freely in the open air, unseen and undisturbed but by the ecosystem that will soon take up residence in your mired frame. The phrase *chilled to the bone* will mean nothing until your bones freeze with the invading cold of winter, turning brittle and cracking under the pervading frost. It would

be a blessing, a joy, a brilliant exit from life to be left in-between the trees or on the damp shore of a creek, on the silt bed scattered with the husks of leaves.

When I die, lay me out in the open, to be grotesque, to be broken, to be free.



Fish Tank

Epiphany Hunter, Agnes Scott College

The tank held fifty gallons. The walls met together in a sickly, green beam. Bluish beads of air jetted into the water, diving in and ricocheting back to the surface like a body thrown in a wave. The water was weighty, content, and a greenish tint. I was awed by how opaque it was. I liked things that were clear at the time. They were the perfect parody for things that were dark.

The tank remained pristine because of the elvish looking fish that toiled its grounds. They clung to the glass by the power of the suction of their mouths and bobbed across the width of it. I was told they were sucker fish. They were a ribbon long with tails like slugs. They were black with ghastly blue speckles. Their mouths covered the span of their bellies—the outline a murky gray with the inside a sticky pink. The middle pulsed like a drum. I thought they were pathetic looking creatures, extracting their nourishment from the leftover grime of others with a constant, grappling motion.

The landscape of the tank was a rock jungle gym. When my dad first bought the tank, all of the children surrounded him and he let us help stack the stones. I remember diving my hand into the warm water as the purifier whirred, trying to stack a cragged,

flat rock on top of an ovular one and enjoying the way my arm looked detached under the surface. Today, my interest enveloped two fish weaving in and out of the castle. They were both slow, occasionally spooked by instances of excitement. They were bored and inexpressive. One was bigger – much bigger. This one was a hellion. He was introverted, subtle, and dark gray with two faded lines travelling across his gills. He liked to peck things. He pecked the glass, the stones, and the tiny stones in the marble bed. He pecked the smaller fish relentlessly. The little fish was silver with orange and spent most of its time in the darkest corners it could find. It was either at the bottom, the top, under a rock – wherever the gray fish was not. Its left fin hung off its side, flesh and a white streak peaking from behind. Where the silver fish hid to no avail. The gray one lurked, unimpressed, until it shot out from behind whatever rock, pecking at the flesh behind the little fish's fin. It pecked again, ripping some silver skin between its teeth as the silver one circled on its right fin.

My cheeks were burning. I watched the big fish strike and the little one sink, its left side rotating down as he tried to uphold himself by his whole fin. Bored, the gray fish

launched again. In my head, I could hear it cry. I felt something hot sliding down my cheek.

The first time it happened I had been four. He was five.

My mother believed it was her evangelical mission to save children from the Georgia Public School System. Four or five academically challenged boys, my uncle being one of them, arrived daily at our miniscule, three-bedroom home and, in addition to the four kids already at home, our mother tried to nurture our academic prestige. This didn't last long. My mother had no educational training. Yet, my uncle stuck around long after the other boys stopped coming. He was family.

Our home was the dust-colored one at the front of the cul-de-sac, with a large property that stretched across the entire left half of the circle. The girls' bedroom was the one behind double windows that peaked out over the property. The contents of our house were old and uncoordinated, everything was a dirty crème color, and there was one bed for both my sister and me. A wooden television and a VCR player perched on the highest dresser. Even then, it was out of

date. The first time I remember it happening, she and I were watching movies while sitting on that bed and he was with us. The sheets of the single bed were billowy and haphazardly sewn together. They were a vomiting color with a dainty floral print. He was fascinated by them. He asked me if I wanted to play a game under them.

I didn't like movies when I was four. I couldn't watch cartoons with villains. Evil, for me, always felt thick enough to be pliable. Several times that day, I had to run out of the bedroom, stabbing the sole of my foot on an upturned toy, with my ears cupped, because something frightening had appeared on screen. My sister was braver, with a strong stomach for tolerating evil. This is probably why our uncle liked her more. That's why I appreciated our special game. It made me feel like I had something my sister didn't have. It calmed me. I was able to block out the tumultuous cartoon. That is the first time I remember it happening, which was not the first time it happened, because I knew what he was doing before he got there.

He and my sister shared the most things between them. My sister was ambitious, playful, and athletic, with all the traits of a second child. She pretended to be a cat, bird, or some other pet, and he was her owner. The tireless consistency with which they played this game baffled me, a pragmatic

child, who insisted that Teletubbies had universal significance. I wanted to be jealous of their types of games. My games with him were different— they involved dark corners and the space behind the couch. Once, the three of us built a fort of the highest grandeur from cardboard boxes and fitted sheets. My sister crowned herself princess of the fortress, at which he insisted that it was only appropriate that he be the high king and I high queen. Later, he told me since we were king and queen we were meant to be married. We giggled. We toured the castle with plans for interior designs and determined the space behind the blue office chair was our dining hall, near the bookshelf was the grand ballroom, and that there should be two bedrooms: one for the princess and one for the king and queen. My sister and I tucked bedsheets into our shirts for gowns and, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the royal family went to bed. In our bedroom, my father in the other room, he asked if we could play our game. I liked it. I was a natural oldest child. I liked having something to myself.

A lot of bad things have happened in front of that fish tank. I was sixteen when I fell over in front of it and dislocated my knee. My mother didn't believe I was truly hurt until I was screaming, sure that my leg was

going to twist off, and the ambulance had to retrieve me.

This time I'd control the curse myself. I rapped the left side of the tank and watched the gray fish dart in terror with every hollow plink. I watched it jump twice, a third time, and smiled to myself.

My grandmother didn't raise my mother completely, so my mother escaped the scathing of her influence. The birth of her son was an accident. Her love language is giving gifts. She is hardly good at anything else. She naturally has a manipulative personality and has a hard time remaining self-aware. My mother's first fiancé had been financially well-off and shy, but he was White, and my grandmother chewed into him. Soon after, my mother found my father, and they were engaged in a year. My mother was still writing secret letters to her first fiancé when my sister and I were toddlers.

My mother, aunt, and uncle all had different fathers. My uncle's father is an enigma to me— not to my sister. In our childhood, she would take a few minutes to describe him to me as she stroked lines into her paper with drawing pencils and I would ignore her. I was never curious enough. Our uncle spent blocks of time with him. Days when he was away would last for weeks,

sometimes months. Most of the time, however, he was with us, and the three of us would dig with shovels and stolen spoons in the plastic sand box. I drew pictures of armadillos while my sister relayed our experiences of summer camp.

When it wasn't summer, there was the schoolroom—my mother's pride and joy. The interior was peach with a single red wall. There were shelves and crates aligning everything and hiding atop haunting corners. Most things were broken. My favorite aspect was the timeline of American history that wrapped around the room from one end of the door frame to the other end. Here, I learned the pledges to the American and Christian flag and outwitted my sister and uncle by the speed at which I could read a list of five-letter words straight down the page.

Our uncle liked the schoolroom and his splintered, brownish-red desk with missing handles. He spent two hours every day scratching on arithmetic sheets. My sister and I preferred the oval table in the kitchen, where the sun streamed in white through the tall windows, shaded in white cloths painted in watercolor fruits. By the time I was nine, I studied out of large, black books with classical Latin paintings adorning the front cover. Our uncle was somewhat less bright. My sister had trouble seeing and probably needed glasses, but never let

anyone know.

When my sister and I went into the schoolroom to mull our learnings, nothing productive was accomplished. Our uncle would initiate by drawing something absurd like a chameleon riding a wedge of cheddar and soon we went from giggles to cartoon analysis. We joked, danced, and passed notes. Once, my uncle passed me this note:

1-18-5 25-15-21
23-5-1-18-9-14-7
1 2-18-1?

I deciphered it halfway, then stopped. My face was hot. I had heard him say it multiple times by now, close to my ear when we would pass in the hallway or when I was reading. I crumpled the paper and shook my head icily, suddenly feeling exposed. Stalked. Perhaps pecked.

When I was ten and he was eleven, he began to scare me. He whispered a quantity of disconcerting things. He was getting quieter, quieter, quieter, and much darker. He was getting bigger and had a harder time sneaking around corners, but he was doing it with more vigor. He followed me into my bedroom when I wasn't paying attention. He tested the stretch of my skirt. I quickly became fond of tight jeans and belts.

I gave his intelligence more credit than it warranted. In his adulthood, I've heard great-aunts and uncles toss around terms such as schizophrenic and other words they don't understand, all to describe him. Yet, in his childhood, to my mother, he was slow and that could be fixed. Her methods of discipline were old-fashioned and involved arms spread straight out with thick stacks of books balanced in each palm. I saw him cry a lot, hot tears polishing his cheeks. His tears always had a croak of desperation that fell under the dip of his neck. I kept my head down, circling unfamiliar words in the works of R.C. Sprouls, while my mother lashed several stings into his wrists. My sister always sank into an angry fit when a scene played out. My mother had to eventually stop this form of punishment because He began to complain of stomach pain.

Most of my family was away from the house while I laid shivering in front of the fish tank. It was Saturday, and youth league bowling was a family tradition on my mother's side. Several gold medals and scholarships prove that my brother and sisters are talented at this. I rejected the sport before I was twelve. My sister enjoyed that she got to see her uncle every weekend, even after my parents knew everything. I could no longer step into the alley without feeling

lightening in my stomach by the time I was fifteen. I once went to watch them play, and instead spent an hour sprawled on the gray tile floor of a bathroom stall.

My mother was moody when she found me flat in front of the fish tank. She bickered, then giggled at me, before she saw that I was crying. So she stroked my head and refused to leave until I told her what my problem was.

My grandmother still kept all of my mother's and aunt's things in her house fifteen years after they moved out, so her house was beginning to overflow. My mother moved her entire homeschool to my grandmother's house and, for maybe three months, we spent our time there. My sister loved my uncle's room. He had a high perching bed with a Hot Wheels track, a Beyblade stadium, and mechanical robots stuffed under it. He had his own video game system. My sister admired his room, like she admired him. Once, I wasn't paying attention and I saw the two of them saunter out from behind the closed bedroom door. My whole body felt cold. I never said anything.

I was on his playing field. I was in his dark corners and his small hallways. There were no more games to play because I was twelve and he was thirteen, and I was telling him

no. He was fifty pounds heavier than me, a foot taller than me, and desperate. I was in a bath towel when he met me outside of my room door and said he needed scissors. I didn't believe him. He insisted. He begged. I wanted to go to my room. I wanted to run, but he was faster. I went to the schoolroom, where there were spiders this time of the year, and darted to where I knew the scissors were kept. He was behind me with his fingers around the knot in my towel. He told me that He had lied about the scissors.

The day I shattered everything, I was almost thirteen, he was fourteen.

It was summer and the entire extended family was there. My grandmother, with her dark, speckled face and perpetual scowl, arrived to my great-aunt's house whipping a cigarette around. One of my great-uncles fired up the grill and an electric deep fryer. My sister and I were forced to socialize. We made rounds between this great-aunt, that great-uncle, and other figures we didn't care to know. We looked out across the overgrown yard with the hair-strand creek, low hanging branches, and mossy statues. Our great-aunts and great-uncles bickered, and my sister and I huddled together on an old metal bench with brown, water-stained, cushions, silent in discomfort. When I was sure that my mother wasn't looking, I crept away to the library.

I had read every book on those shelves, but family gatherings cast them as being wholly more interesting. I pulled out an encyclopedia of world religions, and started to familiarize myself with the seven pillars of Islam, and Hinduism's elephant, and tried to separate in my mind Taoism from Buddhism. I pulled out a book filled with 3D illustrations of anatomy systems. I was reviewing the aspects of the human eye when my uncle slowly shuffled into the library. I peeked out at him, then back down into the optic nerve, not yet realizing we were alone. Eventually, I realized that the next page had been ripped out, that my uncle wasn't moving, that we were alone, and that I should not have left my father's side.

