

49TH ANNUAL AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

WRITERS' FESTIVAL



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APRIL 2 - APRIL 3

Writers' Festival Magazine Staff

Eve Barrett '21, *Promotions Team Coleader, Poetry Editor, Nonfiction Editor, Playwriting Editor*

Lara Barton '20, *Coeditor-in-Chief, Fiction Editor, Poetry Editor, Design Team*

Abbie Cox '21, *Coeditor-in-Chief, Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor, Poetry Editor*

Anna Dodds '20, *Playwriting Editor, Nonfiction Editor, Design Team*

Siu Loong Englander '21, *Poetry Editor, Promotions Team*

Alan Grostephan, *Contest and Faculty Coordinator*

Sarah Letteer '21, *Lead Playwriting Editor, Fiction Editor*

Saul Lewis '20, *Design Team Lead, Fiction Editor, Poetry Editor*

Sara Masters '21, *Lead Poetry Editor*

Lydia Oliver '20, *Lead Nonfiction Editor, Poetry Editor*

Lourrain Simon '21, *Promotions Team Coleader, Fiction Editor, Playwriting Editor*

Keia Sykes '20, *Fiction Editor, Design Team*

Maya Webster '20, *Lead Fiction Editor, Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor, Poetry Editor*

Yuxin Zheng '20, *Nonfiction editor, Promotions Team*

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

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Note from the Editors

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this year's magazine and supporting the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival. There was so much passion and care that went into the curation of this magazine, and your support for writing and art is much appreciated. This year's magazine is about the interconnectedness between ideas, people, places, art, and words. It is about the details that interweave to make a bigger picture, and how we are all tethered to one another in some way. This year's magazine expresses that writing is about finding that tether and exposing those connections. As you read through each story, we hope that you find a way to connect to them in a meaningful way, and we hope they leave you with a lasting impression.

For the safety and comfort of our readers, the editors of the Writers' Festival Magazine would like to include the following trigger warnings: references to sexual assault, violence, or blood.

- Lara Barton '20, and Abbie Cox '21

History

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

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

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the Writers' Festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category. The visiting writers for this year's festival are Lidia Yuknavitch, Tina Chang, and Anna Cabe '13.

This event is made possible by the Emma May Laney Endowment Fund for Writing, the Margaret Guthrie Trotter Fund, and the Ellen White and William Wyeth Newman Writers' Festival Prize. We wish to thank President Leocadia I. Zak, Vice President for Academic Affairs Christine Cozzens, Eleanor Hutchen '40, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. Thanks to Cosmo Whyte for the magazine's cover image. Special thanks to Charlotte Artese, chair, and other members of the English department at Agnes Scott College.

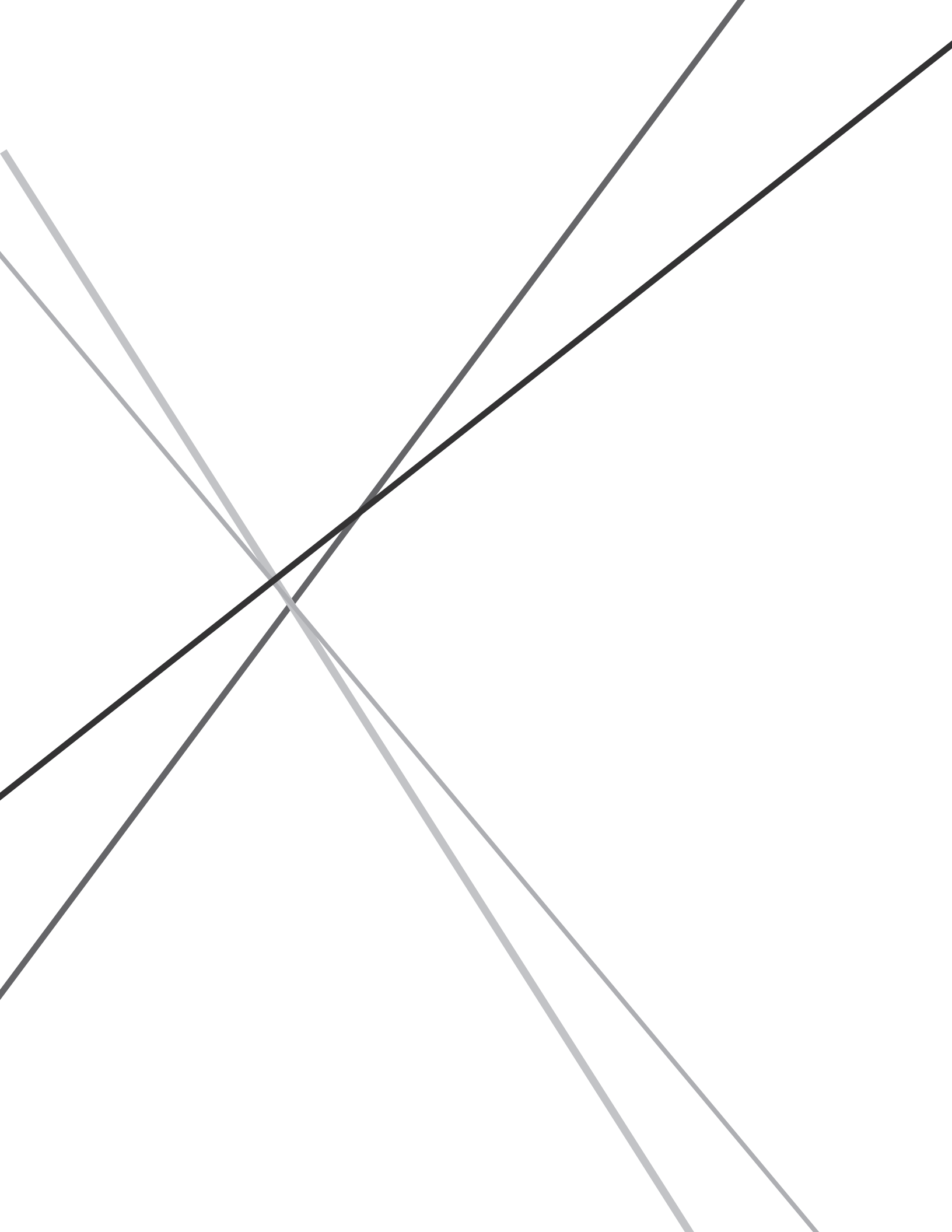


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Poetry



Away

Kira Tucker, Emory University

Signs welcome visitors
across the Powhatan.
On this side of the river, I'm told,
is T-Jeff's poplar forest retreat,
and, past that, Sheetz and Liberty.

They serve plantation mint tea here,
where I hear the nearest Black woman
through my headphones. I sit wordless
at the name of this place. Lynchburg,
christened for a man who led mobs
under a sun so hot it burned white.

It's local tradition to bow at graves that name
the dead. Snakes hide in wild violets,
while I sit lakeside and see my body in water.
We seem to have the same storm each night,
that leaves the air drenched when it ends.
I go to sleep knowing people lie
in the ground below me. When I wake,
I'll find my way back to the trees,
where nothing rises up
like morning mist.

Fall

Xavier Jacobs, Young Harris College

Maybe God made us in the wrong
Shade of brown. It's the same brown
That you see on a paper bag wrapped
Around an amber malt liquor on the porch.

The same brown that you can find
On a sun-melted Tootsie Roll's edges
During a sweltering Georgia summer
That makes children cry, "Yuck!"
As they trample it under their feet.

It's that same brown as the young bodies
That hung from Mississippi magnolias
On those warm, restless, summer nights.
That attracted little white boys and girls
Shouting morning cries of, "Poor Niggers!"
As they passed the grim wind chimes.

What if God had made a mistake?
Why don't we share the same brown
Of the crisp leaves in the Fall air
That attract those same white boys and girls
To come outside in the cool morning
And see how beautiful they are in the sunlight.

me, at my first funeral

Jasmine Tabor, Spelman College

when my momma lay me down to rest, i hope my grave black as me—the colorless epitome of brown i'd ever seen, a wash of endless light when you gaze my casket, as ashy as can be like stepping out of a shower not meant to clean yourself in but cleanse yourself in: an absolving shower, the soap + shampoo + oils in the crevices and i attempt, for maybe the third time this week (it's only tuesday) to drown myself in these waters so shallow my reflection doesn't compare like it would on a casket as black as me

when my baby plants lawn flowers, i pray those sunflowers stretch farther than my smile towards our star—the petals melting in our charleston, old plantation heat beating on her tiny hands while she toils and my brown skin, turned purple, lights up for a moment in the depths of the dirt under the worms + swamps + bodies of unclaimed bones just as baked as my brown, maybe darker; the roots grow tall and the stem touches a freedom, a peace of mind so fine its seeds split open in a grin, spilling on my white smile, stretched in a laugh

when daddy sits this parade out, my small washed-up body delivered before the soft, creased hands of the women in my life while they cook all the things i'd wish to eat: the gator's fatty insides, the call of the deer cooked in rice, the mashed sweetness of those orange potatoes, the sugar rush of rainwater + lemonade; and when they are done, he gobbles it up and prays, in the lord's name, that no baby was his baby like this baby

my sister will have to dig me up

when she brushes off the debris, pats my curls of the uncleanliness, kisses my forehead, and closes that grave, she'll whisper into my chest

*your heart beats different,
your voice sounds changed,
whatever happened under there
you're blacker after losing your chains.*

Feedback Loop

Caroline Crew, Georgia State University

Impossible to fathom how a snake has no neck, when we hold our heads high and tight. Tongue to toe,

tail in mouth—most of us want a ragged exclamation point to stunt the serpent in the grass, forgetting

the echoes that keep us click-baiting. Terrible rhythm. I keep breaking pencils drawing the snake eating

its own tail, which is to say I believe our own bullshit. Ouroboros—such a sashay of soothing sounds. A comfort

of repetition. In one draft, the closed circle is safety, in the next, literally self-sabotage. Either way, this self—

so much self—so much delicious self-reflection. I used to think music without guitars was no music

at all—could not hear the chugging circles of my own daily dance. Snake hips with no venom.

I mean, no payout. I agree, I agree, I agree so loud for a moment the music is lost under the sound-storm

of choking on my own tail.

Flumen Tsimmes

Sigal Kahn, Agnes Scott College

She tucked knadles into brisket,
raw and rising in liquid. I was eleven
when she died and still feel sweet
potatoes thick on my tongue,
the same texture of remembering
her name against the roof of my mouth.

I pressed “chy” from diaphragm to mouth,
tasting soft onions clinging to brisket
and carrots and potatoes, not remembering
the prunes. The prunes! At age eleven,
I must’ve liked prunes, wrinkled tongue
to wrinkled plum, black skin flumen sweet.

Her name, Chyena not Channa, tasted sweet.
America found Jenny sweeter in the mouth.
So they eased out “chy”; assimilate the tongue.
I flicked mine around desperately. To taste brisket
again, to savor her, to search for eleven
ways to describe tsimmes and remember.

We called her Grandma Shavzin, remember?
No first name, I don’t know. It was sweet,
but they found more sugar in the “j.” Eleven
family members put Jennifer, Jill in mouths.
But Jennifer and Jill didn’t braise brisket
like Chyena, who knew how to please the tongue.

I’m trying to think; I can’t think. My tongue
finds some kind of liquid; remembering
is hard. I don’t know if I had a name for brisket.
Her brisket, of liquid and carrots and sweet
potatoes and knadle. I pressure my mouth
to think. Flumen tsimmes! Sounds like eleven

syllables, strung together and familiar, eleven
sounds bouncing from front teeth to tongue
tip. It’s comforting to rely on my mouth,
roll Chyena, Shavzin, flumen tsimmes, remember
her in a bundle of letters, catching sticky and sweet,
melting in my mouth. I let it soften like brisket.

It had a name; I needed to be eleven again. Taste brisket
under my tongue and slipping lingering liquid sweet.
My mouth rolls “chy” into knadle dough, remembering.

To Beloved. By Beloved.

Kayla Reado, Spelman College

souls in one. Lover, I want you to
hoe this sticky mud womb, nestle a
seed inside of your hand
I can bloom your wonder,
child you cradle poorly, haphazardly
you prefer me in your lap or your knee
to ride til I feel an easier self and I allow
you to till my land ‘til its soft like sand, and
the first thing you erect is a monument
cause you love some of you, maybe more than
a mother could,
overindulged in the touch of your own hand
against your own skin, fore anyone
could rub you down in a balm of promises

Dogs Like Me

Bella Braxton, Agnes Scott College

There are so many people in the same
place that we are in—
our first names must be preceded by indefinite articles and followed by
more names, as qualifications.

Some people sleep standing up and murmuring
equivocations both trivial and polite.

I am called by a diminutive of my given name or by
one of many terms of endearment or by
the snapping sound produced by the middle finger and the thumb—
a phoneme which has no written or symbolic equivalent.

There is a possible world in which I was never born, and it
is the one that I think about most.

There are people who give to me their wide, dumb smiles, invent for me whimsical
nicknames, say I Love You, and do not wonder what
I think about.
I know that they take kindness to be a sport or
some form of recreation.

I know they must be fairly agnostic about the meanings of the words they use
because a modest smile is certainly no derivative of,
or basis for, love, and could
not be. A modest smile is of no assistance to me.

I sweep floors in the same way that dogs do, with the tails
that they cannot control. But even dogs like
me, who come when called nicely,
are selective in respect
to compliance.

con los hombros pa'trás/with my shoulders back

Jacqueline Hernandez, Agnes Scott College

[TRANSLATION]

nunca la llegué a conocer
no muy bien
pero recuerdo
(creo que recuerdo)
sus manos cuando separaban el mar que era mi pelo
y su sonrisa cuando le decía eso
y nosotros bajo la sombra del árbol de guayabas
en el guayabo

i never got to know you
not well
but i remember
(i think i remember)
your hands when you separated the sea that was my hair
and your smile when i said that
and us under the shadow of the guava tree
in the guayabo

mujer de acámbaro

woman of acámbaro

me imagino que usted tampoco no me conoció
o puede ser que supo más de mi que hasta yo
porque me miro y la veo a usted
en el espejo
en mi ser

i imagine you didn't know me either
or maybe you knew more about me than even me
because i look at myself and i see you
in the mirror
in my being

juntas por primera vez

together for the first time

y diez años son diez años
y la frontera nuestra enemiga
y la muerte rompió todo lo que tuvimos y
lo que nos quedaba de tener

and ten years is ten years
and the border our enemy
and death broke everything we had and
what remained to be had

ahora yo como usted
camino

now i, like you,
i walk

con los hombros pa'trás

with my shoulders back

Open Flame

Isobel Robinson-Ortiz, Agnes Scott College

7/26-

“I want to learn more,”

He says,

And I can barely hear him

Over the tostones screaming in the skillet,

“Show me the food of your people!”

But, my sweet,

You’ll choke on colonialism!

How can I make appetizing

The fact that my father was most favored among his siblings

Because his skin was lightest?

I don’t know the right spices

To balance out the nose-wrinkling sourness

Of hearing,

“You’re smart. I don’t like you.”

You,

Skilled in the kitchen like you were born to it—tell me,

How hot must the skillet be to burn away

That desperate toxin

I marinate in every waking second?

How many rinses and scrubs under the tap

Until I can think of nothing but you groaning

At how good my cooking tastes?

Truck Pull

Zachary Anderson, University of Georgia

Outside the engines
stir, they are speaking

of weight that climbs
up the sled with each

revolution. A flag waves
the sun down. It lurks

in concentric rainbows
on the bed of an oil slick.

Farmboys descend
from their haylofts

saying, I wore my
gown of diesel for you.

The engines murmur back
I’ll be the spread of your lightning.

multiple choice

Sara Masters, Agnes Scott College

i.

Without a passing glance, I became more fear than love.

A hunted beast, wounded, half-starved.

Running from her and towards her at the same time.

ii.

Please choose one.

I am:

a. huddled in a corner, knives at the door of my throat

b. soaked in water and rage, fist notched in the cradle of her skull

c. filled with a soul-deep silence

iii.

If you chose a:

The phone is in my sweating, sobbing grasp, and the 911 dispatcher's soothing, mechanically disinterested voice does not,

cannot,

overcome the rush of blood in my ears.

My sister stands over me, half haloed by early afternoon light that shines on knives and too bright eyes with the same brittle sharpness.

She reaches for me, not with blades, but with hands, and takes the phone from me.

The voice that couldn't reach me leaves me.

My sister does not like the voice, does not like what it means.

She says,

“if you won't kill me, i'll kill myself”

iv.

If you chose b, please rewind:

The ring of my throat burns, torn shirt unfolding over pale shoulders,

not strong enough to tolerate

(at least, not today)

My pain matches hers, an eye for an eye, equal aches, suitable for twins.

I am on the floor now, cut extension cord in my hand, one less threat to a life she refuses to treasure,

(one I am no longer certain I do)

I am on the floor now, drenched in dirty water and tears when she brandishes metal at me

(not knives yet)

More fear than me lashes out, and my fist strikes out like the stamp of a broken home.

v.

If you chose c, please fast-forward:

Four days later, and I still wear my skin like a costume,

my terror like armor.

Four days in a house that doesn't stink of

her/my/our pain and I still do not remember how to inhabit myself.

There is a cold, shattered-glass clarity to the silence of the bathroom.

Sunlight lances in from the ceiling.

In it, I am stripped bare, sanctified.

Carrying the light close to my chest, wounded-limb gently,

I step into the shower and enter the act of unraveling without returning to earth.

Watermelon

Zoe Salveson, Agnes Scott College

My father liked old music and the Beach Boys
And waking up early to give me watermelon when I was sick
And my throat hurt from coughing.
(softly smile, I know he must be kind)

Except that he wasn't.
He wasn't kind. Not always.
And there was yelling, and there was crying, and there was hurt, and it hurt
(The anger)
And I was sixteen and we ran away from the house for a night to get away from him
And it hurt.

(softly smile)
And it felt like betrayal.

And it hurt. And
it hurt. And
it hurt. And
it hurt. And
it hurt.

And I don't know if you were a good father, or a good man-
There are two sides to a story,
And I don't know.

But what I do know is that,
You handed me something sharp
(Me, a child)
And it hurt to hold,
So I had to drop it.

And as it went, I saw early mornings and watermelon falling with it.

Fiction



Fish

Bianca Buschor, Agnes Scott College

It is one of those fish that looks like all the others, glowing blue and green in the blacklight tank at the back of the pet store. The old woman picks it because it is nothing special. It does not follow her finger along the glass or look her way. As the others chase the bubbles from the filter and flip the neon pebbles at the tank's bottom, her fish hides in the bright pink coral, blends itself with the fake green seaweed. In the time it takes her to choose, the fish does not look at her once. She likes that. She tells the young employee with his neck reddened with psoriasis that she wants that one, the one in the corner, the one that wants nothing to do with her.

The woman pays the boy with a dollar bill. He mumbles a thank you and snaps the rubber band around the top of the plastic bag. It had taken him a while to chase down her fish with his small green net. She watched as he had to remove the features of the tank one by one to catch her fish; the trunks of seaweed, the clumps of pink coral. As she nods him goodbye, he is already returning them, dripping, to the blacklight tank. Once they sink back into the water, the paint begins to glow.

She carries her fish in its plastic bag like a bubble against her chest, feeling its tiny body bump in the palm of her hand. As they walk the nine blocks to her townhouse together, the fish turns to face the street, and when she looks down at it while they wait for the crosswalk lights to change, she can see its head follow the taxi as it passes by. A van comes close behind, and again the fish follows it.

Three blocks in, the buildings rise tall. The fish holds itself almost vertical, its small fins pulsing, and if it leaned back just a bit further, its black eyes would meet hers, but it stays still, frustratingly close. Her hair, long and blonde, taps against the plastic of the bubble, and the fish turns to look at the strands, taking in the brightness of the blonde, and returns its gaze to the buildings, the sky with a plane bumbling past, letting out its breaths in bubbles. She huffs and hurries her pace. It is almost evening, and she wants to have the fish in its bowl before the buildings cover the sun. Something cries to their right. The two jump and jerk. The woman holds her bubble tighter against her chest, her fingers melting into the plastic. A seagull flies overhead. Its wings come close enough to draw her hair with it. The fish, puffing from the bag in her hands, sees a bird for the first time.

The woman tosses her keys on her couch and shuffles her rubber shoes to the kitchen where a small, glass globe she boiled last night stands in the center of

the table. It is full of the best water, the freshest water from the rains the day before, and black pebbles she had found over the weeks at the lake park she visits every Thursday, scratching along its shores in her rubber shoes. Three orange tins of fish food stand in order beside the bowl. One for dinner, two for dessert.

With careful scissors she cuts the bag. The fish, warm and tired, slides into the bowl. She throws the bag over her shoulder and drops into the closest chair, chin in her palms, waiting with the fish. For a minute, it sits suspended in the water. She finds herself holding her breath in her chest. Once the fish breathes it drops lower. Blue fins feather across the black of a pebble. Its belly bumps, dimpling in the middle. She can see it looking around, at the pebbles, at the lights from the toaster through the glass, at the gold bracelets hung halfway down her arm.

At last the fish looks at the woman. First at the dip of her long nose, the browned marks from the sun, the wrinkle between her eyes, and finally in them. The two of them stare into each other, floating. The woman is scared to blink. The fish does not need to. It blows one bubble, two. When she blows out her cheeks the fish turns away, showing her its green back as it takes in the refrigerator, the silver tower with dots of white light.

She follows her fish's gaze and hurries up to the cabinet, pulling out a frosted glass and pressing the ice dispenser to crushed. The kitchen fills with its shredding sound. Her cardigan falls from one shoulder as she whirls to place the cup before the fish, throwing herself back into the chair and leaning farther down than before, her chin poking into the wood of the table.

The ice is thin and melts fast. When it is water again, the fish has come as close to the cup as the bowl will let it, its curved mouth bumping, every so often, into the glass. The woman drools in her sleep. Soft snores pull from her chest. Her saliva pools into the flat of her elbow. Her hands, cracked at the knuckles, rest around the bottom of the bowl.

The fish turns its eyes from the cup and looks at the woman. From the balcony window, the sun is burning down, and her small kitchen is orange and warm. The white tiles fill with light and shine. The fridge beams. Her golden bracelets glow impressions into her wrist. Her blonde hair drips down her face. The fish bubbles once, twice. It swims forward, as close as it can, and touches its mouth to the glass.

The Good News

Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia

The words fell from his lips like dead birds. Plopping out, the dead thumps. Piling up, the bodies gray. Now, on the other side of the glass door, the day shines a burnished blue. I stand frozen—for just an instance, perhaps. Perhaps longer, thinking about the talking time, the pile of birds, the branching yew. I couldn't understand what he said, I said. Still cannot.

There was no why, why, why? The whys I heard from my mother in the house that was hers before she died. From my father. There was only: what? Only: a white-coated man, his cold, limp hands touching fingertip to fingertip. Composed. I am healthy, I said. I am happy, there is nothing wrong with me. Yet, he said. Yet. There is nothing wrong yet.

Look, I wanted to answer. You are slobbering dead birds onto your desk.

Instead, I nodded my head.

Now I stand frozen at the threshold. Faced with this spectral land, this sunny day on the other side of the pane glass door. Paused, for just an instance perhaps—perhaps longer—before the spreading green and blue. Entirely too bright out there, nature not giving a damn for decorum. Looks fake from this static side beneath the tube lights. Looks computer-generated out there, animated for children. Do they look too, the faces behind me—the patients—look past me toward this sunshine land? Patience. Composed and pale, their faces like orbiting moons in the waiting room. Waiting. I can feel them looking at me, looking past me—to my future—their stares as blank and cool as cheese.

There was the tiny window in the wall afterward—just moments ago, an eternity behind me—the women in scrubs, their chairs rolling on casters. Dum-Dums in a bowl on the desk as if this was a pediatrician's. I suppose children come here too. So who am I to complain? I passed to them a card with insurance information. They nodded their heads, they knew. It is all in the file that he opened—then closed. Now filed away with all the others. Everything clean, everywhere. The ladies back there much more decorous than the obscene sunshine outside. Quiet while the patient pays. Then beginning again their office talk as the patient moves through the wooden door toward the waiting room where the others wait—moon-faced. Thinking about the dead birds falling from the cold, clean lips. About the blue scrubs all around. About the files opened and closed and filed away. Budding manuscripts of myriad metastasis.

