

53RD ANNUAL WRITERS' FESTIVAL

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE



Agnes Scott College 53rd Annual
Writers' Festival

April 2nd-5th 2024

Writers' Festival Magazine Staff

Avery Best '25, Lead Fiction Editor, Playwriting Editor, Promotions Team
Kaela Brooks '24, Promotions Director, Design Team
Ollie Elgison '25, Lead Playwriting Editor, Fiction Editor, Promotions Team
Julia Franck '24, Nonfiction Editor, Playwriting Editor
Angela Gregory '25, Co-Editor-in-Chief, Poetry Editor, Fiction Editor
Danielle Holliday '25, Poetry Editor, Playwriting editor
Kelsey Houston '25, Lead Nonfiction Editor, Fiction Editor
Taylor Johnson '24, Lead Poetry Editor, Design Team
Eli Kuhn '24, Co-Editor-in-Chief, Nonfiction Editor
Syd Little '25, Promotions Director, Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor
Jaliyah Parish '25, Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor, Promotions Team
Julia Skowronek '25, Lead Fiction Editor, Poetry Editor, Promotions Team
Megan Smith '25, Fiction Editor, Nonfiction Editor
Julian Uhlman '25 Lead Playwriting Editor, Poetry Editor
Alayna Weber '25, Lead Designer, Nonfiction Editor
Ben Sandman, Instructor

Selection Committee

Ambalila Hemsell, Poetry Judge
Ashley Farmer, Fiction Judge
Beth Marzoni, Creative Nonfiction Judge
Jen Beagin, Playwriting Judge

For the comfort and safety of our readers, the editors would like to include the following content warnings: Blood and violence, opioid use, abuse, death and grief, murder, discussions of racism, isolation.

All works printed in this magazine remain the property of authors and may be submitted for publishing elsewhere.

Cover Image: Michael Jones, "Slick City II" 28" x 43" mixed medium, collage, spray paint

Note from the Editors

Dear Reader,

By picking up this magazine, you have become a part of a tradition that has historically brought together literary enthusiasts, authors, and creatives alike through the imaginative and creative prowess of students across the state of Georgia. The Writers' Festival strives to uplift the voices of a wide variety of authors, allowing readers to get a taste of all kinds of unique pieces. What brings everything together, though, is the amount of time and care that has been devoted to the creation of both the pieces themselves and the magazine as a whole. As you read, we ask that you recognize the hard work and dedication that the Editing and Publishing/Writers' Festival team has put in to make this project a success. We thank you, too, for continuing this decades-long tradition that wouldn't be possible without our readers and their passion and support for the next generation of distinguished authors.

Angela Gregory '25 and Eli Kuhn '24

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 headlining author. 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 Steven R. Guthrie Memorial Writers' Festival Contest 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 Shole Wolpé, Beth Ann Fennelly, and Leticia Urieta '09. 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 Rachel A. Bowser, Eleanor Hutchen '40, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. Special thanks to Bobby Meyer-Lee, chair, and other members of the English department at Agnes Scott College.

Table of Contents

Poetry

“Aubade, Constructed as Burgeoning Low” by Sherri–Ann Forde, Georgia College and State University	8
“A Long Time Ago She Dreamt of Horses” by Nellie Cox, Georgia State University	8
“Confessionals” by Kiyanna Hill, Georgia State University.....	9
“elegy for isaac” by Julian River, Agnes Scott College.....	10
“Ladies’ Church League Softball (with Children in Tow)” by Nellie Cox, Georgia State University.....	11
“for my friend the dancer” by Alice Ashe, Georgia State University.....	12
“None of Me Was the Same” by Kiyanna Hill, Georgia State University.....	14
“For Peggy Rich” by Sherri–Anne Forde, Georgia College and State University.....	15
“Onomatopoeia” by O–Jeremiah Agbaakin, University of Georgia (Athens).....	17
“Self–portrait as dividing line” by Jillian Koopman, Georgia State University.....	18

Fiction

“Dear Ma” by Iquadine Osbourne, Mercer University.....	22
“Lasius or The Undertaker” by Eli Kuhn, Agnes Scott College.....	26
“Penguin’s Detour” by Rohan Shah, Columbus State University.....	30
“Raohe Night Market” by Karen (Sugi) Sims, Georgia State University.....	36
“The Registry” by Leah Franqui, Georgia State University.....	39
“We Did This for Our Friend” by Ian Lindsay, Georgia State University.....	45
“The Silent Strike” by Cameron Carter, Georgia State University.....	55

Nonfiction

“Ad Astra” by Sofia Navarro, Georgia Southern University.....	68
“Enough” by Florine Jordan, Agnes Scott College.....	77
“Anything but Light” by Willow Crabtree, Mercer University.....	80
“Cemetery” by Audrey Gleason, University of North Georgia.....	90
“Death and Rebirth” by Lauren Miller, Agnes Scott College.....	92
“The Story of Dad” by Antoinette Milcherska, Agnes Scott College.....	98
“Enough” by Courtney Wilson, Agnes Scott College.....	105

Playwriting and Screenwriting

“The Carnevale Conundrum; or, The Libertine’s Progress” by Jessica DeMarco Jacobson, University of Georgia (Athens).....	116
--	-----

“Elmer and Paul” by Theodore Golden, Columbus State University.....136
“Mors et Vita” by Elizabeth Cooper, Georgia College and State University....153
Honorable Mentions.....162

Poetry

**Aubade, Constructed as Burgeoning
Low**

Sherri-Anne Forde, *Georgia College and State
University*

Staring out the bathroom window, I whisper *Look
alive*

I watch the bronzing of the sky that
burns a golden heat onto my face

I look in the mirror and wish it could stay
It looks prettier than when my face is bare
Prettier than when my face is alone

Did I say the golden heat
burns my face somewhat prettier?
That my face is alone,

barely alive when it's not burning?
Look alive
More plainly

I wish I weren't me
I wish the sun would stay with me
almost exclusively

More plainly –

mornings bring a low spirit that burgeons
and when I abandon the window
the sun leaves me ugly

Leaves me heatless and gray
like the derelict housing off Avenue B
that tells itself to *Look alive*
in hopes that it won't collapse

in on itself, there
on the corner of the block

where
gray-haired Esther
feeds the pigeons that crowd the doorway
with a glove-encrusted hand

She is beautiful
The sun catches her silver strands
and turns them salt white

A Long Time Ago She Dreamt of Horses

Nellie Cox, *Georgia State University*

Awed by sequins and danger,
my mother watched the diving horses
at the steel pier—their riders ripe
with daredevil swagger.

She told me of the girl blinded
when she hit the water wrong
but kept diving anyway, even in darkness,
the crowd's din her oxygen.

My mother spent girlhood afternoons
sketching herself in a red bodysuit and boots,
black hair ponied high,
leading a white steed to the edge
of an elevated platform, awaiting the gunshot.

Then, at twenty-one, my mother
was called by God to wipe forbidden shadow
from her eyes. Cover her body
in ankle skimming dresses.

And after a year of homemade casseroles
and submitting to her husband's will,
she jumped into her minister's pool
by tiki torchlight — the backyard fragrant
with hyacinth and chlorine —
and she was reborn.

ConfessionalsKiyanna Hill, *Georgia State University*

forgive my mind – it doesn't treat
 me well there's a heap
 of heat at the base of my skull there's a child
 gnawing at my ankles
 i trail blood through the damned house
 little studs on the carpet

forgive my mind – i don't treat
 it well crushing the long
 necks of tulips i chew the blooms
 whole my white teeth
 pollen stained i look in the mirror
 & see myself ghosted, daughterless

i don't treat her well – forgive me
 i sleep all day i feed
 off the night the child wails,
 luring me into another dream

forgive my mind – halved & parched
 bury me in a field of white
 forgive the tulips that grow from my body
 forgive them for growing upside down

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

elegy for isaac

Julian River, *Agnes Scott College*

"to live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing." – anne carson, red doc>

you didn't die on that mountain,
but you died on that mountain.

maybe God just wanted someone
to feel, if only for a moment,

what it's like to lead a son
to the slaughter.

we all hunger
to be understood.

even now, your lips still taste
like altar wood, phantom smoke

curling through teeth.
the rope your father taught

you how to weave stinging
against the red meat of the wrist.

does it give you comfort
to know these things?

to know you're holy enough
to be an offering?

good lamb of your God,
stock of your father's creed.

this is a fever song—
whatever burns

burns,
& you keep the body.

Ladies' Church League Softball (with Children in Tow)

Nellie Cox, *Georgia State University*

Sunday mornings, our mothers huddled
on the pitcher's mound wearing crisp ringer tees,
their long hair braided down their backs.
The big kids lined up bats where chainlink met grass
and kept the toddlers off the bleachers during warmups.
we cheered as our mothers stole bases and hit home runs,
that beautiful horde of grass-stained housewives, feral
in the field, getting loose. Punching mitts.

From the dugout, you could barely see the shortstop's backtalk
shiner or the catcher's split
lip. But when the third base coach waved
runners home, her slinged arm flapped like a clipped wing.
Our fathers always stayed home to rest.
To ice their fists.

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

for my friend the dancer

Alice Ashe, *Georgia State University*

Early evening, maybe six. Sun slipping toward the horizon
but still whistling

its clean light through tangled branches.

You missed your friend's call

an hour ago, and when you pull into the driveway

she's already standing

on your front porch, greasy pizza box perched precariously on the branch
of a thin forearm. Her red topknot frizzing

in the June humidity, loose

strands curling behind her ear

and against her soft jaw. Scuffed peony-pink
enamel peeling from the pointed toes of her flats.

You unload your sleeping infant

from his car seat, shift

and settle him onto your shoulder.

Let your friend inside.

And inside, her wrists tremble.

Lips shine.

I'm leaving Nick, she says.

I won the lottery, she says.

Three million dollars, she says. When I was in L.A. last weekend.

*I'm going back to school, buying
a townhouse in the city.*

*You and the baby can come live with me, rent free. I'm leaving Nick,
for real this time.*

I've figured it all out.

I miss you.

She eats none of the pizza she brought, swoops away
in a Lyft, doesn't respond

to your calls or your texts the next day

or the next, or the next.

Three weeks later

calls you back:

she's been in the hospital
did she stop by

your house a few weeks ago?

Did she say anything strange? She can't remember clearly.

Did she say

she won some money? She dreamed

she won some money. Did she tell you

she was leaving Nick? She's sorry

if she told you she was leaving Nick. She dreamed

she was leaving Nick.

She accidentally took too many pills. She fell

or something, maybe, down the stairs by her apartment.

She

dreamed

she was a ballerina. She was practicing her *grand jeté*.

She can't remember clearly,

just woke up bandaged

in a paisley patient gown. She dreamed

she was a swan in flight.

Concussion, bruising, stitches, et cetera.

She dreamed

she was an angel,

haloed, swathed in sheets of pure moonlight.

She's sorry

if she scared you. She dreamed she was a dainty figurine,

porcelain, delicately painted,

flaxen-haired and rosy-cheeked and perched atop a flaming tree. Don't

worry.

She's fine now. She dreamed

a dozen empty rooms were wrapped in gold

and silver at her feet. They shook like bells and sang

to her. They crooned

like sirens from the deep.

Scaled and shimmering

in the night. Swaying under rippled light. Casting

ragged melodies.

None of Me Was the SameKiyanna Hill, *Georgia State University*

// i took my old heart //
 // wet & glutinous //
 // i dug to the earth's core //
 // i shielded the hole in my chest //
 // with glass, charged my new heart //
 // buffed kyanite in the sun //
 // i charted my body //
 // learned how to let it be //
 // anticipated change like a pulse //
 // my bones gesturing rain //
 // i grew tall, climbed trees //
 // used my nails to keep me //
 // steady // i teased branches //
 // i whittled with my new teeth //
 // built traps to keep myself safe //
 // sometimes i heard your voice //
 // i climbed higher //
 // i woke to newness //
 // swallowed whatever fruit //
 // was bore whole //
 // i lost myself in full //
 // canopies // in a crowned darkness //
 // sometimes i wanted you to see //
 // this new me //
 // sometimes i dreamed of jumping //
 // sometimes a vine kept a tight //
 // leash on my ankle

For Peggy Rich

Sherri-Anne Forde, *Georgia College and State University*

[Virginia, 1866. A black woman named Peggy Rich reported that a white man assaulted her. After being released on bail, he attacked Ms. Rich again. He was later acquitted of both charges.]