I went to insert the book into the shelf. He grabbed my waist and dragged me. I thrashed my legs. I bargained. He stretched the collar of my shirt and I was sure he would rip it. Finally, I threatened. I would burst the bubble wide open. I would shove down all my fear and shame and do something brave one time in my life. Unless he stopped. Unless he stopped right now.

He grunted, his lips behind my ear.

Somewhere in the house, a door shut. I jolted away from his cowering hands and jogged to the porch. Fear perched at my lips and in my head I felt heroic. I watched my mother come into my vision, and opened

my mouth, a storm cloud behind my tongue. My words were hostile, I choked on them, and nothing that came out was correct or even remotely so.

“Could you please,” I paused, “talk to your brother?”

My mother swiveled, then laughed. “What do you mean ‘talk to him?’”

“He ... tickled me.”

“Tickled you?”

My face burned. “Inappropriately.”

There was a council around the kitchen bar. My uncle was in one corner, his face sober. My mother and father were on the other side near me. My great-aunt regulated, listing out the things that would befall my uncle if he ever went near me again. He said he only tickled me, I called him a liar, and my mother crunched her brows and put her finger to her lips. My great-aunt said she would tell my grandmother. I'm sure she did. My grandmother has never brought it up. A few years later I learned that she believed I lied about it all. He's her son, so I guess that's understandable.

My mother allowed me to finish crying and stroked my back. She told me that if I needed anything, she would give me what

I needed. When my face was dry, I told her I was grateful, and picked myself off the ground. An hour later, my dad returned home and looked solemnly into the tank. He took a seaweed-colored net with a long handle and drew out the small, orange fish. He let me pull the metal lever. I watched it circle three times before sinking.



Like Patience on a Monument

Dais Johnston, Agnes Scott College

(Note: some names have been changed)

Viola's story was one of deception and lies, and so was mine. Her story was one of comedy and hijinks, and so was mine. Her story was one of infatuation and unhealthy obsession, and so was mine. Her story was about losing yourself in a role, and so was mine. Our stories were so similar, I don't know how to tell my own independent of hers.

From the rude sea's enraged and foamy mouth

Viola's story started in the 1590s, but mine started in 2010. My family was moving away from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, our home for the last 5 years, the longest time we had stayed in one place. We took a ferry to the airport, a grim building of exhausted sailors with sunburnt necks and family members arriving from stateside gawking at the security precautions. In the corner of the room was the "kids' area," a few bean bags and blocks in front of a television. This television, when we arrived, was playing some Amanda Bynes soccer movie. I was enchanted by it, but I was only allowed to watch G-rated movies -- G-rated movies and *Star Wars*. My parents, overwhelmed by my

siblings and the emotions of leaving, just let me watch it. That movie was *She's the Man*, which my dad pointed out was based on *Twelfth Night*, his favorite Shakespeare play.

Viola's story begins on a boat with her family as well. She is traveling with her brother and her father when the ship is wrecked in a storm. She arrives on a beach with the sea captain, her dress in tatters, her only worldly possession the trunk of her brother Sebastian's clothes she clung to in the storm. In order to make a living, she needs to figure out a plan.

Conceal me what I am and be my aid

My role upon arrival in Germany was just reading and writing. I found a home in my middle school library, and my father and siblings found a home in the base's theatre. They did *Cinderella*, they did *Dracula*, while I chewed through Shakespeare's entire works. I got precious little out of the histories, found some joy in the tragedies, but loved the comedies, especially *Twelfth Night*, because I already knew the story thanks to *She's the Man*.

In 2012, the theatre made an announcement: they were doing *Twelfth Night*. My father,

who I had only known as a civil engineer who sketched out blueprints for our sand sculptures, was giddy over the chance to play his dream role: Malvolio, the pompous servant. I was giddy just to see any Shakespeare performance, let alone my favorite play.

Viola settles into her role remarkably easily. Using what she has on hand, she convinces the captain to disguise her as a man named Cesario, dressed in her brother's clothes. She charms her way into a position as a singer in the local duke Orsino's court and quickly becomes a favorite. Orsino is the very model of lovesick privileged man: he will not take Olivia's "no" for an answer, he *deserves* whatever girl he wants.

Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife!

All my dad wanted was to play Malvolio, Olivia's servant. Apparently he had wanted to play him since high school. He was cast as Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's drunk uncle. Nevertheless, he was excited, but not nearly as excited as I was. My love for Shakespeare had escalated to the point where classmates would compete for who could snatch the

script out of my hand quicker. I was so ready to be around people who loved this play as much as I did. I helped my dad run lines while we walked volksmarches as a family. I learned the script inside and out, I sat in the audience and mouthed lines along with every character, but especially Viola. She looked so graceful in her frock coat and rapier. She looked beyond categorization. The actress who played her later went on to work at my high school, and I would get flustered whenever I had to speak to her. She was my Viola.

Viola falls head over heels in love with her master Orsino, the most unrequited of crushes. She knows she can't ever be with him; he thinks she is a man. Yet, it's her disguise that allows her to be close to him. Exhausted and confused, she laments to the only people she can confide in: the audience. She knows her deception is her savior and her doom, leaving her confused about the very nature of herself. *Disguise, she says, thou art a wickedness.*

Concealment like a worm in the bud feed on her damask cheek

It was 2014. My family moved from Germany to Columbia, South Carolina. I had survived to tenth grade, chopped off all my hair, and was living the life in Catholic school. I was pious, never broke a rule; I was dating Ash, the football captain; and I was best friends with Jamie, the most popular

girl in school. It was everything I could have possibly wanted. Sure, I would actively avoid Ash and have panic attacks before dates, and sure, I kept dreaming about Jamie and how pretty she was, but nobody needed to know that. Especially not her. If I could get her a boyfriend, then she would be taken. The dreams would stop. I could be normal again.

While wistfully listening to lutes, his favorite activity, Orsino asks Viola if she's ever been in love. Sheepishly, she answers yes. Orsino asks about her crush, prompting Viola to perfectly describe Orsino. Viola hesitantly floats the possibility that maybe some girl loves Orsino as much as he loves Olivia. Orsino immediately says it is impossible for anyone to love someone as much as he loves Olivia. Viola, through tears, tells the story of a hypothetical girl who was in love with someone she could never be with, so she sat and pined and let the feelings eat away at her. Orsino sends "Cesario" to woo Olivia in his stead, as "he" seems to have a way with understanding women.

He named Sebastian: I my brother know/Yet living in my glass; even such and so

My brother, Henry, was also flourishing in South Carolina, but it was genuine. A natural-born performer, he snapped up all the lead roles opposite Jamie, even regrettably playing Bill Cosby in a fall revue. He was everything I wanted to be: confident,

funny, charismatic, and masculine. Because he, and more importantly Jamie, was involved in theatre, I decided to help behind the scenes. Henry kissed girls and sword fought, I played a lion but wore a bear hat and couldn't roar loud enough. On the car rides home, he would workshop jokes to add to the script and made my cheeks hurt from laughing.

Because this is a Shakespearean comedy, Viola's twin brother Sebastian is, of course, alive. He was rescued by Antonio, a pirate, who protests when Sebastian says he wants to visit the court of Olivia in order to get a job. Antonio is wanted in Illyria, so he cannot go with him. He gives Sebastian all of his money, and even after he leaves, speaks at length about how his love for Sebastian is beyond all comprehension. It's the gayest that Shakespeare ever gets, which is why my high school made Antonio a girl.

How now! Even so quickly may one catch the plague?

Our little Catholic school somehow put together my dream production of this beautiful play. We added songs, from a heartfelt ballad for Olivia, to Sebastian singing "Kiss the Girl" behind Orsino and Viola dressed in an old costume from *The Little Mermaid*. Rehearsals were my favorite place. My boyfriend wasn't my boyfriend, he was Sir Toby Belch. (I decided to ignore the Freudian implications of that being my father's role.) I was assigned a new boy, a

sophomore who had previously performed Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a Skeletor voice, to be Orsino. Jamie, of course, was cast as Olivia.

When Viola arrives at Olivia's house, she tries her best to woo her, but stumbles over herself. Olivia, still in mourning dress, finally takes off her veil to look this young boy in the eye and instantly falls in love. She plays it cool, telling "him" to go back to his master, she'll have none of these charms, but if he were to come back to tell her how Orsino takes it, that would be okay, and gives Cesario a ring. As soon as they part Olivia freaks out about how she's in love, and Viola freaks out about how Olivia is unknowingly super gay. Thus, the first love triangle is formed: Orsino loves Olivia, Olivia loves Viola, and Viola loves Orsino.

"I pity you" "That's a degree to love"

For some reason, I could never get the Viola/Olivia flirtation scenes correct. Jamie would peek over her black lace fan and all my words of love, all my sighs of fire, disappeared into the ether, replaced with the words of a 17-year-old in love with her best friend: "Um. Uh." I would politely ask her to run that scene and the one where she says she loves me over and over. Politely, Jamie would accept. Once, she kissed my hand to blot her lipstick. I wanted to never wash it off. Ash, bless him, refused to acknowledge

anything was wrong. He bought me a small crucifix necklace for our eight-month anniversary. The symbolism of my boyfriend buying me the dead weight of a man to hang around my neck is almost too on-the-nose. Still, I wore it every day, a reminder in my role to serve the men in my life: Jesus, Ash, Cesario. Serving the man inside of me? That would be selfish, so I left him alone.

When the lies get too much for Viola, she questions her role in the entire situation. Who is she besides Cesario? Cesario is who her master favors. Cesario is who Olivia loves. Who even is Viola anymore? She's lost her father, her brother, and now herself. She's found a role, a man to serve, but serving him has become confusing and harmful for her. She wants him, and the charade is running thin. Meanwhile, Sebastian meets Olivia in her court. Olivia, mistaking him for Cesario, asks him to marry her right then and there. Sebastian decides not to question the strange hot woman who is inexplicably in love with him and runs off with her.

What relish is in this? How runs the stream? Or I am mad, or else this is a dream

Costuming was my domain, and now, with some creative control, I was allowed to dress myself and my friends any way I wanted. I set the tone as the 1920s with a color scheme of black, white, and gold. I

handpicked Olivia's dresses, ending with Jamie in her prom dress. And for me...I ordered a tux. Putting on that suit was a religious experience. Every ounce of insecurity washed away. I was Viola... no... I was Cesario. Cesario, who sings, and flirts, and makes clever puns. Cesario, a man about town. Cesario, who is healthily and happily masculine. Jamie took a picture of us together in our costumes for her Instagram. My face is one of half panic and half ecstasy. When Jamie asked me about it, I told her I was in character. She wrote in the caption that I looked like a model. That single comment kept my self-esteem stable for a solid six months.

Toby Belch, drunk as usual, challenges Viola to a swordfight, only to be rescued by Antonio, who is promptly arrested. Antonio asks who he thinks is his lover for his purse, but Viola is ignorant. He pleads with her, but she is confused, and, for a second, wonders aloud if, possibly, she's being mistaken for her twin. Orsino, thankfully, releases Antonio, and Viola and Orsino continue towards Olivia's court. Meanwhile, Sebastian is blissfully enjoying the morning after his wedding night, wondering if he's dreaming, hoping he never wakes up.

But when in other habits you are seen, Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen.

The weekend before opening night was

prom. I spent the day with Jamie getting ready. She didn't have a date—none of the boys at school were worthy—so she brought roses for all her friends. She laced me into my emerald-green tea-length swing dress, helped me pick a petticoat, it was just like I imagined. Then she drove us to meet our friends, and Ash, who brought me a tiny corsage with a turquoise ribbon. It looked pitiful alongside the handmade boutonniere I had crafted out of the pages of my favorite book, a book that he only deemed “okay.” I don't remember most of that night, not because I was drinking, but because I am terrified of what happened. Catholic repression is a hell of a drug, but it does the job of repressing trauma better than anything else. All I remember is waking up and climbing into my mom's minivan, heels in hand, feeling strange. I didn't like being me. I wanted to be Viola again. I wanted to be Cesario.