Yes, they know this place in their bones. They who roam the hallways with their bald heads, or

their hair growing back, with their bodies bloated in strange places. Unnatural, out of proportion, sleeves of medical fabric squeezing them into shape. I remember my mother wearing a compression sleeve because of the lymphedema. Remember her padding one side of her bra after the surgery. Was she one of these patients? Answering questions in the hallways. Yes, I have had a good day so far. No, today has not been great. Stepping onto scales, letting doctors poke and prod. Of course she was. One of them with tender feet along the carpets, afraid of breaking something, afraid of bouncing away weightless into nothingness. Tiptoeing on the moon. They trembling. They wearing painful smiles. Smiles that are not smiles at all, carved into the cheese flesh. Rictus. They know this place—their wings clipped, their beaks burned away—their knowledge shining on my back. Can they see themselves reflected in me? In this statue upon the threshold, unable to take the necessary step. If they were able to stand they would pat my back. They would tell me it would be alright. With tears in their eyes they would sing sacred songs of going home. But they are too tired today. So they sit and stare. They wait.

Is there time to go back? I wonder. I could have asked more questions, I think. There was only: what? And him talking, and talking, and talking in the cold, clean room. A professor holding forth before a single awestruck student. After palpating with long, precise fingers. Cold fingers, after palpating, talking. About the discovery of the gene in the mid-1990s—I don't care, I thought to myself. About the history of testing and my own genealogy—I don't care. Was it not clear to him? My mother, he said, my mother, my mother. The numbers, he said, the numbers. His voice falling flat in heavy feathers. Don't interrupt, I thought to myself, there is only so much time. He keeps checking his watch. He's in charge—this towering man—excusing himself to view a text on his mobile phone. What? I thought. What is he doing? He's sorry, he says. It was very important, he says. He is very important, he wants me to know. Then the dead birds cascading again. A single finger upraised to quiet me. A cold finger that probed my breast. There is only the procedure, the surgery, he says. He repeats himself. That is the only option. Of course all the testing before hand, of course the MRIs and mammograms, the ovary ultrasounds, of course the meetings with genetic counselors, the subsequent visits to himself and his colleagues. Of course, of course, his voice ringing with money. Together they will assemble a team. The best, he says—you will have some say, of course, he says—but they will be the best, there's no doubt about that.

There must be measures to take, I insisted.

Exercise, diet, a bottle of pills? Yes, yes, he says, of course. All of that, of course, but the answer lies in the percentages. Look at these charts, these numbers. He points. Here, I have them here on my computer. It's very professional, I think. Eighty-eight on one side, one and one-half on the other. If you want our "advice," he says, you should be thinking in the time frame of six to thirty-six months.

Why put "advice" in physical quotation marks, I wonder, with fingers that have probed my breasts? With fingers that are itching to slice off my breasts?

Instead I say, I am twenty-six. And there is nothing wrong with me. Yet.

The sunshine shines, knowing no etiquette. I would like to put it out like a bulb. And what if I never leave my post here by the exit? Will everyone else be trapped inside? Will the cleaning crew come and vacuum around me? Feed me crackers and Coca-Cola from the vending machines? Perhaps let me listen to music? Will we dance until the break of day? Perhaps I will make love to one of them. Bear him beautiful children. And, if they are little girls, they will have a fifty-fifty chance of carrying the gene just like me. Is this what inheritance looks like?

When the doctor said I should think about starting a family, could he see the disbelief in my face? Could he hear how ridiculous he sounded? My significant other is not sitting here beside me, doc. Is there someone on the surgery team who's DTF? A rich man with a better sense of humor than you? One with warmer hands? One who wants to start a family with me—right now? One who uses his mouth for more than talking? One who talks of making babies, of cultivating DNA mutations for kicks? Forget it. I'll wait for the cleaning crew. Wait for one who will fondle my breasts as if they are not doomed to amputation. Fondle them fondly for six to thirty-six months. Cup them as we spoon on the carpeted floor.

Birds out there in the sunshine now. Chirping. A veritable Disney scene bright, bright, bright. Inviting me to play the part of Cinderella, they wish to prepare me for the ball, these birds—six to thirty-six months away—undress me with their fluttering wings and drape over my nakedness a paper gown. Out there in the sparkling parking lot, one of them tries to kiss itself in the side-view mirror of a pick-up truck, and I am suddenly sure that they have planted it there, one of the nurses hiding in the bushes. Darting around in scrubs with blue latex gloves on her hands, planting good omens through the world like Dum-Dums. For moon-faced patients who can see spread deserts of vast eternity. A cascade of dead birds floating through space.

The best. They only want what's best for me,

he kept saying. They are looking out for my best interest. Which they know intimately. Because they wear white jackets. Because their world is clean, their hands dry, cold, precise, their voices steady as they recite numbers and speak solemnly of "advice." They know what's best.

We cannot tell you what to do, he said. But you remember your mother's struggle. Yes. I do. She's pictured here on this genealogy chart, he said. I see. Here on my computer, a pink pizza slice in her circle. I get it, that's cancer. A diagonal line bisecting. Yes, I know. She's dead. Ten years. There's a pile of dead birds on your desk. You want me to amputate part of myself though there is nothing at all wrong with me? Yet, he said. Yet. Nothing wrong yet, let's be clear about that. OK. You want me to amputate part of myself and start a family for the sake of starting a family? Well, there's only so much time, he said, before the ovaries have to go too. OK. You want me to get the surgery over with so I can get on with my life? Begin a new one? As if this is not part of my life at all? You want to catch me before I am moon-faced? Before I too become a dead bird on your desk? You say these are my best interests, and I believe that you believe. But in your mouth, I am just a percentage point, not yet come to fruition. The good news: not yet come to fruition.

A percentage point now rushing into the Disney day because I hear the footsteps of a scrub-suited nurse come to comfort me. A soothsayer who will coo as they put me under. Craft me into proof of their method. Then plant me fluttering in a sparkling parking lot to give hope to someone hearing the good news. A percentage point rushing into the Disney day because I know that her touch is a cage. Because I know that the whys will do no good. I saw my mother flutter away. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush: I can't believe is a thing that they say. The doctor yawns and yawns again, his mouth always full of feathers.

Off the Clock

Hayden Hart, Mercer University

On occasion, between the stress of work and the relentless tedium of suburban life, I was afforded the opportunity to venture out into the ether to see what the natural world had to offer. The waking nightmare of desk jockeys and unbridled, purposeless ambition, if left untreated, can bring one to madness. Whenever the tie around my neck became too tight or the work-kids-home-dinner-news-sleep rat race became too grueling, I often elected to join the 3 a.m. dark yellow golden arches and unilluminated Walmart signs and take a breather. On nights such as those, when I suffered from insomnia or some other ailment, I often drove, aimlessly, through the night in search of something unattainable, a cowardly act of nobility offering a safe reprieve from monotony. The night in question was, initially, a night of similar character to those of the past.

I double-checked whether or not my wife was asleep, then the children, then I simply took up my keys and walked out. The lack of a goodbye contributed to the overall legitimacy of nighttime. I did not want to interact with them, so I didn't. Every action performed after midnight is truly voluntary. No one is on the clock, keeping to a schedule, or asking obligatory dinner questions. For a brief moment, in exchange for sleep, I could dream of being my own man.

I was, unfortunately, a closet smoker, which I had been for years. Insurance was a complex, often immoral, business, and I needed something to reduce my stress. For me, ghetto Swisher Sweets were something of a health asset, without which I would have certainly put a bullet through my head. Classless, typically unacceptable behavior known only to the quiet. Like swearing behind a parent's back, I lit one and took a brief inhale before starting my car. The smoke juxtaposed the cool, dark leather perfectly, and the little red flame danced with the moonlit dashboard and smooth blue light of the speedometer. Everything that moved in the dark felt inherently unnatural; they screamed out into the oppressive stillness. Something about the dark was more primal, yet also more placid. It did not bore into my brain with sirens and screeching breaks and cell phone calls and asshole police officers like day does; it simply existed around me, in spite of me. Night did not care whether or not I slept through it or watched cable. I was of no significance to it, nor was I obligated to play my waking role. Every sensation intensified with the dark; I felt everything differently: each notch in my key as I inserted it, the soft whirr of the seat-heater loosening the stitching of the seat, the slick, crisp leather of the steering wheel

squeaking against my hand.

In what during the day would be considered profound silence, I slammed my car into reverse and screeched out onto the pavement. At night, the road transformed into another being entirely, a silk snake that coiled throughout my neighborhood. Asphalt was typically an inanimate object, but at night, it became the dark's silent acquaintance, a mirror reflecting the sky. The dark houses lining the streets were fantastically uniform. During the day, each held its own set of lights bouncing off the blinds and children peering from windows. Night told a different story, one of consensual deadness. The entire world had retired to its individual pods and abandoned their roles as suburbanites. I nodded to them, grateful for their vacant company, and turned out onto the highway, where the others were.

After a few minutes of plunging into the dark, I saw a pair of headlights approaching from the other direction. Their brightness covered the man inside, as mine covered me, but I knew he was there. We both knew. During the day, people followed routines. Why was David driving down Charleston Road? Because his son went to school at Winchester Elementary. Why was Miss Martinez driving across town? Because she went to church there. Why was a certain man driving on a certain road in a certain direction at a certain time? Because of work, school, dinner, a party; it did not matter. They all moved with a garden-variety purpose. The man slowly approaching me was driving, that was all I knew.

I liked to think that he saw me in the same light. Two people, outside, and nothing else. We passed, and his headlights faded into the night behind me. I was isolated once again. The dark brimmed with life existing in individual pods of sentience. Everything in the night was oxymoronic. Alone, together. The concept of aloneness struck a bizarre and unfathomable dread in me. The day coated everything with movement, but night played no such games. Life was as it was and nothing more. I drove in silence for five minutes, saw another car, and continued. Each sighting of another hunter in the night brought relief, then terror. I expected something inarticulable from them. They were with me; why could they not reach out? I knew the answer, everyone did: it was a breach of contract to acknowledge others in the night, a contract to which I strictly adhered. Night is aloneness and that state must not be disturbed by its denizens. Wanting both acknowledgment and isolation is the unmain-tainable natural state of the dark. If the impossible became possible, if man acknowledged one another in the bleakness of night, then night would surely have been lost.

Even the sound of the radio failed to bridge the gap. Irrelevant, recorded voices talking to themselves. DJs did not constitute human beings; they were merely disembodied voices searching for an ear in a harsh environment. The music felt similarly sterile. Notes fell flat in the dark. A band played instruments and I heard them, but I was not their audience and they were not my entertainment. It was a bizarre act of consensual voyeurism. I saw their headlights and they saw mine, then we parted ways.

The busier portions of the road brought more stimulation. It epitomized night-driver socializing. A dozen cars snaked into the dark both in front of me and behind. Together, we formed a separated chain of individual hunters journeying into the night. Each streetlight reminded me of the unnatural, busy daylight that caused unnecessary ripples. They followed a prescribed rhythm: one, two, three, four, light, one, two, three, four, light. Fortunately, their sickly orange glow could not truly mimic the sun or the busyness of the real world. The smoke buildup in my car managed to block some light as well, another benefit of smoking.

I saw that I had begun to tailgate the car in front of me as his taillights cast an unwelcome red glow on my hood. I lifted my foot from the gas, reminding myself, in silence, that distance is natural. The car shrank ahead of me, taking with it its light. I inconspicuously dropped my cigarillo from my cracked window and let it tumble to the side of the road, then lit another. That cigarillo was given a great honor; it received a burial in luxury, on the beautiful, shiny black silk of night.

I pulled off an exit ramp on a whim. When veering off, I heard a hollow thud behind me. The cardboard box I used to declutter my car had not been removed. It once carried a stash of candy wrappers, discarded spelling tests, and toys, but to drive at night, my car had to be sterilized. Once I was out of view of the highway, I tossed the box from my car, restoring the peace. With my car cleansed and me finally alone, I continued my search.

On occasion, a fast food restaurant may remain open, an affront to the natural state. I had never indulged such senseless barbarism and continued to avoid it. The brief interaction at a drive-through window bridged the gap that the dark so graciously provided. Thankfully, the smoke managed to blot it out and return me to my public isolation. This state of affairs would be short-lived however; twenty-four-hour restaurants wormed their way into the placid early-morning hours ever-more frequently. Within two miles, a second restaurant appeared in the night, a Taco Bell that remained open until three in the

morning. Beside it I saw a horrid thing. A true denial of nature manifested before me, writhing its unsightly body against the dark. A homeless man clad in layer upon layer of torn jackets dug through the garbage, showing his honest form to the night drivers. I shivered, and without thinking, cracked my window to drop my now-depleted second cigarillo; this error would cost me dearly. The man assumed my opening the window was intended to be an invitation for him to approach.

He limped to my car, trapping me in. If I were to drive away, that would constitute an unnatural interaction, as would a legitimate discussion. He knocked on my window, initially timid. I gritted my teeth, betrayed by my habit. The night was broken. I cracked the window, trying to salvage what I could of the night. I held out a fistful of cupholder-change, but I could not release, the man opened his mouth.

“How are you doing this morning, sir?” He saw past my headlights and bridged the gap in a single blow. The moon suddenly appeared to be brighter. I swallowed, released the change, and responded.

“I’m ok.” I released the coins into his cracked, wrinkled hand. He nodded his head and smiled before retreating into his garbage pile. The night being broken, I drove away. The crack in my window had let the smoke out, forcing the orange light’s glare into the passenger seat with me. Signs of life breached the darkness during my return. Horns honked and one by one restaurants began to open their doors. Cars uncloaked by headlights began to flood in and bury the road. The trip home would not be another venture into nowhere; the world had returned to its unnatural state. Under the eye of the sun, I was no smoker, I wanted for nothing, and I drove with a purpose: to return home and sleep.

Dawn broke as I pulled into my house, unremarkable in the early morning, and returned to bed. The experiences of night were buried until further notice; it was a Saturday and the kids would be up soon. I thought it to be wise to sleep before the contract expired. Outside my window, the silk turned to asphalt, the radio returned to life, and a homeless man approached the day with the same defiant attitude with which he approached the night.

Cyanide

Sophia Ho, Agnes Scott College

There's a leak in the roof.

The water drips downwards, splashing its way onto the pillow and soaking across my face, greeting me each morning. I open my mouth and wait patiently for the droplets. That staleness, having crept in through layers of soft, rotting wood and faulty paneling is borderline acidic — but the taste never fails to push me from my cocoon of warm blankets, sending my body running towards the sink to gag and rinse away the flavor with a slightly better one. Here in the bathroom, the cool tiles of the floor send shivers up and down my legs, thin knees and paper skin knocking together. I pull out my toothbrush and smile at myself in the mirror. The landlord told me when I moved in to contact him immediately if anything was wrong with the apartment, but whether he meant it or not, I am happy with my leak, clutching it to my chest like a secret and closing the door of my bedroom carefully before I leave each morning — a refusal to share even a little of this precious luxury with the outside world.

At night, my eyes trace the black mold that has spread around the bubble the water has created in the plaster in smooth, circular patterns that lull me to sleep more than any lullaby ever could. Each morning, the gentle splash serves as the perfect alarm clock, urging me out of bed and into the world. The faultiness of this building has given me a precious gift, allowing me small tastes of suffering, from the slow drain in the kitchen sink, to the wind that whistles in through the faulty paneling around the windows, to the broken air conditioning. Every month when my mother sends me my rent, she tuts impatiently over the phone, surprised at the low prices and reminding me that her and my father expect me to move into a better neighborhood soon — god knows they can afford it, want something to throw their money at in a refusal to let it pile up, stack against the walls and overflow. They've never been ones for charity — but, then again, they had me. Despite what they say, I like this apartment, like the quiet dirtiness of everything behind its walls, the layers of refuse even the paint, layered time and time again, cannot cover up.

Out of the bathroom, I turn to the matter of breakfast. There's a small apple in the fridge, picked specifically for its stunted size, and I draw it out, sitting at the counter and eating all ninety calories methodically as my legs thump rhythmically against my chair with each bite — chewing at each thump. Ev-

ery piece of the apple is consumed, including the core, but the seeds I save for last, picking out and placing on my tongue, swirling them around within my mouth and feeling them knock against my teeth. When I was a kid, the maid would cut out the core of the apple for me, flushing the sweet center and its precious seeds down the garbage disposal, one by one.

“There's cyanide in the seeds,” she'd say, voice lilting, and even as a child I was fascinated by the idea of letting something so deadly so close to our bodies, hidden away inside a snack we were all encouraged to eat more of. When I was older, of course, I looked it up, let down to find that the so-called amount of poison in the seeds exists only in a nearly harmless chemical called amygdalin — convertible to cyanide only if the seeds are chewed up, and even then, in large quantities. Despite this, I am careful to swallow each seed whole, counting one by one as they hit my stomach, their value so small I don't even count them as part of the overall caloric number of the apple, logged carefully into my food journal and stored away in a cabinet that sticks deliciously, stubbornly, shut each time I try to open it.

Weekends are my least favorite part of the week — nothing to do. Try as I might to convince them, the yoga collective that I work at won't book classes for weekends, stressing the need for mental as well as physical rest. Without work though, the circles my mind runs in are the opposite of the well-deserved break I'm sure they imagine me taking. My thoughts do more stretching to fill the space of the empty days than they ever could in the studio, as I push down the back of some cow who's quickly failing New Year's resolution is to lose weight. No amount of sleeping in or idle hours can compare to that feeling — the soothing burn of my muscles as I sink into a particularly hard pose, the resentment coming in waves off the women I teach as they eye my body — every rib countable, the curve of my stomach as it arches inwards instead of bloating out, all of my form's angles with edges so sharp they could cut. The only thing even slightly similar is the satisfaction of inputting calories into my food journal, subtracting the work of the day, and coming up with a negative number.

There's dinner at my parent's house every Sunday, of course, but each minute until then is like a ticking clock, spelling out unimaginable boredom, with nothing to do but pace around the house, feeling every piece of food shifting within my stomach, a perfectly split balance of either feeling guilty for daring to eat, or sick from my lack of doing so. The memory of

from around the area — their smiles too shiny and their phones too poised, positioning every meal they receive into the perfect photo, seemingly desperate for people to know that they have the ability to put away twice their daily recommended value of calories and keep asking for more. I see them on my way to the yoga studio on weekdays, headed up the street with my custom mat tucked below my arm. I have to walk two miles away from the street where I live to call a cab — the ones that pass the streets here smell on the inside, both like feet and Pine-Sol air freshener.

My stomach rumbles again, screaming, and I reluctantly make my way to the fridge, pull out another apple, and repeat the same process. I reach the end of the apple, pop the seeds in my mouth, counting them as they hit my teeth.

I bite down.

The feeling of the seeds with their poisonous insides exposed hitting my stomach makes my hands shake and I stand up, the screech of the chair echoing throughout the apartment as it pushes back against my thighs. I can feel sweat starting to bead at my temples as I imagine the amygdalin working its way through my system, the chemicals of my body already beginning to change it to cyanide. Deep down, I know I cannot have eaten enough seeds to make whatever is coursing through my veins kill me, but the rapid thump of my heartbeat promises otherwise. My breathing begins to speed up and I wonder again if it is the anxiety or the poison before deciding I need to do something to soothe my mind, regardless of whether I am dying or not.

Moving deeper into the kitchen, I slide open a stiff drawer and pull out an old knife, rust gathering at its edges. Clutching the dull end of it tightly in my hand, I make my way towards the bedroom, moving with purpose. The apples and their seeds have turned into a riot in my stomach, sloshing around inside of me in a way that makes me pause for a second in my mission to visit the bathroom, eyeing the porcelain rim of the toilet before deciding that to vomit would be a weakness, letting my base emotions of fear get the better of me.

Back in my bedroom, the water bubble above the bed gleams in the midday sun, bloated and shining with condensation. The paint around it chips off and sags into the swell of the water as it pushes outwards, reminding me of the round stomachs of the women from yoga, puffing over their size twelve waistbands like a declaration of weakness. The knife in my hand feels heavy as I stand underneath my precious bubble, angling the blade upwards into the most tender part of the leak, the smallest hole that already drips downwards onto the mattress.

When I pop the bubble, I decide, I'll stand underneath it, and let the refuse I imagine has gathered within seep into every pore. I will show up at my parent's house for dinner, dressed in my Sunday best, stomach empty and aching, without having rinsed it off, mold crawling up and down my skin — the living embodiment of everything they'd like to forget, to push aside from their pretty world.

Vivienne

Lydia Knowles, Agnes Scott College

When Vivienne was discharged from the hospital, she could only move her lips enough to smile, frown, and grunt. Her bandages had been soaked in an antiseptic smell that made her nauseous, and the stitches around the corner of her mouth had tightened over the course of a week. No one had seen her since her accident, whatever it was, whatever had happened to force her eyes closed and coerce the doctors who watched over her to perform whatever surgery the many rumors about her had entailed -- but there she was again, gauzy material to cover the lower portion of her face, her mouth a thin line pressed against the bandage.

Everyone around her was quick to move her back to school. The fresh and familiar air of her dorm room made the smell of bleach and rubbing alcohol more tolerable, and finally, *finally*, she could lay her head on something softer than a hospital pillow! Before Vivienne was deemed well enough to attend school once more, her parents had doted on her as if she were just born, tending to her when she so much as grimaced. But now, it was different. Their departure had been swift, leaving Vivienne with nothing more than a *get well soon* and a few kisses on her gauze cheeks. Her mother had watched her sit down with a furrowed brow, concern embedded on her face and quirking the corners of her lips. Her mother's kiss had barely landed before she moved away from her daughter, the base of her nose crinkling as if she'd smelled something vile. The people who lived on her floor had watched her move in, she was sure, their heads peeking from their own rooms as if they were afraid of her, afraid of what rested underneath her gauze. She felt their stares on the back of her head. Uncomfortable pairs of eyes that bored holes in her clothes, that searched for *something* to be wrong, *something* to have a reason to impede or avoid. Vivienne felt their stares on the back of her head, and looked behind her quickly. The doors were closed, and the hallway was empty.

Finally, Vivienne was alone. Her body felt sticky and used, the corners of her face where the bandages stuck the most almost impossible to find comfortable. And underneath her skin, she felt something shift. Something prodded at her throat, but she couldn't remember what it was. *Didn't* remember what it was. Quickly, Vivienne made her way to the bathroom, her caddy in one hand and an extra towel in the other. The door closed behind her, a heavy stream of water to follow the clicking of the lock, and she undressed. Slowly, her hands lifted her shirt over

her head, her fingers feeling like lead, and they did the same with her pants. Then, her underwear, and finally, the shower curtain was pulled back. She felt heavy. The water felt heavier against her skin. The bandages stuck to her face as if they had been glued down. She needed to remove them. Needed to feel what was underneath. The gauze felt like rubber underneath her fingers, its edge pulled away from the wrapping, falling to her feet in pieces and clogging the drain. Then, she felt her own skin. On both sides of her face, a path of stitches started at the corner of her mouth, then continued upwards, stopping just where her ears began. They felt lazily done, the string that kept her mouth together softening too much in the water, so Vivienne hooked one finger in her mouth, placed it against the skin and string, and tugged.

At once, the stitches fell apart, her skin separated, and the water at her feet went pink.

* * *

The hospital room was a quiet, beeping place. Vivienne's arms carried light pinches from the nurses sliding needles into her veins, the pain around her jaw and neck dulled by whatever medicines they gave her. The liquid coursing around her body kept her groggy, her surroundings unfamiliar, and her movements slow; her mouth opened too wide and gauze replaced where her cheeks *should* have been. The nurse who bandaged her left her room with big eyes, Vivienne saw. She didn't meet Vivienne's gaze, couldn't say more than "you'll be okay here, we've got you" before quickly leaving. The report taken from the woman who brought her to the hospital had said that she was generally unharmed save for the way her mouth was split open. The blood was too much, but Vivienne kept herself alive. The woman said that her eyes were glassy and darting, her chest rising and flattening too fast. And then, she went still -- Vivienne's eyes closed, and her breathing all but stopped. The woman said she was conserving energy, waiting until something disturbed her again.

Vivienne was kept in that bed for two months. Her hospital room kept itself bare, save for a small vase of sunflowers that took up a bit of her desk, and a few cards left by her mother and father. The nurse with the too-big eyes promised that she'd leave soon. She waited.

* * *

She couldn't remember the accident. That's what she would tell anyone who asked. She didn't know what was behind the bandages, now fresh and newly applied. She didn't feel anything in her mouth. That's what she would tell anyone who asked. Her campus felt new again, and Vivienne felt fresh. Felt like everyone she passed looked too hard at her.

Perceived her a little too hard, made her feel exposed, naked underneath her clothes. She couldn't remember the accident. That's what she would tell anyone who asked. A few days after she moved back in, all speculation around her had vanished. No one watched her, no one opened their mouths to inquire about her bandages, then closed them upon second thought. Still, she felt odd. The hair on her arms stood up at strange times, and suspicion formed inside her head. Her classmates looked like strangers to her. Suddenly, they threatened her with their glances. Their laughs became directed at her, their syllables warping themselves to center her and the "what happened" that surrounded her. What had happened to the woman who found her? Was *she* the one who did this? What about those around her? Why did they watch her so carefully? Why did their eyes hurt?