Ms. Rich, what must you have felt
when they let him out? You must have
left the potatoes boiling on the stove
when a neighbor banged at your door
with the news. You must have paced
the kitchen, preparing for his revenge
while those potatoes boiled over and
wet your linoleum. I know you
were no fool—you knew

what that report against a
white man meant. Your hands
must have shaken with dreadful
anger as you sopped up the water
with your red dish cloth and
smoothed the pleats
in your skirt in an effort to
gain your composure. Was
anyone there with you, Ms. Rich?
You must have fought tooth and
nail to keep your door shut. Your
nails must have had his skin
caught underneath them. His skin
must have bled red from your
scratches for days to come.

You were revolutionary. Ms. Rich,
I've been reading about flowers lately.
Some words that describe you that also
describe them: *withstanding*, *cold-hardy*,
perennial. Lilies are all of those things.
Did you have any in your yard? You must have
had a green thumb that knew of
nourishing and soil. You must have
tilled the earth knowingly, willing
beauty and bounty to bloom in your life
regardless. Flowers have a way
of making even the wrongs feel

bearable. And the bearing has a way
of bringing in the fury.

Did anyone witness that bearing,
Ms. Rich? Maybe you had a daughter.
A little body learning to create her own
beauty and furor by watching yours.
Maybe she hid in the broom
closet where you told her to
stay safe. Maybe the broom closet
became a sanctuary where
she worshipped the fury with lilies
from the yard. Maybe other women
from your town sent flowers to
contribute to the shrine in that closet.
Maybe women from neighboring
towns sent their daughters to help
your daughter make the shrine too big
to be contained. Maybe when the shrine
left the broom closet, its altar entered
the living rooms and kitchens and
bedrooms of the daughters who helped
to build it. And maybe
it also lives on the mahogany kitchen table
in my grandmother's third-floor walk-up,
Ms. Rich. I've brought twelve daffodils
and their goldenness inside.

Onomatopoeia

O–Jeremiah Agbaakin, *University of Georgia, Athens*

I deny every responsibility for what
you think I mean, for your father on
earth who answered that your prayer
voiced a threat, that your law degree
was his arrest warrant. You didn't know
what to believe, so you left the prayer
spot, became wild as a song, became
a minstrel. I deny every responsibility.
But sometimes, I scrawl. I hoot. I ache
or ach. I tweet. I bloom. I cloud your
thoughts: Kai. Haba, without explanation.
I beep the dead with their numbers
shuffled. I am my heaviness, o you
hard of listening. Don't you tremble
at the thra! of the thunder god, Sango?
Don't you believe the emperor unbridled
the noose to heaven, broke the horse and
the harness free? Have you considered
my mascot, *Loxodonta*? There's no outrage
like his. Tóòbá mọ erin, sóògbọ ohùn erin?
If you've not met a herd, don't you hear
the stampede, their musth rumble, bellow,
fanfare, and squeal? Their *tsk tsk* over a tusk
poached, their growl as the forest retreats?

Self-portrait as dividing lineJillian Koopman, *Georgia State University*

We have a new game,
 my son and I, though I'm not sure
 I want to play. It goes
 like this: he tosses toys over the gate
 that divides the hall
 from our basement steps, and I lope
 over the self-imposed
 strain to get them. Elmo doll, green ball,
 juice box, down they
 go, and he'll wail until I straddle my gait
 like his Buzz Lightyear
 doll with its moveable head though still
 unable to sit up straight.
 Now, to shake things up, I've started
 making new lines:
 I leave the toy, teaching him instead
 about life's cruel streak,
 how it grabs what you want, places it
 just out of reach.
 Each day now he asks for the creek
 that forms the edge
 of our neighbor's backyard, its wriggling
 vein, loose stones and ,
 muddy curve. He'll yank me toward his
 blue rubber boots,
 his mind like an arrow, body a furrow
 for desire's flood.
 We trudge the creek, find a ridged black
 drainage pipe where
 shadows crouch and noises trickle.
 He wants to climb,
 hold, splash, to hide and be found,
 and I am there as
 a hand to hold or an arm separating him
 from danger, a hook
 dragging him home for dinner, a worn
 down bed beneath
 fresh rage, my body a gate and a wall,
 a tunnel and a creek,
 carrier of debris and transporter
 of wanted things,
 an edge or a base, a home or brief
 resting place, each

morning renewing itself like the sky
 between trees, uniting
 what forks, delivering what is lost
 to found, propped up
 and a prop, always sought and never
 found, brute force of
 nature and midday lull, grated against
 and grateful.

Fiction

Dear Ma

Iquadine Osbourne, *Mercer University*

That time I watched you from behind the couch. It was dark behind the couch. I watched you make grandma's breakfast: callaloo and saltfish with boiled bananas and yams. The entire room was filled with sunlight—or was it your presence? Your headwrap—half-removed—revealed charcoal plaits, a mix with silverish strands.

The sun had yawned, its arm stretching over everything, illuminating your face—sweat trickling from your forehead, collecting a puddle inside your chest. Your eyeballs, undiscovered, to this day, are the hardest book for me to read.

Your hands were the busiest. They held aluminum without potholders, peeled and diced, all while tending to the sweat that slithered onto your face.

You will complain about that later, how the pain stings, how it fluctuates from muscle to fingertip, lingering underneath your flesh. The steam flooded the roof of the kitchen, drawing bubbles on the top of your nose.

I wanted to blow them away. You never sat down, even though veins popped from your legs like sores.

I watched you, Ma, but you never watched me.

*

I asked. "Would you do this for the rest of your life in the same place?"

You nodded. There was something

sweet about that. The way milk swirls in coffee to become one. What you did not say was that you wanted to belong to a place that has always belonged to you. To be seen by a place that never shuts its eyes. To be released into something that would always catch you. To be greeted by the dead who speak your language.

*

May 17, 2014. Grandma's body. Flat and motionless. An ebony aura calls from the mattress. The sun peeked through the curtains, falling flat on images—images of a life lived and of a life left behind. An otherworldly hiss dissolved into the backdrop of the evening. No sound. Just footsteps. Footsteps of the dead leaving.

I watched you.

Your face in anguish as grief capitalized on the opportunity to free itself from captivity. Your grief—stored up like rain. Any minute now the skies will darken, and the belly of the clouds will burst. But your body refused to let go. Your arms you threw over her as a shield. Your frame now between hers and death. But grief is determined—armed with bullets. She aims. Your knees buckle as each one hits your torso, breaking your fall. Your body announces it with a loud thud.

I look away.

Your insides now a measure of holes and ash. You've lost the fight, you strong—grief stronger. Grief inhabited your limbs like a voracious demon, the soul disappearing before it opened your mouth to medicate you, and you swallowed like you had done for me so many

times. *Don't worry ma, it'll only make you better.* I can't see much of your face anymore. It's swollen, overrun with strangeness. Your eyes and nose no longer where they used to be.

That was the first time I saw grief, until now. It sat on your face, hand-in-hand with the sun, dancing overtop Grandma's dead body.

*

I sit nervously on a therapist's couch. One hand in my lap, the other piercing my flesh, my brain wishing blood would come. I look at him. He looks at me and he sees grief with her crude arrogance and expensive language—rich off our inheritance.

He looks again. This time he sees me young—untouched. The way mothers see daughters. But life had dispensed its fair share. My body not like yours. But just like yours. A gallery that remembers like the rain remembers the earth.

"You're grieving," he says. It wounded me the way a newborn's cry cuts the sky. His voice was the sound of someone eulogizing a funeral, a soft, pitiful tone that waited patiently to be lauded with a comforting embrace. Could I be grieving, and my body not know? My brain researched. Quite possibly. Could I be standing so close to a dead body that instead of burying it, my body made a home of its shell?

Am I angry, stuck in denial maybe, bargaining with some anonymous force, or am I simply depressed? Have I accepted my fate? Which fate? My body held no signs of either. My face is still my face. My eyes are still my

eyes. Yet there is an ugly thing inside me. Just like what was inside you. Was it grief? Does grief change a person?

*

That time I called you from school, crying a puddle of tears. The teacher's words slapped my skin the way a belt touches a buttock. And I cried. I cried for you, Ma. But you could not answer as you had a gun pointed at your head. The gun heavy, forcing your head back as the cold metal landed on your jaw. You flinch. Your eyes still looking ahead. Your arms wishing they were strong enough to overtake him. But you sit still. Your body quiet as a graveyard—your skin refused to say a word. He told you to remove the contents from your bag. When you refused, his fingers tightened around the trigger as if eager or scared. Something galloped inside your stomach.

I watched you again.

Your eyes now, not crying, but crying—I could taste every salty tear. They washed your face like the dew washes the leaves on the trees that crowd grandma's grave.

Grandma you are not forgotten, the dead lives in our skin.

The corner of your eyes is fixed on metal. But not the metal. Your eyes looking at me, looking at us.

*

My therapist taps his pen on his lap. He's getting impatient, he wants to know, Ma, why I'm sad. I look at you, and you look at Grandma. Then the three of us burst out

laughing. For a moment though, we swallow—fear, the one that has kept our mouths shut while on the inside we bleed, fester, and rot. He looks, but he can't see the three of us crammed together on the small gray couch.

I am nervous again, my fingers tap the arm of the couch, your hands fall on top of mine, bringing it to calm, although he can't see.

Don't let go, Ma.

*

That time I watched you from behind the couch. Dad left; his clothes packed in a bag. You lay in the fetal position, your face in hand. Silent like the moon. So, at eight and three-quarters, I raised my legs and forced my way into your lap, my body safe between your arms, and looked into your eyes. You'll ask me later how I knew you were in pain. I told you I didn't. But I lied. It was your eyes, Ma, your eyes that told me. That's how we speak, you and I, we have no voice. Our eyeballs mirror the proverbs of our soul. The living mock, *'the women with no language.'*

*

I dreamt once that you called me. Your voice was distinctive over all the other voices, even though I was lost in a crowd. But I heard your voice. The way I always hear your voice. You were standing over an open flame, stew bubbling, you placed some onto a spoon, and told me to *open my mouth*—there was a pause. When I did, grief flew out—like birds. My therapist begins to write something on a piece

of paper. He is convinced that I need more help than he can provide. *Nonsense*. Maybe he will prescribe rest or pills. Maybe a weekly visit will get bumped up to two or three.

To kill some time, Ma and I speak in proverbs: **Wa nuh kill yuh—fatten yuh, long run—short ketch**. When I finally opened my mouth, Ma's mouth opened, then Grandma's. We speak. It shocked him. His eyes rolled forward, watching but mostly listening.

I kept on speaking.

*

Dear Ma,

That time I watched you from behind the couch—I wish I could have watched you forever, but I got up from behind the couch and peeled and diced—so your feet could rest. This time we made your favorite soup, the one where pumpkin seed escaped through the side of the pot and landed on the stove. The one where the liquid's so rich, it scratched our throats. Do you remember, Ma? Do you remember how our stomachs jiggled as the liquid seeped inside and stood where grief was?

I start over.

*

Dear Ma,

Now that I have found my voice, I would like you to be the first to hear it. I am a year older, though you will never see it. My

skin keeps asking for you, it waits for your arms around my arms. *The body forgets.* Its memory—not perpetually cursed as ours. My tongue fumbles whenever it mentions your name and common sense scolds it. But Ma, my poems are portals, inside you sit cross-legged on a stool in the kitchen—alive. Sometimes we cook, sometimes we talk about you as a child before me— wide-eyed and strong. And when it rains, the rough winds bang against the kitchen windows demanding release. I hold you up so you do not get wet. *Ma, if I hold you up then you cannot die.*

*

Ma, that time I watched you from behind the couch when the sunbeams exploded in the kitchen. Your skin shining the way Grandma’s did. Do you remember, Ma? Do you remember the way the sun smiled on us?