Finally, Olivia finds Cesario/Viola and praises “his” performance. Viola, disgusted, claims ignorance, and turns to exit, only to be interrupted by Olivia, exasperated, calling “Cesario, husband, stay!” Viola is shocked. Orsino is even more shocked. Olivia even brings out the priest who officiated and he identifies the youth before him as the groom from the wedding. Viola claims she could not love Olivia, she's in love with Orsino, and reveals her true identity. Sebastian

enters, and the twins reunite at last. Orsino, who apparently can turn around feelings on a dime, proposes to Viola, and they all lived happier ever after.

But that's all one, our play is done, And we'll strive to please you every day.

I wish I could say that my story ended that way, but high school is not a Shakespearean comedy. The shows were the highlight of my year. Everything went perfectly. I grinned so much every time Jamie said she loved me, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep a straight face. I cried, wondering who I was, who I could be if everyone knew a lie. Being Viola was the most comfortable I had ever felt.

In the moments that our stories merged, in those three nights where I got to carry Viola's torch, to step into her skin, that was the moment I had enough distance to get close enough to my issues. Henry treated Sebastian as a jumping off point for his own comedy. He added a monologue where explained that Sebastian and Viola are “Twins. Big time twins. Ask me what my favorite baseball team is. It's the Minnesota Twins. Ask me what my favorite movie is. It's the Danny DeVito classic, *Twins*.” When Sebastian reveals the pearl that Olivia gave him, Henry used a kickball painted white, miming its extreme weight before punting it backstage. Henry found his confidence as a comedian, I found my confidence as

a... well, I hadn't figured that out just yet. I found my confidence as someone other than me.

I had to leave Viola behind. I had to leave Jamie behind. I broke up with Ash the week before graduation. I came to college. I still didn't want to be me. I thought dating girls would fix it. It didn't. I thought coming out to Jamie would fix everything. It didn't, in fact, she told me it was my fault I was like this. I haven't spoken to her since.

Every now and then, I would put on my old suit jacket and remember how it felt to be Cesario, how it felt to be in disguise. How it was a version of me that I wanted to live in forever. But that wasn't my disguise. Sure, I wasn't Viola, I wasn't Cesario, but I wasn't me either. My gender, just like Viola's, is complicated, fluid, and beautiful. It took me three years in college to confront it, but I eventually came out as genderfluid. The day I came out, I found a boy's tuxedo jacket at my local consignment shop. It fit perfectly, not like the boxy cheap Amazon tux I wore on stage. Daisy Ann Johnston was the role of a lifetime and I played it well, but it's not who I am. My role has no script and no blocking. My name is Davey “Dais” Fisher Johnston, and this is just the beginning of my story.

The I That Watches Over Me: An Imitation of “Growing Pains: A Life in Ten Chapters”

Destiny Sims, Young Harris College

Chapter 1:

The yellow-cream house with crimson shutters receded back into the woods away from the cracked pavement. Here, a small girl, age three, was taken in along with her little sister. She had deep sapphire eyes, bright like the blue of a hydrangea petal, veiled beneath long, sable lashes. Her hair was a light brown, and, as coiled tendrils would escape the bow in her hair, curls would tumble onto her neck, framing the child's eyes and shrouding her face. She had skin the color of caramel, an olive tone. A lovely child. At three, when her Nana and Papa were away, one at work, the other at school, she was taken to Building Blocks, the pre-school on the outskirts of Madison County. The workers and children there all had skin the color of chocolate and names like the middle name her Mama had given her. The boys, in particular, skinny and animated with cherub faces and crimson cheeks, admired her. She did not understand the attention, so when he stood

in front of her, hands outstretched, small fingers unfastening the tiny white buttons of her shirt, she just stood watching. No expression. This was the first, the first time she understood their gaze, but didn't blame him for it. It's the parents' fault. What had you seen them do? Seconds later, the worker rushed over and pulled the boy aside. No one told.

Chapter 2:

She turned four in August, and as seasons change, her navy eyes turned to shades of verdant green, almost the color of a Luna moth's wings or the shade of a darkened fern leaf. At the close of summer, days after her birthday, she left Building Blocks and began school at Ila Elementary, wearing her new white, Nike sneakers, the ones with the purple check mark on the side. She didn't know how to read or write or how to count to ten because she hadn't been taught such things, so they placed her in Mrs. Minnie's

class, a class that was held outside of the school in a small, white trailer that would determine whether or not she had a learning disability. There, Mrs. Minnie taught her basic letters and numbers. She learned these symbols so quickly that they placed her in an actual classroom halfway through the school year. In this new setting, she became somewhat aware of the discrepancy of color, for all the kids were white like the frosting on her birthday cake. It didn't matter though. It was hard for her to make friends because she was shy, not because of the color of her skin. She began to conform soon after; her brown curls were flattened into straight wisps of hair. Her friend told her she was more white than black, and, at four, she wished she had been born white.

Chapter 3:

That school year, in P.E., she played alongside the other students, running around on the gym's rough, green carpet,

beside a section of wooden bleachers across from a wall lined with windows. When her headband fell off halfway through the game, she ran back for it, and the students yelled for her to finish the race. She picked up her headband, put it back on her head, and ran to her seat. The activity changed. When the kids began to run laps around the gym, the teacher played a song on his radio. He picked up a microphone and sung with the track he made. The words "You are my Destiny" reverberated off the padded walls and against the bleachers. Her face, Destiny's face, turned crimson, and the other students laughed. At the end of the school year, another race was held on Field Day on the hot pavement in front of the school where she sat against the warm brick wall beside her redheaded best friend. She watched the kids race around with a wet sponge and watched as they ran to the kid with the bucket on his head, squeezing the water from the yellow sponge over the bucket, splashing cold water onto the boy's hair.

"Why aren't you playing?" her friend asked.

"My hair will get curly," she said. "Why aren't you playing?"

"I hurt my knee."

During her late school years, the P.E. teacher would be convicted on counts of child

pornography and sent to jail.

Chapter 4:

In the sixth grade, she wore hot pink gym shorts to P.E that came above her knee caps. When she bent over, they came up farther than she wanted them to, but she was thankful, thankful that the teacher from the next class over was not watching them stretch today, thankful that he was not her P.E. teacher.

After class ended, she dressed back into her regular school clothes, a zip up hoodie and jeans, and, later in the day, attended church at Union. Her blonde friend, the one with the glasses, motioned to speak with her outside on the porch steps.

"She said you were a hoe," her friend said bluntly.

"Why?" she asked.

"She said it's because of the clothes you wear. The shorts you wear in class. I defended you though. I told her she was wrong."

She held back tears and wished that she was shorter, wished that her shorts wouldn't look so small against her long legs. She went as far as imagining a stack of bricks on her head stunting her growth and thought of how

she'd begin drinking coffee.

In the seventh grade, she wore holey shorts to lunch with duct tape covering the holes. She hadn't put on enough tape to cover the hole above her knee, so when lunch ended, she covered the hole with her hand as she passed one of the teachers. The teacher saw her and pulled her off to the side.

"Does your mother let you out of the house like that?" the teacher asked.

"Yes," she said pointedly, thinking of how she lived with her Nana and not her mother.

"Either change or you will be sent home or suspended."

Her face flushed, and she walked to her locker and grabbed a black pair of gym shorts. She proceeded to the bathroom to change.

Chapter 5:

In the eighth grade, she sat at a computer desk beside her friend, the girl a few shades darker than her. The girl was mixed too, black and Latina. Looking up from their computers, a boy, engaged in conversation with his friend, looked at the two of them, a crooked smile forming against white teeth. He played football, an All-American boy, blonde haired and blue-eyed. He opened his mouth to speak and watched the girls' faces

as sharp words fell from his pink lips.

“Black people don’t go to Heaven as angels. They go as gnats,” he said.

“You’re wrong,” her friend said.

Chapter 6:

At seventeen, in the twelfth grade, her ex-boyfriend asked her to prom during a conversation. He was on the football team and, like most of the players, was black, but his skin was more the shade of deep honey. He was the first black boy she’d dated, and his culture and his life at home were completely different than hers. He lived in Comer on the other side of the railroad tracks along a road dotted with farms, overgrowth, and other houses. His culture was also different than the one she was somewhat familiar with, was different than the culture she was immersed in when she visited her other grandparents at their house in Athens. His family’s vernacular, the way they dressed, and the interior of their homes, such as the objects they placed on mantles, were different than her other grandparents. With him, she began to truly understand the differences in class, and felt a divide form between them. She later broke up with him because they wanted two different things and were set on different paths although she would still go to prom with him. In May,

dressed in a grey Jovani gown, silver gems stitched onto the bodice, a halter around her throat, and the hem of her skirt tickling the floor of her Uncle’s Jeep, he asked her a question.

“So are we going to...?”

“So are we what?” she asked.

“You know.”

“No. I don’t know,” she said.

“Sex?”

“No, we are not,” she said as she stared ahead at the road.

Her mind tumbled as he mentioned rumors his friends had told him about her doing things and how he’d assumed that he’d be her first. *Don’t believe what you hear*, she’d said; rumors aren’t always true.

Chapter Seven:

At the close of senior year, she was invited to a graduation dinner at her church. Her Nana told her to wear the taupe dress with the flowery designs on it, so she put it on. Looking down at her legs however, she noticed long, black hairs on her calves and knee caps. There was no time to shave, so she put on a pair of black leggings along with her white cardigan. The ensemble looked tacky with the thick leggings, and

her Nana told her to just wear the dress and cardigan. She took the leggings off, and she, along with her Nana and sister, left for the dinner. When her Nana parked the van in the gravel lot outside of Union Baptist, the girl began laughing hysterically and then proceeded to cry, for she did not want people to see her unshaved legs. Her face was flushed and tear-streaked, her Nana was furious, and her sister was laughing at the utter ridiculousness of her sister’s vanity. Returning home, she stepped out of the car, and her Mama was there with her boyfriend. Her mother saw her crying and walked with her up the porch steps. She wept in the bathroom as her mother coddled her, holding her for the first time in a long time, murmuring *it’s okay* over and over to distant ears. She understood the daughter’s vanity and began to cry herself. Her tears were tales of past mistakes, words like, “I’m sorry, I haven’t been here for you; I’m sorry I abandoned the two of you.” She held the daughter now at arm’s length and looked into her glassy eyes, whispering, “Don’t be like me.”

Chapter Eight:

She began college in 2016 at Young Harris College and planned to transfer to UGA after sophomore year. She immediately resigned herself to an English major and

an art minor. Her professor in ENGL 1101 said she had potential, and her First Year Foundations teachers commended her reflection papers. Beginning college wasn't as scary as she thought it would be. That year she met a new friend. The girl was short and wore glasses and was also multiracial, Latina and Caucasian. Her friend worked at Chick-fil-A, and she visited the girl often. There, her path crossed with a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy in a red Chick-fil-A uniform. They did not speak, but he later found her on social media and asked her to hang out. Soon after, he asked her to be his girlfriend. The relationship with the blue-eyed boy felt like her first real relationship. Theirs was like driving the curves of the mountain roads outside Clayton; he made it complicated, and she was blinded by the curve in the road. He would say things like, "Are you going home this weekend to get your hair done," or, "You would look pretty with blue eyes," or tell her to paint her nails black. She was different from the girl he had dated before, and he made sure she knew it. She did not have long, straight blonde hair. She did not have piercing blue eyes. She did not paint her fingernails black. He left her, once for two hours because he was undecided and a second time because he decided he'd rather be with his ex.

Chapter 9:

She was nineteen, a sophomore in college when she met a twenty-one-year-old foreign student. He was tall and handsome, had golden hair and ocean eyes. She was amazed by him. When they were together, he told her of home, and she tried to understand what he meant when he said he didn't have one. "America is not my home, and neither is England because I'm not from those places. I lived in Hungary." She thought of it how she thought of her skin color, how she did not belong to either race, how she did not feel completely accepted by the African American community or by white people. She wondered if he knew what it felt like to not feel at home in one's skin.