Her presence on campus had become scarce. The girl she roomed with began to move herself out of the room, casting worried glances at Vivienne, moving around her bed and desk quickly and closing the door behind her. Her bed had become her solace, stripped of its sheets and pillow, with the bare mattress scratching her legs. The room was empty now, the lights turned off and the switches taped down. A chair was propped against the door's handle, preventing anyone from coming in. Preventing whoever did *this* from coming back. She reeked of urine and blood. Her hands removed her bandages from her mouth, the scars of where her stitches were forgetting to heal. Pus filled her cheeks, oozed from her skin and stained her neck, her shirt, her hands. Her bones cracked and stretched, and she became hunched over. Soon, her legs forgot how to stand properly. Her knees became permanently attached to her chest, and pus flowed angrily, matted with her hair.

Vivienne's stomach growled. It twisted inside of her body, and she did not remember when she had eaten last. She did not remember when she had last trusted herself to eat. Suspicion had become so far deep in her mind that everything – everything – was unsafe. *What if?* shot into her head within moments, forced her hands back down from any food offered to her and filled her with nauseous bile that almost escaped. Now, she was hungry.

She was *starving*.

Something moved in the corner of her room. Her eyes darted there. Her breathing quickened, and there, again! The chair against the door jostled. Vivienne pushed herself far back against her bed, hands trembling as she brought her fingers to her face. It came closer to her bed, pushing itself one of the legs. And then it stopped. *It*, she was sure, was waiting. It knew where she was, and it had returned. She moved

forwards, peeked over the edge of her bed. Nothing was there. Nothing sat in the dark and waited to jump at her.

And then something in her right arm moved. Vivienne looked at it, and her mouth opened, though no sound came out. Underneath her flesh, something waited. Something waited, and watched.

* * *

Vivienne had been missing from class for almost two months. It had taken too long to break the door apart. The chair that kept it closed flew to the opposite side of the room, and her old roommate stepped in. Immediately, the smell of rot assaulted her nostrils. The floor was stained a mixture of copper and snot green. She walked further into the room, and the smell became worse. Decayed flesh, blood, and something else made her cheeks bulge. And then, the mess came to a halt. A mass of flesh, still a body, still Vivienne, moved slow on the mattress. She groaned from something that resembled a mouth, the skin hanging loose from where her ears began, blood and pus drying and oozing from where the cheeks would be. Her body was concave, and patches of flesh were missing from her stomach, her side. She chewed slowly, her teeth worn down and brown, and then brought her right arm to her mouth.

Her arm was splotched, too much of the skin and hypodermis visible, and the bone knocked and scratched against her teeth.

White Noise

Casi Turner, Columbus State University

It is my fourth patron of the day and undoubtedly the worst I have experienced in my week and a half as a waitress. The elderly woman, with a voice fit for a plantation, sits alone, blowing the steam from her coffee, as the lenses of the glasses perched on the tip of her nose fog up with a thin white mist. Her skin resembles that of an unironed T-shirt, and the small pouch of skin between her neck and chin flaps when she speaks.

I force a smile as I approach the table, applying rule one of server etiquette that Rondo taught me: “You can forget your tag, but never forget that smile. Serving here ain’t just a job youngin’, it’s a lifestyle.”

“Is everything alright over here, ma’am?”

Her plate of food remains untouched, the grits hardened into a saucer of salt and pepper next to three strips of bacon and a scoop of scrambled eggs. Without saying a word, she tears open a packet of sugar and empties it into the coffee, unraveling her silverware and dipping the spoon into the mug before dragging her eyes up to mine.

“No, young lady. It isn’t,” she says with a bite in her tone.

Taking a noisy slurp of the coffee and leaving a smudge of cheap red lipstick along the rim, she pushes the mug a few inches forward.

“Is there something wrong with the food?” I ask, the irritation in my voice thinly veiled. My fingers flex behind my back, and my face strains against the instinct to scowl.

“The real question is, is there anything right with it. The bacon is still too crisp, the eggs are watery, and if I recall properly, I certainly asked for *cheese* in the grits. There is none.”

Thick folds of skin bunch around her eyes, chalky blue and squinted, a condescending smile stretching her lips into a line; her demeanor spits years of deluded superiority and willful ignorance. Heat spreads across my neck as I gnaw on the inside of my cheek. This has been her third complaint about the food, each more trivial than the last.

“Well, would you like me to — “

She raises a pale hand. “I wouldn’t like for you to do anything except take this plate and not come back unless it’s with your supervisor or whomever is in charge of you here.”

Her tone makes it clear that she expects nothing less than blind obedience, for me to walk away with my tail tucked between my legs like a scolded puppy. Anger shovels into my chest as I nod stiffly and grab the plate from the table, thinking things I

wouldn’t dare say. Things that would redden her face and have her clutching her fake pearls.

She mumbles beneath her breath and takes another sip from her coffee.

Ducking between tables, my mind reels with thoughts of the decades of experience she probably has of making people feel like this – pissed off and defenseless. I keep my chin up as I walk, thoughts strangely drifting to the lunch counter protesters during the Civil Rights Movement who sat straight-backed as condiments seeped into their scalps, and I wonder if this is how they felt. I wonder if she did any dumping in her day.

Pushing past the double doors and stalking over to Ichiro, the plate clatters from my palm to the metallic table where he stands chopping vegetables for the lunch rush.

“Yo, Ichee. Mrs. Doubtfire sent the food back. Again. Said the grits ain’t have enough cheese and some shit about the eggs being too wet.”

He sits the knife down gently and turns to me, visibly frustrated. It’s a few seconds before he speaks. “First, they were too salty, then too lumpy, and now not enough cheese? Ichee doesn’t know what to do to satisfy this woman. She is very... What is the word? Pokey?”

I chuckle despite my mood and correct him. “I think you mean picky.”

His cheeks puff and his shoulders drop as he pulls the plate towards himself and peers down at the grits. Mouth set, he scrapes the pile of grits into the trash bin at the end of the table and scoops another spoonful from the pot simmering on the stove.

I don’t see what else he does as I glance across the room at Liam who is hunched over a sink of suds scrubbing at a mound of dishes. His hair, normally gelled back, falls across his eyebrows in a khaki wave. The person currently in charge of me. My overseer. I feel dirty as the words cross my mind, and I head across the kitchen, choking on the swell of pride wedging itself deeper into my throat with each reluctant step. Standing a couple of feet away from him, I roll my shoulders, hating how small I feel.

“Uh, Liam.”

He cranes his neck over his shoulder and smiles. “Hey, Keila. Wassup?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” I ask with a sigh, shifting my weight onto my hip.

He tilts his head to one side and his eyes pinch marginally, but the smile never falls from his lips. “Sure thing. Just give me a minute to finish up these last couple dishes and I’m all yours.”

Turning back to his previous task, he begins humming the tune to a song I don’t recognize. Real

slow and filled with quick stops. His foot taps along with the beat.

I stand off to the side watching him but not truly seeing him. Waiting to be acknowledged. Left to slump into a hole of submission whose murky walls I was once accustomed to. Years of letting people make me feel like my thoughts and feelings were irrelevant, a mindset I fought hard as hell to escape, and one that I'll fight even harder to remain free from.

Fierce determination sears in my chest, and by the time Liam finishes the last of the dishes, I'm thinking of subtle ways I can serve this woman her ass on a platter without getting myself fired. I briefly consider granting her a fresh-made chocolate pie on the house. Miss Minnie style.

He dries his hands on a dishrag and flings it across his shoulder. "So, what's up? Must be serious if you're coming to me about it." He pulls a hand through his short strands, leaving them splayed like worn bristles on an old broom, and rolls his lips into his mouth.

"Lady at one of my tables wants to speak to my supervisor, and Rondo called out today so right about now you the closest thing I got to one."

I stare at his nose, not wanting to meet his eye as the smidgen of my reserved dignity is laid at his feet. What I have left is too susceptible to be picked up and handed back, trampled over and kicked to the side. He makes a face.

"Really? That's weird. You've been doing fine all week. You actually caught on pretty quick." He hums to himself and brings his hands together. "But let's go see what the problem is. I'm sure it's nothing."

He gestures to the double doors, and I lead us back out into the main area where I point out the woman, who is now rearranging the condiments. We swap positions. Trailing behind him and gritting my teeth, I feel like a child on their way to a parent-teacher conference. Closing in on the table, the set of aged eyes rise to me and shift to Liam, her expression softening into one of relief.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. How's everything going over here? I was told that you wanted to see a supervisor."

She places a dramatic hand against her chest, and her lips pull back to reveal yellowing teeth.

"Oh, thank the Lord. Finally, someone who looks like they might actually know somethin'." Her eyes dash to me and in a blink, they're back on him. "I don't mean to be such a bother, darling, but it seems like these people can't even get the simplest of things right."

These people?

My body jerks slightly at her words, and my stomach fists with the need to defend myself. That she

feels entitled to speak, as if I'm not feet away, has my molars painfully pressing against each other. Liam doesn't acknowledge her words. "It's no bother at all. Our main priority is to make sure you get the best service possible."

She reaches out and rests a hand on his forearm. "Thank you for being such a dear about this. I really don't wanna cause you any trouble. It's just that my food isn't being prepared properly, and I've had to send it back three times now. It's ridiculous, honey."

Liam begins to apologize, and my chest lifts with a deep inhale.

The rest of their conversation is white noise, but my eyes never stray from her as she speaks. Fake remorse and confusion, the carefully crafted mask of a seasoned actress. The short, dust-colored hair framing her face jounces as she laughs at something that probably isn't funny, and it sways as she dips her head to sip the coffee. Her lipstick, cracked and peeling, now looks like it was drawn on with a crayon.

"This could be such a fine establishment if you all were more diligent and," she glimpses in my direction and continues, "selective in your hiring process."

Liam peeps back at me and his eyebrows cinch. "Ma'am, I can assure you that Keila is one of our best employees. Granted, she is new in this position, but she's a fast learner and an even harder worker."

Her eyes move between the two of us, and she tucks some hair behind her ear.

"With a nice young man like you in charge of her, I'm sure you'll have her whipped into shape in no time." She smiles sinisterly, blinks once, and directs her attention to me. "Check, please."

Liam approaches me at the rear of the kitchen where I have been for the past five minutes, talking myself down from a cliff that would leave me unemployed. "Hey, why'd you walk off like that? I had to get the check for her."

I scoff and say, "Yeah, I'm sure she had no problem with that."

"What's that supposed to mean? Did I do something?" he asks as he sidesteps a passing waiter.

I squint up at him. "You seriously don't see the problem with that whole interaction back there? Because if all of that was okay to you then that says a lot."

We lock eyes, and no words are spoken as I give him time to come to his damn senses. But his slightly parted lips paired with him anxiously rubbing at his neck exhausts me in a way I hadn't expected. My reaction should have been self-explanatory, and he should have done more than just reassure her that I was worthy of being her waitress, of serving her.

"I'm sorry, but I'm just hella confused right

now.”

His hand drops to his side, and I stare incredulously, waiting for him to piece it together for himself, because there was simply no way he could be that blind. After a while, he raises his eyebrows in question, and I uncross my arms and take a small step toward him.

“How can you be confused, Liam? Besides the fact that she was bogus for making me get my *supervisor*, she was being racist as hell just now.”

He is visibly taken aback by my words, licking his lips and straightening his stance. “Rude, yes, but I don’t think she was tryna be racist, Keila. She’s just older, ya know? My grandparents act just like that. It’s just how they are once they hit a certain age.”

I roll my eyes. “Then it sounds like your damn grandparents are racist, too, Liam. Be ignorant if you want to.”

“Ignorant? Because I don’t think she was being racist?” He is frowning but it doesn’t reach his voice which remains level.

“Yes, ignorant. It’s white folks like you who are part of the problem. Brushing shit off and giving them passes ‘cause they old, but nah. She ain’t senile. She knew exactly what she was doing, and she knew it was foul. You think it was a coincidence that she said you could whip me into shape? And what the hell you think she meant by these people? Everybody up in here black but you and Ichee, and she ain’t seen his ass.”

“Just wait. I’m not trying to brush anything off or *let* people be racist, okay? I’m sorry if I didn’t pick up on it, but I honestly didn’t know.”

His voice is apologetic, but at the moment I could care less.

“Yeah, okay.” I begin to walk away.

“I swear I didn’t. You really think I wouldn’t have said something? I mean it’s 2017.”

Jayshawn Rowlands’ face immediately comes to mind, and I stop mid-step to turn to him. “Yeah, and? Is that supposed to mean something?” A couple of workers had begun to watch us.

“I just don’t feel like people are as racist as they used to be. Don’t you think it’s gotten better?”

I can’t help the thoughts that stem from his words. Thoughts about Jayshawn’s parents and how they will spend the next several months trying to prove that the character of their son can’t be assumed from a single image; how they will sit in courtrooms and stare at snapshots of their son’s lifeless body lying in a pool of crimson; how they will have to listen as some lawyer digs up every questionable thing Jayshawn ever did and sit powerless as they use it as justification for their child’s murder; they will spend months fighting for justice from a system that isn’t built to give it to people

who looked like them.

“Better for who, Liam? Do you ever watch the news, man? Ain’t shit changed but the year. As far as black people go we might as well still be living in goddamn Jim Crow. Just ‘cause *you* don’t see it don’t mean it ain’t there.”

He opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out. He meshes his lips into a line and looks off to the side.

“But it’s like you said. Your own damn grandparents are like that which means you’ve been around it so much that at this point it’s the norm for you. I don’t expect you to get shit you’ve never had to deal with.”

Hands on his hips, jaw clenching and unclenching, all Liam can do is stand and blink as the truth of my words presses into the parts of his brain that have been trained not to recognize ignorance. I brush past him and out of the kitchen, leaving him with his thoughts and the sporadic squelching of non-slip shoes.

I sit with only one ear plugged and follow the vehicles that cruise past the restaurant, distractedly searching for the familiar blue of Ms. Corrine’s car. My attention switches between my music and the scattered ramblings of coworkers counting tips and lounging around. Rachel – one of the other waitresses of whom my knowledge is limited to the lone fact that she dances ballet – slips a dime into the jukebox and selects a song not often played in the restaurant.

I look around and grin. In my few months at Dolly’s, I had come to learn that closing time when Rondo comes to work is nothing like closing time when he doesn’t. These are the days when everyone lingers and dances and breaks out the private stash of liquor from the supply closet to play drinking games.

The rustic voice of Howlin’ Wolf fills the room from wall to wall, and Rachel twirls over to Dre who is leaning across the bar tracking her movements unashamedly. Her hips swish and flow to the steady bass of the song; her steps are graceful and yet exude a power that even her work uniform can’t disguise.

I find myself forgetting about the cars and my music and anything else that isn’t the way this place has transformed into a modern-day juke joint. The same brown, sweaty bodies moving to the same soulful music. Dense afros now dreadlocks, and roller set curls now lace-front wigs.

As she continues to tiptoe across the drying tiles, the rest of the workers seem to become infected by her, one by one, putting away their phones and creating moves of their own. It’s all smiles and blues and mindless dancing.

“Keila, can I talk to you for a minute?”

I am tugged from my trance by the hesitant voice of Liam. I don't look up at him when I answer.

"About?"

I hear him blow out a breath, and I sense more than see him rub a hand through his hair.

"Just wanna tell you that I hear you. I mean, I was thinking about what you said and you're right. But nobody's ever been that blunt about it, and I know it's not your job to make me understand or fix my... ignorance, but – ." He uneasily clears his throat. "I uh – I get it now, and I'm sorry, okay? I respect you too much to ever intentionally let someone treat you the way she did."

I stay quiet as he speaks, staring down at the lettering beneath the glass. I trace it with my fingers before nodding and lifting my eyes to his. His eyebrows are raised slightly, eyes a bit wider than usual. He's being sincere.

"Thank you, Liam. I appreciate that, I do." I give him a small smile which he returns as he releases a breath I hadn't realized he was holding. He raps his knuckles on the table and turns to leave, waving goodbye to everyone as he heads for the door, a lightness to his steps.

The Hunted

Shelby Turner, Agnes Scott College

Some were coming from Charleston, others from Atlanta. They drove with coolers in the back of their cars, with desserts and wines that are meant to be served chilled. Jeremy and Harper and their mother had only to prepare and wait.

Harper and his mother worked in the kitchen.

Jeremy sat on the bottom step of the garage to clean his gun. The light from the windows was bleak and gray, and he liked how the sky matched the speckled paint of the finished concrete, gray and gray. He could see his breath a bit. It occurred to him that if a bird flew in and got trapped, they wouldn't smell it till spring. Hmm. He breathed into his cupped fingers and unlatched the long black case. The yellowed fridge hummed in anticipation beside him. He held the gun in his hands. He removed the forend and set it down next to him on the brick step. He set it down gently. Forend removed, the cleaving was simple. He broke the wooden stock from the barrel across his lap and sprayed brake cleaner into the barrel. He took a rag to the action. He considered going inside for wood polish and the rag they used on both shoes and tables. It would make the stock shine. Hmm. He decided against it.

It was nice, having the proper materials to clean. He remembered when he had borrowed a clarinet from the band teacher. She had neglected to give him the proper cleaning supplies, so he had gathered scraps of an old T-shirt onto a length of yarn. He used to pull it through from one end to the other. The yarn had been red with a single strand that had all the colors of the rainbow that poked through here and there. It reminded Jeremy of candy canes. He'd run it through the clarinet, and the saliva would pour out all at once. It was always cold and putrid on his hands, but now his hands were clean.

He ran the bore brush through the barrel. To remove any excess brake cleaner, he ran a rag along the rim, and then up and down the barrel. He repeated the motion for longer than what was necessary, finding comfort in the rhythm. Curious, he pressed the choke-end of the barrel to the soft parts around his eye. The world was reduced to the toe of his left boot. He held it there. The chrome of the rifling still somehow caught the light.

Beautiful.

The garage door opened behind him, but Jeremy kept his face to the barrel as if he were a seaman with a telescope. Harper descended with a glass dish of green beans smothered in white sauce. He was still in his pajamas. Jeremy moved the forend and Harper

stepped where it had been.

"I thought you went on a walk," Harper said.

"I did," Jeremy said.

The fridge shut.

"Did you clean mine?" Harper asked.

"No."

Harper nodded.

"Mom wants you in the kitchen. I'm gonna go take a shower."

"Maybe we can go shooting after," Jeremy said.

"Maybe," Harper said. He climbed back up the stairs. "You ask her."

Jeremy reassembled his gun, put everything in its place. The cleaning supplies went on the shelf. His case went on top of Harper's. The fridge hummed.

It was nice, having something to look forward to.

Jeremy did not go straight to the kitchen. He went around the back and watched his mother through the kitchen window, hiding himself behind the yellowed leaves of the river birch. That morning, she had been all lotioned legs from a large t-shirt. Now, she was dressed and putting sweet potatoes into the potato strainer. She held each spud in a rag with one hand and spooned out its contents with the other. The steam was visible against the dark cabinets as it floated past bits of tape, fading paper, and glossy photographs framed with popsicle sticks. The rag slipped. Her finger touched the purple skin, and she dropped the potato and the rag into the metal cone of the strainer. One of its three supports slipped the edge of the counter. It did not fall. She pushed it onto the counter, went to the sink, and held her finger under the water.

It made Jeremy want to do the potatoes. Seven brick steps up, the bottom three crooked from where the foundation had settled. The blinds on the back door rattled when he opened it.

"Can I do the potatoes?" He eyed the large wooden pestle on the counter. She saw him eye the large wooden pestle on the counter. She dropped eggs into a pot of boiling water.

"You need to get dressed. Your uncle's going to be here with Grandmother Marmie any minute." Jeremy didn't know which uncle she was talking about. He hoped it was Uncle Arnold. He felt he could talk to Uncle Arnold.

"Don't put relish in them," Jeremy said.

"I never put relish in them," she said.

"There was relish in them last year."

"I didn't make the eggs last year."

The TV above the knife drawer was on but the

sound was low. There was a commercial about toothpaste. It showed the insides of people's mouths.

"I already promised Harper that he could do the potatoes," she said.

"Harper's in the shower."

"Yes. But you're good at doing the eggs. Everyone was so impressed last year."

He had used a sandwich bag to pipe them, cutting a small snippet from the corner so that the pumped yolks were neat in the divots. He had sprinkled them with paprika. They were impressive. But it was like when he had cleaned tables at school two days in a row. He had reminded Mrs. Fletcher, with some effort, that he had already done it the day before, but she had said, "You're just so good at it!"

The commercial ended and his mother turned the volume back up. There was a parade on TV.

"Can Harper and I go shooting later today?"

The confetti was coming from somewhere off camera. There was so much of it.

"I need you to get dressed, my dear. You don't want to upset her."

She sent him down the hall with a kiss on his forehead. Jeremy went down the hall.

The parade on TV looked boring.

Their house was much fuller now, much louder, but Harper was only just getting out of the shower. Harper liked to take long showers with water that was too hot and scorched his back. He liked coming out of the bathroom red, steam rushing out from the door when he opened it. He thought this made him look like either a great hero or a great villain. He had seen movies with machined fog, capes, low camera angles. These were the marks of important men, men with theme music and costumes. He thought on these things until the steam had dissipated, then stepped softly because the brown shag carpet could only disguise his steps so well. He saw Jeremy at the mirror in the corner of their room, his back to him. He looked swell. Must have showered downstairs. Harper grabbed his shirt and slacks from the closet. They were slacks and not pants today because today was a special occasion.

"Are we goin' shootin' today, Jeremy?"

"I don't know."

Jeremy ran a comb through his hair. He thought himself handsome, there in the gilded mirror. He had just one pimple, uncrested and on his forehead near his scalp. He had polished his shoes yesterday and laid fair claim on the duck belt. It was made of fabric with a motif of ducks flying between two horizontal bars of red. It depicted only three types of ducks—wings up, wings midposition, wings down.

Was it a whole flock or one duck, the same duck over and over again as it flew across the sky? Because they all looked the same. Then again, he couldn't really tell ducks apart in real life, either.

Harper kneeled at the foot of the closet.

"Are you going down, Harper?"

Three stuffed animals, a box of shell casings, and a pile of fabric surrounded him. He wore no shoes.

"I can't find my tie." He was halfway in the closet now. "It's red and blue. Raw silk. It feels like a washcloth."

It went well with the ducks.

Jeremy told him, "I am going downstairs."

But he lingered on the landing. The voices were louder there, but they could not see him behind the balusters. He rubbed his polished shoe into the shag carpet, and the smell of roasted bird drifted up to him. There was cheese below, soft cheese heated until it dripped. It was covered with maple syrup and some sort of crushed nut. There were spears of asparagus wrapped in bacon. The pools of fat were spooned from the baking dish and stirred into a pot of hot macaroni. Dinner rolls bought from the Mennonites were brushed with butter and placed under the broiler. Two dishes of sweet potatoes sat on the counter: one with marshmallows, one with streusel. The marshmallows were uncooked. The deviled eggs were in their dish, the filling spooned in. No paprika. The rest was hidden.

Harper was taking a long time. He always did. Maybe it was because Harper was even more precise than Jeremy. Harper tucked his shirts into his underwear to keep them from puffing out, but Jeremy didn't like the way that felt. Jeremy counted the balusters on the railing. Twenty-seven. He counted them again. Still twenty-seven. He wondered if anyone would see him if he went to the garage. Maybe he would polish the stock. If he squeezed the barrel tightly between his knees, he could probably get at the wood without getting any of the polish on him—

Harper wasn't wearing any shoes. He had wrinkles at the knees of his slacks. He wore the green tie.

"You've been wearing it the whole time."

Jeremy went downstairs. Harper followed. They looked in the dining room. It was thankfully empty save for their grandmother, their Grandmother Marmie. This was how Jeremy and Harper thought of their family members—tagged by their relation to them—but they did not know what to call them. Cousin Marissa had not liked it when they had called her "Cousin Marissa." "It's just Marissa," she said. The adults they called "sir" or "ma'am." They knew

their names—Gary Stewart, Daphne Stewart (formerly Daphne Williams), Arnold Williams—but they did not know if they were to speak their titles. And then they did not know who it was appropriate to call by their first name. They did not know the first names of others, like the girlfriend of the cousin-who-was-not-actually-a-cousin-because-Uncle-what’s-his-face-was-actually-adopted. So they never called anyone by name.