Ma, don’t go.

Lasius or The Undertaker

Eli Kuhn, *Agnes Scott College*

The Undertaker circled the entrance of the compound, waiting for the call that someone had died. She followed the same path she had been wearing down with her feet day after day, week after week, year after year, since the first day of her life. Like the rest of the colony, she had been born into her role. Unlike the rest of the colony, she was the only one in her role.

She was to remain outside the compound, only permitted to enter when a member had died and needed to be returned to the surface for disposal. She couldn't live inside the compound, as the other members believed her to be tainted from handling the dead. She didn't get to venture very far, and she received her rations from the foragers who dropped them off on their way back into the bunker.

Her only companions were the creatures she watched from afar, who busied themselves at the edge of the nearby forest, collecting food, scaling trees, and chattering to one another. She longed to talk to them and learn about their lives, but it would be too dangerous to bring any kind of attention to where she paced, small and defenseless, in the open field.

She only rested for brief periods at night, when she could be practically invisible to any passersby. If it was cold out, she was permitted to rest right inside the entrance to the bunker, so long as she stayed away from other members and left as soon as

the temperature reached a safe level again. Though her role was vital to the survival of everyone else, she was an outcast, a pariah.

The Undertaker heard the mournful wail of the siren, rising and falling in pitch, and was spurred into action. The alarm was triggered by one of the workers, signaling to the whole colony that someone had died. On a normal day, she received somewhere between one and five retrieval requests, more in the winter when many members died of hypothermia. The younger members were expected to leave the colony if they fell ill and were at risk of infecting others, so most of her calls into the compound concerned the elderly workers.

She descended into the bunker, following the sound of the blaring alarm through the twisting hallways and chambers that connected the colony. Chatter and energy filled the compound around her as she passed other members attending to their own individual duties: building and reinforcing tunnels, collecting food, caring for the children, and attending to the queen.

No one noticed her.

Upon her arrival to the chamber where the most recent death had occurred, the workers simply motioned to where their coworker lay in a crumpled heap on the ground. They went back to their jobs and left The Undertaker alone with the corpse. She got straight to work, strapping the old woman on her back and heaving her up to the surface. Even while she was hauling the body of their sister, the other workers went about their duties without casting The Undertaker a

second glance.

She knew her role was important—possibly even more so than the others, as she was the only one who could fulfill it. Even so, she couldn't help but feel lonely. She fantasized about having a friend to talk to about the things she'd seen, the happenings within the colony, and the burdens of her role. She wanted to laugh and chatter while she worked. She wanted to help expand the compound or forage and prepare food or care for the children. She wanted to leave someone else alone in a room to take care of a corpse.

Once she had taken the body to the graveyard, she returned to her circle and resumed pacing. She tried not to think about her loneliness too often. She was born an undertaker, and she would one day die an undertaker; there was nothing she could do to change that.

As she circled, she tried to think about beautiful things, things that made her happy, things she loved; she liked to see the vibrant flaming streaks of color as the sun rose and set, she liked to watch the creatures at the edge of the woods, she liked to imagine what it would be like to fly away from her little home. She couldn't truly enjoy these things though, as they were clouded by how alone she felt despite the life that was constantly teeming all around her.

All she knew of her own colony, she had gleaned in passing, through her thousands of brief trips inside. All she understood about the world was that everything would die eventually. A butterfly passing overhead was just that. Its brief existence was nothing

compared to the time that came before and the time that came after it lived. Try as she might to push them away, these were the thoughts that circled with her, around and around her minuscule world.

One day, in the midst of her circling, The Undertaker was snapped to attention by an unusual siren emanating from the depths of the bunker. It was similar to the normal death alarm, but more hollow and melancholy. Even from above ground, its weeping call resonated deep within her body, shaking her to her core. The ground beneath The Undertaker's feet rumbled as the workers fell out of form and scrambled around wildly through the halls.

The queen was dead.

The whole colony knew that one day the time would come when their leader would perish and their colony would die off; they even knew that it might be soon. Their queen had first established the colony when she was very young, but after many long years it had become clear that she was slowing down. She was giving birth to fewer and fewer children every month, and her once bountiful meals were now more akin to scraps as her appetite dwindled. There were whispers within the colony about how long she had left, but no one was actually prepared or knew what would happen between this moment and the last death of the colony.

Except The Undertaker.

She entered the bunker and a sudden stillness replaced the chaos, the moan of the alarm still echoing through the halls. All eyes were on The Undertaker as she proceeded all

the way down to the bottom level, where the queen's quarters were. When The Undertaker entered the room, the alarm went silent mid-cry. The queen laid in the middle of the floor, and her attendants lined the wall of the large chamber, staring at her lifeless body, their faces a mixture of terror and uncertainty. The Undertaker nodded politely to them, and they watched, wide-eyed, as she carefully heaved the body onto her back and swayed slightly under the weight. When she found her footing again, she turned toward the entrance and began her journey back to the surface.

The whole colony formed a silent processional behind The Undertaker as she wove her way back up. Now that they didn't have a queen to give orders, the workers looked to The Undertaker to guide them through their grief. They followed her all the way over the hill to the graveyard and watched as The Undertaker lowered the queen into the ground. She was unnerved by the massive crowd observing her as she worked. She just wanted a friend to talk to, but instead she had 5,000 members who had never given her so much as a friendly smile or a wave relying on her.

Once the queen's body was laid to rest, the silent processional formed once again and the colony returned to the bunker. Without someone to serve, the workers had nothing left to do but stay inside and wait for death. All they had done, they did in service of the queen, and without her, they no longer had purpose or duties to busy themselves with.

Except, of course, for The Undertaker. She worked in service of everyone,

doing a job that kept one death here and there from becoming hundreds of deaths overnight. While the other workers were finally enjoying their well-deserved rest, The Undertaker still had to work to ensure they got as much time to enjoy themselves as they could. Nothing about her life had changed, apart from her workload.

Deaths increased exponentially over the next week. The day after the queen died, The Undertaker responded to ten different calls. By the second day she had twenty calls, then forty, then eighty, and then she stopped counting.

She resorted to carrying bodies out in giant, wavering piles, the crippling weight causing her feet to sink into the dense earth, just to find a new, bigger load of corpses in need of disposal upon her return. Every part of her body was imbued with a deep, unwavering ache. Her limbs cried out with each tremoring step. She worked like this for a week straight, every minute of every day and night, but the bodies continued to pile up faster than she could carry them out. She didn't even consider taking a moment to rest. Everyone was depending on her.

In just a week, their community dwindled from 5,000 members to only 3,000, with more and more dropping by the second. Her once neat, distant graveyard had rapidly grown into a mass grave with a mountain of bodies that interrupted the landscape and could be seen all the way from the entrance to the bunker.

The Undertaker continued to pass through the hallways and collect as many of

her siblings' bodies as she could carry. She was weak. She hadn't eaten or rested in so long. She persisted anyway and picked up her heaviest load yet. Her hundreds of overloaded trips in the past week had worn deep, grooved paths into the dirt hallways inside the compound. With no workers to repair them, the dirt had piled up along the walls and made it harder and harder for her to squeeze through the more bodies she carried.

She had almost reached the door to the surface when she collapsed beneath the weight of the bodies. Unable to move, The Undertaker knew she had done everything

she could. Without her to remove the decaying bodies that now formed a barricade against the only exit to the surface, she knew the rest of the weakened colony would begin to die out by the hundreds.

She wished she could keep going. She wished her life had been different. But she already knew she couldn't change anything by wishing, so she decided to finally rest and resign herself to the freedom of death.

Soon, there would be nothing left but silent, empty hallways, and a lonely, circular path of dirt.



Penguin's Detour

Rohan Shah, *Columbus State University*

Sonny took a roundabout route for his journey home. He gracefully placed his flippers on the steering wheel and navigated the drive home. Taking the main road would have led to him passing by areas he once felt a part of, but not anymore. The time saved from the fast path wasn't worth the pain it stirred up. Places he had to drive by all day as a by-product of working in the transportation industry. These businesses replaced Sonny's history, and were a reminder of the collapse of his memories. He was sick of them. They first started sprouting up during his years as a chick. Slowly but surely, the polar bears came and bought out the old established communities.

It began when Sal's Hot Mackerel was bought out and renovated into a bubble tea restaurant called Tapioca Tavern. Bubble tea always left a bitter taste in Sonny's beak, and Sal's departure left a hole in Sonny's heart. Sonny remembered how Sal used to help him with his homework and give him day-old mackerel that wasn't purchased. Sal was one of the many parental figures Sonny turned to in his life as an orphan. Nevertheless, everyone has a price. Sal's abandonment of the community was the first piece in the chain reaction that led to many more dominoes falling. A month later, Gregory's Bodega was purchased and turned into a Bed Bath and Blender store. Gregory had operated that bodega for almost three decades, and the new enterprise erased all traces.

A few decades passed, and Caligulahad been irreparably altered. Sonny was about to enter his forties, and the only remaining things from the olden days were Sonny's family business and the name of the city. Sonny operated a fleet of taxi cabs that claimed their residence on a little edge in the corner of the city. They used to be surrounded by other quaint businesses, however the polar bears had now flanked Sonny from all sides, and he was one of the few penguin institutions left. With inflation and increased competition, Sonny knew he only had about four months left before he would go under. He had already let go of most of his employees and only had two left under his wings.

Sonny used to be able to scrape through these tough times when he could still go across the street and meet Sonya. Sonya had grown up with Sonny, and they were long-time companions; Sonya was two feet taller than Sonny since she was an Emperor Penguin and Sonny was only a Macaroni Penguin. Sonya was one of those rare bright spots that brought comfort and warmth in the dark world. Sonny desperately wished he could walk across the crosswalk and just see her one time, but she had been taken from the world too soon.

One late spring night, whilst walking home from work, Sonya was murdered. The buildings in Caligula may have gotten prettier and more expensive, but the crime remained. There was a funeral where Sonny balled his eyes out and mourned the loss of his dear friend. The street lit candles and hung lanterns in solidarity with the loss of a great empress. Eventually, Sonya's family caved and

sold off the bakery to the polar bear known as Mr. Glacier. He turned it into a dentistry practice. What ticked Sonny off the most was that he didn't even have teeth. It was like Mr. Glacier wanted to rub salt in the wound.

That left Sonny in the Caligula of today, a town he can barely recognize anymore. He went down the winding roads until he reached a small, dusty apartment complex; after parking his beaten and bruised twenty-year-old box car in the worn down parking lot, Sonny began to feel a tingle in his stomach. Sonny hoped that his two employees had scrounged up some grub.

He twirled his keys in his right flipper as he waddled toward the apartment building. It must have been no taller than twenty feet. There was artistic grafting spray-painted all over the front, and there were vibrant neon drawings on the sides. The drawings mainly depicted cartoon polar bears playfully eating penguins like apples. There was even a drawing of a penguin with his head hung low, waddling into the distance after witnessing his friend being consumed. The building had random dark spots blemishing the gray bricks that were laid during its construction. The complex was frayed and bruised, just like Sonny.

After he made his way to the chipped door, Sonny pushed through and was faced with a warm sight. His last two employees were sitting comfortably across from one another and playing Go Fish. The reason these two outlasted all their other coworkers was quite simple, family. The Humboldt penguins duo were both Sonny's nephews; the only

remaining blood ties he had left in the city. The one on the end of the table closer to him was Duriel and the bird sitting parallel from him was Neville. Neville was the older of the pair by about three years, and had just turned twenty-eight seven weeks prior.

"Just give up already," said Neville.

"No way man! I'm still in this!"

"Is there anything to eat? I worked up an appetite during closing after you two left," interjected Sonny.