Chapter 10:

She sat on the couch in her dorm room with a friend she met sophomore year. He was not from here. His skin was a dark ebony, and he knew many languages; some were the languages of oppressors. He was from Martinique and was proud and tried to unveil her African roots. She didn't completely understand. He exposed her as playing to one side of herself more than the other.

"It's like you're fighting yourself. I can see it in the way you walk and when you speak. If I closed my eyes and listened to your voice

for the first time, I would have assumed you were white," he said.

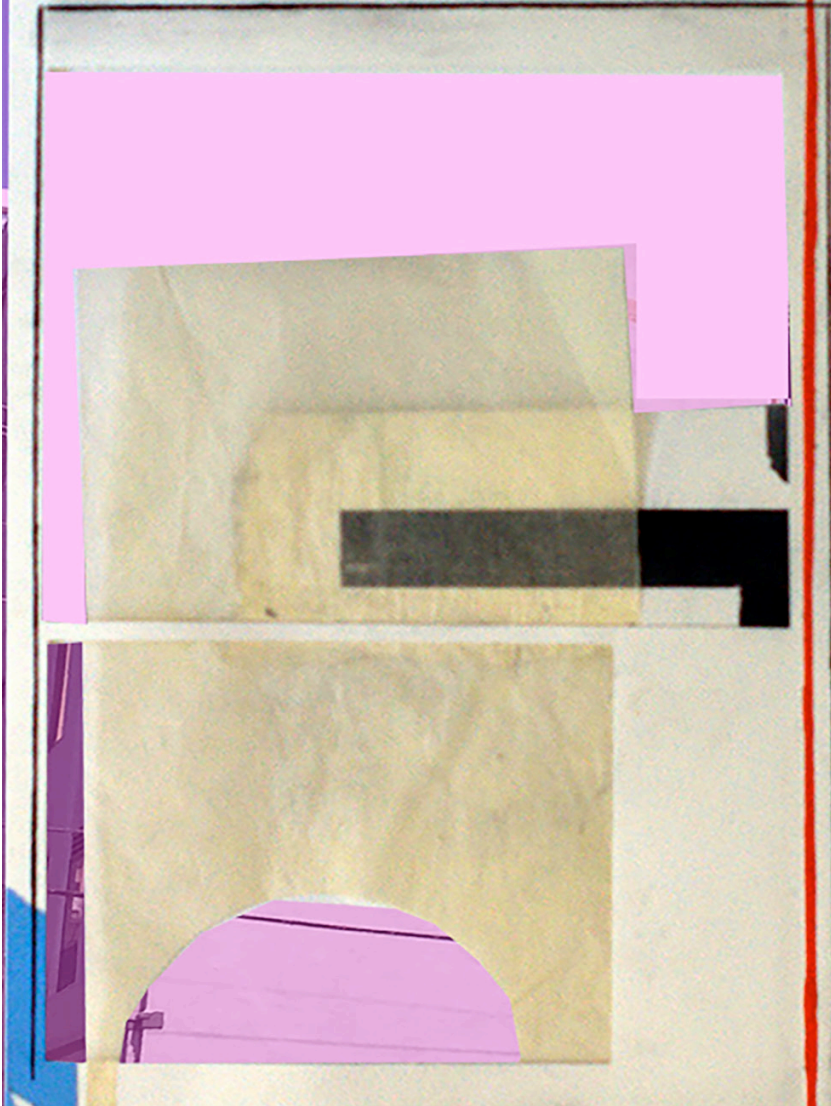
"What about in the way I walk?" she asked.

"You swish your hips like a woman of color, yet you walk like a debutante. It's like you control each step. Walk naturally."

In a later conversation about race, she would tell him about the blue-eyed foreigner. She told him what another friend had said: the blue-eyed man would not date her because she was half black. He was only wanting to experience what it would be like to be with a black girl.

"And that was wrong," he said. "You were just black enough for him to say he had been with a black girl." A token. An experience. She remembered how the man with blue eyes had thrown around the words "experience" and "fun," and she grew to hate both words. She was finally beginning to understand what being black meant.

Playwriting



WANT

An Odyssey of Interview

Sam Regal, University of Georgia, Athens

Cast of Characters

PRODUCER: A voice: a woman of unidentifiable age and a cool measuredness. Is she God?

LEATHER DADDY: A man of at least 40. He wears a leather jacket and leather cap, à la Tom of Finland, but his sexuality has partially spoiled. Probably has a moustache.

SIX PACK JACK: A man-child in his late teens to twenties. Young, swarthy, vapid, cartoon.

PAULIE: A disheveled and baseline-irate middle-aged man. He is wearing a soiled sleeveless shirt that once was white, and his gut asserts itself.

EAGLE EGG: A fussy yet urgently desirous woman in her 20s or 30s. She is pert, dressed formally.

JUSTICE: A beautiful, wily, androgynous stud. They have short hair and two thin lines of mustache drawn on with eyeliner or marker on either side of their mouth. It is an obvious affectation, and is intended as such. Shimmery, devilish, universally arresting.

Place

A spare studio.

Perhaps they're in a mall, or somewhere on the Lower East Side. Or on the moon.

Note:

Most dialogue has been adapted from data culled from a widely-distributed, anonymous survey. No character represents any one respondent; they instead form a raucous, aggregate every(wo)man.

Scene 1

Setting: ALL CHARACTERS sit on individual flimsy stools before identical photo-studio backdrops across the stage. Maybe the backdrops are patterned with clouds. The stage will be lit solely by a traveling spotlight that rests on each character as he/she/they are interviewed. Characters are not present for one another's interviews, and they've probably never met. The transitions between scenes are 1-2 seconds long as lighting is adjusted.

At Rise: Spotlight on LEATHER DADDY as he stares confidently into a fixed point in the audience that we come to understand represents the PRODUCER. The PRODUCER is offstage; her amplified voice stands in for her body.

PRODUCER: Thanks for coming today.

LEATHER DADDY: Mm-hmm. Sure.

PRODUCER: So. We'll get to it. What do you want?

LEATHER DADDY: (Thoughtful, unexpectedly erudite.) To sit or recline comfortably in total darkness. To become drunk while cooking a delicious fillet. To have one friend, maybe two. To escape my inner saboteur. To avoid obligation, both to others and the self. More money. Less dread.

BLACKOUT

Scene 2

Spotlight on SIX PACK JACK.

PRODUCER: So, what do you want?

SIX PACK JACK: To quit my day job.

BLACKOUT

Scene 3

Spotlight on PAULIE.

PAULIE (Desperately): The answers, man. I want the answers. I need to make up my mind. I can't make up my fuckin' mind.

BLACKOUT

Scene 4

Spotlight on EAGLE EGG.

EAGLE EGG: (Timidly.) A sense of home, and an intriguing mind to share it with. I want to feel completely seen, you know? I want... (Her desires have sprung a leak.) I want to travel spontaneously. I want to *want* to go to... Madagascar! But I also want to be happy in one place. I want to live in my body, and to trace it. I want to do yoga on a mountain! To watch myself dance madly in the mirror, and to like it. (Remembering herself.) And I want to find a partner—not just a boyfriend or a husband to roll my eyes at and demand things from. I want a man who will go through life with me as a good friend. Nothing loud or showy or extravagant or wild, but paced and patient, and supportive. Maybe sometimes even boring! We'll sit quietly together in our even happiness. And maybe go to Madagascar.

BLACKOUT

Scene 5

Spotlight on JUSTICE.

JUSTICE: Money, baby. I want to fill a yacht with dollar bills and float down the river on an inner tube. No. I want to *be* money. Am I already money? (Winks.)

PRODUCER: (Nervously.) Oh! Ha ha.

BLACKOUT

Scene 6

Spotlight back on LEATHER DADDY.

PRODUCER: What has to change?

LEATHER DADDY: Capitalism. The laws of physics. My relationship with my father. My mortgage rate. I'd like to subtract ten years from this body but keep the wisdom. I need to be less hungry—or hungrier. (Pointing.) To direct my desire.

BLACKOUT

Scene 7

Spotlight on SIX PACK JACK.

SIX PACK JACK: I need money, baby. I need to meet a rich woman who'll take care of me. Look at me, look at this beautiful body, I deserve it. I'm a prize. I'm not picky, either. I'll take 'em young or old. I'd be like Anna Nicole Smith, marrying that ancient dude. I could have my own show on cable.

BLACKOUT

Scene 8

Spotlight on PAULIE.

PRODUCER: What needs to change?

PAULIE: (Slumped, radiating anxiety. A dangerously unpredictable physicality.) What needs to fuckin' change? What doesn't? (He doesn't say "bitch," but he may as well have.) The fuckin' government, lady. The fact that I have to grind my hands to a pulp to put food on the table. The fact that my wife wishes she married Joe the grocer down the street, with the tiny fuckin' Asian car. What the fuck do you think has to change? And now I can't make up my fuckin' mind. No one looks out for the guy like me, the average guy like me. And now I can't fuckin' decide or make up my fuckin' mind.

BLACKOUT

Scene 9

Spotlight on EAGLE EGG.

EAGLE EGG: (Somewhat loosened.) What needs to change? Something fundamental about human nature, like at the lizard-brain level. Our systems have failed. It's depressing that the best compromise I can think of between an ideal future and a realistic one is something like *The Matrix*, only you don't escape from it. (She reveals to us her strangeness.) We also need much more ozone. And we should let the people who can afford to go to Mars do that and stay there, the sooner the better. Don't let the door hit you on the way out.

BLACKOUT

Scene 10

Spotlight on JUSTICE.

JUSTICE: (Licks their lips, contemplates.) I need more sex. More

dancing. More parties. Trips to Berlin. The bouncers know me at Berghain. Stick with me, kid. I'm on the list. I am the list. Do you want a Club-Mate? I brought a case. We're going to Bossa Nova later. (Holds up bottle.)

BLACKOUT

Scene 11

Spotlight on EAGLE EGG.

PRODUCER: Okay, this is a fun one. If you could live during any historical period, which would you choose and why?

EAGLE EGG: (Vibrating with intentionality.) Historical period? What do people say, like, The Roaring Twenties? The Summer of Love? What a question. (Considers.) I'd choose the '70s, maybe, for its emergent activism. (Considers further.) I won't pretend I haven't considered the question. Who hasn't? But there's also the issue of the continuum. I could put countless lives in jeopardy. I could erase my own existence. I mean, it's not like that's the chief issue at hand, but... my perspective is inherently limited to the self. Damn self. Think of the wars, or dinosaurs, or paradoxes; the butterfly effect. There's just so much *unknown*. I don't know if I could be responsible for the repercussions of that decision. I can barely be accountable to myself. (Pause.) I'll tell you—I'd love to adopt a little cat. I've even picked her out from the shelter. She's perfectly white. I'd name her Iona. But every night I dream that once I have her, bring her home, her little head slides right off her neck and—plop!—drops onto the floor.

BLACKOUT

Scene 12

Spotlight on SIX PACK JACK.

SIX PACK JACK: (Gussyng up as he considers.) Historically? (Laughs.) I think I'd like to be a Roman. With a long sword. And a golden shield. I'd charge out of that horse, you know. The big one

from that movie with Brad Pitt. Slice some goddamn throats. Get the girl.

BLACKOUT

Scene 13

Spotlight on PAULIE.

PAULIE: (Personally affronted.) What kinda fuckin' question is that?? Historical period? Must be nice to have the time to think about fanciful shit like that. Unicorns and sunflowers and strollin' through the rain and shit. Must be nice.

PRODUCER: What do you think about?

PAULIE: Real fuckin' life. My family. My kids. The fuckin' government. Big Brother watching over everything I say and do. The cameras they put in the trees in the parks, now. You heard about those? Good luck taking a leak when you need it. Good luck finding a moment of fuckin' privacy.

BLACKOUT

Scene 14

Spotlight on LEATHER DADDY.