But Grandmother Marmie liked being called Grandmother Marmie, or she did not protest it. Jeremy and Harper believed that she liked it. She talked very slowly and could not hear well. Or see well. They had been told that she had had a stroke. Her hair was white, and she wore thick glasses. She sat at the table with a glass of water. Conversation and kitchen-noises were heard through the wide double doors. Outside, yellow leaves fell off of the river birch. A cat jumped over the fence on the other side of the street. Harper wondered if she could see it, see the leaves.

She had this deep sound that vibrated you if you touched her.

“And how are you boys doing—at the school?”

They did not go to the local public school.

Harper leaned in close and told her. “We’re doing fine.” He looked into her eyes because this made people feel special, but she did not understand. Perhaps she could not hear.

In the kitchen, Cousin Marissa turned on the hand mixer to whip cream.

“Harper is good at shooting. He’s going to state championships for shooting next week,” Jeremy said.

Harper was quick to forgive. He reciprocated.

“So is Jeremy. He broke 97 out of 100 pigeons last Saturday.”

Marissa cranked up the level of the hand mixer, so Jeremy raised his voice.

“They call them pigeons even though they are not pigeons. They are disks made of clay,” Jeremy said.

“They break apart like a plate,” Harper said.

The hand mixer grew louder. The brothers looked at each other.

“Dad once told us a story about you breaking plates,” Harper yelled. “It was when Grandfather Stacey bought a plane.”

Harper cooked more than Jeremy. He knew that Cousin Marissa was close to making butter. If Cousin Marissa made butter, Harper would not be able to eat his pie. He only ate his pie with cream. Grandmother Marmie was unresponsive. Jeremy suspected they just needed to be louder. He tried again.

“I went on a walk today. I saw a new fox trail.

And deer tracks. And there was a cat.”

Marissa cut off the hand mixer, so he yelled “cat” into relative silence. The conversation filtering through the wide double-doors stopped for a moment, and the chandelier overhead seemed to twist on its chain. Their grandmother reached out a hand and grabbed Jeremy by the arm. Her hands had no fat on them like theirs did.

“I had a scare getting out of the car—a bit before. There was a cat—in the plant on your—porch. It popped out and ran. I about—fell.” She made a noise. “Someone ought to shoot those cats!” She laughed and raised her glass to her lips.

Jeremy and Harper had been told to anticipate her death. It did in that moment seem like she was going to die.

“What did it look like?” Jeremy asked.

“It was—white. Brown spots. Oooh, it scared me.”

Jeremy knew the cat. He had seen it on his walk, and it was frequently seen roaming the neighborhood. In order of the frequency of sightings, there was the white cat with brown spots, then the albino squirrel, then the owl.

Grandmother Marmie looked at her grandchildren through thick glasses. It looked like she was smiling. But her lips tensed when she looked in the direction of Harper’s feet.

“Where are your shoes?”

Harper dug his toes into the soft rug.

The adults were drunk on Uncle Gary’s chilled wine. Jeremy sat next to Aunt Daphne. She wore a dress with a low top, and seeing the spots on her chest made him fear going out in the sun. He saw them all the more when she leaned over and asked, “Do you want a sip?” She did not offer Harper a sip. Jeremy was older than Harper, but not by much. He thought it was funny how a year made such a difference to people. He did not think the wine tasted very good. That was probably why they drank it cold. If their mother was paying attention, she might have been upset or maybe told the story about Harper chugging the expensive port at communion. He must have been about four then. When Harper was old enough to retell it, and debatably young enough to recall it, he said the chalice had been heavy in his hands. He was scared that the priest was going to drop it on him. But their mother sat at the far end of the table, cutting food for Grandmother Marmie. The dead bird was at three o’clock, the green beans at five. Jeremy and Harper sat quietly. Jeremy offered Harper the last roll. Harper did not take it.

Uncle Arnold said it again, this time louder:

“Now, did one of you boys shoot this bird?” He was rotund.

“No,” Jeremy said. “Mom bought it from the grocery store.”

“Martha, you best get these boys out there huntin’! They’ll shoot you... Well, I don’t know if I have any turkey. But you bring them to me and they’ll bring you a fine meal.”

Their mother smiled into her glass of water. Her forehead seemed to move though her eyebrows did not.

Uncle Arnold lived by himself on a large farm. They had been before, once.

They had shot geese over the pond.

Orange potato smeared on white porcelain. Green beans smothered in white hung from forks. Aunt Daphne talked about Cousin Marissa doing something impressive, and then Cousin Marissa talked about doing that impressive thing. Mostly the young knew their duty: their job was to be the audience, pupils to be informed, and occasionally prodigies to be shown off. They needed only to listen to the stories others told. They were often the same year to year, requested as Jeremy and Harper had learned one requests songs at a school dance. But they changed, too. Maybe they were remembered differently. By the time dessert came around, Uncle Gary was telling a story about strawberries.

Uncle Gary had been watching Cousin Marissa when she was a baby. He was watching baby Marissa alone because Aunt Daphne was in Europe. He fed her strawberries and bananas and cereal, and Marissa got sick and began vomiting. Uncle Gary told himself that if the baby vomited one more time, he was going to the hospital. The vomit was red and foamy. He drove very quickly, and apparently the parking lot was very large and he ran. She vomited again there in the parking lot, and he said it went in between his shirt and his chest, that it looked gruesome. He ran through the doors of the ER and he cried, “I need a doctor!” A woman in the waiting room screamed when she saw the red on his shirt, and people stampeded out of the hospital. Then a nurse took the baby.

“Next thing I know, I’m flat on my back and they’re cutting my shirt off.”

“Why did they cut your shirt?” Harper asked. Harper had not been paying attention.

“To look for the bullet wound,” Uncle Gary said.

“Why would there be a bullet wound?” Harper asked.

“Because it looked like I had been shot.”

“Oh,” Harper said.

The girlfriend of the cousin-who-was-not-ac-

tually-a-cousin-but-still-a-cousin spoke up then, and Harper tried taking a bite of his pie. It was too dry without whipped cream, and he actually didn’t like the taste of pumpkin. He tried moving it around on his plate and dropped his fork. He had dropped it so he could retrieve it, but Jeremy went to get it for him.

It was dark beneath the tablecloth, none of that blinding light from the naked bulbs of the chandelier. Legs knocked at each other, mostly in khaki. Uncle Arnold had unbelted and unbuttoned his pants. Next to him, cousin-not-cousin-but-still-cousin was rubbing his girlfriend’s thigh. And then Jeremy looked at Harper’s feet and envied him. Shoeless, he had been running his toes in the silk pile of the cream and burgundy rug. Little tracks in the rug showed where he had gone back and forth, back and forth. It looked soothing. He stayed a moment and rubbed his fingers against the soft carpet, too. He’d miss the calm, how the framework of the table was stiff and wooden. It was nice how—

A dog barked outside the window, and Jeremy banged his head on the table. Returning with the fork, he saw the Anderson’s dog off his leash, chasing after the white cat with brown spots. Necks turned to the head of the table. The skin on Grandmother Marmie’s face looked like gluey paper mache. When she could speak again, she said, “What was that?”

“Neighborhood cat,” Harper said. “The one you saw earlier. It likes to climb on our porch.” “The Andersons need to learn how to keep that dog in their fence,” his mother said.

Outside of the window, the wind blew. Leaves fell off the tree.

“Can we be excused, Mom?” asked Jeremy.

The answer was yes. Jeremy looked to Harper. Harper looked to Jeremy. They rose from the table. “Now you put on—shoes,” Grandmother Marmie said.

Jeremy told Harper of all that he had seen that morning on his walk, before he took to cleaning and rubbing the rag back and forth on the gun: the fox trails, the deer tracks, the goose... “We must mobilize,” Harper said. They were to be great heroes today. They put on t-shirts with long sleeves and boots. They found their coats at the bottom of the coat closet. Jeremy collected scraps of the dead bird into a napkin. Harper carried the step ladder into the garage. Together, they pulled the cases from their high shelves and their shotguns from their cases. They wore their guns on their backs, letting them hang from their attached straps. Jeremy grabbed the plastic bag they used for pool noodles and towels. The sound of the garage door blocked out the sound of laughter. They had shot living creatures before. There had been

geese on Uncle Arnold's farm, after all. But they mostly shot pigeons, the clay pigeons. Jeremy and Harper agreed to call them plates, because that is what they were.

"Do you have your license?"

"Yeah," Jeremy said. It was in his back pocket.

Everything was bleak and gray and like the inside of a tin can, but they went down the street. The autumn wreath Mrs. Sullivan always draped on her mailbox had fallen on the ground. Jeremy bent down and replaced it. They kept walking. Their steel-toed boots clicked on the hard asphalt. They weren't expecting to see much. The Andersons had their blinds closed. It looked dark inside. Maybe they were out of town. Yeah, maybe. There were five, six, seven, eight cars in front of the Lepolls' house. A small child waved at them from her swing set. They waved back. They walked. There was the crunching of gravel.

The boys had set up a perimeter in the pine rows: orange lines of plastic across the back two-thirds. This is where they shot at soda cans and milk jugs. They asked the janitor at school if they could take these from the recycling bins because it was not nice to take things without asking. Sometimes they taped a paper target to a dead tree. But they wouldn't go that far today. They would start behind the Lepolls' house where there was a large clearing. The bamboo was in front of them and the pines, recently burned, to their right. They found a dip in the land where they would be suitably hidden and waited side by side in silence. Sometimes they whispered their thoughts to each other, breath condensing in the cold air. Jeremy tried to whisper about a new girl in his class. She had kissed him on the cheek and he did not know how to feel about it. Maybe it was because she was foreign. Harper wanted to talk about it but they had to be quiet now, so he did not say anything. There was something moving at the edge of the clearing. It was moving fast. It was like when they roll the clay plates on the ground.

Jeremy shot it.

"Good shot," Harper said, because it was.

Jeremy collected it and put it in the bag and they reset as they were before. They waited longer.

"We should have brought hot chocolate," Harper whispered.

"Shh," Jeremy said.

Jeremy was cold, and the cold made his fillings ache. He had had many cavities and, hence, many fillings. Once he had asked to have it explained to him, why he was the way he was, but he still did not understand. He did not think this lack of understanding was entirely his fault. But what he did know: the sensation had something to do with low cusps and high nerve

endings. It was like having a drill go down into one's tooth, except without the smell or the fine powder. If only he could rip his lower jaw off. He imagined putting his thumbs at the corners of his jaw and his hands inside his mouth. He would reach in as far back as he needed to, back where his tongue went into his throat, where it felt like the rubber-dotted bottoms of wet, cheap slippers. If he pulled down hard enough—no. Pull each tooth out individually. He had only had one tooth pulled in his life. Last year, when they were making room for his braces. He remembers running his tongue in the collapsed flesh of his gum. He had liked the way it tasted. Undercooked game, perhaps the taste of a woman. His greatest urge was to keep burrowing his tongue into the hole. He wanted to feel that again. He wanted someone to punch him in the mouth or to be hit in the follow-through of the swing of a golf club... again, as his father had once by mistake. He wanted that again. And more. He wanted the immediate aftermath of pulling out all of his teeth but not the long-term consequences. He would want to be able to chew food, after all.

He wanted to experience the extraction more than once.

Another dash across the clearing like the rolling of a clay plate. They shot it. It thudded in the dry grass.

It started to grow colder and darker, and Harper thought he might like to eat the leftover pie now, even without whipped cream. He especially hoped the sweet potato casserole was in the fridge. He liked when the toasted marshmallows got cold and chewy, sort of soggy. Should they head home? "No," Jeremy said. "I know where we can find another one." Jeremy knew from his walk. He shouldered the bag they used to carry pool noodles and towels.

It was very heavy now.

As they walked deeper into the bamboo, they walked deeper into a fog. It wasn't usually foggy. They would know. They had been in the bamboo many times before. They used to play in it, fashioning spears with tin foil tips and forts. Last year, they had built a lean-to. It had been very hard to keep the bamboo from slipping, so they had tied it with rope. Now, when they passed the pile of hollow stalks where the lean-to had stood, Jeremy simply bent down for the rope and shook the broken leaves from it. He wound the rope and put it in his pocket. It was wet, but that was fine. Had the leaves been dryer, it would have been difficult to move stealthily.

Jeremy put down the bag, and the pair grew quiet again. Harper breathed the cold air and looked forward to eating the sweet potatoes cold from the

fridge. That is what he wanted. Jeremy wanted to rip out his jaw again.

And then there was rolling like a plate again, but really it was running, lithe strides made by thin shoulder blades. Harper saw it first, a dash of white out of the corner of his eye. The gun was in his arms. His finger was on the trigger. The wood slid in his hands, tracking. It jumped on the fence.

He fired.

It crumpled off the fence, and it was only when it thudded into the wet dead leaves below that Harper had the slightest misgiving. Its mouth hung open. Blood came from its head, from between its ears. Jeremy saw this and said, "Good shot," because it was, but Harper was a bit upset. It was not as white as it was before. So he let Jeremy collect it. He was a good big brother, even if he was the sort that cut off the whole stickin' nose of a fish instead of neatly weaving it out. He had yelled about it once, years ago, but it was a quality that had its uses.

Jeremy had never actually been so close to one before because Mom didn't like them. This one looked very soft. He touched its belly. It was very soft, and still warm. He did not understand why she didn't like them. Hmm. He used the rope to tie its back legs together. Harper approached, and Jeremy held it above the fence for Harper to take.

"You should carry it over your shoulder. It will look cooler," Jeremy said.

"Like the movies," Harper said.

It hung there next to his gun. Jeremy got caught on the barbed wire of the fence when he climbed back over. The barbs dug into his thigh through the denim of his pants. There was a bit of blood, but he was happy to feel it. He realized how cold he was. His feet felt numb, two masses in his boots.

He freed himself.

Harper imagined how it must have looked, the white next to the wood and the black of the barrel. The spots on its side. A great hero. They could show Grandmother Marmie. They could show Arnold. Mom would probably like it, too. They walked up the hill. They passed the swing set, and it rocked back and forth a bit. Their steel-toed boots clicked on the asphalt, and it sounded like a drum roll. They saw that Mrs. Sullivan's wreath had fallen again. This time Harper reached down to replace it. He smiled up at his brother, but it was so dark that only his teeth caught the light from the Sullivans'. The artificial leaves rustled into the sound of static applause. They walked up the center of the driveway, two cars on either side, because Harper had seen a movie where the heroes walk down a long isle as the music swells.

Jeremy went into the garage, and the garage door cut the light and illuminated a perfect band on the driveway. Jeremy looked at his brother with all of the love in the world.

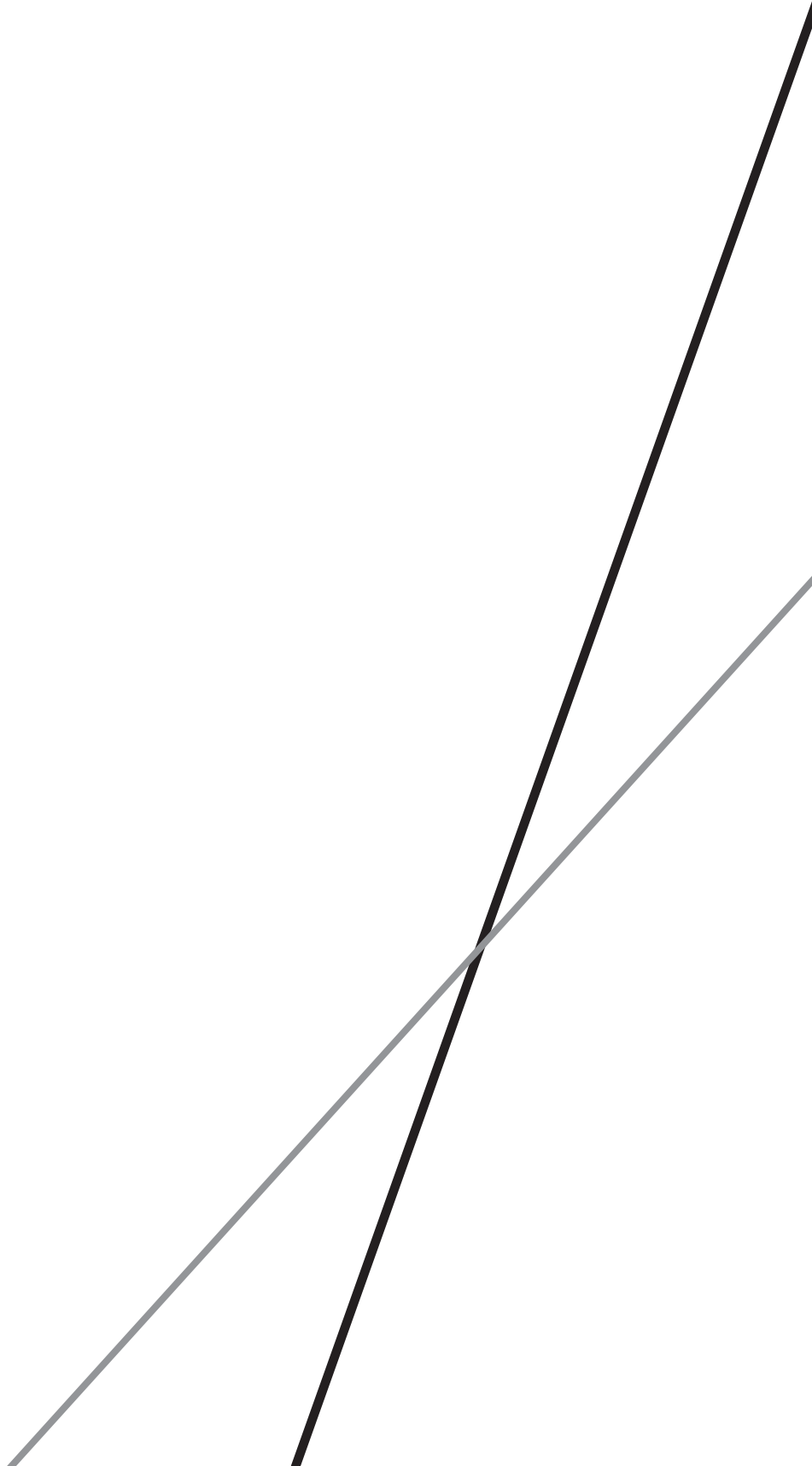
"You arrange them the way you think is best," he said.

He arranged them to show the chronology of their hunt. He started with the orange one, then hunched the backs of the rest into each other like measuring cups that all fit together. They went from left to right like words on a page. Harper took special care with the last one they had shot, the white one with brown-gray spots. It went at the end.

Jeremy thought it looked clean and precise. He hummed his approval.

They climbed the steps to their door with anticipation. The sound of laughter and the clatter of coffee cups on saucers filtered through the door.

They knocked on the door of their own house.



Nonfiction



The Thing about the Sugar Cube

Bella Braxton, Agnes Scott College

I went to church every Sunday morning with my family. Being inside the church building nauseated me. The organ sounded, and the teenaged children of the church members walked up the aisle and lit the candles. During the service, we were made to stand up, sing, and sit back down, stand up, sing, and sit back down; this cycle continued ad infinitum. While the preacher read from his bible, there were small noises of affirmation or praise from the assembly. His sermon was different every Sunday, but he spoke with the same voice. We concluded with a synchronized “Amen” and everyone shuffled out behind the old ladies. While I waited for my parents to finish socializing, I was urged to join the children’s choir. Then, we left.

It is worth mentioning that no one in my immediate family fully believed in God. We were there for morals, for community, and out of habit. I was under the impression that no one at our church entirely believed, and I wondered why we couldn’t all meet under less fabricated pretenses. Love your neighbor, Love your enemy— the illogical nature of God’s love scared me. The adults, who seemed to hold an infinite power over me, surrendering to a greater authority, scared me. They would nod their heads, saying, It doesn’t need to make sense; it’s true.

My father made the coffee. It sat in a pot on a fold-out table in the church’s lobby. There was also hot water for tea, creamer, packets of artificial sweeteners, and the sugar cubes. The sugar cubes were perfectly square and smooth-sided, despite being composed entirely of those messy, miniscule, sand-like grains. If a god created the sugar cane for us, I thought, he must be proud of the way we earthly beings have processed it into something so easily manageable, portable and convenient. The sugar cubes carried the faint odor of Halloween candy. Sinking to the base of a plastic coffee cup, the sugar cube lets go of its straight edges and its pure white color. Anyone watching the scene is left to wonder whether the sugar cube has been corrupted or the coffee given virtue.

I wanted a sugar cube, and there they were on the table, for anyone to take. I wanted to take in that clear honest prism and be made whole. I wanted to crush its geometry between my teeth, ruin it, interrogate its granular structure with my tongue and melt it down to a sticky sweetness in the heat of my mouth. The sugar cube was there, so close to me, and so faultless it seemed to be breathing a soft warm breath, and my mother told me no.

It’s too much sugar. That’s what she said. A sugar cube is a teaspoon of sugar, four grams. I thought about the song in which they sing, a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. We went out to lunch every Sunday after church. At lunch, I drank a soda. A soda, maybe twelve fluid ounces, about forty grams of sugar, about ten teaspoons. The contradiction did not occur to me until later, but this is what I realized then: the thing about the sugar cube is that it is too perfect. It is unadulterated and uncut by intervening substances. Too much sugar is not too much sugar when it is dissolved invisibly in carbonated water or stirred into black tea. Too much sugar is only a threat when it presents itself unveiled, and so we mask it ourselves to still our suspicions.

People talked about the devil. He sneaks up and hides just to give us the things we feel bad about wanting. I think our bad has dissolved in our good. I think the snakes sing like angels sometimes and tell the truth. Nobody knows which apples are meant for eating.

We Are All Cousins

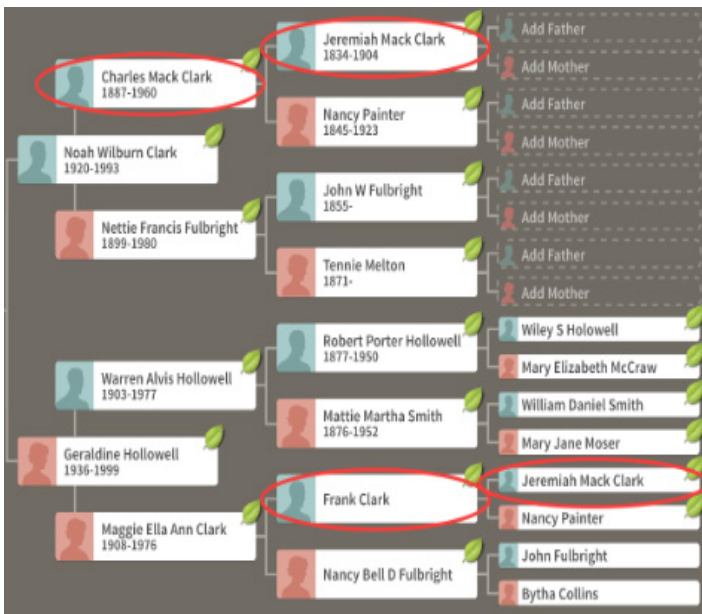
Megan Clark, Georgia State University

There's a branch in my family tree that doesn't fork, so I'm going to be upfront about it.

Back around 1880, Jeremiah Mack Clark married Nancy Painter. They begat, well, they begat like five sons and two daughters. The important ones were Frank Clark and Charles Mack Clark. Now, Frank married Nancy Bell Dolly Fulbright. They begat even more children: six daughters and two sons. Let's focus on the oldest daughter, Maggie Ella Anne Clark, who married Warren Alvis Hollowell. They begat nine children, luckily one of which was my grandmother, Geraldine Hollowell. Now, she married Noah Clark. Starting to see the problem? Well, Charles Mack Clark, the brother of Frank, married Nettie Frances Fulbright and they begat my grandfather, Noah Clark.

We need a cork board and yarn or a flowchart and laser pointer to make sense of this: All my relatives marrying other relatives out there in the hills. But I think the fact is my paternal grandmother, Geraldine, married her (second? third?) cousin, Noah, who was sixteen years her senior. Why didn't anyone take them aside and unscroll the list of Clarks and point out how close they already were to each other?

Here's a visual that could have helped my grandma and grandpa out. (Please note that genetic overlap thanks to Jeremiah Mack Clark):



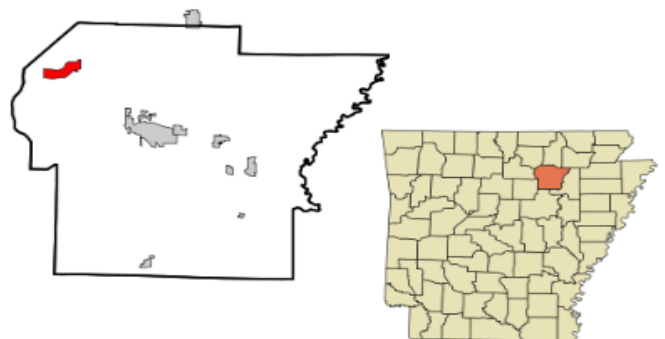
Some geneticists believe that everybody on Earth is at least 50th cousin to everybody else. Go far enough back and you're related to everybody, sprung forth from the ancient riverbeds of Mesopotamia—or the dark-green Garden of Eden, if you prefer.