"There's some leftover Red Snapper in the fridge, I made it myself with a delectable Old Bay-inspired dry rub." Duriel's beak grinned widely.

"Don't act like you're Ramsay, it wasn't Old Bay inspired, you used only Old Bay." Neville was always there to put the real world back into Duriel's delusions.

By the time the two had already gotten into their routine bickering, Sonny had begun to delightfully chow down on the fish. He savored every bite; even if Duriel's head was mostly in the clouds, that boy could cook. Sonny loved his family, and even if it was for just a moment, he felt whole from spectating the two siblings go about their shenanigans, it reminded him of his youth. All the nonsense debates he and Sonya sparked to pass the days, but that was all before the polar bears took his home. Poor penguin families that had lived in Caligula were forced to leave their homes because of how difficult it was getting to make ends meet.

Sonny knew that the polar bears were not comically evil entities. They were just like him in a way, except probably ten times

taller, stronger, and richer. He knew they probably didn't mean for penguins to lose their home. He knew they probably just took the opportunity in front of their hands and weren't trying to perform any malpractice; nonetheless, Sonny was hurt. The entire penguin community was torn to shreds. It was only natural for Sonny to harbor some resentment towards the bears. He just had to figure out a way to gracefully express it.

Sonny didn't want to wage war or commit any atrocities that would stain both his soul and what was left of his community. All he wanted to do was remind the polar bears of their actions, through a notification of some sort that would at least make them conscious of the communities they had bulldozed, trampled over, and taken for themselves. He just wanted to make the elephant aware of his destruction of the ant hill. Nothing violent, nothing bloody, just awareness.

"Boys, I know you two are some sharp tools. You both know by now that the cab service is hemorrhaging money." Sonny blurted out this statement and wiped the smiles off of the duo's faces. "We have at most four months left, and in these next four months you two are gonna operate the entire business and take care of things while I work on a project."

"It seems unfair for you to be out and loitering while we have to do everything," pitched in Duriel.

"It's not like you two have your plates full of anything else. It's also a small business. We only have two vehicles that work, and the

clerical stuff isn't much to sweat about when business is so dry. Besides, this project is more than me sitting around home all day. It's something that'll preserve the penguin legacy far after we're gone from Caligula."

"What is it, Uncle?" questioned Neville.

"Well... I dunno yet. I haven't got a clue, but I want something that'll help the town remember the penguin hearth that this dump used to be." Sonny finished his dinner and embarked to the washroom.

As Sonny rinsed his gums with mouthwash and stared at himself in the mirror, he reflected on his life. He had a feeling deep inside that this project of his would be the most impactful action of his life. Something deeper in him told him that this would be the make-or-break time of his life. He knew that the climax of his life was just around the corner. He shut the lights off and lay in his tiny bedding. That night, Sonny was up until the sun rose.

He spent the entire time just conjuring up ideas and casting them away. Most of the ideas that came to his mind just felt off and seemed wrong. He had a few ideas that could be effective, but would have consequences that could hurt the parties involved. Some transient thoughts raced by about subtly planting some elixir or aroma that makes polar bears sneeze or lightly sick to mildly annoy them, however, this plan would only hurt the polar bears and do nothing to preserve the penguin legacy. He thought on and on until sleep took a hold of him. This was his one shot, and he could not miss.

He woke up the next day well past noon.

That set the mood for it to become a lazy Saturday. Sonny brewed up a cup of coffee and slowly slipped away while returning to his brainstorming. He thought of questions like: “what does it even mean to be a penguin?”, “What is the legacy of my people?”, “What would even begin to capture the joy brought to me and many others by penguins?”, and “How could someone like me even pull this off?” He was spiraling, and his head was starting to hurt. Sonny put on a small coat and went for a walk.

While patrolling the quiet streets of Caligula, Sonny wished Sonya was still around, as she was always more of the analytical type. Sonya was one of the greatest penguins he had met. If there were more Sonyas in the world, then maybe she wouldn't have been murdered. Maybe the penguin people would still have a place to call home. While mulling his loss, Sonny passed a hip new donut shop.

Called Marcel's Bistro, the shop was no wider than ten feet and had a gigantic green donut at the top. Sonny figured he could grab something to eat and went up to the shop, and there was no line at this time of day. He noticed that there were flowers in front of the vendor that appeared to be golden. They looked like they were dead, but the petals were still intact, the flower was still whole. In the dead middle of winter, the flower remained beautifully preserved. Sonny approached the shopkeeper.

“Can I get two jelly donuts? With a chocolate swirl on top, please.” The man that responded to him was an ostrich.

“That will be seven ninety-nine.”

God that's expensive. Sonny handed the man a ten-dollar bill and asked another question. “What's up with those flowers you got out in front of the shop? Why are they gold?” He raised his flippers in joy.

“Oh, those babies? Those are some Chinese Wenmily flowers. They're grown in special conditions that make them look golden when they die. Some call them the ‘immortal flower’ or the ‘Midas flower.’ Legends trace them back to the Han dynasty.”

Looking at the flowers awakened something in Sonny, and he knew exactly what he needed to do to ensure the sanctity of the penguin legacy in Caligula. “Where can I get some of those flowers?”

“I know a guy that can get you a lot for cheap, I'll hook you up with him, but for a price of course,” said the tall bird with a sheepish grin.

“I'll be back.”

Sonny bolted home and began drawing out schematics for his plan. He was never an artist, but he had the dexterity to at least put together something decent or even passable given enough time. Plus, he had a secret weapon. Sonny spent the next few hours just sketching out a prototype of his idea, but he needed to wait until his secret weapon was available.

Soon it had reached six in the afternoon and Neville and Duriel had returned home. Sonny's eyes lit up when he saw Neville come through the door.

“Neville! I need your help! Please! I know you used to be an art wizard during your school years. Your mom and pops would

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

always brag to me about how amazing the things they stapled to the refrigerator were. I need your help with my project." By the time Sonny had finished his spiel, he had already gotten uncomfortably close to Neville.

"Depends on what you're cooking Uncle," responded Neville cockily.

Sonny walked over and showed Neville his sketch. Neville's jaw dropped.

"THAT LOOKS SICK!" shouted Duriel.

*

A month passed after that encounter. At this point, there was probably only about two months left until the taxi service was bankrupt. Sonny expedited the death of the business by using the funds to procure the Wenmily flowers. The seeds took a while to import overseas, so during the wait, Sonny created a four-by-four-foot wooden platform as a pedestal for his creation.

The next three weeks were filled with intense watering and the planting and harvesting of Wenmily flowers until they were enough necessary for the project. Luckily, Sonny had a small yard behind his business that could do the job. The assembly took another week and the gang's magnum opus was complete.

Sonny, Duriel, and Neville had all come together to create a gorgeous statue out of Wenmily flowers. What was this statue for? Who was it even of? The person they all agreed on was the definition of the model penguin. Sonya.

She was recreated with hundreds of

Wenmily flowers that had been attached together with an adhesive material. They created a hollow statue without a solid frame so that the elements could pass through it. The statue was four-feet tall and was entirely black. The ostrich warned Sonny that it would take quite some time for the flowers to turn golden, but he didn't care, he was in the project for the long run. The ostrich even came by and lent a helping hand during assembly.

The family had created a symbol that would shine bright for decades and let everyone know about the golden penguin that used to reside in the heart of Caligula. The taxi business was about to go bankrupt, but the statue would always remain at the corner of the street. The last month of the business was spent doing negotiations and transferring the business to its new owners.

Sonny arranged a meeting with the busy Mr. Glacier and wanted to come to an amicable conclusion to his family's long-running taxi business. When it came time for the appointment, Sonny wore a small blue scar and sat face-to-face with the eight-foot tall behemoth, who donned a silk suit.

The discussion lasted no more than an hour, but Sonny had fully accomplished all his goals and gotten even more than he was hoping for. They had a long conversation about the history of the town, and Mr. Glacier expressed genuine empathy for the loss of Sonya and the displacement of the penguins. He knew what was done could not be changed, but promised to make it right by honoring Sonny's wish and making sure that

the new owners of the land would maintain and preserve the statue of Sonya. After the end of the month, the business was no longer Sonny's, and the penguins of Caligula were practically wiped out, all except for Sonya.

Decades passed and so had Sonny. He didn't get to live to an ancient age, but he was satisfied with what he accomplished in his short life. Duriel and Neville moved to a small town known as Rapture and started a fish food truck. Their food spoke for itself, and they met success. After this grand passage of time, the statue of Sonya had fully transformed into a golden beacon of penguin culture. No matter how many penguins would be forced to relocate, the best of them would still be in Caligula.

Raohe Night Market

Karen (Suqi) Sims, *Georgia State University*

Raohe Night Market in Taipei is famous for two things. The first is the fresh tianbula, a tilapia and cuttlefish paste sliced into a boiling pot of vegetable oil. Uncle Tianbula shaves at a giant mass of seafood clay, the shards sizzling in his dynastic cauldron. His eyes are glazed over. Will his third-generation food stall be enough to put his daughter through college? What will his wife mutter as she scrubs fish oil from his apron tomorrow? You don't know. You don't really care. You are here to see his magic, not his anxieties. You're here to see the tianbula transform in the pot—from an indecisive mass to a chewy, crispy prophecy: All come to Uncle Tianbula's before the end of the night. The fragrance pulls like the strings of fate.

The other thing Raohe Night Market is famous for is its fortune tellers. They prostrate themselves along the narrow street. There's the Taoist moon blocks, wooden crescents lacquered red as kidneys. Throw them to hear the gods laugh at you. There are tarot cards in varying degrees of wear. Look for the softest cards and the hardest eyes; that's a sure sign of precognition. Then, there's the bird. The little green bird that sees the future, who hears the universe whisper, who lives in a bamboo birdcage that smells like grass. Ask her a question and she will pick a scroll. The scroll will tell you what to do. It will solidify the mess of your life.

Ask her, "What is my path?" and the handler will let her out of the cage. She will

dance along the edges of the basket that holds the all-knowing scrolls. She dances for you, as always. But tonight, as she pirouettes, she will spot her cage out of the corner of her eye. This is unusual. This is unplanned. She will freeze, then twist her head to get a better view, filling one pupil with the bamboo bars. With her other eye, she'll stare at you, the fortune-seeker. The question-asker. Her feathers will flash red from the tianbula stall's blinking sign. As the handler registers that something is off, the bird will fling herself into the air, leaving your mouth agape.

She will not stop. She will stretch her wings until her tendons quiver. She will unclench her talons properly for the first time. The smell of her bamboo cage will fade, replaced by the oils and starches of the night market, then by the damp washcloth of humid island air. She breaks free of Raohe and heads for the river, a speck of green twisting and turning in the dark. People will confuse her for a leaf. For a piece of a lottery paper. For a plastic candy wrapper.

She will fly past the river and to the countryside, guided by the magnet in her mind. She will no longer listen for answers to other people's questions, she will now listen for herself. To herself. To what the universe wants *her* to know. When hungry, she will steal fruit from the farmers: guava, papayas, mangoes, and lychee. Agricultural triumphs intended for kindergarten lunches, the organic orchards full of delectable worms to boot. When thirsty, she will drink warm water from a brown rice paddy or crystal rhinestones off a waxy leaf.

She will sing to the other birds, but they won't speak her dialect. No matter. She'll travel from township to township, calling out. She will spot herself in a traffic mirror, convoluted and swollen. She will almost wonder where she's from, and since she can't form the question, she'll be headed that way. She'll fly past mountains fat with rainfall. She will feel the weight of gods in typhoon winds. A hawk will try to eat her, but she'll slip through his claws. She will arrive at the place she was born, an Asian dogwood tree, and she will make a nest there, because that seems like the thing to do. She will use twigs and leaves and a nylon thread from a hiker's hat. Adidas. She will relax, although her home is a tourist trap for nature aficionados. For birdwatching families with plastic-wrapped picnics.