LEATHER DADDY: (Calm. A breath of fresh air.) I'd like to visit Ancient Egypt, before the library of Alexandria burned down. I think about that library often. What was lost? Of course, I'd have to be of a certain social class to benefit from the library. That's implicit in all these historical "what-if" exercises. (Pauses judgmentally.) Are you familiar with the concept of the grandfather paradox? Really, questions of this ilk are so transparently flawed.

BLACKOUT

Scene 15

Spotlight on JUSTICE.

JUSTICE: (Oddly threatening.) Germany, during The Counter-Reformation. (Takes a long sip of Club-Mate.)

BLACKOUT

Scene 16

Spotlight on SIX PACK JACK.

PRODUCER: Okay. Ready? Describe your ideal partner.

SIX PACK JACK: (Flexing his arms. A caricature.) Myself.

BLACKOUT

Scene 17

Spotlight on LEATHER DADDY, our North star.

LEATHER DADDY: (Grins wryly.) A partner? Trusting, witty, well-read. Not interested in ownership. Veiny forearms. Thick legs. Patient. Unconventionally romantic. Has a favorite Tarkovsky movie. Wants kids. Understands that strength lies in vulnerability.

BLACKOUT

Scene 18

Spotlight on PAULIE.

PAULIE: (Having lost some steam.) My ideal partner? Can I be completely honest with you? I'm not such a conventional guy. People see me, they think, *this is a conventional, everyday guy, walking down the street*. No. Not so. I got exotic tastes. I don't want your Barbies, your bimbos, you know what I'm saying? I like flavor in my women. Spice.

Vim. Vigor. Alright. My all-time dream woman? Cher in *Moonstruck*. She can slap me across the face any day, to tell you the absolute truth.

BLACKOUT

Scene 19

Spotlight on EAGLE EGG.

EAGLE EGG: (Naked with desire.) I want someone silly who will detect that—while I'll never say it—I desperately want to dance to old-timey music with them. I desire a mind I can love and fascinate over. Chew over. Someone with a lovely and lively intuition. “Two solitudes that meet, protect and greet each other,” as Rilke put it. (Pause.) I need someone who will let me trace and analyze them from head to toe. Someone who is learning, and failing too, and waking up the next day. Someone funny and dumb and smart. Caring and eager to attend to this common world, who will love the sound of rain with me. Who'll watch movies with me. (Another pause.) I'm afraid to utter what I want out of fear that utterance will evaporate my chances. Evaporate the person. Or persons. (Baldly.) I believe in them.

BLACKOUT

Scene 20

Spotlight on JUSTICE.

JUSTICE: (Thinking they're a real card.) I like legs that go all the way up to the asshole.

BLACKOUT

Scene 21

Spotlight on LEATHER DADDY.

PRODUCER: Okay, this is your last question. Describe your ideal self.

LEATHER DADDY: (Considers.) Voracious. A sexual hero. Peaceful. Compassionate. Assured. Accepting of change. Eating raw vegetables. Saying “no” more. Saying “yes” more. Myself. More of myself. At The Cock on Second Avenue.

BLACKOUT

Scene 22

Spotlight on JUSTICE.

JUSTICE: A Duchamp ready-made radiating sex. A pulsing, erect art. The feeling when you wake up from a nightmare, skin cells percolating. A nonsense. An aroma: *Tiresias Fucked*. A brand. A lifestyle. An aimless bullet. An aimlessness.

BLACKOUT

Scene 23

Spotlight on PAULIE.

PAULIE: (Drained, slumped, like a used handkerchief.) My ideal self would be a self that could go the fuck home, please. When do I get my thirty bucks? (Pause; implied silent encouragement from PRODUCER.) Alright, fine, lady. I'm getting laid more. You like that? And I'm a world champion darts player. With groupies. I can't think about this shit. What's the fuckin' point? Will you tell me, what is even the fuckin' point of all this? Of thinking about this? I've got to decide on shit! I got real-life shit! How nice for you that you can spend your afternoons asking philosophical questions. Missus Socrates over here. How cute.

BLACKOUT

Scene 24

Spotlight on SIX PACK JACK.

SIX PACK JACK: (Now shirtless, applying grease to his pectorals.) My ideal self? Babe, why bother asking? You know what my answer's gonna be. Take it all in. (Grotesquely flexes.)

BLACKOUT

Scene 25

Spotlight on EAGLE EGG.

EAGLE EGG: (Loosened.) Who do I want to be? I want to act from the part of myself that wants to love, rather than the self that wants to be loved. To learn to be less crazed. Less neurotic. To commit to a yoga practice! To be forgiving. To recall that I have body, that I hold multiplicities in tension. To challenge myself, attending to my private world while also attending to the people I care for. To ask questions. To constantly learn and grow. To identify emotions and live happily, or contentedly, among them. To pluck from the tree of them and eat them. To find peace with the self and its notions. To grant others the strangeness that I often trick myself into thinking I am alone and lost in. To find communion with others. To allow communion.

PRODUCER: Thank you. That's all. Nice job.

(EAGLE EGG awkwardly rises from the stool, gathers herself, visibly adjusts her features to guard against the outside world, and walks off stage.)

BLACKOUT

THE END



If Not for Family

Maya Gelting, Agnes Scott College

Cast of Characters

- LEO: In his 40's. A teacher, heavily involved in the Jewish community. The father.
- ANNA: In her 40's. Sews on the side to make enough money. Fiery and feels deeply. The mother
- ESTER: 18. Has a job. A sarcastic, old soul.
- HANI: 13. Innocent. Still in school.

Place

Berlin

Time

1940

Based on a true story.

Dedicated to Marie Louise Rouff

Prologue

Setting: The Eissen family home. Not fancy but homey.

There is a kitchen, a table, a few windows, a telephone, a coat rack, a few walking sticks, and stairs leading to the upper level. The door is braced with scrap wood and the windows are broken.

At Rise: We hear sirens, the sound of a mob, and breaking glass. Lights up on the Eissen family, tinged slightly blue to give a surreal feel.

ANNA: We had been awake in the kitchen for hours, hoping desperately that the unrest would lead to nothing.

LEO: It was the only time I wondered if we should have left. The shouts, the sound of the mob outside—all belying the fact that this is our home.

ESTER: We could hear them coming up the street. I remember wondering if this was going to be the end and laughing because eighteen seems too young to die.

HANI: I didn't wake up until they got to the Abramsons. When I ran down to the kitchen, they were just—sitting. Silently. I sat down on the floor next to Mama like I was a child again.

ANNA: (affectionately) She thinks she is no longer a child. She alone has saved some innocence through all this. But Ester—she has heard too much, seen too much. Hani hears, but she does not listen. Not yet.

LEO: We feared for the Abramsons, our neighbors. They were always meant to be the first—on the corner, marked with the Star of David. I should have helped—but I could not. It would have been a death sentence. When I saw Jacob's swollen eye the next day, I wondered if I should have gone regardless. What man dies more honorably than he who lays down his life for his friend?

ANNA: But your children—

LEO: Yes, but my children. And you.

HANI: I wanted to pray; Papa always told us to ask God first—

ESTER: We stopped her, of course. How much worse would it be if they saw us, with a tallit on the table, praying, when they arrived? In that case, eighteen would be all I was given. Pretending that a prayer shawl is a tablecloth only works once. Now we can't even afford a tablecloth. Jews can't hold assets, as the master race has decreed, of course.

ANNA: I will never forget that night—November ninth, nineteen thirty-nine, when we sat in solemn silence, trying to stay away from the windows, lights turned off to convince them that we were not home. In a way, we weren't. After that night, this is not our home.

LEO: I was afraid that our home would not be safe, no longer our haven.

HANI: Mama still has a scar from the window being broken.

ESTER: Being broken? It exploded. There was glass everywhere!

LEO: They call it *Kristallnacht*, night of the broken glass.

ANNA: Glass was not the only thing broken.

LEO: I should have expected it, of course, but everyone thinks that the aggression, the egregious acts, the tensions, would stay outside of our home.

ESTER: People would always tell me that I should be proud of my family. My father, Leo Eissen, a pillar of the Jewish community in Berlin, so brave, and my mother alongside him. Frankly, it scared me. It is easy to be proud until thirty men outside your door want to kill him.

HANI: They told me I had to be quiet. I suppose that is what they always tell the baby of the family.

ANNA: *Kristallnacht*. The night of fear, of lost hope, and of knowing that we were no longer welcome in our country.

LEO: The night of broken glass.

BLACKOUT

Scene 1

At Rise: ANNA is sitting at the table, sewing a yellow star onto a jacket. After a beat, LEO enters through the front door.

LEO: Good evening, *ahuvi*. (a beat) Will you not ask about my day at the school? There were no disturbances today. (another beat) Anna, speak, please. My love, speak.

ANNA: Shall I? I will only berate your decision, of course.

LEO: You know we cannot give up our heritage. We are just as much of Israel as we are of Germany. We both abhor the Nazi party—

ANNA: And fear it! Protected status, Leo. Protected status with the party! As German citizens! Think of the children.

LEO: I do! They shall be raised in our heritage as we were.

ANNA: You see the world as too good, my love.

LEO: If we see it that way, God will provide.

ANNA: Well, what has God provided today?

LEO: (handing it over) A few potatoes and half a loaf of bread.

ANNA: (continuing dinner) It will do. I remember when I would make more. We would hold half the synagogue in this tiny room and eat like kings.

LEO: I'm sorry, Anna. I'm trying.

ANNA: I know, Leo, I know. I'm trying too. To do everything I can to protect our children. Times have changed.

LEO: But our heritage stands firm, giving us hope.

ANNA: But—

LEO: But what?

ANNA: But nothing at all. Why must your logic be so infallible?

LEO: Speak, *abwvi*, I asked, and I will listen.

ANNA: I worry about our girls, what their life will be. Will they only remember growing up with hate? Will they remember nothing of their childhood but shouted insults and broken glass? Would taking protective status save them from some of it? Every time I see that window, I think of that night. It's been a year—I don't think it will ever be fixed. I used to see you, walking up the drive to blow me a kiss before you came inside.

LEO: I still do. *Abni ohev otach*, Anna. (He kisses her.)

ANNA: *Abni ohevet atkha*, Leo.

(They embrace for a moment.)

LEO: I brought you a treat.

ANNA: (laughing) What have you managed to find in this economy?

LEO: Chocolate. From a colleague.

ANNA: You spoil me.

LEO: You cannot be strong alone. Moreover, I promised to never stop wooing you.

(HANI and ESTER enter.)

ESTER: Here is my pay for today, Papa. Perhaps you can buy some real food with it this time. How much did the sewing bring in today, Mama?

ANNA: Not much, I'm afraid it will be soup again tomorrow.

(HANI groans.)

ESTER: Ayayay, the attitudes of young girls these days!

HANI: Oh, hush!

ANNA: Hani, let me see your face. Goodness, why must you fall so often? Someday you will truly hurt yourself. All our neighbors needed the Star on their jackets. None of them have the time, they all spend the day trying to make enough to afford soup.

ESTER: A delicacy!

ANNA: Oh, hush! (The phone rings; she answers it.) Hello?

HANI: Who is it?

ANNA: Mrs. Abramson. Yes, Abby? What is it?

HANI: (simultaneously) Why?

ANNA: Speak slower, Abby. What's happened?

ESTER: (simultaneously) Why what, *yeledah*?

ANNA: When?

HANI: You're barely older than me!

ANNA: Girls, hush!

ESTER: Well I—

LEO: Anna, what's happened?

(The girls continue to argue in the usual sibling fashion.)

LEO: Anna? Anna, what has happened?

(She hands him the telephone.)

Abby? Abby, what. . . Dear God.

ESTER: Hush, Hani. What's happened?

LEO: It's Sarah.

ESTER: What about Sarah? I have not seen her today?

ANNA: And you won't. She's gone. They took her. The Germans.

ESTER: Why?

LEO: Ester. . .

ESTER: Dear God. It's all true. The rumors, the threats, everything.

LEO: Threats? Ester, what happened?

ESTER: The same as always, of course.

LEO: Did they hurt you?