You know, now that I'm looking at it, maybe my grandpa and grandma were double cousins. Frank Clark married Nancy Fulbright, whose dad is John Fulbright, and his brother Charles Clark married Nettie Fulbright, whose father is John W. Fulbright. I've been scouring the family tree cobbled together from research I've begged, borrowed, and stole from others. Access to the government documents on Ancestry.com isn't cheap, so my research is done half blind. I can't tell exactly if or how Nancy and Nettie might be related. We might have a case of brothers marrying sisters. My tree might be doubly tangled.

Back home, the unspoken rule is to ask your mother or grandmother if your family trees cross before dating someone. My brother ended up not dating one of my childhood babysitters because of this. Ashley, his longtime high school girlfriend, joked about vetting him before going out. (She was small-eyed, blonde, and hateful; truth be told, I was glad not to share her genes.) The sentiment is you better check before climbing into their car. People fan themselves, roll their eyes, and laugh about all the near misses with cousins.

In the Bible, cousins are not listed among the relatives that are prohibited from marrying one another. Actually, the Old Testament details several cousin marriages. Two occur in the book of Genesis when Rebekah marries Isaac, her first cousin once removed. Then later their son, Jacob, marries Rachel and Leah, two sisters who are his first cousins. Jacob loves Rachel and works seven years for her father Laban, his uncle, in return for permission to marry.

I grew up in Cushman, tucked back in Independence County, Arkansas. If you look on a map, the county is easy to find because its outline mirrors the shape of the state. It's a dry county – in case you're wondering how much fun people might have there. We're that red rectangle in the corner of the county.



According to the 2000 census, Cushman had 461 peo

ple, 178 households, and 140 families residing in the town. I joke about how that population includes the cows. I take down anybody bemoaning their one-stop-light town by saying mine doesn't even have one. It's been about that size since its founding in the early 1900s. Hardly anyone moves away. That's plenty of opportunities for cross-pollination.

I can trace the typical path my ancestors trod to get to Arkansas. Start in a coastal state: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina. Waltz a meandering route through Tennessee, Kentucky, maybe dip down into Alabama. (Do not stop in Alabama.) Converge in north-central Arkansas in these small nooks like Cushman and Crocker, in Love Holler and Lafferty Holler along the White River. Don't branch out from there. Stay in the craggy bosom of those hills and find your future family.

Personally, I've been married twice and divorced once. That's one more marriage than most people in my family. I never told my family about the first one.



From the top of Painters Bluff, the White River crooks and bends through Independence County. This view is to the south of Lafferty Holler where my dad's family rooted and stayed upon arrival in Arkansas. I like to think that Painters Bluff was named after Nancy Painter's family, the woman who married Jeremiah Clark and helped bring forth my grandma and my grandpa. Getting to the bluff means driving down a dirt road and then through a cement tunnel that keeps the earth from closing in the path. The insides are scrawled with a litany of teenagers' names. "Terry Clark" appears near the end of the tunnel, dug into the wall with a sharp edge and lined with black ink. I keep meaning to go back and add mine.

When my dad sent off his saliva swab to AncestryDNA, the results came back 90% from Great Britain. My mom laughed at this. She said something to the effect of "That's no surprise, huh, what else could he have been expecting." The implication hung in the air that my dad's tree didn't have too many places to branch out to. I don't think he took it too well. Maybe his parents being cousins was something he'd rather forget.

He never did directly tell me he'd sent off his spit to analyze his roots. He shrugged it off when I brought it up. Later, he told me about the emails he'd get from people on Gedmatch asking if we were the Clarks from Scotland. Honestly, Dad and I kind of hoped so. Maybe we were hardscrabble Scots-Irish folk after all, drinking, fighting, praying our way across the South.

At our last Clark family reunion in 2015, a Brad Clark drove all the way down from Iowa to meet our clan. He said we weren't from the same branch necessarily but from the same Clarks. He'd written and compiled books about the Clarks onto CDs. We took down his number, and my dad ordered a copy of Brad's extensive genetic research. Brad believes two Clark brothers came over to the New World from the Isle of Skye, which is a rocky island in the Scottish Highlands off the northwest coast. Its original Gaelic name has been translated as "misty isle" or "isle of clouds." He believes that one brother begat his family's legacy while the other brother begat ours. His ancestors traversed the north, while our ancestors traversed the south. And here we are today.

Third cousins, people who share a common set of great-great-grandparents, have a relationship coefficient (the measure of the degree of consanguinity) of just 1/128. This means about 200 of their 23,000 protein-coding genes are identical by descent, a level of relationship easily detected by geneticists.

I didn't date in high school. Once, I was supposed to go on a date with Zane Herrin, but he stood me up at the Sonic Drive-In. Honestly, I'd rather have been writing Harry Potter fanfiction and imagining romances than dealing with my own. But I sure as hell knew not to date a Melton, Moser, or Swaim, unless I wanted to run the risk of becoming too close with someone who was already too familiar.

A brief list of famous people who married their cousins*:

Albert Einstein
Charles Darwin**
H.G. Wells

Igor Stravinsky
Edgar Allan Poe
Samuel Morse
Jesse James

*(They married their first cousins, and I'm sure they had their reasons, but at least, I can say my family has the higher ground here, even on the likes of Einstein and Darwin.)

** (Actually, Darwin and his wife's mutual grandparents were also cousins. After three of Darwin's ten children died young, he and his son George conducted studies into whether the family's long tradition of inbreeding had reduced his reproductive fitness. Their conclusion: "the widely different habits of life of men and women in civilized nations, especially among the upper classes, would tend to counterbalance any evil from marriages between healthy and somewhat closely related persons.")

I guess Darwin didn't account for how the "civilized" Queen Elizabeth didn't "counterbalance any evil" when she passed down the recessive hemophilia B gene to her male descendents who often died from internal hemorrhaging caused by taking even the smallest of falls.)

I dated my cousin. I even married my cousin. Kind of. Either way, my parents never knew.

She was a girl though, so there weren't any concerns about inbreeding. Her name was Jackie. We met in our small high school but were only friends. We worked together down at the Quiznos near the White River. I slept over in her bedroom, which was a converted shed in her family's backyard.

Then, we romanced and dated through undergraduate, living and loving easily in female-only dorms. To everyone else, we were "very good" friends. My parents tolerated this. They never spoke about what she and I were to each other. A few years in, we signed up for a domestic partnership in Eureka Springs, before same-sex marriage was legal. We didn't have the money to fly to Oregon or California or Vermont to sign a marriage certificate. All we had was a liberal enclave in the Ozarks that offered gay couples the opportunity to pen their love to a Xeroxed form that was filed in a red three-ring binder. We paid a small fee and pocketed the yellow receipt. As we set in the clerk's office, Jackie and I poked fun at the blue binder that held all the annulled domestic partnerships, as if our love would prove any different.

One day, my mother, in her sustained and perpetual denial (or innocence) about my relationship with this girl, mapped out on a piece of wide-ruled paper our linked heritage. She traced our families back, back, back to where we intertwined in the Fulbrights.

I thanked her, but I did feel slightly sick at seeing this closeness laid out so plain. I wondered if my mother had an ulterior motive when she did this, an underlying suggestion not only were we wrong for both being girls but doubly wrong for also being cousins. Maybe that last part isn't true, but the first part is.

Since then, I've crumpled that paper and tossed it to the wind, much like Jackie did to me. I am no longer sad about severing that connection. I never took her to a family reunion, and I probably never will, even though I blame our connection on Nancy and Nelly.

My mom told me an apocryphal story about Nettie and Nelly Fulbright, who, if you look back at the family tree, both have a dad named John Wesley. She, too, thought that maybe she'd found a double cousin situation, what with Nettie and Nelly potentially being sisters themselves and then marrying brothers. However, if you go back and look, these women had different mothers. The story goes that John Wesley was not Nettie Fulbright's father, rather she was born before her mother, Tennie Melton, married John Wesley. The story goes her dad's real last name might be Helm. Apparently my dad learned this from my great-aunt Veda. The other day, he tried to bring up the story again with her on the phone, to see what she remembered exactly, but the right moment never arose. So maybe, Nettie Fulbright is actually, genetically Nettie Helm, and our family tree has a different, fresh branch.

Broadly speaking, Clarks pepper the borderlands between Scotland and England. Etymologically speaking, Clark is an occupational English surname for a scribe or secretary. They were originally a member of a minor religious order who undertook such duties. The word cleric denoted a member of a religious order, from Old English cler(e)c ("priest"), reinforced by Old French cleric. Both are from Late Latin clericus, from Greek klerikos, a derivative of kleros ("inheritance," "legacy") with reference to the priestly tribe of Levites "whose inheritance was the Lord."

In medieval Christian Europe, clergy in minor orders were permitted to marry (for which I am thankful) and found families; thus the surname could become established. In the Middle Ages, it was virtually only members of religious orders who learned to read and write, so the term cleric came to denote any literate man. I am the first Clark in my immediate family to earn an advanced degree. My brother is perpetually working on his MBA and one of my first cousins, Chris, recently finished a M.Th. But, another cousin has a bachelor's degree and works down at

the Walmart as a cashier. Sometimes, we don't say hi to Steven. But, he's trying to make a living is all. And here I am keeping tabs on them, rustling through the minutiae, asking what's my inheritance from the fruits of my family tree, that promise of a legacy of literacy. It's no wonder I decided to major in writing.

In 2008, researchers at the deCODE genetics company in Reykjavik conducted a study of all Icelandic couples born between 1800 and 1965, a cohort that included some 160,811 couples. The couples who were third cousins produced more children (and subsequent grandchildren) than couples who were eighth cousins. The researchers weren't exactly pleased with the results because they indicated that maybe cousin-marrying and inbreeding weren't so bad after all.

Between my dad's two sisters, I have five first cousins and then five first cousins once removed. In comparison, between my mother's five siblings, I have eleven first cousins and then sixteen first cousins once removed. I can name them all. It's no wonder all the intermingling resulted in babies popping out as plentiful as dandelions and scattering like those fluffy seeds, blown a short distance across the hills to land in the arms of their kin. We've bred and covered the landscape like a weedy thicket of Clarks (and Storys, Duncans, Fulbrights, Tates, Hollowells, and on and on).

My great-great-grandfather (or my great-great-great grandfather, depending on how it's traced), Jeremiah Clark (yes, the one that started this mess), served in the 3rd Arkansas Cavalry Regiment, Union, Company M. Next to his name: Pvt. Enl 28 Jan 1864 at Little Rock, AR. Ht 5'9", eyes blue, hair drk, complx fair, farmer, age 28, born in Lincoln Co, TN.

We use this list of factoids to flesh out his life. We've got a hunch that he defected to the Union for the money. Or maybe he realized the tide was turning. We do know he was Confederate and then he was Union. I really can't speak to his morals concerning the whole thing.

I learned this at our last Clark reunion, back in June 2015, in the basketball court/reception hall of the Westside Baptist Church. When they did a roll call, I stood in two pictures. One for the descendents of Frank Clark. And one for the descendents of Charles Mack.

Here's my grandpa Noah Clark before he shipped out for Europe during World War II. He's carrying on that family tradition started by Jeremiah Clark. He even enlisted in the same place, Little Rock.



It was in 1942 when he was twenty years old, long before he met my grandma who was only four at the time. On his papers, he's listed as a white citizen with a civil occupation as an unskilled construction worker with a grammar school education. We've got other army pictures of him, more across seas, lounging with men on the bumpers of trucks. Apparently, somehow he messed up his feet but continued marching. He could have gotten an honorable medical discharge, but refused to leave his

company, as if they were as close as kin.

For his part, Dr. Stefansson, an Icelandic neurologist, suggests what we might call a Goldilocks Zone for inbreeding. That term, which is usually applied to exoplanets, refers to the idea that planets need to be neither too far away from nor too close to their star in order to be able to support life. In much the same way, third cousins might actually have just the right amount of genetic overlap, neither too similar nor too dissimilar, and enjoy a reproductive advantage.

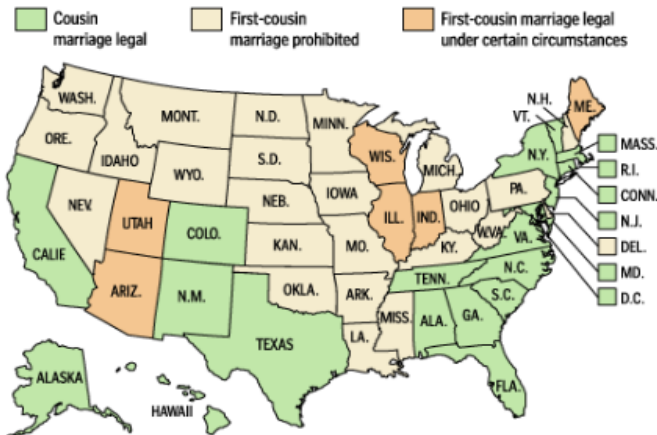
"The take-home message is that ... we, as a society of [the] 21st century, have basically ruled against the marriages of closely related couples, because we do not look at it as desirable that closely related people have children. But in spite of the fact that bringing together two alleles of a recessive trait may be bad, there is clearly some biological wisdom in the union of relatively closely related people." Maybe the hillfolk weren't so backwards when they married their own. Robin Bennett, a genetic counselor at the University of Washington, is so affronted by banning cousin marriage that she sees it as "a form of discrimination."

Not long after dumping the first Ashley, my brother began dating another Ashley. She was the adopted South Korean daughter of a doctor in town. We cheered her on at beauty pageants. She was prettier and nicer than the initial Ashley. After they broke up, he began dating and eventually married Helen, who is Cambodian-Vietnamese, but mostly southern, twang

and all. A Baptist church helped her mother flee the napalm-laced aftermath of the Vietnam War. Her first husband dead, she met Helen's Vietnamese father stateside, both fairly fresh to the terrain. I'm not sure how much of my brother's shift in dating preferences was subconsciously tied to gene pools.

In 2003, Phyllis Kahn introduced a bill to repeal the ban on first-cousin marriage in Minnesota. She proposed the idea after learning that cousin marriage was an important custom among some cultural groups with a strong presence in Minnesota, like the Hmong and Somali. The bill died in committee. Republican Minority Leader Marty Seifert criticized the bill in response, saying it would "turn us into a cold Arkansas."

I'll have Marty Seifert know that Arkansas currently has a ban on first-cousin marriages, just like Minnesota. Other cousin marriages (second or third cousin) are legal in Arkansas, just like Minnesota. Maybe that bill would've turned them into a "cold" Tennessee or Georgia or Alabama. Maybe down here we're a "hot Minnesota." Maybe Marty needs to get off his high horse and stop shaming people for marriages that don't harm anybody.

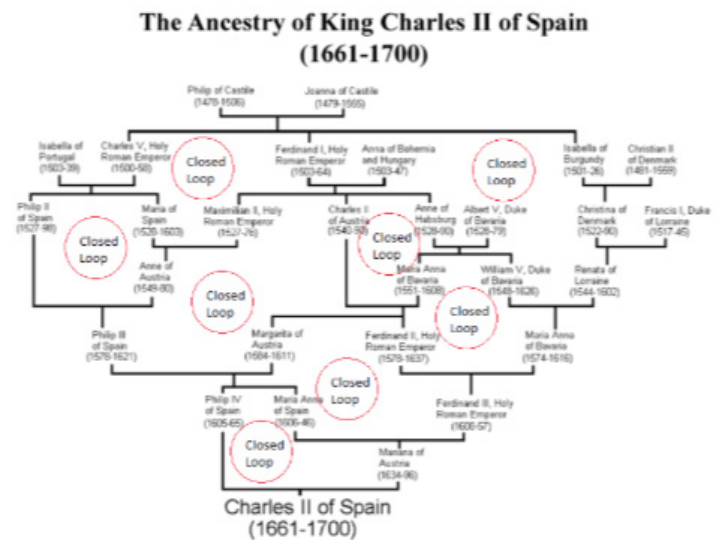


One of my cousins (let's call her Diane – Who can even keep up with all the names?) at that last Clark reunion asked me to update my personal information on her computer. The machine was an ancient laptop wheezing on a folding table littered with yellowed photo albums. My dad leaned forward, asking if she'd recorded my newest niece, who was nearly five years old. The software was all grays and blues, a relic of Windows 98. My name was listed next to my brother's and under my mother and father's. She asked if there's anything that needs changing. I said no. A spouse? She smiled at me. Through tight lips, I said "Not right now" before turning away. And it was

the truth.

It was June and hot outside but the converted basketball court was cool enough. The tables by the kitchen area overflowed with barbeque pork, brisket, and chicken that somebody named Clark smoked for today. Next to the silvered pans of meat sat a lone KFC bucket sitting in the shameful knowledge of not being home-cooked. We said grace for this bounty, thanking God and the cousin who toiled over the barbeque. Diane corralled more Clarks to her computer, asking them about births, deaths, marriages, divorces. I thought about how even if I was still married to Jackie, even if it had been legal, I wouldn't have said I was married, and if I had been brave enough to speak, it wouldn't have been recorded anyway.

At least my family tree doesn't look as bad as King Charles II of Spain. He's the worst result of kin marrying. All the closed loops indicate inbreeding, which is helpful to keep power in the family but not to keep the family sane.

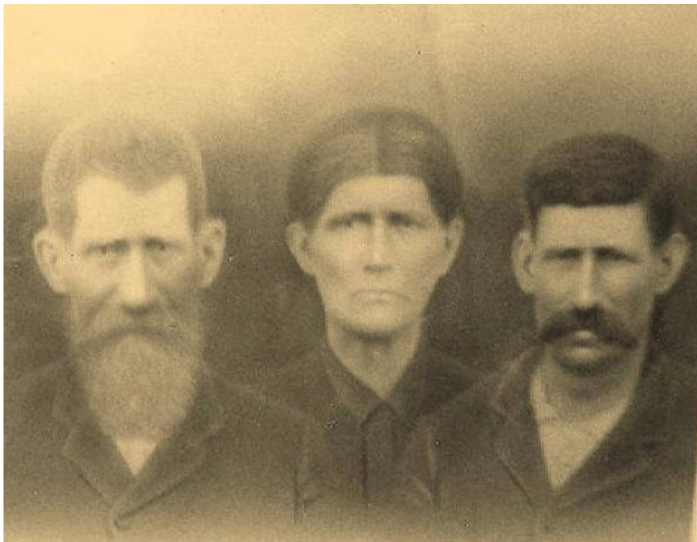


The House of Habsburg experienced pedigree collapse, in which the reproduction of two people who share an ancestor limits the number of distinct ancestors in their offsprings' family tree. 95.3% of Charles II's genes could be traced back to just five ancestors. Due to considerable inbreeding, he suffered from an extreme case of the Habsburg jaw, a severe underbite that grew worse with each generation. By the time it reached Charles II, he was unable to chew, his tongue so large he could barely speak, and he drooled incessantly. Due to his massive mental, emotional, and physical disabilities, he was nicknamed El Hechizado or "The Hexed." He believed people were working witchcraft against him and even endured an exorcism to relieve his curse.

According to Arkansas law:

“All marriages between parents and children, including grandparents and grandchildren of every degree, between brothers and sisters of the half as well as the whole blood, and between uncles and nieces, and between aunts and nephews, and between first cousins are declared to be incestuous and absolutely void. This section shall extend to illegitimate children and relations.” For the state, ignorance is no excuse for not knowing who you’re related to and who you’re copulating with.

At Clark family reunions, the only cousin I can name on sight is Sky Clark due to his red hair. It’s thinning now, but his eyes are still bright blue like my dad’s. Several of the other Clarks are red-headed and freckled. I did not spring forth fair-eyed like them, though in the sun my hair holds a reddish hue. Maybe they look more like our ancestors from the Isle of Skye. Maybe Sky’s father subconsciously named his son after our ancestral homeland. Sky (with no “e”) manages the Southern Tire Mart and has a son named Lonnie, who isn’t bad looking in a striped polo and baseball cap-wearing kind of way.



This photo and various reproductions are always trotted out at reunions. It’s passed around the most. Jeremiah Mack Clark is on the left, looking as hollow-eyed and spectral as the other two who I can’t recall. This man helped beget my paternal grandma and grandpa. My father and I owe him a lot.

At the end of the day, I’m not here to condone interfamilial mingling.

My second marriage is holding, and I love my husband, Valentin Henri Jacques Dubuis, for many reasons, one of them being he’s French. I get to call him mon mari, which has most likely never crossed

the lips of my ancestors. His mother’s family is also German, and his father’s has ties to Italy. The closest his family tree has gotten to mine was probably at the Invasion of Normandy or the Battle of Hastings. Nobody was at either of those to get a date. During World War II, my grandfather, Noah Clark, marched east across Europe and was the only family member I know that ever made it to France.

Listen, I got lucky and did not have to venture outside the hills to find my husband, rather he and his family nestled down into the Ozarks much like those early Clarks who traversed inward from the coast, and I was glad to find him. We were only 50th cousins. Though on the marriage application, under “intended name,” I penciled in *Clark*.

An Attachment

Sigal Kahn, Agnes Scott College

I remember toying with paperclips, the way they link into each other. Occasionally, the colored coating on the outside of the metal would rub, making a small squeak as forefingers and thumbs fidgeted. And sometimes, the sharp metal tip, unsanded, would poke out and prick. But mostly, what I remember about paperclips, is the mindless art of daydreaming. The way the metal bends and unbends, itself a new bend. And how intricate it is to link and the danger of uncoated metal, an M&M without shellac candy. Paperclips are an intimacy, the gentleness of fingers flicking between metal and air, wandering into a realm of maybes interrupted. by. pinpricks. of un-sheathed. hurt.

Once upon a time, I fell asleep to a book. *Goodnight Moon*. And it chronicled a lullaby of goodnights from light to clocks to an old lady who was whispering hush. As the cover slid closed, the curtain, cloaked in draping pomegranate juice fabric, drew together, and my eyes followed.

Once upon a time, a boombox tucked me into dreams, a chord progression of pensive and doleful notes before I had the language to identify a minor key. As the girls of overripe blueberries filled it up again, navigated hole-pocked skies, ventured past shrinking water supplies, the melodies smoothed my hair down and bunched the comforter corners around my shoulders.

Once upon a time, I imagined myself to sleep. I watched my mind plant a cement lamppost and began to feel the tingle of light in the darkness against my heavy skin through a permeable, screened window. I observed myself glance over to an alarm clock, soft gray and dirty white, flashing a time close to midnight, and gazed as I softened under a ticklish thrum of cicadas outside my window. I let my body curl against blankets and into folds, nestling into the comfort of anticipating someone in my mind. Hearing a deep and soft voice joining the cicadas, I melded my world with sleep.

Once upon a time, I fell asleep to lime green and bright gray bubbles: whispers of sweet dreams, soft goodnights brushing against my ear, content kisses, and wishful empty arms finding warm skin.

Once upon a time, I couldn't fall asleep. There were no zesty and warm bubbles. Music pressed into my earlobes, other realms dimmed and faded until undistinguishable and undiscoverable, and *Goodnight Moon's* only lesson clung cold: to say goodnight to the noises everywhere. But what about the silence?

Beauty, Gaze Unaverted

Anna Sandy-Elrod, Georgia State University

Like Medusa, my body is monstrous. It is female, feminine, visible.

*

Once, I kept covered. In the Pentecostal church, modesty is ingrained into girls from childhood. It was we who were the gatekeepers of sexual purity, we who must hide ourselves away to keep men from lust. Sleeveless tops, skirts above the knee, bathing suits, sports uniforms—these were all forbidden. We were meant to blanket our bodies, make them invisible. If we didn't, we would cause men to fall. If the men fell, it would be our fault.

*

Ovid first explored Medusa's tragic origins, writing of the once-beautiful young woman who had the misfortune of catching Poseidon's eye. When the god, never doubting his right to her body, caught and raped Medusa in Athena's temple, the outraged Athena took revenge on Medusa, turning her golden hair into serpents and her visage into one that would turn all who looked at her into stone. To Poseidon, nothing.

*

Always, women pitted against women. When we saw girls with tight dresses, hems skimming their knee-caps, sleeve lengths above the elbow, we derided them for the lack of modesty, their shamelessness. When the boys we liked at church dated other girls, we whispered that it was because they were easy, cheap, a distraction. At twelve, thirteen, we comforted ourselves with the thought that we were the ones who would become wives, the ones who would hold on to our purity and thus our value.