A young boy will try to catch her. She will peck his ear and fly away. The boy will cry and report to his mother. His mother will accuse him of lying, because she didn't see it with her own eyes. The bird will return safely to her nest, and the taste of blood will be sweet in her beak. Still, she will be flustered and insulted. She will notice that the whispers of the universe have faded into bated breath. Another bird, just as green as she, will find her sulking. Terrible timing. He will chirp and chatter. He will do a little song and dance for her. She will understand him, but will find his accent strange. She'll almost wonder if she has an accent. The dance will not impress her. She will look at her nest, and the whole thing will seem ridiculous.

So she will leave the dogwood tree and fly back towards the city. She will reverse

the magnet in her mind. She'll make pit stops under trembling overpasses and eat rice out of an abandoned bento. One night, she will sleep in a drainage pipe and be washed out to the harbor. She will choke on salt water and grease, and in a delirium, she will smell her old bamboo cage in the dark water. When she comes to, she will smell only garbage and seaweed, garbage and seaweed. She will ride the waves, floating on a plastic bag. She will wash ashore by a river.

She will be battered and wet, but alive. With the sand from the bank, she will wash the pollution off her feathers until they shine green once again. When dry, she will pierce into the night. She survived. Above, the stars speak to her once again. Answers for everyone that no one else can touch. Below, a swirling sea of blinking lights. She will follow the sound of hungry murmurs. She will smell tianbula and spiral down lower and lower. She will spot the flashing red sign, then her handler, with palms more familiar than soft. She'll slice into her bamboo cage and land on her feet. She will settle, shift her talons, and momentarily smell seaweed and garbage. Then all she'll smell is bamboo, like she's never smelled anything else. She'll almost wonder if she ever left. All she knows is this cage, this handler, this job picking scrolls from a basket.

You hear letting a bird go is good karma, but what happens when a bird escapes? What happens when the bird returns? What happens when freedom is not the gift you expected, when choice becomes oppressive? When the script doesn't fit either way, and the universe doesn't know what to

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

tell you, so it falls silent instead? You don't know, and you don't really care. You're here for answers to your own private life, for the magic of a fortune-telling bird. The bird will jump out of her cage, dance, and pick a scroll for you. This is usual. This is planned.

“You may leave your job, but you'll return with a new perspective.”

The handler has read your fortune. You almost wonder, how could a bird possibly see the future? Almost. But the thought is pushed away by an intoxicating smell. Fresh seafood meets blistering oil. You can hear the sizzle and cracks. You see the golden, crispy exterior and imagine the satisfying crunch. Your brain recognizes the sensory patterns, and your mouth begins to salivate. Instinct. No time to question. Because across the street, the deep fried tianbula takes its shape, and Uncle calls out to the crowd. Number 23 is ready for pickup. That's your number.

The Registry

Leah Franqui, *Georgia State University*

I get it, I really do, but this has gone too far. Celebration has gone too far. Birthdays, weddings, bar mitzvahs, old rules for anniversaries (paper, wood, gold, diamond, death), new rules for anniversaries (whatever the internet tells you), pet weddings, condolences, national pizza day. Everything cannot be special, because then nothing's special, you know what I mean?

All that is to say, I got the invitation to Mallory Sanchez's divorce party and my first and truest reaction was *absolutely fucking not*. I was so loud that Jackson heard me even though he had those giant headphones on that make him look like he's trying to be twenty three even though he's been about forty five since I met him when he was nineteen. We've been together since the second day of our second year of college. Our next anniversary (old rules crystal, new rules watches) is three days after Mallory Sanchez's divorce party. She should know better, she really should. She was at our wedding, after all.

"You crack a lung?" Jackson is smiling. We once had a fight about whether this was actually possible and ever since then he's teased me with it. It's very funny. I love being reminded of what to me was a horrific and upsetting argument, and what to Jackson was an intellectual exercise. Jackson is fond of intellectual exercises.

"Why is everything a thing now?" I

was talking about the divorce party. Jackson frowned.

"I thought you liked it when I joked." His headphones were askew on his head, and he looked deranged. He was reminding me of something we'd been trying recently: affirmations. *I like it when you wear jeans. I like it when you bring the right take out from the good Thai place, not the shitty Thai place. I like it when I don't have to remind you ten times which one is the good Thai place and which one is the shitty Thai place. Just five. That's nice.*

I pointed to the email and he squinted, reading it. Jackson needed reading glasses, but when he found that out he bought the headphones crowning his head. They made a strange halo as if he were a piece of medieval art and these indigo *Beats* his golden circle, extending out from his skull, marking him as divine.

"Huh. A party. I guess that's nice? Oh, weird." Now Jackson was the one pointing, his finger almost brushing my screen.

"Oils. Your hands," I said.

"What's that link?"

"Please stop touching my fucking computer, thanks," I said. Jackson put his headphones back on. I was supposed to be working on this, the way I got angry about things. *I like it when you stay calm. I like it when you are nice to me. I like it when you're you and not the volcano version of yourself.*

I guess I wasn't doing a good job of it.

Jackson silently went back into his home office. It was a Saturday, but he was working. He loved working, genuinely loved

it, and I loved this about him, that he cared, that he truly loved what he did. It made me feel very proud of him, of both of us, that we both loved our work, that we weren't mindless drones or secretly holding out hope for being movie stars.

I clicked the link. It led me to a soothing blue page with images of broken china healing itself, gold as the glue. *Kintsugi*. The page said "Begin Again Registry, for when you're starting over, starting fresh, starting to realize you need cutlery." *Just type your friend's name here*. Obedient to instructions, I did so, and Mallory Sanchez's divorce registry popped right up. She had a gift registry for her divorce party three days before our anniversary.

Over my dead fucking body would I be getting Mallory Sanchez a divorce gift. I smiled uncontrollably, imagining the reactions of our friends getting this absurd invitation with its unbearably ill-mannered gift grab; the shock, the disgust, the horror. I couldn't wait for this party now, to see the pity and rage in their eyes at the absolute affront to good taste, to generosity, that was this ask. I knew they would all feel just the way I did. I knew no one would stand for such a thing. I knew I was right for feeling this way, and I couldn't wait to see that in their faces, to celebrate the joy of my rightness like cool rain on the parched earth.

*

"In the end, I just figured, fuck it, you know? She deserves it. So I did both, the lamp and the candles, for, like, a brighter future, you know? What did you get her?" Stella Lin

had changed her hair, dramatically, and I wasn't sure I liked it. It was very short in the back, and kind of long and layered in the front, the longest lock hitting her chin. She looked like all the boys I'd loved on television in the late 90's, like Cory Matthews's older brother in *Boy Meets World*. I wondered if that was what she'd been going for. I considered humming the theme song but realized I had to respond.

"Sheets. Linen," I said, letting my resentment paint my tone. I hadn't intended to buy anything at all, but I watched myself put the 300-dollar sheet set in cool slate into the little shopping cart and then pay for it, just like any other online purchase. The whole time I was thinking *this is ridiculous, this is stupid, this is capitalism, this is unfair, this is what I'd bought her for her wedding, anyway*. Mallory had bought me a set of wine glasses I adored—rose colored glass, gold rims, hexagons—, but never used because I loved them so much—and I was terrified Jackson and I would break them. They'd sat in their box for 15 years. It hadn't been from my registry, and I'd been furious at her, furious that she'd found something better than I could have even known existed, furious that she'd gone off the registry and made it *work*.

"I never really thought about it but like, if Marvin and I split up, I wouldn't want to sleep on the sheets we'd slept on."

"That must have gotten expensive for you in your twenties," I say, without any real heat. I knew it wouldn't land hard. Stella owns her slutty tendencies.

"I just washed them then." She shrugs. "It's more like, when it means something."

When you shared something. I'd have to get a whole new bed, really. I'd probably move. Because the house would be, like, the coffin of our marriage." We both looked around the room. Mallory hadn't moved. We party guests, in our carefully festive but not too bright outfits, were in her marriage's coffin. "I also got her knives." Stella said it like a confession. That was three gifts. Jesus Christ.

"He was always the cook."

"So? She can stab someone with them. She can stab him."

"I don't think they speak." He'd cheated on Mallory. Fucked his younger, thinner assistant. Mallory called me, drunk and weeping, right at the beginning of all this when she found out and told me that the most unforgivable thing about it all was the way he'd made her a total cliché. The way it had all been so unoriginal, so poorly crafted. He'd made her life a stereotype, and she couldn't unmake it.

"You don't need to speak to stab."

Stella declared this like sacred wisdom and punctuated it with a sip of her cocktail, a mix of mezcal, lemongrass syrup, and passion fruit. Mallory said it was called a Fuck Me Up.

I'd had something similar at dinner. I'd insisted upon dinner, and made it clear we would be doing it first, that our anniversary celebration would come above, and before, Mallory's idiotic evening events. I was dressed now as I had been for that, in a cream slip dress, almost bridal. I'd wanted Mallory to have a reaction to this, but she hadn't, which was cruel of her, not to notice my pointed choice.

At the restaurant, Jackson had been silent as the waiter laid down his entrée with a dramatic flourish, begging for a reaction from us both. Jackson had ordered the pork loin, the special, and the waiter wanted to be congratulated for bringing it to the table, as if that wasn't his job, as if he had made the thing, as if he had slaughtered the pig, as if he had raised it from infancy on soft acorns and fermented mash. Jackson and I nodded, aligned in our disinterest in pandering to the egos of waiters. Jackson cut into the flesh, his knife serrated and gleaming in the pink body. The pork was the same shade of pink as the rims of Mallory's eyes the night she came to my home, sobbing over a man who left her for younger meat, and just as tender to the cut.

"You want one?" Stella shook her empty glass at me, gesturing to the bar area punctuated by pathetically cheerful paper umbrella shaped string lights. I gave her a look that indicated, to the best of my abilities, that I had no intention of engaging in a "Fuck Me Up." I stuck to wine. Jackson, however, was on his third cocktail and had become more comfortable around Marvin McNamara, who he was usually desperate to impress because Marvin was a painter and wore very interesting sneakers. They were talking with Emily Dawson, her hair up in a wax printed headwrap, as her wife, Llorena Diaz, ran her hand along Emily's pregnant stomach.

This room hadn't looked this way when Mallory had been married. The art on the walls had been different, and there hadn't been rugs. Perhaps she'd gotten some early gifts and put them to good use.

"She wasn't going to come." Stella was still talking while I'd been thinking about how Mallory seemed just fine, with her rugs and her paintings. What a slap in the face it was, her neat living room. Why had she registered for things when she had things? When we'd given her things at her wedding, at her birthday? It was greedy, this asking for gifts all the time. Grasping. Gauche.

"Emily, she was thinking of not coming. Because. Well. Mal had wanted kids, hadn't she?"

I hated that Stella called Mallory "Mal." It implied a closeness I could not believe existed, a closeness beyond my own with Mallory, which was intolerable. Mallory might be a nightmare, with this party, this registry, this demand for things, but I still held a more important place in her life than Stella Lin with her Eric Matthews hair and her husband who made my husband pretend he liked hip hop and Cy Twombly paintings. The reading glasses I got him—old rules, crystal—are in his pocket even now, and I know that he likes them, even though he pretends he doesn't. Just like I know that if I walked over to him and put them on in front of everyone, in front of *Marvin McNamara* and everyone, it would make him cry. I could gather his tears with the plastic dishwasher safe wine glasses he got me—ugly stupid things I will use for years, practical and horrible—glistening with how well he knows me and how little he knows the person I want to be instead.

I'd asked her once, Mallory, what she thought of Jackson. He'd been away at school for months and months and I was twitchy,

irritated with him when he was visiting, and when he was not. Irritated with myself, that I had tied myself down, compromised myself so completely, formed myself around him like a tree that wraps its trunk around the metal fence surrounding it, enveloping it in permanent embrace. I'd done it all so young, I knew then, even though I was still young thinking that, and it already felt too late to flee.

"So Emily thought maybe she shouldn't come. But Llorena talked her into it."