ESTER: And what would you do if they did, Papa? It's the same every day. At first it was just the shouting and the whistling, I hated it, but I was so glad they never touched me. And then, the threats. We'll take you for Germany. We'll take you, so you can finally serve your country, you little Jewish slut.

ANNA: I'll kill them.

LEO: No, Anna.

(He takes her hand, they are both obviously distressed.)

ESTER: You're shocked? You wouldn't be if you were there every day, hearing them. It was only a matter of time. Men like that love to say what they would like to do to you.

HANI: Ester, that's horrible!

ESTER: That's life, *yedab*.

LEO: Why did you not tell us, Ester? Why did you hold this in your heart alone?

ESTER: And what could you have done? What can any of us do? It's useless. You act as if this is a surprise, as if they haven't been taking us for weeks now. I don't want to die as a prostitute for German soldiers. I don't want them to kill me when they've had their way or leave me to waste away. I'd rather die the way I am now!

ANNA: Ester, my darling..

(She embraces her.)

Why are you trying to be strong alone? We are your family, (glances at LEO) your people.

ESTER: I didn't want you to worry, or to know. You are both so strong alone, and you hold up so many others. I wanted to protect myself. I tried so hard, I . . .

(She removes her headscarf, she has shaved her head.)

It did nothing. I loved my hair. I thought it would make them stop. It's funny, you know, they never bothered Tikvah. All they ever said was that she was too thin, and they'd never want someone like her.

ANNA: My beautiful daughter..

LEO: Ester, may you never have need to be strong alone. You most certainly do not now. We are strong. Our people have borne hardships in the past; God will carry us through this.

ESTER: Funny how he goes about it! The only good thing that happened to Hani this week was falling on her face. It has been the only thing keeping them away from her.

LEO: Hani, have the officers been bothering you too? Ester, did you know about this? How could you not tell us?

ESTER: I didn't know! She was so happy that she passed unbothered today, she couldn't help but tell me. I have never seen a girl so thrilled to hear a man call her ugly. Perhaps she should fall more often.

HANI: Mama...I'm sorry.

LEO: You've done nothing wrong. And we love you, both of you, deeply. Perhaps some chocolate? I have managed to procure some for us!

ESTER: (gently) The world isn't simple like that anymore, Papa. But thank you.

ANNA: You are both exhausted. Go to bed, we'll be up in a moment.

(HANI and ESTER exit up the stairs.)

LEO: Anna—

ANNA: Yes, *abuv?*

LEO: For the first time, I do not know what to do. God is not in this city.

ANNA: Perhaps someday he will be. (beat) I need to visit Abby. No woman should be alone after losing her child. Go check on the girls. Please. And pray Hani's bruises don't fade.

(She exits through the front door. The lights fade out.)

Scene 2

At Rise: The next day. The girls are in the kitchen. ANNA and LEO say their farewells for the day and ANNA gives them each breakfast.

ANNA: Have a good day. Be safe.

(They exit.)

LEO: Please be safe. . . Do you think they will be?

ANNA: No. None of us are safe anymore. Leo, why must you be so strong in your beliefs? Sometimes I wonder if you are simply stubborn.

LEO: Stubborn? I have faith! I do not abandon my tradition!

ANNA: And I do? What have I done but my best to hold this family together?

LEO: And what have I done, but the same in my own way?

ANNA: Do you wish to protect our children or your own faith?

LEO: How dare you suggest I have anything but love for our children. We built this house, this family, together! We could not have done it without the community and our heritage.

ANNA: It makes us a target!

LEO: Would you have me abandon those who have helped us? Do you want me to turn Abby over to the Gestapo? Do you want me to tell them they take Sarah with my blessing?

ANNA: No, no, of course not.

LEO: Then what would you have me do?

ANNA: Protect our children.

LEO: I do!

ANNA: You do what is easy, not what will keep them safe.

LEO: Everything I do is for us!

ANNA: Everything I do is for my children. Do you see that star on your jacket? And the same on Ester's as she left? She is marked!

LEO: There is no way to keep them away.

ANNA: (a beat) Perhaps there is. . .

LEO: What is it then?

ANNA: What has dissuaded them? Not Ester's hair, not the dirt Hani comes home covered in. . . how could I not realize that she did it to keep them away?

LEO: It was both of us.

ANNA: Only Tikvah, tiny Tikvah like a twig-

LEO: What would you have them do? Our daughters do not look like her.

ANNA: And Hani, with her bruises.

LEO: And what would you do, give her more? (a pause) No. No, you can't.

ANNA: I told you I would do anything to keep them safe.

LEO: Of course I do not want them to be taken, but how could you—

ANNA: If they are taken, we will never see them again. The only way I will see my girls is in my nightmares, wasting away under a German officer.

LEO: You cannot. It is wrong.

ANNA: What gives you the right to decide what is right and wrong?

LEO: Anna—I can't even look at you.

ANNA: But would you stop me? Leo, please, tell me. Would you stop me?

LEO: It's wrong. So very wrong.

ANNA: Berlin is a battlefield for people like us. Everything around us is wrong.

LEO: And you would make yourself the enemy?

ANNA: (desperate) WOULD YOU STOP ME?

LEO: I'm leaving.

ANNA: *Ahwi*—

LEO: I'll see you tonight.

ANNA: (grabbing him) Leo, please. Don't leave.

LEO: Get off of me!

ANNA: Leo, it's still me. All I want to do is protect them. Please, my love, don't leave me alone.

LEO: I'm going to be late.

ANNA: Listen, I must keep them safe. Even if it is hard.

LEO: Even if it tears this family apart? And even if it is wrong?

ANNA: How can you tell me that I'm wrong? I'm not some heathen, some violent barbarian. I'm your wife!

LEO: Do I even know that anymore?

ANNA: *Ahwi*, please—

LEO: Goodbye Anna.

(He exits. ANNA sinks onto a chair, and she attempts to collect herself. She fails. She slowly walks over to the door and picks up a walking stick. She looks at it. Blackout.)

Scene 3

At Rise: ANNA is standing in the kitchen, holding her sewing. She walks to the stovetop out of habit, then walks back and tries to pick up her sewing again. She starts as ESTER and HANI enter, chatting. They try to reclaim some sense of normality.)

ESTER: I was paid a bit more today. That's good, isn't it? Mama, if you're going to look at me, then please answer.

ANNA: Hm? I'm sorry, what did you say?

ESTER: Never mind.

HANI: Today was almost as good as yesterday, if that's important.

ANNA: Of course it is.

ESTER: Mama, it's not going to last long. You know that.

ANNA: It will.

ESTER: Don't be blind, her bruises are healing as fast as ever.

HANI: (awkwardly) What's for dinner. Soup again? (No one replies. She looks at ESTER, hoping for a return to her normal demeanor.) Another delicacy? Right, Ester?

ANNA: Not tonight.

ESTER: I didn't think we had enough money for anything else.

ANNA: We don't. There's something else.

(She walks to the door.)

HANI: Where are you going? What's that?

(ANNA turns around, holding the walking stick.)

ESTER: You're shaking.

HANI: Do you need help carrying that? You could hurt someone.

ANNA: It may.

(a long pause)

ESTER: (realizing) Mama, no.

HANI: What? What's going on?

ESTER: Nothing, Hani.

ANNA: I'm sorry. It's for you.

ESTER: You won't.

(A beat. Tension. LEO enters. He stops.)

HANI: Why are you late, Papa?

ESTER: He didn't want to be complicit.

LEO: My loves—

ESTER: Don't.

HANI: Is Mama going to—

ESTER: Yes.

HANI: Why? Mama, why?

ANNA: To protect you.

ESTER: This isn't protecting us!

ANNA: It is. I don't want you to be taken.

HANI: And how is beating us—

(Both parents flinch and react.)

ESTER: (understanding) Oh. The bruises.

HANI: Ester? Ester, we have to leave. Papa, you can't let her do this!

(ANNA looks at LEO. He looks away. HANI starts to move away but ESTER grabs her and looks at ANNA.)

ESTER: Hush, *yeledab*.

HANI: I'm scared.

ANNA: I'm sorry. I. . . I love you. Both of you. More than you could ever imagine.

(HANI takes a step toward ANNA but retreats back to ESTER.)

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry

(She readjusts her grip on the walking stick. A flash and then BLACKOUT. We hear a thud and a scream.)

HANI: Mama! (She cries out.) Stop!

(ESTER cries out.)

ESTER: (quietly) Papa, please.

(LEO begins to cry. The screams and thuds continue for a few moments and then subside into silence. ANNA's heavy breathing fades into silence, as does LEO's crying.)

Scene 4

At Rise: ANNA is sitting, holding her sewing. She is unable to complete the task and puts it down. LEO enters. He pauses. ANNA doesn't notice him. He puts his hand on her shoulder.

LEO: I'm home. Anna. . . I don't know what to say.

ANNA: Usually I am the one who does not know what to say. You always have an answer. Had an answer.

LEO: And I have none now?

ANNA: No.

LEO: What would you have me do?

ANNA: I don't know.

LEO: Do you think I should have. . . ?

ANNA: You didn't.

LEO: I did not want to hurt you.

ANNA: I did not want to hurt them.

LEO: But you did.

ANNA: Yes.

LEO: Do you think it was right?

ANNA: It does not matter.

LEO: Does not matter? They are our children.

ANNA: That matters. Whether it was right does not. Only that it keeps them safe.

LEO: And if it does not?

ANNA: Don't.

LEO: Your plan, you may have been wrong.

ANNA: *My* plan? You cannot remove yourself from this.

LEO: Yes.

ANNA: Yes? You dare to think you can? You are as guilty as I, Leo.

LEO: That is not true.

ANNA: That is where your logic fails. He who does not intervene shares the guilt.

LEO: What if it kills them?

ANNA: I will never hurt them any more than I must.

LEO: Not their bodies. They are young. Their hearts, their souls.

ANNA: That was always your area of expertise—the soul.

LEO: Do you still honor yours?

ANNA: Everything in my heart cries out against me. Do not presume to think that this is easy. You can hide. I cannot.

LEO: I am the one who refused to hide!

ANNA: What you did is refuse protected status for your children.

LEO: What are we without our heritage?

ANNA: Alive, Leo. Alive.

LEO: But what are we?

ANNA: And what am I? Every day, I sit here and I wonder. I wonder if I can be blamed. And when you come home and do not speak to me, I try to blame you and find that I cannot.

LEO: I am speaking now, Anna.

(A knock.)

LEO: Enter.

ANNA: Come in.

(ESTER and HANI enter, quietly. They are bruised.)

LEO: Good evening, girls.

ESTER: Good evening, Papa.

(He reaches out to embrace her, but she stops him.)

ESTER: I can't.

(He tries to embrace HANI. She is silent.)

HANI: May I eat today? I feel faint. Please, Mama.

ANNA: There is bread in the cupboard.

(HANI takes it out and begins to eat, obviously starving. She gives some to ESTER, who does nothing.)

ESTER: Again, tonight?

ANNA: No. I can't.

HANI: Thank God.

ESTER: God has abandoned us.

LEO: No, my darling. God will never abandon us.

ESTER: Perhaps that is true for you. It was Eve who was punished for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

LEO: It is she that sinned!

ANNA: Not only she.

HANI: (innocently) They told us, at school, that Adam was to blame as well because he stood by and watched.

ANNA: See, Leo? You have raised a little theologian.

ESTER: Theology is a sport for men who sit in towers and watch the world drown.

LEO: It is how we understand God!

ESTER: There is no God. None that I want any part of.

(LEO takes her hands like she is a child.)

LEO: My love, you must have faith. God is with us in the valley of the shadow of death. We must fear no evil.

ESTER: I do not fear death.

HANI: Ester said you would say that, Papa. She said, she said, the valley of the shadow of death is not my concern it's—oh. The valley of—Never mind.

ANNA: What is it?

ESTER: The valley of being fucked to death by a parade of high-ranking Aryans.

LEO: Ester!

ESTER: That is what shocks you? My language?

ANNA: She is right. She only speaks the truth.

HANI: The truth is that I could not sleep last night for pain.

ANNA: I'm sorry.