*

In medieval Europe, women who were accused of promiscuity or sexual betrayal often suffered ruthless punishment—noses cut off, faces disfigured, a brutal act to strip them of their beauty and therefore of their power over men. Athena, too, turned her retribution to the face of the woman, ensuring no one could ever look upon it again.

*

What kind of god would punish a woman for rape?

*

When I began to develop curves, the clothes that my friends could wear without comment were suddenly too tight, too revealing on me. I began to question what I was told. I was immodest, they said. I was a Jezebel. The way I walked, the swaying of my hips, was seductive, forcing men to sin. How, I asked, should I walk without moving my hips.

*

A decade later, in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence on my honeymoon, I stood before Caravaggio's rendition of Medusa: the Gorgon captured in the moment between her beheading and her death, eyes widened in the realization. She is both monster and victim, blood streaking from her severed head, body unpictured, the snakes erupted from her skull and writhing vividly around her face, a look of horror at what has become of her. In rich oil paints, she is fixed on a shield, perhaps meant to mirror what would have reflected in Perseus' shining shield in the seconds after he defeated her. Perseus is always the hero of this story; we forget that Medusa never chose to be a monster.

*

It is difficult not to draw connections. A pretty young American student accused of murder because she kissed her boyfriend, vilified by the world for being a woman who had sex. A Congresswoman forced to resign after the spread of revenge porn featuring explicit photos from a consensual relationship she had with a young female campaign staffer. An actress shamed across media outlets after nudes she sent her partner are leaked. A White House intern mocked and derided, her chosen life destroyed at twenty-two while the president she had an affair with continues to hold public favor. Countless girls embroiled in purity culture, told how they were born already shameful.

*

Outside the Uffizi, under the wide arches of the Loggia dei Lanzi, Medusa is portrayed again, this time in a sculpture by Cellini. Perhaps the most metaphorical portrayal of Medusa's treatment at the hands of men is this one: her head held aloft by a victorious Perseus who stands naked atop her crumpled body. Almost unnoticed at first, she lies with one foot curled to her side, one arm limp and dangling, Perseus' feet planted atop her torso.

*

Presented with blue satin ribbons to represent our purity, we were told to keep them safe, to treasure them as depictions of our bodies. In the pulpit, the preacher described how we would someday carry this ribbon down the aisle and present it to the man who was becoming our husband, a token of our virginity, of our worthiness to be loved.

*

In Cellini's sculpture, it is Perseus himself who gazes down at Medusa's body rather than at the head he holds high.

*

Before I ever lost my virginity, a visiting evangelist cornered me in the wings of my church, demanded that I repent for my impurity, that I ask to be cleaned

of my dirtiness. I cried so hard that I couldn't tell him I had yet to even have my first kiss. He pointed at the curvature of my breast under my shirt as proof of his belief.

*

Medusa, terrifying because she could turn men to stone with a single look. Medusa, terrifying because she was excruciatingly beautiful, because every man who laid eyes on her was washed with want. Her power in her face.

*

The men I grew up loving taught me that I was guilty. For years, I was terrified to let a boy into my bed. I got blackout drunk to have sex for the first time, determined to get it over with the summer before I started college, and the next morning I showered in scalding water until my skin was blistered. I couldn't decide if I felt soiled or liberated.

*

Poseidon's crime is forgotten and Medusa is turned into a monster whose death we celebrate, Perseus a male worshipped for killing her. The only victory for Medusa is that her head continues to petrify all who look upon it, retaining its power even in death. Indeed, many of the victories Perseus goes on to claim are won by Medusa's head.

*

I look men in the eye now, wear my body proudly, dress it up and down. I ignore the viper-whispers of women when I visit home. I, stone. I, green. I, snake.

*

It is lonely not to look upon another human face. It is lonely not to be looked at in return.

The Orange Show

Camryn Smith, Agnes Scott College

It is in the city where lonely hearts, hearts chasing after something, go. I, a heart chasing after some makeshift dream that is steadily shifting with every thought, did not seek such a place or seemingly such a thing that is found in a city to which I was called by chance. A chance to work in Houston during the summer doing research on brain cancer. But there must've been a sort of longing despite my repulsion from all the bodies, and the towering buildings and mystery smells of garbage and coffee because I accepted the chance. For I knew that going where I wanted to go in life meant going here. Yet there is something beautiful about this city. The blue that reflects off the tall buildings' glass makes me look up. Up to the tops of such structures to see how they grace the sky, reflect the clouds. My case for getting lost: It is never about such a thing as not knowing where one is or how to go back, but how to go forward with something new. So, it is with each step that I walk down the concrete sidewalk, surrounded by bodies in shades of blue and green scrubs, business suits going to work. I am amongst the sea of people going somewhere, even if it is without the knowledge that there is somewhere to go at all. Somewhere else besides where one is supposed to be. How I've longed for elsewhere.

A man wearing a white fisherman's hat walks down the street, looking towards the ground, distracted. He is an older man of middle age, searching for something. He bends down, picking up a sheath of metal, turning it in his hand and packing it away. He disappears into a store, gone from the street, from the birds' eyes. He comes out with a smile, a song on his lips with more scraps of metal and an agreed-upon gift of some fences. He has been thinking, planning, but not really knowing what would come of his thoughts. Truly, there is no plan. Not until he starts building, anyhow, with his mediocre skills of welding and constructing learned from the army. So, he keeps looking down, looking at the little things to collect, and the bigger things. He collects what seems like mere trash and buys things, faces, animals, tiles. He is going to make something worth remembering.

To be so far away from home for the first time allows for a sort of escape yet to be experienced. I am detached, untethered, and yet certain things, fears of breaking invisible, unspoken rules still hold me trapped within the bars of home. I follow the rules with no question, no desire to see what happens if I break them. Where did the longing go? Perhaps I never had it. I always imagine that someday when I am older, I'll be able to go anywhere, everywhere. Here I

am, alone in the city, nothing stopping me from traveling to elsewhere. Yet, here I stay. My lack of wonder creating for me a prison.

The man wearing a white fisherman's cap builds for himself white walls that encapsulate trees. This was not the plan in his heart. This was not what he meant to do when he bought two plots of land in front of his home. So, he sells those trees, starting from scratch. He amends his building permit, explaining that it mustn't be meant for tree farming, but to be a beauty salon. No, although such a thing would attract women, he wants it to be more than that. What will it be? He carries on his life. He is a mail carrier with a past of carrying oranges in trucks throughout Florida. He brags that he has been to every bit, every edge of Florida. Perhaps there is something in the oranges. Life, he begins to believe. It is in the oranges that can lead to a long and healthy life. He collects everything, every scrap as his house fills with things. Junk, from the outsider's view. But he knows it isn't junk. He changes the permit of his building just one more time. On it he writes, *The Orange Show*.

Wonder. I let it lead me and trigger my searching for a place to disappear, where for a moment I only exist to myself. But a spot on this earth I will be. My immediate surroundings empty of any living spirits but I and the ones who may linger from another time. So, I search for a place that no one knows, that is not popular, but is a must-see. Fear bites at my heart. In wandering alone into empty streets that are not quite soulless, but bare in terms of the lack of eyes looking to the quiet road from large bricked homes of fresh-cut grass and trimmed trees, there is a sort of danger, fear. But it is a learned fear from being told that it is so. I put it on my calendar. Saturday, I will go and wander in this general direction towards this thing with just myself and my thoughts to keep me company.

The man searches for his own solitude, disappearing from the world in order to create his own. He builds and builds with hope. It is brilliant, he thinks as he shapes steep staircases from brick and metal, and makes up the floor with bricks cemented together. He colors fences orange and yellow and white to encapsulate a steamboat that he too built by hand. The steamboat can move in a circle from a set of tiles that spell out *Fort Gaines GA*, to ones that read *Apalachicola FL*, *Columbus GA*, and *Eufaula ALA*. In front of the steamboat, he fashions rows upon rows of seats, built using tractor seats painted in red, blue, and purple. He places hearts made from smaller hearts upon the walls throughout the show. It is a massive structure with multiple levels and hidden crevices, with stages and seats looking upon them. His two hands build a

small home. He shall have a date in which all of this is done, and the world shall be invited to come in, to see his work. It is not art. It is just a message from him to the world. He wants to be remembered. Despite such a disappearance, his wish is not to disappear from memory, from existence, once he is gone. This is how he shall be remembered. This is his life's work as he assembles the metal, the blue and red metal boards, assembles the chairs, the towers, the seats for many, and the oranges. So many oranges.

To think. At times, that is all I am. A body that stands and thinks, saying nothing, looking to the ground peeling away at my thoughts, planning. The summer has caused destruction in my plans. I want to do something important with my future, my career. I think of the past and what makes me who I am. Who am I? What do I like? Should I dare to consider what makes me happy? My boss insists that I go have fun. I am on the latter end of this trip and I know she is right. But in twenty years, I am not certain of what that looks like. As a child, it was sitting on the carpeted stairway reading a book as the warm light streamed in from the window. Or the excitement at going to bed because I got to stay up and think up worlds, making up stories, and drawing pictures. Perhaps going outside and building makeshift swings and playing imaginary games with my brother, daring to go outside the confines of the backyard. It may not be about not knowing what fun is, but not remembering the feeling. Such things all had a common theme: getting lost in something. I think I miss getting lost.

In each of us, there is a sort of museum. Some keep the treasures, the memories, stories the museum holds to themselves. Others must throw it out of them so the world may see it, or just by chance a single person, even if it is themselves. Perhaps that would be enough. But it isn't for that white-capped man. It is not enough for his museum to be for his eyes alone. He sets a date for the world to come and see his museum, his ode to health, to life.

I wish this to be my home, Houston. Perhaps because it is away from my Georgia home that I have taken a claim to it. I look up housing in Friendswood, TX, on Zillow and imagine living in a Victorian or small Tudor house, elsewhere. Perhaps I liken this place to home because here I am me. At least, what I know to be me. I am finding myself in the things I make room for. I get up at five in the morning, quick to dress and walk to my job when no one else is there except for other people in other labs. I make a fresh cup of coffee with my mug that I keep at my desk which is covered in classic books such as *Great Expectations* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I then write for the one to two hours before people start

trickling in, and I am tasked with taking care of cell cultures or learning a new research method. Sometimes I stand in the room of glass which is surrounded by windows looking out to Houston. And I just stare out. After work, a friend and I get boba tea. My first taste of it having been with her. She teaches me East Asian culture as we make plans to visit restaurants in Chinatown during my stay. At the hotel, my home for only two months, I organize post-graduate school lists, hunting down a person who is doing exactly what I want to do. No one fits the image perfectly as I take all the opinions of others and what they think I should do. They tend to contradict each other. I am forced to make a decision and there are no rules for decision making. A question begs to be answered: At the end of the road, what will I hope to have done?

It is the opening day. He is an older man now, after working on his masterpiece for close to thirty years. He expects thousands of people to come, fill his over 200 seats. Thousands of people from everywhere. People of different backgrounds, colors, genders, and ages. Less than 200 people show. He greets them with a smile as they enter a wonder by stepping onto a layer of bricks under canopies of orange.

It is Saturday. I walk out of the hotel and into the parking lot where an Uber awaits, driving me towards nowhere. It is the middle of that nowhere where lies another person's hope. We drive in silence. I look to the hot brown Houston roads and too large highways. We drive into a neighborhood. I get out of the car, thanking the man who drove me. I walk up to the structure in the middle of this neighborhood. In neat block letters against a white wall reads, *The Orange Show*. I smile, looking around, seeing no one except a line of cars along the street giving the impression that people are present somewhere, but not quite here. I walk in, taking a step into someone else's wonder. A dream that came true.

It is six months since the opening day of his life's work. Doctors will say that in the following weeks it was a stroke that killed him. Some things cannot always be explained. Maybe it was a stroke or simply the body's way of expressing a broken heart. He failed, the man thought to himself. He died thinking he had failed. Now who will know of the possibilities, the key to living a healthy life, a long life? Further thoughts must have run through his head as he passed before the age of 80 when he thought he'd live to 100. What else did he not know?

I have no more thoughts as if they each left me the moment I stepped into this monument. What was left in my mind was an awe that there was anything to step into, to begin with, that someone built with their own inexperienced hands. I walk the tiled

floors, reading the quotes against the walls such as *I love oranges* and *Go orange be strong*. There are other quotes without any references to oranges like one decorated with blue tiles, presented on a cement wall under a stone owl, *A wise old owl sat on a tree. The more he saw the less he said. The less he said the more he heard. Why can't we be like the wise owl?* I look to the orange steamboat and the seats meant to fit many. I walk up staircases and onto stages. Fearing that the structure may crumble, I do not touch anything, though it is carrying my weight. Still, I act like a ghost. Yet there is something about those tractor seats amongst many that look out to the stage covered in hearts. I sit in one of those seats, looking up and out to a blue sky. Silence.

I would like to think that the man who died, who built *The Orange Show*, did not pass in complete sorrow. I like to think that the person who once said, *I may look at the world through rose-colored glasses, but what I see sure makes me happy*, was still within him. He may not have considered what he did to be art, and he may not have thought that he succeeded, but over the years those thousands would come even if it was not all at once. More than thirty years later, they still come. They come for *The Orange Show*. They come for a smile or out of curiosity. Perhaps the goal is to leave a smile on this earth. One that is fragile, but will never leave, because people will look upon it, and want to take care of it seeing that it is a smile among few. With such care, they too will know the key to a long life. There is one thing this man didn't express in words. It isn't so much oranges that make a long life. What that something is, is whispered in the brick wall wishing well, in the balconies open to the sky, and the beckoning tractor seats welcoming all. It is articulated in those colorful metal birds hung high, in flight.

The Hurricane

Camryn Smith, Agnes Scott College

I point my five-year-old finger towards the fish, asking my father about how it got there. He stands beside me tall and black in front of the blue sky. His quiet demeanor allows a calmness to surround us, despite the loud waters. I watch the Blue Tang's lifeless, vibrant blue body against the sand as white waves inch towards her. My father tells me that sometimes people throw rocks into the sea and they hit the fish, killing them. He picks me up, taking me into the ocean.

St. Thomas is a notable vacation spot for people who want to get away from America without really leaving it. It is set apart because it has a different culture, different people, a different atmosphere. Their calmness, their friendliness and "what will be will be" attitude define the people. The only true chaos belongs to the sea and the past. The island, along with the others creating the Virgin Islands, was bought by the U.S. on March 31st, 1917, from Denmark for \$25 million. But the islands were more known for slavery. Slaves were shipped from West Africa in such numbers that they outnumbered the freemen. The islanders before such a time were considered pirates. There are tales of Bluebeard and Blackbeard coming from the washed away history. My father's family is from Tortola, a part of the British Virgin Islands, but they immigrated to St. Thomas for a better opportunity. At twenty-five, my father, first generation American and youngest in his family, moved to Georgia for the same reason.

Grandmother is a stout woman who wears colorful, flowered dresses that fall to her ankles. Her eyes are quite small, shrinking behind her eyelids, particularly when she smiles. When she grabs us into hugs, she brings her moist lips to our foreheads. She lives in a tall home atop a steep hill looking out to the blue ocean water with a lovely garden she tends to in Smith Bay. It is a two-story white house with many rooms, though I have only been in a few of them for others were being worked on or occupied by renters. A balcony stretches over the garden and when stood upon, a person can reach out to the tops of the trees, always occupied by an iguana hiding among the brush. The home was built by her children in the mid-to-late 80s and well into the 90s and was never quite finished. Before the house, they lived in a trailer. In 1989, hurricane Hugo, a Category 4 storm, hit the island. They lost the trailer. The unfinished house was damaged, yet they had to move into it. Twenty-nine years later, Father tells me about the hurricanes, *A lot of wind and rain. A lot of howling. A lot of debris*

flying around. Roofs being torn off. Poles and trees snapping. Certain areas would flood, but because it is an island, the water goes to the ocean.

Perhaps I have always known my father's brother, but my memory is meeting him for the first time at age five. Uncle is always at Grandmother's house, for that was his home. He is a towering, skinny, big-eyed, happy man. Uncle wraps me into a strong hug, and I grin. He is a good, funny man. His smile is contagious. They say you can't please everyone, but he is the type of person who could.

Uncle is a drifter. His heart is not one to settle for the conventional as he may have been born with a sort of fire that burned differently than the rest of his family. It was a good, warm fire, but it was not one that led his searching, drifting feet towards family, towards a career. He did odd jobs and gained skills in construction. But he could never be still.

In this world, who am I? So I know where I belong. I ask a different question that leads my father to say, *What does it matter if another person is black or the other white? If we ever want to change, we should stop calling out the differences and stop making distinctions.* I nod. So nowhere. Why did I care now to ask? I found it strange that I couldn't care, couldn't find my place and belong where one should or one who looked like me should. The problem was always the actions. In school, it was the action of spending more time in the library and talking to the librarians than with my own peers. The action of being in marching band or hanging out at lunch with a boy who didn't look like me, yet we were treated the same, rejected from fourth grade high society. And in high school, when my friends and I looked behind us to the circular table in the lunchroom with a single race, we looked at ourselves, black, mixed, white, but at the end of the day, all the same. We just weren't black enough. But even as I write such an answer out, I still do not truly know. *What are you?* A question asked when I straighten my hair that falls down the length of my back. I can't help but feel I have lost something, missed something, but where lies the confusion, there is a sort of peace. This postulation leads to no significance. Shall we go again, or consider something new? With the fail, a fall, time moves forward. We inevitably do too. So here I am once more. Unbothered. Untethered. A cycle of finding one's place and losing it the moment one catches purchase.

The fruit has green skin like no other fruit I have seen. The innards are yellowish orange and it is soft and sweet. I peel off all the skin, not caring that now my hands are sticky with its sweet juice. I bite into it, fibers lodging themselves between my teeth. The mango is freshly picked and unlike that red,

green, yellowish kind we find at The Dekalb Farmers Market with stickers proudly declaring that they are from Mexico. These straight-from-the-tree green mangoes we eat in Grandmother's kitchen. My father bites the end of the mango and sucks, squeezing the juice out. This is the proper way. When I am home and my parents gift us with mangoes from The Dekalb Farmers Market, I am grateful, but they do not taste the same or have the same warmth or the same softness. Yet the juice rolls down my arms all the same.

My father takes us to the cemetery to visit Grandfather in Smith Bay. It is a place that can be seen from quite a distance as colorful cement containers lie atop one another. Some green, yellow, purple, pink, perhaps to distinguish them. Perhaps to say that this person lying in this cement box in this casket is different from the one below. Such stacks, sad for the ones hidden in the ground where they should be, are there for there is not enough space on the island for people to have individual plots. At this time, the beaches would be full of tanning people, laughing people, country and rap music blasting people. I ask my father his favorite thing about St. Thomas. He says, *The people, they do not act like strangers.*

The mango from St. Thomas tastes like home because it is the home that lies within me. A mango from anywhere else can never be the same for it represents a place elsewhere. Everything about it says that it is different and from a different place except for the fact that it is a mango. We are the same. However different from one another, with our homes and origins of many variations within us, everything is telling us that we are different and meant to be that way except for the one thing that we seem to forget.

When home, I do not hear much of St. Thomas. Sometimes a worrisome call here and there or a call from Grandmother. Or a call about Uncle. He has slipped again. He is scared. There are people we cannot see coming for him—white ghosts. I hear he is a man with an addiction, though he smiles the same. I hear he sometimes scares Grandmother, though his arms still wrap me in that same tight hug. Yet his arms, how skinny they've become. Still, he is a man. A man who was left with no one to hear his lighthearted jokes during the storm.

In fall of 2017, two Category 5 hurricanes hit St. Thomas. Irma and Maria. Grandmother's house is damaged once more. It is not a place for a person to stay. I hear of Puerto Rico on the news. I hear my friends talk about it, about how to help them. They gather water bottles, canned foods, garbage bags, first-aid kits, money and more. I ask myself, what about St. Thomas and the Virgin Islands? My father tells me, *Puerto Rico is big, is well known. It is more*

important. Why save one person when you can save ten?

There was aid at first. Then Maria. On St. Thomas, islanders' eyes watched Navy ships turn to Puerto Rico. Almost 3,000 people died in Puerto Rico. What of the USVI? 5. Uncle called to family in Georgia. Mold. Destruction. Flu turned to pneumonia. It is possible to treat in the right setting. After a hurricane, nothing is right. I wonder who picked up the phone, spoke to him. I wonder who was the last to hang up.

That night, I will never know the truth. I won't know the story that led to it and what came after. Yet I see my uncle sitting on a wet floor, back against a damp wall. His big eyes looking across the room to his past, his mistakes and regrets. Perseverance does not give a person a one-way ticket to a happier life. All journeys end. When the mountain is scaled, who says that one must come down? A sneeze, another, and another...

My mother's anger vibrates the walls, the very structure of the house. Father's brother is the he she cries for. I sit in my bed, computer open as my own skin vibrates and my heart grows heavy. I go to my mother and she asks me, *Why aren't you upset?* I laugh, make a joke with my deadpan face. Make them smile. That is all I can do. I can't be the sad one.

Because I know a tomorrow exists elsewhere beyond our attempts at comprehension. We have endless questions with answers yet to be discovered. Will there be some sign before we give up, move on to a different problem with its own endless journey when we could have been right at the answer? Are we expected to go on like this, forever? Are we not living for the end, for the proof, for that thing? Can't I too propose my own theory? Just over the wave.

We pull into my aunt's home in Georgia and sit in the sun. Grandmother flew here from St. Thomas. She looks off into the blue sky. The world is more beautiful on sad days. I watch her, knowing she must be looking or perhaps searching the few clouds for her garden now lost to the tides. My mother asks questions as I stand. There are no words good enough to say, but *hello, goodbye*, and a whisper, *I love you, too.*

When I was a child, I talked to my hamsters through my head. I would communicate without opening my mouth, forgetting they cannot hear me. Maybe people don't speak, say what they are truly thinking not because they are not thinking of anything to say. Maybe they are just forgetting to open their mouths. As we sat at my aunt's house, the warm, still air surrounding our silence, I thought of all the things we are not hearing because of our closed mouths. But for a moment, I will open mine.

I wish I could remember my uncle as he was even on the bad days. They are better than what I am left with, constant cries for help that I cannot answer. Yet I know why they are there. A reminder of who you could have been. A reminder of who I will be.

If someone asks me who I am, I will always say I am black, and I will hide my discomfort at saying the word, at going against how my father leads his life. That is not who I wish to be, like the others who care so much about the differentiations. If you ask me again, which you won't because that is not what we are taught to do. But ask me again...

The fluid filled his lungs as Uncle swam, his skinny black arms weak from the effort and years of abuse as the waves pushed him back to shore, but he continued because he knew that over the waves, just farther beyond the scope of the island, was freedom. But the waves still came, and his throat burned with the salt sea water and his feet touched the sand. The rain came like brimstone, the dark, cloud-filled sky impossibly bright. Again, he jumped in and swam, did all he could to swim to a happiness that was just in his grasp, but he was lost to the sea as sharp water pellets hit his black skin. And perhaps he saw something, a silhouette of a person in the distance. He screamed for help, ripping his throat and exhausting his last bit of energy. He must have thought, *If I could just keep swimming*, as the silhouette turned, disappearing into the distance. He yelled with a might that comes before a victory or before an end as another wave came overhead and the crash, a crescendo was louder than any of his pleas to be saved. The white sheet, a surrender, a finale.

What I imagine seems so close to reality for pneumonia is characterized by fluid filled air-sacs of one's lungs. A person will struggle for breath, above land, drowning. I can't find any other way to make sense of the events. My mind places me on the beach as a ghost, as a silhouette, for I am my family tree, and I get to turn away. There is only one hospital on St. Thomas that serves two islands. As the winds whipped, breaking the windows, ripping the ceiling panels, the patients and staff must have wished for their transgressions to be washed away. I watch the night, watch the waves come and go, receding with the rising sun, taking home secrets of that night. Who was there to hear? If no one, who will remember?

I'm five again. My father holds me in his arms as we wade in the ocean. I point to a boat. *Take me to that boat*. We stumble in the ocean, and fear grips my heart as it knows that I do not know how to swim, but I want to keep going. We try again and again for I am determined to touch that boat, touch the lonely speck against the sea. We never made it.