"Mallory isn't like that," I declared. "She's not the kind of person who wants everyone to be as miserable as she is. I'm sure she's happy for Emily." She'd probably already gotten Emily a gift. Maybe that's all anything was, really, just getting people gifts and then they get you gifts and you do it until you die.

I heard metal clinking on glass and realized Mallory would be making a speech. I hadn't talked to her, not really, since I'd come in and kissed her cheek and smelled her smell. She'd been smiling, but her eyes were tight, pink rimmed again, the pork from Jackson's dinner stark on her face. She'd thought about Botox after she kicked him out, but she just got highlights and started doing monthly facials instead. I wasn't going to be sympathetic about this tightness, these pink eyes. She chose to have this event, to do all this. No one told her to or demanded it. She chose to have us all come *celebrate* with her. I didn't understand why she was doing it if it made her eyes so tight. I didn't understand this whole thing at all. I didn't want to listen to her speech. I made my way out of the living

room, quietly, looking to the bathroom for comfort. But on my way, I realized all the doors in the hallway were closed. This was very odd, I decided, because who does that? Mallory never did that. She was an unrepentant slob. When we lived together in our twenties, when Jackson was in graduate school in another state, I would frequently look down and realize I'd stepped in her discarded underwear, crumpled on the floor, or put my elbow in an old plate, covered in crumbs. She'd been rather disgusting, in this wonderful way, a way that made it clear she felt free to be disgusting living with me, free to be a cat leaving behind a mess, charmingly unaffected by her own squalor. Cleaning up after her had been a joy. I had known very clearly that I was needed, and that she needed me. Jackson was very clean, always had been. He never needed my minding. I'd said it was a relief when we moved in together, but really it made me a bit sad, to have less work to do, to have less of a sense that I was being helpful.

I opened up a door. The room was entirely empty. This had been something, his office maybe? Entirely empty, as if she was moving out. Nail holes in the walls, dust on the floors, but otherwise nothing. I opened up another door, their guest bedroom. Entirely empty. Rings from chair legs on the floor, but otherwise empty, nothingness. I looked down the hall at the last door that wasn't the bathroom; their-her-bedroom. But by then I knew what I would find. Empty, again, but for a sleeping bag on the floor, a little pillow and a book next to it. *Permission to Feel*, stained, I had no doubt, with tears. I pictured her there,

curled up in the bag like a fox in a den. Like the cat that she was, curled in on herself, her misery, her bedding. A better person would have found this unbearably sad. I wanted to find it that way. Instead, it felt like justice to me. Punishment, one I wanted to see her take. I was taken aback by my satisfaction in that moment, lost to the world.

"It's a little extreme, I guess." Her voice was soft. I looked up and there she was. Her speech must have been a short one. That was unlike her.

"He took everything?" I asked. If he'd really been that petty, and she that weak, maybe I could forgive her for the registry. Maybe. Mallory shook her head.

"No. He... I mean, he feels too bad, he's so guilty. Sometimes I think I'll buckle under the weight of his guilt." I rolled my eyes. She'd always been dramatic and wanted things to sound poetic, which was stupid and juvenile.

"I just, everything was haunted," she said looking at me, her eyes wide. She wanted me to understand. I understood perfectly. She'd made us all buy her gifts because she was afraid of her own furniture. She was punishing herself. The joy seeped out of the moment.

"I gave it all away," she said, sounding sad and virtuous, which felt calculated to me, crafted.

"That was idiotic," I said. "You're going to fuck up your back." Such a martyr. A modern flagellation, a bad night's sleep.

"It's been okay, actually." She looked down at the sleeping bag. "I know it was idiotic. I know." Her mouth curled up, and there

she was, seeing herself being the way she was being. I felt myself softening, a little, at that glimpse of her watching herself.

“Good.”

“I should get back,” she said, in the way we always used to say things we didn't want to do but felt we ought to do. “It's a party.”

“What else did you register for?” I couldn't help but ask. I could have just looked myself. But I wanted her to tell me. Suddenly, I wanted every pathetic need, laid out. I wanted Mallory to flay herself, to let the blood flow down her back, into the floorboards of her empty home. If she was going to flagellate herself, I deserved to get to watch.

“Plates. I didn't have any. My mom sent me this stuff from Boston, cocktail glasses, a dozen forks, no spoons. At least 100 napkins, cloth, different sets. But no plates. Glasses I didn't mind breaking. The sheets. A kettle. We'd never gotten one. He thought they were stupid. A thing just to boil water. He took just weird positions on things. A cookbook I'd wanted. New planters for sad herbs I'll try to grow and kill. A bookcase no one bought me. Dish towels. Bath towels. A peppermill. He took ours.” Her voice had become choked at the end.

“Don't,” I reminded her sharply; she had guests. “There is no 'ours' now.” Mallory nodded. She wanted me to hug her. I knew that. She was pathetic with longing. She wanted comforting, like a child. But I'd bought her her fucking sheets. She couldn't have everything. No one could.

“I asked for the glasses I got you and Jackson,” she said. “I always get people gifts

I want someone to give me.” I knew that. I had always known that. She was transparent, dangerously so.

All those years ago, when I asked Mallory what she thought of him, really I was asking, how do I leave him, how do I go?

You can always start again, she said. It was one of those things people said. How dare Mallory actually mean it. I had always thought of her as a soft thing, a cringing mush, all underbelly. I felt electric in my rage at the knowledge that even if she was, she wasn't.

“It would have been nice, that's all, if we had lasted.” She wanted my agreement, my confirmation. She knew better.

“I told you not to marry him,” I hissed out. She was looking in the wrong places for what she wanted. She always had.

“It must be nice for you,” she said, her stupid blue eyes wide, big, ready for someone to fall into them, and for a moment I thought she was talking about Jackson, about my life, about my marriage, and I almost told her, right then, the truth. There is a lot I cannot forgive Mallory for. But the worst of it all is that she can do what I cannot. She can stand it, the empty house, the new plates. She can sit and list out what she needs on a registry, she can see the shape of a new life just as soon as she gets rid of all the ghosts. I cannot imagine what that must look like. I'm afraid to open my eyes and try.

“It must feel good,” Mallory says, “to have been right all along.”

We Did This for Our Friend

Ian Lindsay, *Georgia State University*

We first knew something was for real wrong with Tarek when a cigarette burnt straight through his fingers. We had left him in the living room, staring at the broken TV, his reflection like chalk on the dark screen. Tarek lived at the eight-five-0 house with us. Lately, he'd stare at nothing while his Chesterfields turned to a tube of ash. Before we found him like that, he'd been drinking two Big Gulps filled with vodka every day. Said it kept the voices quiet. We checked out his hand and saw the cig burned to the filter, a blistered trail through his knuckles like a yellow-ashen disease. Somethin' had to be done. We loved the dude.

Whenever someone told him "take it easy," he'd say, "if it's easy, take *two*."

Tarek was a bassist for Megaera, a Spanish metal band that crashed on the couch when their Southeast tour brought them through Florida. He never left that couch. Most of us got to the eight-five-0 house that way. Far as anyone knew, he didn't have family and was already planning on quitting Megaera even before he fought their drummer—we thought his name might've been Hoover—on the Purple Turtle's stage. He was mousy and short but had pummeled Hoover bloody, like he was six-two and lifted heavy. Later we asked Tarek about slugging it out with the drummer. He told us Hoover was moving H, and had sold it to a young kid in Gainesville at their last show.

"Crossed a line," Tarek had told us.

They'd argued backstage where Hoover was bagging it up. "I was about to throw down right when the Turtle's promoter said, 'show time,' and we had to go on."

Megaera got two songs in before their 'fuck you' stares turned to fists. Tarek's nose wouldn't stop bleeding 'till Phlegm shoved a tampon up his right nostril. He walked around the venue with his goofy smile, that blood-soaked tampon in his nose. Made us laugh when the gentry cringed. After that, all he had was us. We found him to be a good human—quick to laugh and really listened. Didn't just wait his turn to talk. He played every instrument and could death growl in Spanish. A metal head, a bruiser with a heart the size of his fist. Young dude, maybe twenty. It was tough for him to find work. He had no citizenship, so for him, most job applications were shot. We let him stay as long as he needed.

He became one of us living at the eight-five-0, a two-story Spanish colonial in Frenchtown, rotted and loved. Some bragged that The Vandals' first lead singer, Steve-O, had read *Das Kapital* here. Eight-five-0 was graffiti-tagged and smelled like raccoon piss and French toast. At house shows we encouraged punks to smoke inside. Made the place smell better. We hosted bands, charged covers—scraping together enough for breakfast or bail someone outta jail. No judgment. Just raucous sex, socialist love, and rebellion.

Tarek showed us H20, a hardcore punk band formed in the '90s. This track called *5.Yr. Plan*, a nihilist track about despair and

struggle, but Toby Morse's best line was about friends being like family. That's what the eight-five-o was: a bunch of despondent kids; spinach seeds surviving in a shit garden, but we had each other.

Mickey, the house dad, owned the eight-five-o straight up. Paid his taxes off the covers we charged. He'd been a paralegal until chunks of his hair went missing from stress. Now he interviewed the bands on podcast equipment in his room upstairs. Then there was Abril, our house mom, who was thick and sweet once you earned it, but was ruthless to the core for all of us. Her muscled right arm had a faded Misfit tattoo that looked ready to bite. Phlegm was there too. They had a wiry personality—always tinkering with bass amps or Christmas lights. There were dozens of us floating around, crashing wherever we dropped, but these three mattered to Tarek most.

Until Akim told us his plan.

Akim was rich. Rich, but sad. In a way, Akim was kinda beautiful. He had cold, gray eyes and an Adam's apple that throbbed underneath his chin. Big in the BDSM community and never dressed punk. He and Tarek were like a forty-ounce Crazy Stallion with a Sparks poured in: OG sidewalk slammers. Maybe they got along because they both had lost their parents, or maybe because they never let that loss beat 'em down.

Akim was somewhat a pimp, somewhat an antiques dealer. Made money by organizing fetish voyeur events. Found people down to fuck, get watched by the rich. Most of us thought he really made his money selling

Russian chess sets from this 1972 tournament where Boris Spassky lost against Bobby Fischer. His dad had bought all sixty of the tournament's chess sets and left them to Akim, who sold them out of a storage locker, one at a time, whenever he needed money.

"These aren't reproductions," Akim had told us. "They're real. They go for the kind of money that can change lives."

"Sure, man," we said. Most of us at the eight-five-o house worked in kitchens or scrapped copper—enough for Purple Turtle's bottom shelf and to keep our bass amps working. We never dreamed of anything else, and Akim was generous. Told stories of American avarice that made our lives feel noble.

"You know, though," we said. "Tarek needs to see someone." We told Akim about the cig and nodded to where Tarek sat in the corner, mumbling and flicking himself in the head.

*

After the cig, things were almost like old times when Tarek had first shown up years back. Back then, he'd yell at the college kids who littered on game days, flooding the city with their ignoble bullshit. Made us laugh so hard that our intestines got sore. Once, we threw Mickey a birthday party, and instead of jumping out of the cake naked—obviously we couldn't afford one that big—Tarek stripped his clothes and ran around the eight-five-o. We all joined for a lap. Now, that dude was gone—the one who fought for the planet, a radical who could throw a punch and made us laugh.

“Lo-fi skate punk helps,” Tarek told us on the porch that wrapped the eight-five-o. He was sitting in one of the rocking chairs overlooking Carter Park, blowing smoke at the mosquitoes buzzing in the heat. “Feedback and reverb,” he said. “Helps drown the voice. Just worried about what I see.”

We nodded.

“Pero, you need medicine,” Abril said what we were all thinking. “You see things not there. You get paranoid. Might hurt someone.”

“Or yourself,” Mickey said. “You keep drinkin’ that way, you’re gonna open a hole in your gut.” Mickey glanced at Abril.