HANI: (finally breaking) What good is that? What good is a mama if she never makes you feel safe?

ANNA: I am only trying to keep you from being taken!

ESTER: God, at what cost?

LEO: Right and wrong. Good and evil.

ANNA: There is no right here, no place for black and white morality. There is merely a woman, wasting away in gray, doing her best to protect her children.

ESTER: (sarcastically) Wasting away? Oh, I hadn't realized you were not allowed to eat as well.

ANNA: My darling-

ESTER: No. Come, Hani.

(She leaves.)

HANI: I don't know what to do, Mama.

LEO: (desperately) Perhaps have faith?

HANI: No, I don't think so.

(She leaves. ANNA reaches for LEO's hand. Blackout.)

Scene 5

At Rise: ANNA sits alone once again. LEO sits next to her. HANI enters from the stairs. She is dressed in more raggedy clothes than usual.

HANI: Mama? Mama! How is this? Enough?

LEO: No. Try your sister's old clothes.

HANI: They fall off me! She is too tall.

ANNA: It will make you look thinner.

ESTER: (entering) You speak as if she is not thin enough. She is emaciated.

ANNA: What else should she do? Those clothes are far too new, far too flattering.

ESTER: I think you have done enough, Anna.

HANI: It's alright, Ester, I'll just wear your old clothes.

(HANI exits up the stairs.)

LEO: I think you look ill enough.

ESTER: If only I could think of a reason.

LEO: Ester, do not do this. Not now. Your mother—

ANNA: Let her go, Leo. She is right.

LEO: God, woman! What would you have me do? You ask me to be part of your scheme, your plan. You tell me that I am your husband, that I am unable to leave—

ESTER: Papa, you tried to leave?

LEO: Would you not? If the woman you believed you loved beat your children?

ANNA: No.

LEO: But, despite all of this, here I stand, with you, because you told me it would be wrong to abandon my family. I made a holy commitment to stay with you forever and I do not go back on my word. And you, woman, you made a holy commitment to care for them, to nurture them, to guide them on their journey to God. You were to welcome Him in this house.

ANNA: I spent years welcoming God. If He chooses not to stay in this place, it is no longer my concern. What wise man would not jump at a chance to leave this cursed city?

LEO: One with faith!

ANNA: One with fear. You follow your faith and keep it in your heart—we can only remember it, remember a time when—

LEO: Do you remember when we first met? We rarely spoke, only shy greetings, little advances and retreats, that timid dance, set to the music of hearts not yet ready to step forward. And then, that day—that day at Shabbat. You frightened me, with your firebrand ideas and your questions, but I was drawn in by you, like a moth to a flame. I have never seen a rabbi lose his words. But you, my beautiful Anna, you argued, and you fought, and you refuted until the poor man had painted himself into a corner with his words and could not leave it without leaving bright red footsteps on the front carpet. I remember thinking, that is the girl I am going to marry. I am going to be with the girl with the wise eyes and the fiery spirit.

ANNA: I knew as well. I was fascinated by you—so clever and handsome, but so beautifully kind—

LEO: Do you know what else I remember? I remember wondering if your words, so fiery and new, would lead me into the unknown.

ANNA: I swore to stay with you through the unknown, *ahuvi*. I promised—consecrated to you, according to the laws of Moses and Israel.

LEO: In the corner of my mind, I wondered if you were too fiery for me, that I would burn myself instead of basking in your flames. You are so bright, Anna, your body glows—

ESTER: Please, stop.

LEO: (grabbing ANNA) Do you know what I remember?

ANNA: No!

LEO: I remember thinking that this beautiful woman, could drag me into the Land of Shadows by her light and I would not notice.

ANNA: *Ahni ohevot otkha*, Leo.

LEO: And now, I stand in it. Or is this itself death? Perhaps this is the year before—I am forced to consider my life and repent each sin in it, even as I am drawn into the commitment of more.

ANNA: I am not your Sheol, Leo, nor your Gehinnom. Please. You hardly believe in it, you believe in love—

LEO: I believe that you have made me someone I was never meant to be.

ANNA: You did not stop me! You knew I was right.

LEO: You were never right.

ESTER: Papa—

LEO: (simultaneously) And when I try to protect you, just once...

ESTER: Protect her from what? From my criticism? It is what she deserves. She knew this would happen.

ANNA: Part of me, a small part, hoped that you would understand.

ESTER: How could I? Look at me. LOOK AT ME!

ANNA: I am sorry, Ester.

ESTER: And for Hani? Will she ever understand?

LEO: Understanding is not a blessing. Knowing makes it worse. I have been part of this from the beginning.

ANNA: Leo, no.

LEO: And the one time I try to protect you, merely a fragment, such a small thing, you turn against me as you turned against them.

ANNA: I turned against no one!

LEO: You turned against your family!

ANNA: I was protecting them!

ESTER: If your family is gone, then what are you trying to protect? If not for family, then for what? For yourself? For your faith? God knows, I do not. And perhaps you have managed to leave behind even Him. I am leaving. My examination is soon. The one test I pray that I will fail. Or at least I would pray. I will never pray again. Hani!

(HANI enters, visibly shaken.)

HANI: Are Mama and Papa—

ESTER: I don't know. I don't care. Time passes. It is time to leave.

(She pauses for a moment. To ANNA)

Goodbye. Goodbye, Leo.

(She shakes his hand.)

HANI: Goodbye, Mama. Goodbye, Papa.

(She starts to leave.)

ESTER: Come, Hani. We cannot miss the doctor.

HANI: If we fail. . .

ANNA: (quickly) Then you can come home.

HANI: And if we, we pass the examination?

ESTER: They will take us. As whores for the German army.

HANI: I do not want to go. I want to be here, I want everything to go back to how it was. I need my family back. I want to go home!

ESTER: That will never happen again, *yeledah*.

HANI: But at least it will stop.

ESTER: You do not know that.

ANNA: You both have your papers? Remember to cough—

LEO: And if they ask how long, tell them your lungs have been afflicted since the beginning of Autumn.

ANNA: And Ester, do not forget, if they ask, tell them you have pain in your hips, and burning in your—

(She gestures toward her private parts)

LEO: The time.

ESTER: Yes. We will be late. Come, Hani.

(They exit.)

ANNA: I hope it is enough. Abby told her daughter to feign a cough.

LEO: She was strong. They are weak—too weak to triumph against a cold, let alone a serious illness. I prayed all night for some miracle. If only they did not need to go.

ANNA: Or if they had protected status.

LEO: It will only last so long for those who take it. We can only buy time. You cannot blame only me. You are the one who gave them a salvation of horror.

ANNA: It was a foolish chance.

LEO: A foolish hope?

ANNA: I would never wish them gone. And yet if they could be safe. . .

LEO: I know what *you* would do to keep them safe.

ANNA: Anything.

LEO: But kindness? Love?

ANNA: Anything, Leo.

LEO: Kindness. Another foolish hope.

(This line is important.)

Do you think they will come back?

ANNA: Where else would they go?

LEO: If given the choice? Anywhere but this place.

ANNA: I love them.

LEO: As do I.

(He rises and starts to exit.)

ANNA: I too wish that things could return to the way they were. When this was a home.

LEO: A haven.

ANNA: Leo?

LEO: What more do you wish of me?

ANNA: (going toward him) Stay here with me. In the kitchen. Both of us together, as it has always been.

(A long pause. He leaves. Anna sinks to her knees. The lights tinge blue like the prologue. She looks at the audience. The lights fade around her until she is all that can be seen.)

BLACKOUT



THOUGHTS & PRAYERS INC.: A PLAY[GUE}

Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia, Athens

Cast of Characters

KEELY CHANCE:

A peppy go-getter, a Hallmark master writer who “loves reading, running, and spending time with her husband and daughters.” Her faith in the power of sympathy cards to help heal—to help make a real change—remains unshakable throughout the play.

JAMES “JIM” SCOTT
BRADY:

In 1981, Brady—the White House Press Secretary—became permanently disabled from a gunshot wound during the attempted assassination of Ronald Regan. His death in 2014 was ruled a homicide, caused by the gunshot wound he received 33 years earlier. Both the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence are affiliated American nonprofit organizations that advocate for gun control and against gun violence. Together, they are commonly referred to as the Brady Campaign.

MASH MOTHER:

A concerned mother trying to make sense of a mass shooting at the high school she attended years earlier. She is afraid for her own children—slotted to attend this school—and feels compelled to send sympathy cards to the parents of victims from her former alma mater. She simultaneously recognizes the futility of such action.

DEAR LIZA:

A character from a children’s song (played by multiple girls, all wearing the same outfit).

DEAR HENRY:

A character from a children’s song (played by multiple boys, all wearing the same outfit).

CHORUS OF CHILDREN:

All of the collected Dear Liza’s and Dear Henry’s.

SETTING

There is no discernable character to the place in which the characters perform. Mash Mother cruises the internet. She might be at home, she might be at work, she might be at a coffee shop. She might be in her car—waiting to pick her children up from softball practice or ballet school. It does not matter. She is anywhere that someone might take out their laptop. Scenery should not clutter the stage. The audience cruises the internet with her. A screen behind the stage shows what Mash Mother views on her laptop.

TIME

It is dark.

SCENE 1

(Black out. The sound of gunfire rattles into the auditorium. Rat-a-tat-tat. Short bursts and single shots. Loud, then fading away from the stage. Coming closer again, an echo. In the middle of the stage, MASH MOTHER opens up the laptop in her lap and the gunfire stops. She sits on a stool flanked by KEELY CHANCE (on a shorter stool) and JIM BRADY (in a wheelchair). She scrunches toward her laptop, the digital glow lighting up her face. Behind her, headlines about mass shootings flash in jumbled time on a screen. Whenever KEELY CHANCE or JIM BRADY speaks, a light bulb blinks on above his or her head. Whenever they finish speaking, the light bulb blinks off. ENTER CHORUS OF CHILDREN, filing in from either side of the stage to kneel in a line in front of Mash Mother, Keely Chance, and Brady.)

MASH MOTHER: I have a child.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: We lose our children to the sea.

(One Dear Henry stands up.)

DEAR HENRY: The red tide washes over me.

(One Dear Liza stands up.)

DEAR LIZA: Pig shit brown.

DEAR HENRY: Luminescent bloom.

(All of the children stand.)

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: Red algae feed on spilled lagoons.

(The children EXIT to either side of the stage.)

MASH MOTHER: (watching the children go) I have a child. I should do something. I have a child.

KEELY CHANCE: Signing a sympathy card isn't easy. We search for words. We wonder what would be comforting to hear. We worry about saying the wrong thing.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: (shouting from both sides of the stage) Or making too obvious your apathy.

BRADY: EVERY DAY, forty-seven children and teens are shot in murders, assaults, suicides and suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, and police interventions.

MASH MOTHER: Always in the passive voice, isn't it? Bodies become numbers. Agents become objects. Victims are shot. By actors. I should do something.

KEELY CHANCE: But even though it's not easy, it is important to reach out in sympathy. Our words can't take away the pain of losing a loved one, but they can go a long way toward helping a grieving person feel loved and supported.

BRADY: EVERY DAY, eight children and teens die from gun violence.

(ENTER Dear Liza, followed by Dear Henry.)

DEAR HENRY: (singing) There's a hole in my noggin, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

There's a hole in my noggin, Dear Liza, a hole.

(EXIT Dear Henry, followed by Dear Liza.)

KEELY CHANCE: You should know right up front that you won't find the perfect thing to write here.

BRADY: Four are murdered.

KEELY CHANCE: However, you will find ideas from seasoned Hallmark writers for good, helpful, and hopeful things to write in a sympathy card.

BRADY: Three die from suicide.

KEELY CHANCE: For those times when you can't deliver one in person, Hallmark offers Sign and Send, which allows you to send a personalized, handwritten sympathy card from your phone or computer.

BRADY: One is killed unintentionally.

KEELY CHANCE: No matter how you send it, we hope our tips help you relax, write, and share your heartfelt caring with someone who is going through a time of grief.