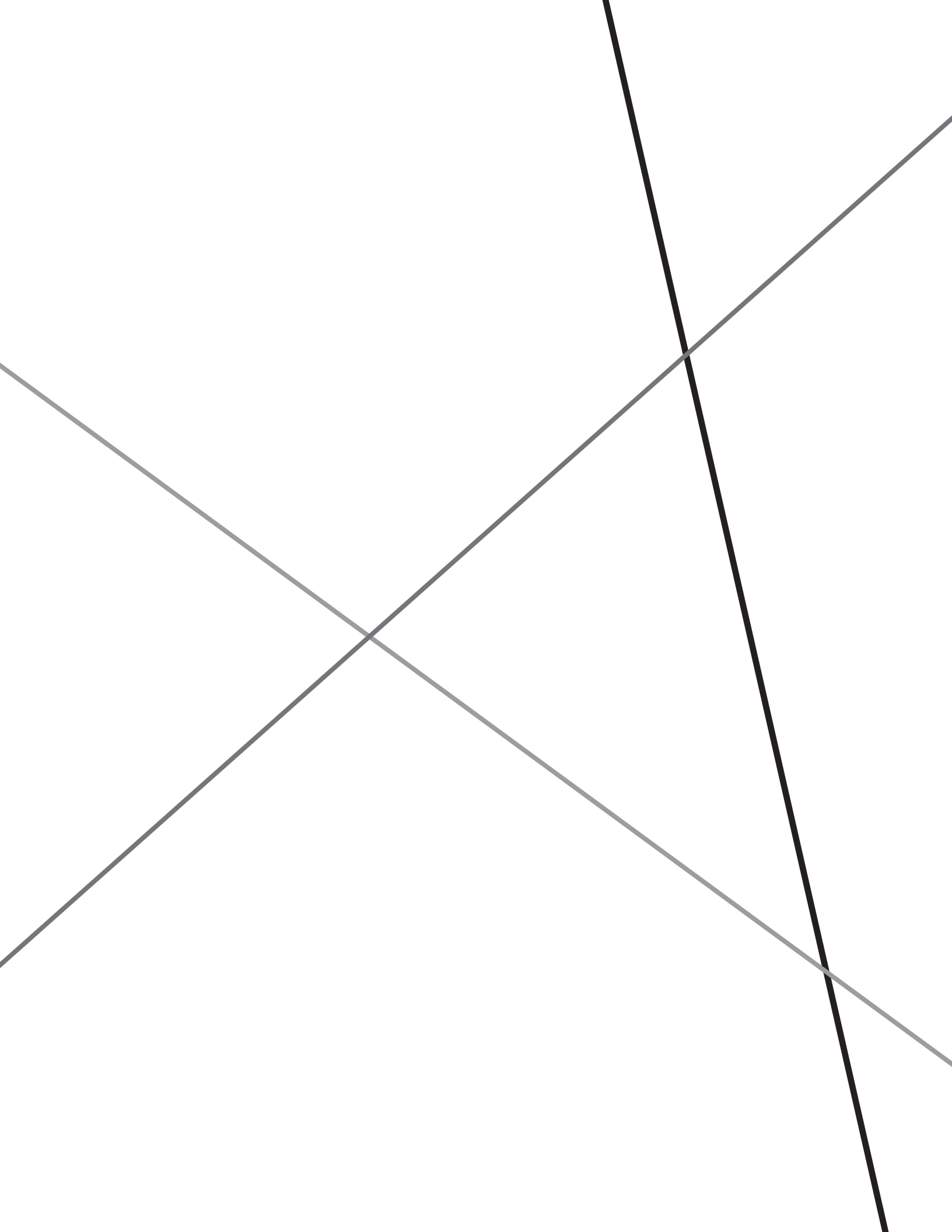
In the Kitchen

Damara Soto, Agnes Scott College

In the kitchen, she stood, long wooden spoon held absently in her hand, dripping thick red pasta sauce back into the forgotten pot, dangerously close to boiling over on the stove, the spoon in even more danger of plummeting down, just a little looser, just a little further, until there it went down down down.

In the kitchen, the spoon made a wet plop into the sauce, making two tiny drops of scalding scarlet sauce spew out and land on her bare arm and fingers that had yet to notice they were no longer anchoring a spoon in the air or that they should be feeling two tiny pinpricks of pain and letting the brain know it should probably get that wooden spoon and turn off the damn stove.

In the kitchen, she paid wooden spoons and red sauce and boiling pots and pinpricks of pain no mind as she watched two tiny twin towers turn to dust on her TV.





Playwriting

Phantom for Reality
Delaney Porter, Agnes Scott College

Cast of Characters

LENA: a woman in her 60s, intellectual and introspective
JIM: a man in his 70s, Lena's husband, dead
SHANNON: a woman in her 40s, Lena and Jim's daughter, strong and impulsive
ROXY: a woman in her late teens/ early 20s, Shannon's daughter, queer

Place
Lena and Jim's house

Time
present (within 2015-2020), late autumn

I.

Setting: The sitting room of a house. It looks neat and clean, but the furniture and fashion are outdated.

At Rise: A morning ritual: LENA and JIM sit in their respective armchairs. LENA drinks coffee and reads *Orlando: A Biography by Virginia Woolf*. JIM has coffee but does not drink it, and he reads a newspaper.

LENA

(laughing)
"As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking." (continues laughing) Dear, did you hear? As long as she thinks of a man—

JIM

Oh, I heard.

LENA

She makes me laugh.

JIM

Hm?

LENA

Virginia.
(sarcastic)
My dear friend, Mrs. Woolf.
(pause)
Have you ever read anything of hers, dear?

JIM

(slowly)
Not that I can recall.

LENA

Are you sure? Because I—

JIM

I'm sure.

LENA

Why so short with me lately? What's the matter?

JIM

Nothing, dear.
(pause)
Is something wrong?

LENA
Well, it seems as though you're less—you're less like yourself lately.

JIM
Well, you know I'm—

LENA
Yes, I know that, but I mean you used to be so enamored... with books and things. You used to—well, I'm almost sure you've quoted Woolf to me before. Or Sackville-West, maybe.

JIM
I don't recall.

LENA
I think it's funny, the quote.

(LENA returns to reading for a moment but is both uncomfortable with silence and unable to contain her enthusiasm about her reading.)

LENA
(stifling a laugh)
"As the male novelists define it... Love is slipping off one's petticoat!" Oh, dear Virginia.
(to JIM, after a moment)
I know it doesn't interest you, but I think it's absolutely lovely. The way she dismantles and ridicules soci—

JIM
You've read it before, Lena.

LENA
You of all people know that doesn't make a difference.

JIM
It gets tiresome, reading the same text a thousand times over with different students, listening to them having the same things to say a thousand times over...

LENA
I still don't understand how you got bored of your own subject.

JIM
I said tiresome, not bored, my dear. The same thing over every fall. Just got tired.

LENA
Maybe you would've liked literature better than history. Some new stuff every now and again?

JIM
(JIM gestures to LENA's worn, over-read book.)
New, you say?

LENA
Something without age.
(pause)
You almost wish you could be Orlando, you know. You're just a duke with an unfinished poem and a broken romance, and you suddenly wake up a twentieth century woman. Encounter gypsies and an ice age, adventure, time travel...
(LENA looks around her house, realizing how her surroundings and life don't stand up to those of Orlando.)

JIM
It is fiction.

LENA
Fiction. Of course.
(pause)
But romantic, Jimmy.

JIM
Hm.

LENA
You remember romance, Jimmy? Remember when you were ali—I mean, when we were planning on going to Spain? You wanted to see the bullfighters and eat tapas? You used to send me those letters...

JIM
Sure, dear.

LENA
(teasing)
We'll go see El Museo del Prado? Share churros and chocolate in the moonlight.

JIM
Yes, I remember. But I can't do that now.

LENA
I know.
(pause)
You're—I understand. But you wanted to. I bet Orlando's been to Spain. And we're just—

JIM
Lena—

LENA

Dear, you were much livelier in life.

(LENA and JIM pause for a few moments and try to go back to reading.)

I'm sorry.

(pause)

I—I visited your grave yesterday.

JIM

I know. Morning glories. Thank you.

(LENA and JIM continue to read. A moment passes to relieve some tension.)

LENA

“Love is slipping off one’s petticoat...”

(chuckles)

Jim, you always used to think these things were funny.

(LENA pauses, but JIM doesn’t answer.)

Why aren’t you answering me?

(pause)

I think it’s funny. What do you think? You used to tell me what you thought. You always tell me what you think.

JIM

(attempting a chuckle)

I guess it is, a little.

LENA

I mean, more than that. You told me all sorts of funny things. You had read everything. I mean, you do read everything. You still—

JIM

I know. I’m still me. Death doesn’t change that sort of thing.

(LENA and JIM sit in silence for a moment, as if LENA might disagree.)

How is Mrs. Woolf?

LENA

(with a sigh)

“Life, it sings, or croons rather, like a kettle on a hob, life, life, what art thou?”

JIM

Well, hell if I know.

(pause)

How many times do you think you’ve read it?

LENA

(mumbling under her breath)

Not nearly enough times.

(JIM laughs as if he’s not taking her seriously and goes back to reading.)

LENA (CONT.)

“Let us go, then, exploring...”

(LENA pauses and skims the page for a moment. She looks up.)

We’ve stopped exploring, Jimmy.

(She closes the book abruptly and looks expectantly at JIM, who does not look up.)

JIM

What do you mean, dear?

LENA

I think I’m going to run a bath.

(LENA rises and exits. JIM doesn’t look up.)

II.

Setting: A bathroom in the house.

At Rise: LENA is taking off her clothes and stepping into the bathtub. The scene should move slowly with pauses where appropriate and much meditation on LENA’s part.

LENA

(mimicking JIM)

“I’m still me...” That’s not the old Jim... “Death doesn’t change anything...”

(LENA stops as she settles into her bath. LENA’s thought of what she feels is the winning line to an argument that she thought of too late.)

LENA (CONT.)

Death is change, the bastard.

(LENA calms down and begins to read letters from a younger JIM. Perhaps they’ve been tucked in the pages of her book. The pages are old. This is habitual.)

LENA (CONT.)

“My dearest darling...” He used to be so damn sentimental. “I miss your soft skin. I miss holding you in my arms every night, my love. I feel so empty now without you...”

(LENA begins to tear up. She flips to another letter.)

“When I finally come home, let’s honeymoon in Spain.

You've heard of Madrid and Barcelona, I'm sure, with all that reading you do."

(laughs)

"I want to love you in the Spanish heat and listen to everything you feel about the art and the literature, the bullfighting and dancing. Let's learn Spanish, my darling. Te quiero. I love you. J."

(LENA is crying. She puts the letters aside on a table or floor. She slowly recovers.)

LENA (CONT.)

I miss him.

(LENA relaxes and reclines in the tub, maybe putting her head back. She breathes slowly and deeply, stopping herself from crying. She begins to mess with the water a bit, as one might do when alone and thoughtful, by making waves and ripples. She traces designs or words on herself with the water, eventually going to touch herself. She stops abruptly, feeling embarrassed and guilty. She looks toward the room where Jim might be. She returns to the letters.)

LENA (CONT.)

"I want to love you in the Spanish heat and listen—"

(LENA's cell phone rings. She isn't expecting a call. She reaches for it and answers with a start.)

LENA (CONT.)

Shannon?

SHANNON

Mom—hey, how's your morning?

LENA

Um, good, yeah. I've just been reading.

SHANNON

You alright? You sound distracted.

LENA

(LENA puts the letters down.)

Yes, I'm just fine. How're you doing?

SHANNON

Oh, I'm great. I—Roxy's back for the weekend and I was wondering if you wanted to see her? It's been a while since you two—

LENA

That sounds wonderful. You're right; it's been too long.

SHANNON

Great, so you're free?

LENA

Well there hasn't exactly been a lot on my schedule lately.

SHANNON

Right, since Dad—

LENA

I'll cook.

(LENA begins to stand and wrap a towel around herself.)

LENA (CONT.)

I have some tomatoes from Wednesday's farmer's market. I didn't know what to do with them, but they're gorgeous. Maybe some caprese or spaghetti and—

SHANNON

Perfect, Ma.

(pause)

Thank you.

LENA

Can I expect you around five?

SHANNON

Five? Is that when you eat? Holy— Never mind. We'll be there at six.

LENA

I love you. I can't wait to see you both.

SHANNON

Love you. We'll be there, Ma.

(SHANNON hangs up. LENA laughs a bit as she dresses.)

III.

Setting: The dining room of the house. Some hours have passed.

At Rise: LENA, ROXY, SHANNON, and JIM sit at a table mid-dinner. There is no place setting for Jim and he does not eat.

SHANNON

Well, I wasn't in Bangkok the whole time; they wanted me to write about the waterfalls on Ko Kut. A small island off the coast?

LENA

And you didn't speak the language?

SHANNON

Yeah, they speak Thai there. I mean, I picked up a few words and I met a few English speakers, but yeah, Thai.

LENA

Goodness, I'd love to do something like that.

JIM

No, you don't, love. Sounds unsafe.

(LENA looks at him sternly. ROXY and SHANNON are confused at what she is doing.)

JIM (CONT.)

What? She could get hurt.

ROXY

One of my friends says that if she could have one superpower, she'd want to speak every single language. So she could connect with anyone, she says.

LENA

Wise girl. I'd like to think we have something in common.

ROXY

Did you ever learn any?

LENA

I learned some Latin in school when I was young, but it never really came in handy. I don't remember much now. Later, I learned enough Spanish to keep up with your grandfather.

(to SHANNON)

Your dad and I were going to—

JIM

(dismissing)

Why do you keep bringing that up, dear? That's an old fantasy.

LENA

Are you taking a language class at that college of yours?

ROXY

Yeah, Mandarin, actually. And I was thinking of picking up Arabic too.

LENA

Sounds like you're doing good in school.

JIM

(stern)

Better than Shannon ever did.

LENA

(joking)

Better than your mom ever did.

SHANNON

(slightly offended, but laughing)

Yeah, well I hope so.

(pause)

Did Rox tell you she got all A's last semester? She's—

ROXY

Thanks, Mom.

JIM

(laughing)

Sounds like she's got her brains from us.

LENA

(trying to make Roxy more comfortable)

Sounds like you take after your grandfather. I'm sure he would've been pleased to hear that. He was always so obsessed with academics, you know, as much as he liked to complain about teaching...

ROXY

Oh, I wouldn't say I'm obsessed or anything, I just like my classes...

LENA

Well, I'm glad, dear. Are you still thinking of going into architecture?

ROXY

Yeah, I've been taking some of the courses this semester. They're really—

SHANNON

Rox, tell Lena about your formal.

JIM

Since when does she call you by your first name?

LENA
Since you—
(She realizes it appears she's talking to ROXY and SHANNON, as they can't see or hear JIM.)

LENA (CONT.)
Never mind. Sorry. Do tell?

SHANNON
You okay, Mom? You seem like you're being pulled in a million directions.

LENA
No, yes. A few directions, but I'm just fine. What was it about a formal?

ROXY
Oh, it's really not a big deal.

LENA
Of course it is!
(to SHANNON)
Why? Does she have a dashing, young date?

SHANNON
(laughing)
I'd say so! She's got a special someone.

JIM
It's about time, isn't it? I can't recall her ever having a boyfriend.

LENA
Oh, that's lovely. I knew Roxy would find a nice man eventually.

(ROXY looks deeply uncomfortable.)

ROXY
Well, they are very nice. We were lab partners in physics and then one day they asked if they could sit with me at lunch and we hit it off. I had a crush on them for a while and then—

SHANNON
They asked her out! Isn't that adorable?

ROXY
And then they asked me out and so we've been a thing for a while and I think we might... love each other? It's been a few months now and I wanted to tell you. They asked me last week to go to the formal.

JIM
"They"?

LENA
I'm so happy for you, dear.

JIM
Aren't you going to ask about it?

LENA
Glad you finally found someone you like.

JIM
Lena—

LENA
(careful)
Um, dear, did you mean "him," before? You had a crush on him?

ROXY
(very tense)
Not exactly. No.

JIM
(confused, a little angry)
I can't believe my granddaughter's—

SHANNON
Go ahead, love.

ROXY
Not really a "him." Not a "her" either, sort of in the middle? Or not on that spectrum at all, you know? They're non-binary. They don't really fit either gender.

(There is a pause where LENA tries to understand and craft a reaction.)

SHANNON
(softly)
Ma?

LENA
(suddenly)
Like Orlando? Maybe you've read that?

ROXY
No—I don't think I have.

LENA
By Virginia Woolf. It's about this character named Orlando. He—She is—They are a nobleman in the seventeenth century who takes a very long nap--

LENA (CONT.)

--and wake up a woman. But some scholars are unsure how to refer to them, since they go through such a change. But for one or two sentences, Woolf refers to Orlando with the singular "they." So it's like that? Maybe? That space between Orlando as a man and as a woman.

(During this, LENA rises and finds her book. She flips to a dog-eared page.)

LENA (CONT.)

And there's this one passage... "For the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each."

(LENA looks up expectantly. ROXY rises and crosses to LENA on the next line.)

ROXY

Sort of! I mean, yes. People have lots of different words for it, now. Words that are all a little different. To fit them. But, yes.

(ROXY, relieved, hugs LENA.)

ROXY

Thank you for trying to understand. For understanding.

JIM

Words, words. But what are they really? I mean, what's... you know...

LENA

(under her breath)

That doesn't matter.

ROXY

What?

LENA

Nothing. I'm so glad I could. I'm so glad you found someone you like and who really cares about you.
(She looks meaningfully at JIM.)

JIM

Fine. If you're okay with your granddaughter being queer...

(It is unclear if JIM uses the word "queer" in the derogatory sense.)

LENA

And what about you? Is it okay if I use "she" for you?

ROXY

(so relieved)

Yes, yes. I can't believe you're being so cool about this.
(pause)

Thank you.

(pause)

There's something else too. While I'm at it.
(laughs weakly)

I'm, um, bisexual. Meaning I don't just like guys.

LENA

Well, I figured. I'm so glad you felt safe enough to tell me.

JIM

You figured? Did you know? You're allowing this? She just said she does like men. Why can't she find one of those? Not this—this—

ROXY

Thank you for making me feel safe.
(ROXY is looking at SHANNON.)
I feel so much better.

SHANNON

(trying to lighten the mood)

Didn't know you could be so progressive, Mom.

JIM

Lena—
(JIM stands.)

LENA

No, I support you. I understand. I want you to feel like you can tell me anything. Thank you for telling me. Now, I'll want to see pictures of you two at the formal. Promise you'll send some?

ROXY

Of course I will.

JIM

Lena, you don't want to condone this. What if she gets hurt? Made fun of?

LENA

It's who you are. Your friends, are they...?

(ROXY is confused about the direction of the conversation.)

ROXY
My friends know. They have known. Some of them are too.

LENA
(looking at JIM)
So, you'll be safe. Not bullied or—

ROXY
No, I mean, no one really cares in college.

(ROXY looks in JIM's direction, following LENA's gaze, but doesn't see him.)

ROXY (CONT.)
I was more worried about telling you.

LENA
Sweetheart, you didn't have to worry about that. Thank you for—

ROXY
Do you think Jimmy would've been okay with it too?

LENA
(careful)
He was a wise man. I do have hope he would have.

(JIM sits.)

SHANNON
You think? I'm not—

LENA
Yes. I do hope. He was... interested in new ideas. Don't forget he was still surrounded by youth in his old age.

(pause)
We were kindred spirits. I like to hope he would've understood.

JIM
I hate when you talk about me in the past tense.

LENA
I guess we won't know for sure, since he's moved on.

ROXY
Thank you for hoping. For me.

JIM
That's bullshit. I care about her, dear, I do. I just want the best for her. Is this the—

LENA
Tell me again how you two ended up together?

ROXY
Their name is Jamie...

(The dialogue fades out with the scene, whether through lights or a rotation of the stage.)

IV.

Setting: The living room, later in the night.

At Rise: After dinner, ROXY is reading on the floor. On the other side of the room, LENA and SHANNON drink and reminisce about JIM.

SHANNON
Do you miss him at all?

LENA
Yes and no. Sometimes I feel as though he's still here. Other times, he feels so far away.
(LENA tries to change the subject.)
And you? Joseph?

SHANNON
No, Ma. It was way different than you two. We both wanted different things. I think it's better now. I'm better. I needed to be alone for a while. But you didn't really choose that, you know?

LENA
No, but I've been thinking. Maybe I do need some time alone. I mean "did," did need.

SHANNON
I'm glad you can think of it that way.
(pause)
I always thought he kind of weighed you down.

LENA
No—well, I don't know. Maybe. I loved him so much. I didn't want to ever leave him; he was my everything, my... heaven. Do you remember that part in Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam" where he describes his version of heaven, of the perfect afterlife?

SHANNON
You know I haven't read everything you have.

LENA

He wrote that when he died, his heaven would be an eternal spring day with his lover, well, “friend.”

(pause)

I thought it might be like that with me and Jim. I felt as if I wanted to sit in this room with him forever. Just stay here and love each other in this home we’ve made together.

SHANNON

Is that still what you want?

LENA

I don’t know. I mean, maybe? Maybe if Jim— Maybe I need to leave here to come back. Yes?

SHANNON

It sounds like you’ve made up your mind.

LENA

I guess I have. I’ve been thinking about traveling. About taking the honeymoon trip your father and I never got to take? The college got in the way. Then all that research in the summer, the books we wrote and read, and well, we never found the time. Don’t get me wrong, I loved teaching—

SHANNON

I don’t think you’ve ever told me about it. The honeymoon.

LENA

Really? I feel like the fantasy of it is never far from my mind. We were going to go to Spain together.

(A pause. LENA begins to tear up. Her voice cracks.)

LENA (CONT.)

I miss him, Shannon. I don’t think it’ll be the same without him.

SHANNON

I know. I understand.

(During SHANNON’s next lines, JIM walks in. He looks like he might try to comfort LENA, but goes to read over ROXY’s shoulder instead. ROXY has been listening discreetly to the conversation.)

SHANNON (CONT.)

I can give you some travel tips, get in touch with some friends who’ve been there and who teach Spanish. I think I’ve already got some pages saved, though I’ve never been there myself...

(LENA is trying to save face with JIM in the room, but she is still tearing up.)

LENA

Thank you, sweetheart. I really might take you up on it.

(pause)

You’ve never been? With all those places you—

SHANNON

No, they really only send me to Asia, but I’ve been to Australia a few times. But never Europe—I guess it’s the more “coveted” position, you know? But I like writing about—

(ROXY realizes that something’s bothering LENA.)

ROXY

Mom, maybe we should go soon? It’s late and I’ve got class in the morning.

SHANNON

You’ll be okay, Lena? I don’t want to leave you here if—

LENA

(smiling weakly)

No, I’m just fine. Roxy’s right: you two should get some sleep.

(ROXY and SHANNON gather their things to leave.)

SHANNON

Okay, but you’d let me know?

LENA

Of course.

SHANNON

Okay, Ma. Check your email. I’ll send that travel stuff over.

(SHANNON and LENA hug and maybe kiss on the cheek.)

LENA

I will, love.

(to ROXY)

And thank you, my dear, for being so brave.

(ROXY and LENA hug tightly.)

ROXY

I love you.

LENA

I love you too. Thank you so much for coming over. It's been delightful to see you. And to have some company.

(ROXY and SHANNON leave through the front door. LENA calls after them.)

LENA (CONT.)

Farewell! Sleep tight!

(LENA closes and locks the door. She pours herself a drink and then sits in her armchair, the same position as this morning. JIM starts.)

JIM

I'm not pleasing company, I suppose.

LENA

It was rude of you to interrupt me like that. And to distract me like that, and when the discussion was so important?

JIM

Well, were you listening to yourself at dinner? You hope I'd be "okay" with—with— oh, you know. What kind of talk is that?

LENA

I would hope you'd support your granddaughter no matter what you think of it. It's not hurting anything.
(pause)

Even if she doesn't know, I—

(pause)

I do think— I think she would've wanted your approval.

JIM

Please stop speaking of me as if I'm not right here, in the present.

LENA

You're not, you're not. You're—

JIM

Dead, I know. I know. But I'm here, with you. I'm still me.

LENA

(LENA blurts out something she's been holding back.)
Are you?

JIM

Yes, I am. What's wrong with me wanting things to stay as they were? As they've always been? Male, female. That's it, Lena.

LENA

Not if some people aren't. And anyway, you shouldn't talk like that. We're talking about your granddaughter's happiness and wellbeing. You're being selfish. Closed-minded!

JIM

But why can't it be like when Shannon was little? When we were sure she'd marry Joseph down the street?

(JIM sits in the second armchair.)

LENA

Shannon's an adult and has been for some time now. And you see how that turned out? With Joseph? Some people aren't cut out for—Some people don't want—

JIM

But remember how happy we were? Why can't it be like that again?

LENA

Because it isn't. Because you're—you're different.

JIM

Dead?

LENA

Actually, no. Not that. Not even that.
(pause)

You once told me you lose your youth the moment you decide you can't change any more. I think you've lost it. You're... old. You've stopped learning.

(pause)

A second death, my dear.

JIM

You feel I've died again.

LENA

Change is good, especially when it's for the people you love most.