Tarek’s Big Gulps were bleak, but we all had skeletons, and so long as there was peace in the eight-five-o, what could we do? Couldn’t be hypocrites. Most of us drank pretty hard. Yeah, there were still some edge kids that came around our house shows, holding gallon jugs of sweet tea, but Tarek didn’t have that option. Everyone knew him down at Port’s Liquor store. Had his bottle ready for him in the morning. Fuck. It. Dawg. Life’s. A. Risk. FIDLAR, right? Least ‘till he got dangerous.

Tarek ashed his cig. “Maybe they can help at the walk-in clinic.”

We knew the one. Once a year the clinic did free dental, and any punks from eight-five-o with tooth problems went down there. Carper, this kid who hung around, had two cavities once, so he got one filled, then got back in line—had waited all year to get them fixed without insurance. If Tarek tried to get help there, he’d open wormy floodgates. No citizenship. No insurance. We all knew they

couldn’t do shit for him ‘cept turn him over to the state. Once you were in the state system, your door’s next knock would be ICE.

“Journal,” Phlegm said. “Or draw, man. Get the shadow people out of your head.” Phlegm smiled like they might know a thing or two about hallucinating; they dropped a lot of acid.

Eventually, we moved Tarek upstairs into his own room where he drew on the walls in Sharpie. He stole spray cans from Home Depot, gold ones, that he used to inventory his room—sprayed half of everything he owned, splitting the room down the middle. One side, every inch was gold, the other he left alone. When one of us went up there, he’d be holding something—a drumstick, an empty cig pack—against his ear as if listening. Some objects he sprayed gold. Others, he left unpainted. Then placed them on their respective sides.

“You think maybe we should stop him?” Mickey asked us one day. We knew he was talkin’ about the oracular scribbles and strange, golden inventory. We heard Tarek up there, bustling around.

“Let him express himself, man,” Phlegm said. “Keep all that bottled in, it’ll be bad. Better he gets it out creatively.”

“Yeah, man,” Mickey said, squishing his lips to his mouth’s side. “Yeah, it’ll be good.”

But we all knew Tarek’s head wouldn’t hold. Made us feel worthless.

*

One night, the eight-five-o was packed—everyone bludgeoned off PBR and Beam. We had this all-girls band in town called Sailor Poon. They played sludge punk, and between

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

songs, they insulted the dudes in the crowd—mad funny. They played a big venue called Hattie's, but since they were staying with us, Abril got them to play an 'after.'

Summer night. The rain was thick, comin' sideways onto the front porch. Inside, the already warped wood floors were slick and muddy. Kids moshed in the living room, hanging off the graffitied house columns. Before, Tarek would've stood in the pit, have this giddy look on his mousy face as if he knew right where he belonged. When the bands were the loudest, the crowd the rowdiest, he was *home*. We couldn't help but feel happy when we saw him like that, instead of him grimacing in the corner, flickering between the Tarek we remembered and the Tarek that was haunted.

Sailor Poon was halfway through their set when lightning struck real close. Lights went out. None of us were cowards, but we all agreed when the power had cut out, a creepy energy hung around—something sinister. Out the windows, the neighbors' homes were dark. We sent Phlegm to work their magic with the fuse box and shuffled around, bumping shoulders in the dark. Sailor Poon's vocalist rapped Missy Elliot's verse from *The Rain* into a dead mic while we waited for the set to start back up.

We don't all agree on what happened next. Some swore they heard Tarek yelling, "he's coming!" in a voice that wasn't his; a voice that sounded primordial, inhuman, as Mickey would say later. Others said Tarek was paranoid that someone was playin' in his pockets, trying to rob him. Some even swore

Tarek yelled about his mother, and, after what we learned later, that would've made sense. There was a shuffle in the living room: the heavy footfalls of boots scrambling over wood. None of us could see.

"Stop saying my name!" Tarek kept screaming.

There was movement. We heard Abril soothing him in Spanish, followed by a shattering sound like the coffee table had been flipped over, bottles shattering. The crowd—dark and swampy—groaned. Abril followed Tarek out of the living room; others thought she lost him making sure the crowd was safe. Either way, she was by the door when we realized the bathroom was on fire.

"Tarek," we heard her yelling in the hallway, banging on the door. "Abres la puerta!"

Smoke hit our nostrils like a flaming junkyard tire. We found out later, Tarek had shoved the plastic shower curtain in the toilet. Poured 151 over top. Lit it up. Phlegm sprayed a fire extinguisher under the slit in the door frame, but it wasn't until Mickey and Abril bashed the door off its hinges that we could yank Tarek out, and Phlegm could extinguish the flames. When we got him into the hallway, he was raving.

We felt so fuckin' bad. There was this terrified look in his eyes like he didn't recognize us. He kept pointing, yelling different sins.

"Lust!" he yelled at Akim before Mickey tackled him to the ground.

"Show's over, y'all," Mickey said. "Our friend needs help."

Abril got the party cleared, and we got Tarek upstairs. There were a few mattresses with sheets up there. We lit candles. Turned on flashlights, placed the handles on the ground. Phlegm turned on the gold-painted radio to static—we had found that had helped Tarek kinda meditate the voices away. Bourbon was shared, and Mickey sighed when Tarek held up his fingers for a gulp. We let our friend drink, his head in Abril's lap.

"You good?" one of us asked him. He wasn't.

Tarek shivered. "He's coming. He knows my third eye opened."

"Who's coming?" Abril asked. No answer, so she nestled his head against her chest. "No one can hurt you."

"Drinks don't keep him quiet." Tarek shook his head furiously, blinking. "Maybe I'll leave. Fight him out."

Abril rubbed his back. "Por la sangre, you not going anywhere," she said. "You're home where we can take care of you." She rubbed his back until he slithered into the fetal position, rocking, his breath tremulous.

"Fight who?" Phlegm asked the room more than Tarek. Mickey shot them a look as if to say, 'don't rile him up,' but Phlegm ignored him. "Tell us how to help you."

Tarek didn't hear. His eyes were like cymbals, bewildered. "Who said my name? Stop saying my name."

We told him no one, but he didn't believe us. The fear in his eyes broke our hearts. Glassy, brown eyes that pleaded for a thousand things we couldn't see to stop. He shook, then shut his eyes like he could squish

whatever he saw away. A long time off, maybe an hour, he stopped rocking and went still. Nothin' else to do, we nursed bourbon. Cigs were lit, pinched into a pickle jar ash tray. The radio static crackled; we exchanged worried looks until Tarek spoke. Whatever was in his head before was gone.

"When I was a boy," he said. "In Bogotá—" the way he winced told us he didn't really want to be sayin' any of this. "My mom thought I could talk to the dead. I had nightmares. Woke up at night feeling a heavy weight on my chest. My mom prayed over me with a rosary. Months went by like that until she had a priest come in to close my third eye, close my senses to the spirits. I think it opened back up."

We didn't know what to think. Milton, this kid from the DR who did a lot of our tattoos, always talked about gnomes stealing his equipment. Milton was dead serious. But Tarek was talking demonic shit. The court of hell.

"Tribunal del infierno," he called it. Said the priest told him there was an obsession. Berith, the hell prince of Cherubim, was luring him.

Phlegm squeezed his shoulder. "How do we close your third eye?"

Abril ran a finger across her throat, quieting Phlegm.

The night stretched. When the first glow of sun lanced through the blinds, the power came back on. Bulbs overhead glared down on Tarek, who had sipped the bourbon two fingers from the sticker, asleep.

"We need to get him help, maybe take

him to a church?" Phlegm said. "Priest could close his third eye."

"That'll just feed his delusions," Mickey said. "Make it worse."

Abril scratched a curl away with a black acrylic. "He gets more paranoid, he gets worse. They," she tapped her acrylics against her temple, "always get worse without medicine, a doctor."

Maybe one of us noticed Akim on the mattress corner, maybe not. But if one of us did, we would've seen him scowling, deep in the thoughts of how to make this right.

"I think I can fund his medical expenses," he said, and we believed him.

*

A few days later, we sat on the porch. Tarek was sipping his Big Gulp. At first, he kept apologizing for the fire, embarrassed, but now he'd forgotten. We didn't tell him that word had gotten out about the eight-five-o and bands were second-guessing a tour stop here. Made our funds dry up. Plus, we didn't always know which Tarek was home. His latest thing was recording empty sounds on this burner phone—maybe he'd gotten it at a pawnshop, who knows—he kept recording all day. Insisted there were voices caught on the recordings. Only thing we heard was his mind floating in and out of lucidity.

"Just listen." He held up the phone. "You'll hear him. I swear on everything."

"Easy on that vodka, man."

"Hey," he answered, maybe forgetting how we'd arrived at this point in the conversation. "If it's easy, take two."

Some of us mustered a chuckle, but

Abril scolded him, pointing to the side of her stomach. "Tarek, you keep drinking like that, you end up with an ulcer like me. You drink with an ulcer, your stomach bursts. The acid goes to your heart. You want that?"

"It's not going to come to that," Akim said, looking at Tarek. "Drinking only dulls your senses. Doesn't block the hallucinations."

Abril nodded at Akim like her head was at a Gwar show. "You listen to this, Tarek."

"You gotta plan?" Mickey asked, raising brows at Akim.

He scooted forward on his wicker chair, his head on his knuckles, his index fingers extended to the bridge of his nose. "I have—" Akim hesitated, "this client. I've set up a dominatrix for him before. We'll call him Jerry. Jerry is rich, like no-shelf-life-six-figures-a-second rich, and he likes to watch. He's been asking for a while now about a webcam show for his friends. Very hedonistic and it would require people in the community," Akim shot his eyes off the porch into the bowels of the city, "to do things *some* aren't down for."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Mickey shook his head.

"Jerry likes filth," Akim said. "His friends do too. They'll watch on webcams but two of his friends want to attend. I don't know them, but we'll call them Phil and Tony. Phil and Tony are like Jerry, but they like to do more than watch. I'll handle them. Everyone else hooks up, then we get paid. Every penny goes to Tarek."

Akim's idea dawned. We'd heard his exploits. We knew the details. None of us wanted to get filmed—be sex workers acting

out these people's fetishes. Nasty shit, man.

"Normally," Akim said. "I rent out yachts or a five-star resort for something like this, but like I said, Jerry likes filth. We'll set up cameras all over the house, throw a party. People find a partner, someone they've probably already slept with, except me. I'll take Phil and Tony. Everyone else just proceeds as normal, just a little kinkier, depending on chat requests; they call it 'a rider' for these things too. Only difference is Jerry's watching. We sign NDAs, get a check, and pay a doctor out of pocket. No questions asked."

"No, man," Tarek said. He was back. "You're not fucking two strangers and filming everyone else fucking for me. Not happening."

"Tarek's right," Mickey said. "This is too much."

"I don't think you understand how much money Jerry and his friends have," Akim said. "I've been working my way into this crust for years. We're talking considerable wealth for one night. *Considerable*. Tarek can see the best medical professionals in the country. Ones who will look the other way over a green card." Akim's gaze swiveled from Tarek back to Mickey. "You have no idea the planning I've done to get a deal this lavish. I've seen too many dark nights turn into nauseous sunsets setting up cut-rate exhibitions. I've placated and schmoozed, and I'm this fucking close." Akim held up his index finger and thumb, pinching the windless air.

"Is this about you?" Mickey asked. "Or Tarek? Just sell one of your chess sets."

"You don't understand," Akim said. "With people like Jerry, I could buy every

chess set in the world." Reading our minds, Akim shifted his gaze to Abril; he knew we deferred to her on who got the last word. She looked at Tarek. He shook his head.

"Free love and all," he said. "But I can't ask everyone to go for this. Not for me, man."

*

Akim cared about Tarek. We also knew he cared about this weird perceived sense of affluence. Somethin' that none of us gave a shit about. We were gutter punks. Akim was one of us, had heart, and we loved him, but really, he valued stupid shit. He'd brag about VIPs he didn't pay for at the clubs over by the college or finesse his way into getting a restaurant owner to come out and thank him. What he didn't get, or didn't care about getting, was that he was buyin' stranger's drinks. Tipping servers nearly half the tab just to get some sense of respect. 'Course people let him into VIP and shook his hand; he was funding their good time. None of us had the guts to tell him. We loved Akim too.