BRADY: EVERY DAY, three hundred and forty-two people of all ages in America are shot.

KEELY CHANCE: Condolences.

BRADY: Every day.

MASH MOTHER: Condolences. Are not enough.

(ENTER Dear Liza followed by Dear Henry.)

DEAR HENRY: There's a hole in my noggin, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

There's a hole in my noggin, Dear Liza, a hole.

(At the end of each verse they switch directions and walk to the other side of the stage, the one who was following thus becoming the one followed.)

DEAR LIZA: Well, fix it, Dear Henry, Dear Henry, Dear Henry

Well fix it, Dear Henry, Dear Henry, fix it.

DEAR HENRY: With what shall I fix it, Dear Liza, Dear Liza?

With what shall I fix it, Dear Liza, with what?

(EXIT Dear Liza followed by Dear Henry.)

KEELY CHANCE: There are many good reasons for keeping your personal sympathy message short.

(ENTER Chorus of Children from both sides of the stage.)

KEELY CHANCE: It could be that the card has already expressed most or all of what you wanted to say.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: (Shouting) Or maybe you didn't want to say anything at all.

KEELY CHANCE: Or maybe you didn't know the deceased well.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: Or maybe you knew them too well.

MASH MOTHER: I guess . . . a card couldn't hurt.

KEELY CHANCE: Whatever the reason, you can absolutely be brief and still come across as warm and caring.

BRADY: EVERY DAY.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: EVERY DAY!

BRADY: Ninety-six people die from gun violence.

(EXIT Chorus of Children.)

KEELY CHANCE: "We are so sorry for your loss."

BRADY: Thirty-four are murdered.

KEELY CHANCE: "I'm going to miss her, too."

BRADY: Fifty-nine die from suicide.

KEELY CHANCE: "I hope you feel surrounded by much love."

BRADY: One is killed unintentionally.

KEELY CHANCE: "Sharing in your sadness as you remember Dan."

BRADY: One is killed by legal intervention.

KEELY CHANCE: "Sending healing prayers and comforting hugs. I am so sorry for your loss."

BRADY: One died but the intent was unknown.

KEELY CHANCE: "With deepest sympathy as you remember Robert."

MASH MOTHER: A plague upon our house. A plague upon our country.

DEAR HENRY: (Shouting from stage right) And the waters turned to blood.

DEAR LIZA: (Shouting from stage left) And the waters turned to blood.

MASH MOTHER: I have a child. I have a child. I have a child.

KEELY CHANCE: If you knew the deceased, but not the surviving family

member(s) to whom you're sending your card, it might be helpful to mention your connection to their loved one (from college, through work, etc.).

BRADY: EVERY DAY, thirty-nine children and teens are shot and survive.

(ENTER Dear Liza followed by a string of Dear Henrys who are hounding her.)

DEAR HENRY I: There's a hole in my belly, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

DEAR HENRY II: There's a hole in my elbow, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

DEAR HENRY III: There's a hole in my ankle, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

DEAR HENRY IV: There's a hole in my shoulder, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

BRADY: EVERY DAY, two hundred and forty-six people of all ages are shot and survive.

(Dear Liza turns and stares down the Henrys, who bumble up against one another.)

DEAR LIZA: Then fix it.

(EXIT Dear Liza followed by the troupe of Dear Henrys.)

KEELY CHANCE: It can be a great comfort to a grieving person or family to hear that others thought highly of their loved one, too.

BRADY: In ONE YEAR, on average, seventeen thousand two hundred and seven American children and teens are shot.

(ENTER chorus of children.)

BRADY: Two thousand seven hundred and thirty-seven of those die.

(Chorus of children falls to the stage in a heap.)

MASH MOTHER: Bodies become numbers.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: (Whispering as they crawl to either side of the stage) become numbers, become numbers, become numbers, become numbers...

(EXIT chorus of children, crawling.)

MASH MOTHER: No way to send a card to each and every one.

KEELY CHANCE: If you knew and admired the deceased, be sure to let your recipient(s) know.

BRADY: One thousand six hundred and six are murdered.

KEELY CHANCE: "I have the best memories of staying with Aunt Edie as a kid. I don't think I've told you this, but starting when I was about ten, she would take me to Becker's for ice cream cones... and let me drive! Only Aunt Edie... I'm going to miss her fun-loving spirit so much."

BRADY: Nine hundred and fifty-eight die from suicide. One hundred and ten are killed unintentionally.

KEELY CHANCE: "Nobody could tell a funny story like your mom. Remember at your graduation party—the story about the vacuuming incident? My face hurt for a full day from laughing so much. I'll always cherish those memories of fun times spent with her."

BRADY: Twenty-six are killed by legal intervention.

KEELY CHANCE: "Your daughter touched so many lives for the good. I'm grateful I had the chance to know her as both a colleague and a cherished friend."

BRADY: Thirty-six die but the intent was unknown.

MASH MOTHER: Unknown? And who will send a card to them?

KEELY CHANCE: Need a more specific word than "good" to describe the deceased? Consider one of these: kindhearted, talented, admired...

MASH MOTHER: Lamented?

KEELY CHANCE: ...unforgettable, fun-loving, funny, wonderful, well-loved...

MASH MOTHER: Departed?

KEELY CHANCE: ...lovely, sweet, generous, one-of-a-kind...

MASH MOTHER: Redundant?

KEELY CHANCE: ...one in a million, honorable, respected...

MASH MOTHER: Erased?

KEELY CHANCE: ...caring, hardworking, strong, energetic...

MASH MOTHER: Dead?

KEELY CHANCE: ...happy.

MASH MOTHER: Dead.

BRADY: In America, one out of three homes with kids have guns and nearly four point six million children live in a home with loaded and unsecured guns.

(ENTER Dear Liza Followed by Dear Henry.)

DEAR HENRY: With what shall I fix it, Dear Liza, Dear Liza? With what shall I fix it, Dear Liza, with what?

KEELY CHANCE: Offer to help.

DEAR LIZA: With a straw, Dear Henry, Dear Henry, Dear Henry, With a straw, Dear Henry, Dear Henry, a straw.

BRADY: Talking to children about the dangers of firearms is not enough.

DEAR HENRY: But the straw is too long, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

(Dear Liza stops pacing and turns to face Dear Henry. She no longer sings the words, but spits them—flat—back into Henry's face.)

DEAR LIZA: Then cut it.

DEAR HENRY: With what shall I cut it.

DEAR LIZA: An axe.

DEAR HENRY: But the axe is too dull.

DEAR LIZA: Then hone it.

DEAR HENRY: On what shall I hone it?

DEAR LIZA: A stone.

DEAR HENRY: But the stone is too dull.

DEAR LIZA: Then wet it.

DEAR HENRY: With what shall I wet it?

DEAR LIZA: Try water.

DEAR HENRY: In what shall I fetch it?

DEAR LIZA: A bucket.

DEAR HENRY: (Taking a deep breath, and then happily belting out the words to the song) There's a hole in the bucket, Dear Liza, Dear Liza.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: (Shouting from stage right) And the waters turned to blood.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: (Shouting from stage left) And the waters turned to blood.

(EXIT Dear Liza and Dear Henry.)

KEELY CHANCE: If you're in a position to help your recipient with arrangements, meals, housework, yardwork, childcare or something else, then feel free to include an offer to do so as part of your message. Just be sure to follow up and follow through.

MASH MOTHER: A plague, a disease, a lagoon of pig shit. Brown numbers from the CDC bubbling in the murk. I have a child. Forget follow up. Who will remember her name? Forget follow through. We need prevention. I have a child.

KEELY CHANCE: In general, the more specific your offer of help, the better. And no task is too small.

MASH MOTHER: There's blood in the water.

BRADY: Take action.

KEELY CHANCE: Offer ongoing messages of support. Follow up.

MASH MOTHER: No. Take action. Plug the bucket. Prevent the problem. My daughter goes to school, to the movies, to the mall.

KEELY CHANCE: You can send these cards to note an occasion like the deceased's birthday, a wedding anniversary, holidays or any other time when

the grieving person may need extra support.

BRADY: In ONE YEAR on average one hundred and twenty-four thousand seven hundred and sixty people in America are shot.

(ENTER Chorus of Children.)

BRADY: Thirty-five thousand one hundred and forty-one of those die.

(Chorus of Children falls to the stage in a heap.)

MASH MOTHER: Bodies become numbers.

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: (Whispering as they crawl to either side of the stage) Become numbers, become numbers, become numbers, become numbers...

MASH MOTHER: Haven't we seen this before? Brown lagoons spilling to the bloody seashore?

(EXIT chorus of children, crawling off stage.)

KEELY CHANCE: "It's been a while, but I know that the hurt doesn't go away when the cards and casseroles do. I'm still here for you."

BRADY: Four hundred and ninety-seven women are killed by their husbands or their male dating partners.

MASH MOTHER: My daughter has a boyfriend. Her boyfriend killed a cat.

KEELY CHANCE: You will find some cards specific to sympathy follow up, but you might also choose to go with an encouragement or "thinking of you" card.

MASH MOTHER: He threatened my husband. His father has a gun.

KEELY CHANCE: Or a blank card with a beautiful or lighthearted photo on the cover. Depending on the tone you're going for.

MASH MOTHER: Active Shooter. Going Postal. Lockdown Drill.

BRADY: Millions of guns are sold every year in "no questions asked" transactions.

KEELY CHANCE: A warm, respectful closing, is a graceful way to wrap

up your sympathy message. Choose one of these or create your own.

(Keely Chance forcibly shares her script with the other two. As each person reads, another Dear Henry or Dear Liza files onto the stage. All of the Lizas and Henrys hum the familiar melody.)

BRADY: With sympathy

MASH MOTHER: With deepest sympathy

KEELY CHANCE: With heartfelt sympathy

BRADY: With prayers and sympathy

MASH MOTHER: With sincere sympathy

KEELY CHANCE: With warm thoughts and prayers

BRADY: With caring

MASH MOTHER: With love at this sad time

KEELY CHANCE: In caring sympathy

BRADY: With you in sorrow

MASH MOTHER: Sharing your sadness

KEELY CHANCE: Thinking of you

BRADY: Caring thoughts are with you

MASH MOTHER: God bless

KEELY CHANCE: God bless you and comfort you

BRADY: Keeping you in our prayers

MASH MOTHER: Lifting you up in prayer

KEELY CHANCE: Praying for you

BRADY: Wishing you peace

MASH MOTHER: Wishing you healing

KEELY CHANCE: My heart goes out to you

BRADY: Please accept our condolences

MASH MOTHER: My sincere condolences

CHORUS OF CHILDREN: (singing very slowly) There's a hole in the bucket.

MASH MOTHER: And the water turned to blood

(Stage goes dark. The sound of gunfire rattles into the auditorium. Rat-a-tat-tat. Short bursts and single shots. Loud, then fading away from the stage. Coming closer again, an echo. Continues. Seemingly endless. Continues. The audience sits in the dark. The gunfire continues. Rat-a-tat-tat, ad infinitum. Continues.)



Honorable Mentions

Poetry

“Small Hurts” by Shreya Pabbaraju

“Your Eyes Are So Dark They Look More Black Than Brown” by
Srinidhi Panchapakesan

“Cornfields” by Kara Krewer

“My Mother at the Morning Market” by Alejandro Lemus-Gomez

“Middle School Lunch Break” by Emily Banks

Nonfiction

“On Cleaning Dogs” by Bianca Buschor

“Call Her by Her Name” by Genevieve Arlie

“How to do the Job” by Bella Braxton

“A Lady of Honor” by Tatiana Nigh

“Skirting Observance” by Katherine Winston

“My Brave Girl” by Damara Soto

Fiction

“Good News” by Nathan Dixon

“Flowers in the Frost” by Ashlyn Brisley

“Brotherhood” by Marianne Danneman

Playwriting

“Keep it Under Control” by Paul Cunningham

“Shabbo’s Dinner” by Aviva Kasowski

“The Seven Basic Plots” by Dais Johnston