JIM

We were happy. We didn't need change!

LENA

Yes, "were."

LENA (CONT.)

(pause)

I haven't been happy for some time.

(pause)

But you know that.

JIM

I'm here.

LENA

No. Not really here, my love. Not really.

(LENA begins to tear up.)

I miss you.

JIM

You don't have to miss me.

LENA

You wouldn't act this way. I know—knew you.

(LENA begins to cry.)

You were so kind. And romantic. You wrote me—do you remember those long, long letters? Do you know I read them over again every day?

(pause)

We were going to travel. You were—

JIM

Why aren't I allowed to change too?

LENA

You are! For the better. You're being narrow and—
and—

JIM

You're the one with this idea of me in your head!

LENA

You're being ridiculous, Jimmy.

JIM

I'm not! I'm being reasonable. I want things to be—

LENA

But what about me? I want to travel, I want to be in love again, I want you to—

JIM

Lena—

LENA

Don't you realize I'm becoming a ghost too? I'm trapped in this house with—

JIM

No one's keeping you here.

LENA

I'm keeping myself. With—with you. These letters. These memories. This gh—

JIM

I'm not just a memory!

LENA

Every day it seems like it more and more, my dear.

(pause)

You should be. Why did you come back?

JIM

I wanted to sit here, with you, for as long as I could. Wanted to stay with you forever. Isn't that what we wanted? We can still—

LENA

We can't. You do know that? You're dead, Jim, and it's about time we face it. We're not as we were. Even when we were like we were, we weren't static! Yes, we would sit here in these chairs, but we moved forward in time and in ideas and in our love. And you would laugh at the things I read you and you would have things to say about them and our lives would move forward together. I can't keep doing this. I—Maybe, after—

JIM

You want me to leave.

LENA

No, I know you'll always be here.

(pause)

I should go.

JIM

(after a long pause)

Will you come back?

(JIM pauses. He realizes this is not the right question.)

Will you find someone else?

LENA

Maybe. You're the great love of my life, Jimmy. But maybe. Maybe it'd be nice to share a bed with someone warm and tangible again. To hold a kind hand.

JIM

He'll be a lucky one.

LENA

Maybe. Maybe I'm like Roxy. I didn't know that was a thing someone could be. Heard of it, yes, but never considered it for myself.

JIM

You don't mean that, dear.

(pause)

Why can't you just stay?

LENA

I don't feel alive, living like this. Overthinking the meanings of the flowers I put on your grave, or being afraid to touch myself because I'm embarrassed that you're in the next room, or pouring morning coffee for two and drinking both mugs myself. I want something other than this same damn lonely day over and over.

JIM

I love you.

LENA

I know that. And I loved you.

(LENA stands.)

LENA

But it's different now that you're gone. You're different. You're—I need more. I should do more for myself. I don't want to be a living ghost.

(Out of compulsion, LENA flips through her copy of Orlando that sits on a table in the living room. She just reminded herself of something. She lands on a dogeared page.)

LENA (CONT.)

"It was the fatal nature of this disease..."

(LENA gestures to the space around her, referencing the situation.)

LENA (CONT.)

"to substitute a phantom for reality."

(As LENA goes to put the book down, she goes to touch JIM on the shoulder or hand.)

LENA (CONT.)

You see, dear?

(LENA realizes all over again that JIM isn't corporeal and is dead. She pulls her hand back slowly in grief.)

A moment passes in which they both recognize JIM's situation before JIM speaks.)

JIM

I can't stop you, can I? You've made up your mind.

LENA

Yes, I believe I have. That's what Shannon said to me, you know.

JIM

You've always been a step ahead of me, Lena.

(LENA shakes her head and smiles.)

You know I can't follow anymore? Not like this.

(pause)

Will you be okay? Without me?

LENA

Yes, I do think I will be.

(The scene ends with a fade to black or a full rotation of the stage.)

V.

Setting: The living room, again. A day or two has passed. A piece or two of dusty, long-unused-until-now luggage sits by the door.

At Rise: JIM is still sitting in his armchair. LENA is putting on a coat. JIM is stressed and anxious for LENA, who is calm and content.

JIM

Do you think you have everything? Passport and—

LENA

Yes, yes, everything, my dear.

(pause)

Thank you. For living and... reliving this life with me.

JIM

But there's more for you. Out there?

(JIM gestures toward the door.)

LENA

Yes, for now. More life. And—and love. If I'm lucky.

(LENA messes with her baggage and her coat. A moment passes as JIM accepts this statement.)

JIM

Where are you going? So I can imagine you there.

LENA

I'll... tell you when I come back, Jimmy. I'll be coming back, you know.

(LENA exits through the door. JIM is left sitting in his armchair.)

JIM

(softly)

I'll be here, waiting.

(JIM accounts for his surroundings and grieves for LENA. He is alone for the first time in a long time. Once he recovers a bit, he notices that LENA left her copy of Orlando for him. He starts at the beginning. He smiles.)

Epilogue

Setting: The living room again, six years later. There are boxes and books scattered around the room.

At Rise: SHANNON and ROXY are sorting LENA and JIM's things.

SHANNON

(holding up a book)

Can you believe they kept all this shit?

ROXY

I think it's sweet, you know? They kept a record.

SHANNON

Of everything they ever read? Between the two of them, we could start a damn library.

(ROXY laughs.)

SHANNON (CONT.)

Are you keeping anything for yourself?

ROXY

I'd love to take it all, but Jamie and I don't exactly have room in that apartment of ours.

(SHANNON laughs.)

ROXY (CONT.)

You've seen it! You can barely see the shelf anymore under all those books. You?

SHANNON

Just their letters.

(pause)

Did you know they were really romantic? Jim always knew just what to say. I didn't ever know—

ROXY

I had no idea.

(JIM walks into the room from the door leading to the dining room/kitchen. He seems content and expectant.)

ROXY (CONT.)

I mean I was young, but he always seemed so—

SHANNON

Well, he did marry your grandmother.

(JIM smiles.)

ROXY

(sighs)

Oh, Lena. Academic, world traveler, book collector...

SHANNON

(laughing)

That should've been in her obituary. Died in Morocco of heart complications. Proudest accomplishment was acquiring a first edition copy of *Franny and Zooey*.

(pause)

Is it too soon to be laughing like this?

ROXY & JIM

Not if it helps.

SHANNON

She would've laughed, I hope.

(pause)

But, Lord, it is a lot of books.

(A pause. LENA walks in the front door. She doesn't carry anything. SHANNON and ROXY carry on sorting books and other items as if the front door hasn't opened and as if LENA isn't in the room.)

JIM

I didn't know whether you'd come back.

LENA
(smiling)
Neither did I.

JIM
(unsure whether he wants to know the answer)
Why did you?

LENA
I thought maybe... we could try again. I—I loved you. I do love you. Maybe we can, maybe—

JIM
You went to Spain?

LENA
(relieved to be interrupted)
Yes, I thought it was quite literary of me. To go to the place we were going to honeymoon.
(pause)
I needed to grieve you properly... So I could keep living.

JIM
I'm sorry.

LENA
You don't need to be. I just needed time. I was being impatient. I—

JIM
No, Lena. I understand now.

LENA
(hesitant)
You... do?

JIM
Look at how happy she is.
(JIM and LENA watch SHANNON and ROXY for a moment.)

JIM (CONT.)
They've been here the last few days. And they visited before that, to take care of the house while you were gone. Just in case you came back.
(pause)
You know, I didn't—I couldn't see them as they were, only as I wanted them to be.
(pause)
Roxy has so much love in her. I could never get in the way of that. And to think I—if I weren't... gone, I would have pushed her away. I'm so... mad at myself

for that. I wouldn't ever want to make her feel unloved, but I would have. I only wanted to protect her. I would've pushed her away instead. I've had so much time to think, Lena.

(LENA gets closer to JIM and takes his hand. This is the first time they've been able to touch each other since JIM died.)

JIM (CONT.)
I'm so proud of her for loving so honestly and—and for telling you! Those years ago. You understood so clearly. You... related. I just didn't want to face it.
(pause)

I always thought queer was such a bad thing to be—My parents never—I mean, I was so scared for her.

LENA
You were doing what you thought was right. You didn't know—

JIM
I should have known. I should have been better.

LENA
I did have hope, my love. Remember?

JIM
I remember.
(pause)
I thought about you all the time. Well, how could I forget?

(JIM pauses and gestures around the house, lingering on ROXY and SHANNON packing books.)

JIM (CONT.)
I read everything you wrote in the margins.

(LENA is overwhelmed and kisses JIM. A moment passes.)

JIM (CONT.)
I missed you so much, my dear.

LENA
I'm so glad you—

JIM
Did you ever find anyone else?

LENA
Yes. Well, I had a few flings at first. It had been so long, Jimmy.

LENA (CONT.)

(pause)

And then there was Elise. We moved in together in Madrid. I—

JIM

Did you love her?

LENA

Yes. Yes, Jimmy. We were in Morocco when I—

JIM

I know.

LENA

I thought about you all the time. And then some days I didn't. It was good. To live again. But once I— well, I couldn't stay.

(pause)

I told you, Jimmy: you're the great love of my life. Isn't that silly of me? To trust love so much? To trust all those years we spent together? I knew how you reacted to Roxy but I still—

JIM

I was ignorant. I—I would never want to hurt either of you.

LENA

I thought I could change you. Is that dumb? I thought maybe... I don't know.

JIM

I can't believe you would come back for me. I'm—

LENA

I wouldn't want to spend my... death any other way. I wanted to try again.

JIM

So did I. I decided to learn again, Lena.

LENA

I love you, you know that?

SHANNON

Look what I found!

(SHANNON holds up Orlando.)

ROXY

Let me guess, a book?

SHANNON

Yes, but look, Rox.

ROXY

Oh! Oh, I remember that one. Lena...

SHANNON

I remember her reading this when I was little. Seems as though she flipped right to the first page again when she finished.

(ROXY takes the book and flips to a random page, reading underlined text.)

ROXY

“And she would be buried here, she reflected, kneeling on the window-sill in the long gallery and sipping her Spanish wine. [...] She, who believed in no immortality, could not help feeling that her soul would come and go forever with the reds on the panels and greens on the sofa...”

SHANNON

She write anything?

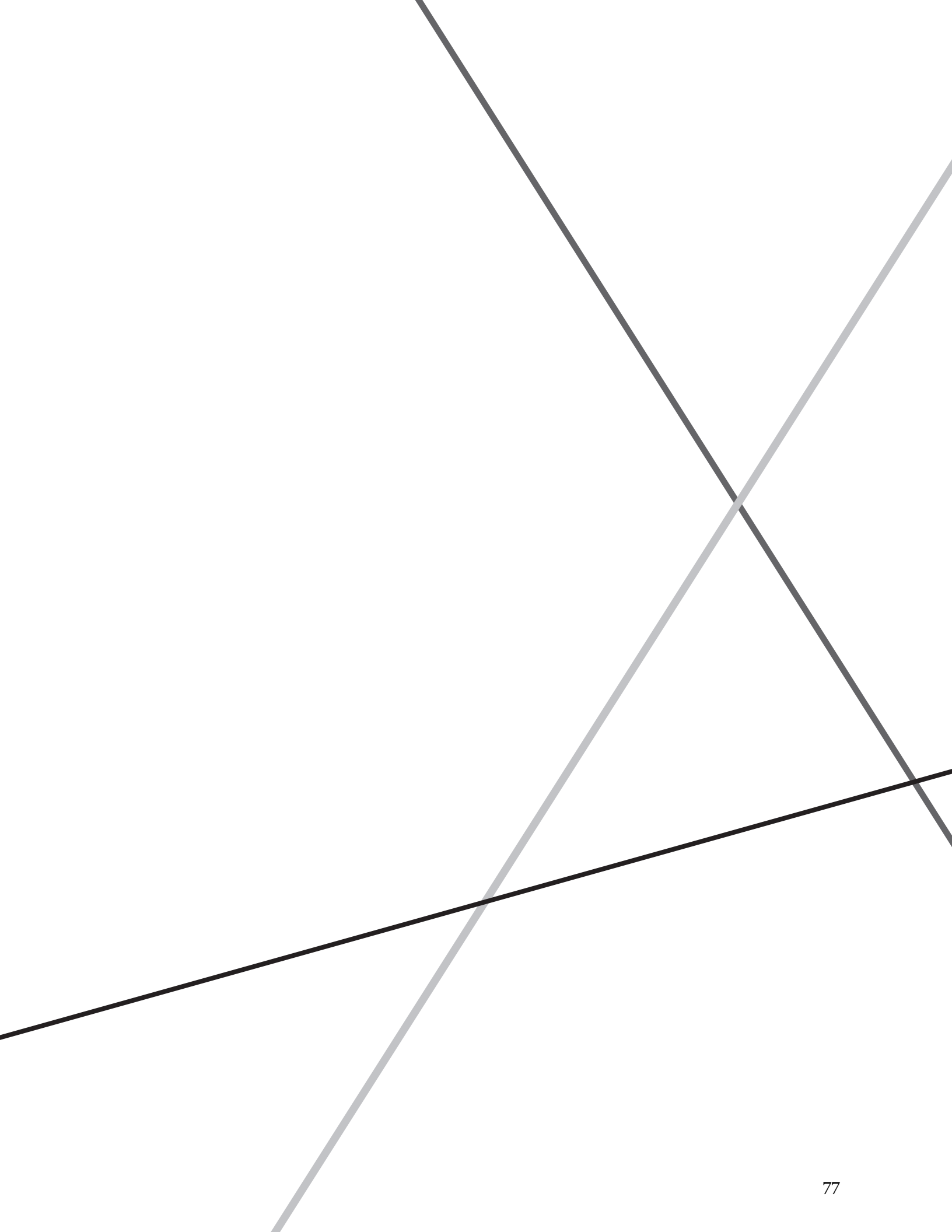
ROXY

Yeah... “Like Tennyson: My heaven. With him.”

JIM

(understanding the reference)

I love you too.



Pocket Scalpel

Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia

Cast of Characters

C: A 32-year-old college counselor living in Durham, NC. Over the past several years she has been dealing with the news that she carries the BRCA-2 Breast Cancer Gene. She must undergo an array of preventative screenings every six months, knowing full well that in the (not too distant) future she will have to remove both her breasts and her ovaries. She has been in a relationship with D. for a decade. They have been long-distance for the past six months.

D: A PhD English literature student living in Athens, GA. Recently, he has been writing short stories about C.'s health issues. Hackneyed existential crises have plagued him through the beginning of the PhD program. He has found solace recently in the publication of one of his short stories. He has been in a relationship with C. for a decade. They have lived long distance for the past six months.

Doctors: The surgery team that C. imagines will one day operate on her.

Swinging Bodies: Dead bodies from the graves in the cemetery through which C. and D. walk.

Setting

Riverside Cemetery contains 87 acres of rolling hills and gardens. It is located within the historic Montford neighborhood near downtown Asheville. Dating back to 1885, it contains more than 13,000 graves, 9,000 monuments, and a dozen mausoleums. There are ancient oak, poplar, dogwood, and ginkgo trees sheltering the paved walkways that overlook the ranges of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains.

Time

The Friday before the Second Annual Women's March. Nighttime. Full Moon.

I.

At Rise: C. and D. walk through the stone arch of the cemetery holding hands. Down among the granite graves, and the towering white oak trees. A huddled group of doctors in white coats and blue masks follows behind them, their scalpels raised—menacingly—above their heads. These doctors duck and cover behind gravestones when they hear noises in the branches. Ridiculous and clumsy, shuffling about in blue shoe-covers, they whisper among themselves, then break loose to encircle the couple, tiptoeing—closer, closer, closer—until C. looks over her shoulder, and they retreat frantically toward a mound of gravestones to hide behind. To collect themselves and begin creeping again. This breaking apart and coming together goes on for the duration of the scene. Both C. and D. remain oblivious to the presence of the stalking doctors.

C

What are we doing out here?

D

We're going to rob a grave.

C

I'm cold and everything looks blue.

D

Faulkner rated him the greatest writer of his generation. The most splendid failure of them all.

C

A gaggle of gung-ho white knights. Proclaiming the pen mightier than the sword.

D

Dos Passos—

C

White.

D

Caldwell—

C

White.

D

Hemingway—

White. C
That's right. White knights riding typewriter horses.
Off to do battle with the status quo. D

Giddy-up. C
Clip-clopping across word-scattered pages. D

Colored ribbons tied into their colorless hair. C

Looped about their worm-burrowed ribs. First, second, third, fourth. D

A lot of good it did. C

Wolfe had the most courage, Faulkner said. D

Faulkner said. C

To experiment, to write down nonsense, to be foolish and sentimental— D

You know that game well, you ink-stained tyro. C

In his monumental attempt to get down the single instance of man's struggle. D

Tyrants. The great burden on the bowed back of the white man. C

Yes ma'am. D

Oh, man. If a boy didn't know any better, he might link arms with his pals, ring around a rosy cross, and declare himself a member of the triple K. Klan. C

White Power. D

Vanilla bean. C

Mayonnaise— D

On white bread. C

But maybe this boy would wear a pussy hat instead. D

Allied in the good fight with a vulva on his head? C

Faulkner said he tried to put it all down in one book. D

Faulkner said, Faulkner said. C

Tried to do more than he could do. Tried to fit the whole world onto the head of a pin. D

Praise be! Amen! C
(crossing herself like a Catholic)
A holy disciple of the pinheaded men!

(making his hands into binoculars and peering through them) D
Always in search of holy wholes. C

Come to witness in the graveyard to the heathens and the witches— C

The hobgoblins and ghosts— D

The savages— C

The half-wild, half-child folk. D

Come to talk down to them. C

Sure. But only as a preacher on a gravestone. D

(D. leaps atop a gravestone, does a pirouet, then jumps back down beside C.)

C
Come to witness to the unwilling congregation.

D
Aren't they always unwilling?

C
Come to tell them how their experience is encompassed in yours.

D
And mine encompassed in theirs, as well!
(shouting)
Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to—

C
Come to fix their experience in place. Come to squeeze them into your book.

D
The whole world on the head of a pin.

C
A butterfly pinned to a page.

D
A necrophiliac on the loose.

C
You would like to have Experience pose for you—naked and silent—on a pedestal.

(C. poses)

D
Stripping rags from corpses to get at their sweet drippings.

C
Only to wrestle it down in the dirt.

D
An angel among the tombstones here. Jacob turning to Israel upon the face of God.

C
Convinced you can explain the way the world works—

D
No, no. I admit to knowing nothing.

C
Explain it all to the queue-sitters in the wings. A Rube Goldberg machine.

D
If not a queue sitter—pray tell—what am I?

C
I don't know, and neither do you. Just an ordinary, average guy?

D
Rough and tumble till daybreak among holy feathers and sex parts. We did it down at Faulkner's grave with PBRs in hand.

C
We did it down at Faulkner's grave. We did it down at Faulkner's grave.

D
Come on. It will only take a minute.

C
The queue-sitters are not sitting. They carry knives and bludgeons behind their backs.

(All the doctors hide their scalpels behind their backs.)

D
Ready to topple monuments, I am sure! And I am with them.

C
Are you?

D
A Durham-ite through and through. Let us begin the ransacking. Let us dance the dance of death.

C
Go down in a spout of flames.

D
Fuck corpses till daybreak.

C
I'm holding my breath.

(Cue Doc Watson's "Tom Dooley." Bodies begin falling from the white oak trees. Tied with nooses to the limbs, to swing like wind chimes, bumping against one another. The doctors peek from behind their gravestones.

They creep out and hide behind the dangling bodies,
surprised every time a carcass swings this way or that
to expose them.)

D

Zebulon Vance is buried over there. The war governor
of the South. Defender of Tom Dooley.

(C. stands rooted in place as D. runs about pointing at
gravestones and calling out names. He reads facts from
a little notebook he has pulled from his back pocket.
The doctors circle around C. as she talks. When D. runs
back towards her they scatter. Then circle around her
again. When she takes a step, or uses her arms, or rais-
es her voice, they scatter.)

C

You know I went to the doctor today.

D

And William Sidney Porter, over here. O. Henry! O.
Henry! And Lamar Stringfield, the composer of savage
songs.

C

Before I drove up the mountain. There were can-
cer patients wandering the hallways, moon-faced.
Bald-headed. Looking like they might float free.

D

And over there, Kenneth Noland under a bull's-eye in
the snow.

(He draws concentric circles with his toe)

C

They circled me. Singing. In warbling orbits.

D

Here on this black mountain paying homage to Klee.
An old angel made new in every expression of the
abstract.

C

Why can't we get at it?

D

The angel of history, blown back. From paradise. You
can't go home again, my friend.

SWINGING BODIES

You can't go home again, my friend. You can't go
home again.

D

The dead are dead for good.

C

I saw that empty look in their eyes.

SWINGING BODIES

The dead are dead for good.

C

In the waiting room there were advertisements for
Prilosec and Levitra on either side of the advertise-
ment for the Golden Corral Buffet.

D

A funnel cloud of spilled wreckage, beginning bloody
back there.

(Kenneth Noland's "Beginning" bathes the scene—a
switch flipped—everything encompassed in the bull's-
eye.)

SWINGING BODIES I & III

Beginning.

SWINGING BODIES II & IV

Bloody.

SWINGING BODIES I & III

Beginning.

SWINGING BODIES II & IV

Bloody.

D

We stare at the storm, arm-in-arm with Mr. Noland—

C

Arm-in-arm with my mother—

D

The catastrophe caught in our collective wings. Prog-
ress billowing skyward.

C

Progress, we sing.

DOCTORS

Progress. Progress.

D

Limping backward through.

Blue.	BODY I	C	I knocked on her window. And asked if she needed any help. She turned and banged her forehead into the glass. She left a greasy smudge. She wasn't crying anymore.
Black.	BODY II		
White.	BODY III	D	Rococo fictions like twisted taffy wrapped into his autobiography.
Green.	BODY I	C	When I pulled out my cellphone—I don't know who I was going to call, I just pulled it out—she cracked open her door and threw a brown paper bag onto the concrete. It thumped—lifeless—when it hit the ground.
Red.	BODY II		
Round.	BODY III		
Rings.	D	D	Real life in impressionistic poetry.
(Kenneth Noland's "Beginning" flicks off like a light bulb.)		C	I did it, she said. I did it. I stepped on it.
And as I was walking into the building, a young woman ran out of the revolving door. Crying her eyes out. She was maybe twenty-five. Her arms crossed over her breasts like someone was trying to steal them.	C	D	The last voyage.
And here, the golden Wolfe on the fold of this purple mountain majesty.	D	C	I thought it would fly away, she said.
SWINGING BODIES You can't go home again, my friend. You can't go home again.		D	The longest.
She was sitting—stock still—in her car when I finished with my own appointment. Staring straight through her windshield at nothing at all.	C	C	But it didn't.
SWINGING BODIES You can't go home again.		D	The best.
(unfolding a sheet of paper from his little notebook)	D	SWINGING BODIES	You can't go home again, my friend.
T-O-M. (bending to the grave with a pencil in his hand)		D	(turning to C.) Didn't what?
The greatest writer of his generation. The biggest failure of them all.		C	(walking back toward him, the doctors scattering) You haven't been listening. You haven't even asked about my day. Unconcerned—apparently—about the doctors' visits.

(The doctors, their scalpels upraised, walk back and forth behind the couple. Back and forth behind the swinging bodies. Brooding.)

D

I was saving it for supper.

C

We haven't seen each other in a month. And you don't even think to ask?

D

I do. I was going to. I've been writing about it, you know.

C

You never asked me about that either.

D

Yes, I did.

C

No. You didn't. You told me you were writing about it. Then you published that story—

D

It's not even about you.

C

Yes, it is.

D

Maybe loosely.

(The doctors duck, and crouch behind the leaning gravestones, a pathetic attempt at hiding.)

C

(turning and walking away)

They said there's nothing wrong. Yet.

SWINGING BODIES

Yet. Yet. Yet. Yet. Yet. Yet. Yet.

(D. shoves the notebook back into his back pocket, and runs after her but sees something on the ground that catches his attention. He bends and picks up a scalpel, examines it, slides it into his pocket [conspicuously] beside his notebook, and hustles to catch up to her.)

C

It's all a waiting game.

SWINGING BODIES

Yet. Yet. Yet. Yet. Yet. Yet.

C

Waiting. Until we can't put it off any longer.

SWINGING BODIES

You can't go home again, my friend. You can't go home again.

(They exit through the stone archway. The doctors follow with their scalpels held above their heads, creeping on tiptoes like villains in a horror film. The bulls-eye of Kenneth Noland's "Beginning" once again bathes the scene.)



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141 E COLLEGE AVE, DECATUR, GA 30030
(404) 471-6000 | www.agnesscott.edu