So, we argued. Tried convincing him to sell a chess set. He wouldn't budge. We couldn't host bands since our friend was upstairs in tongues. Abril tried fundraising. Put out calls to the local co-ops, punk initiatives that helped shelter dogs or did food drops for the homeless at the parks. We raised a few hundred, but that couldn't even get Tarek into a doctor's door without insurance. Down here in Florida, he couldn't even get Obamacare. Too old. An ER would make him wait, give him bottom-shelf treatment, send a check we could never afford, then put him in the system. If Tarek's name popped up in a database, he

wouldn't be the hospital's problem anymore. He'd be ICE's.

We had to sit there and watch him get worse. From the sounds thumping down through the old wood floor panels, we held images in our head of Tarek writhing around, his hands over his ears, eyes squeezed, yelling at whatever haunted him. We'd taken our friend and locked him away: a makeshift asylum. Made us feel like that "tribunal del infierno" he had raved about was where we were all headed.

*

One morning, we woke up, and the house felt quiet. Weird quiet, like a generator hum you get used to and don't notice 'till it's dead. Abril rushed down the stairs.

"Tarek," she said. "He's not upstairs."

Mickey jumped up from one of the stolen bar stools that towered over the table where we ate. "Did he run down to Ports?"

At this point, most of us were sleeping downstairs, escaping the sounds of his room. "He must've gone out when it was dark," one of us said. "Dangerous out there alone. He could get his throat slit like that if he's got that phone on him."

Eight-five-o was a hazardous spot if you weren't used to the lifestyle, but some parts of Frenchtown could get you killed. We all knew the alleyways where junkies smoked flocka and shot fentanyl. Someone like Tarek who didn't have their wits could get hurt, easy. Tweakers would steal the shoes right off his feet. The other side of town was dangerous too; we hoped he hadn't veered toward the college or city hall—someone would call the

cops.

"We need to find him." Abril shook more of us awake. "Let's go."

Some of us on rusted fixies, others in dented hoopties, we had a search party. The eight-five-o was on Frenchtown's edge, and we thought we'd find him if he had stayed near. Someone would spot Tarek and know to get him back to us.

Phlegm devised a system: "city's a grid. Cars should drive down the main roads, roll through the gas stations while bikes search the alleys."

We cruised, yelled his name. We looked for Tarek everywhere. Passed people sittin' outside on cinder blocks burning trash in rusted cans, gates covered in wood sorrel, cars that hadn't run in years, now home to the lizards and roaches. The deeper we got into Frenchtown, the more we saw our neighbors trying to survive. Made us feel bad for how harsh we judged our own neighborhood earlier. We lived on the edge but pedaling into the heart made us realize behind all the bourgeoisie 'rah rah,' most ghettos are just people living their lives. A lot easier to misunderstand a place than to go there and see it. Solidified our belief that if you looked the same, ate the same, prayed the same, you're a lot easier to control. Our search party went on for hours. A few even argued over talking to the cops, but pigs like to hit more than help. Everyone knows 911 is a joke.

Then, Abril called. We heard Tarek's shape over the speakerphone from the pain in her voice. When the rest of us got there, she was trying to pull him to his feet. Tarek was

lying against a tree in an empty lot, overgrown with shrubs, leaned against a Spanish oak. He was lights-are-on-but-nobody's-home, the same way he'd been when the cigarette burnt through his fingers. The back of his pants was soiled. Greasy and covered in something sticky that smelled like a dumpster. Blood dried down his left nostril. He didn't register much and besides muttering nonsensical sounds almost like words, he didn't speak. The scared, panicky look in his eyes had glazed over. His mind was eating itself. We got him home and cleaned him up, but he was still blank.

We all knew what we'd have to do.

*

Jerry sent Akim five K to get the party set up. Phlegm got to work, wiring the webcams in the rooms, fixed at an angle down on the beds upstairs, and on the mantelpiece over the fireplace where incinerated beer cans were buried in soot—plugging the cameras into a desktop that Akim had set up in Mickey's room by the podcast equipment.

"Cameras start rolling," they said.

"You'll see a red light turn on. Means Jerry's watching."

"What time we start?"

"Nine," Akim said. "Before that, we're the only ones in the room."

Akim had brought over Phil and Tony a few hours before the party, but then they left to get "ready." Turns out, they were this old, married couple. Reeked of opulence. The sunburnt wife had jet black hair, drawn eyebrows that arched high over her drooping face; the husband's hairline was high, blue eyes that went gray outside the sun, onion

skin, and a smirking jaw. Reminded us of snakes.

"You're not really going to—" but we couldn't say the words to Akim. "You're going to take the two of them?"

Akim was stoic. "Hey," he said, glancing toward the ceiling that made the floor of Tarek's room. "If it's easy, take two."

Phlegm smiled, giving Akim the finger, and Mickey held his shoulders, whispering something none of us could hear. When Mickey let go, Abril gave him a nod. She respected his sacrifice. We had to admire Akim, but most of us looked at the shoes of the person we'd probably end up rolling around with later, already feeling the webcams trained over our bodies. But hey, at least we got to choose.

None of us knew what Phil and Tony's 'rider' would look like.

Tarek was upstairs, quiet in his half-gold fortress, almost like some part of him could still parcel out what we'd do for him later. Everyone was quiet. And everyone knew this was the only way.

The party had no band, just our HiFi system in the living room rattling the classics: *Dig Me Out*, *New Noise*, *Kill the Poor*. In unison, we belted the songs, singing our lungs hoarse, trying to forget the cameras. We focused on the lyrics, singing them together, beating our chests with fists and pointing toward the ceiling, we were something like happy, as if that night was like so many shows at the eight-five-o where we felt like we would never be alone; we'd never face down the opposition without our comrades, our friends; we were many; we were one; we were family.

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Nine PM came quick. None of us felt like drinking, but we took our last slugs of Wild Turkey, chased with PBR and a drag of a cigarette, and blurred our heads so we didn't have to imagine how we looked on a stranger's computer screen, watching from somewhere out there in this vicious world. The red lights beamed on. Jerry was watching. We played a song, *5 Yr. Plan* by H2O, the one that Tarek had shown us, and we moved through the ways that people showed each other love.

The Silent Strike

Cameron Carter, *Georgia State University*

For a moment, Natasha thought that this new life that she had carved for herself would bring her family closer to utopia, thought that tucked away here so far from America, so far from the pressures of their family, that here in this spacious, three-bedroom apartment, there could exist a kind of Black utopia. When they first arrived in Ghana five years ago, they were optimistic. One afternoon, when Natasha was in the living room, her husband was at work, and Alameda was at school, she caught the tail end of the news.

A news anchor stood on the banks of an Italian beach, looking out at the Mediterranean Sea. A British accent dubbed over their words.

“Yesterday evening, almost two hundred people drowned attempting to find refuge in Europe.” The news stations ran through a slide of pictures and names, showing family photos, graduation nights, and wedding days, showing that these people who drowned had existed at one point in time.

Natasha turned the television off. The refugees reminded her of her students at the local elementary school where she volunteered, their parents who would linger outside the school grounds in the morning after dropping off their children, of the kids she saw at the market square ducking between the stalls and raising trouble. In the end, she knew they were like her. They were chasing that same sliver of utopia that she was; they wanted to cross borders and boundaries, to taste this utopia and give it to their children in the same manner that she had left America. She slammed the remote down on the coffee table. She went to her balcony with a book to read, attempting to recreate that festering, fleeting utopia.

*

“The whole point of us moving to Ghana was for her not to worry,” Natasha listened to her husband, Benjamin, yell. Benjamin held up a now wrinkled slip of paper their daughter had been forced to bring home and have signed.

Ghana was supposed to be their utopia. Their cradle of Black peace. Ghana, like all countries, had its problems. Natasha was the first to admit this. She frequently petitioned Benjamin’s university against shrinking budgets and frequent curriculum changes, and she volunteered at the local elementary school, filling in as a math instructor. Yet, at least here, they didn’t have to worry if Alameda would have to shrink herself down into understandable, consumable boxes.

Natasha read through the note again. *In today’s activity, Alameda, along with a handful of students in her class, refused to participate actively in any coursework. They refused to speak for the duration of the school day.* She knew her daughter. Her daughter loved to talk. The problem wasn’t getting Alameda to talk.

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

"This isn't like her," Natasha said, tossing the letter on the desk. She sighed. She wished she could get a glimpse into what was going on in her daughter's brain. If she misbehaved one more time then she would be thrown out of the international school.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this," Benjamin said. He charged for the door, pulling his belt from his pants. Whooping was uncommon for the two of them, an ancient punishment to only be utilized when all hope for diplomacy was lost. Natasha couldn't remember the last time they had to whoop Alameda, but she remembered her puffy eyes, hot tears, and snot running down her nose all too well.

Natasha stepped before the door, blocking his way out of their bedroom. "Let me talk to her," she said.

When Natasha opened Alameda's bedroom door, she found the teenager lying in front of her laptop screen. She lay across the comforter, still in her school uniform. Alameda barely acknowledged Natasha had walked into the room. "How are you feeling, hummingbird?" Natasha said.

Silence. Alameda looked at Natasha but refused to respond to her. She knew this face. The same face her daughter made when she was a toddler running around the playground and she fell and scraped her knee. Natasha sat on the bed next to her and wrapped her arms around Alameda.

"Why won't you talk, hummingbird?"

Natasha watched Alameda open a Word document on her laptop. She typed and then turned the laptop to her.

The Silent Strikes.

"The Silent what?" Natasha asked.

Alameda retook control of the laptop. She brought up the website of an organization. Natasha saw spread across the top of the screen: THE SILENT STRIKES. Alameda nudged the laptop towards Natasha.

Last night, sixty-five refugees drowned in the Mediterranean Sea on a makeshift raft. Their raft mainly consisted of West Africans seeking to avoid conflicts in their home countries. They sought freedom in Italy after being turned away by the Spanish government. The restrictive EU immigration policies have forced an unnecessary amount of immigrant deaths. These countries milk us for resources and our infrastructure then leave us to clean up the mess. This time we've had enough. We will not be marching. We will not be holding sermons. We will not be begging for humanity with our last breaths. Instead, the world will be forced to deal with our silence for seven days.

Requirements to Participate in The Silent Strike

- 1) *We Must Remain Silent. In this hegemonic, Eurocentric society, we are seen as powerless, our bodies disposable, and our voices a chorus of static to be ignored. Our silence is our power.*
- 2) *There Are No Exceptions. There were no exceptions made for our fallen brothers and sisters. No class, age, or gender privilege was given as protection to our fallen brothers and sisters. Therefore, none must be given to our co-workers, family, friends, or lovers. Our silence is power.*
- 3) *Silence Goes Beyond Our Words. The act of simply being silent goes beyond using our words but also our knowledge. We must not exchange any of our intellect. For too long, we've tried to negotiate with oppressive institutions using our knowledge, our lived experiences, and rational appeals to humanity, and for too long, we have been met with their silence.*

*So, instead, we choose silence.
If our words are meaningless
Then Our Silence is Power.*

“What have you joined?” Natasha asked. “This silence isn’t going to solve anything. Your school is threatening to expel you if you don’t talk.”

Alameda snatched the laptop from her. Natasha caught herself. She realized that instead of comforting her daughter, she had harmed her even worse. “I’m going to talk to your father about this,” Natasha said. She rested her hand over Alameda’s for a moment. She closed the door behind her, scared that she had lost the version of her daughter that she had built inside her head for the last five years.

*

Benjamin was furious when she explained the strikes to him.

“We didn’t move halfway across the world for her to protest,” he screamed.

Natasha never knew what to do when Benjamin got to yelling. Even though he swore up and down that he wasn’t like his father, he was just like his father, and probably his father before him.

When Benjamin was offered a teaching position in Ghana, they decided enough was enough. They sold their belongings the following month. Benjamin’s family argued against their move. John, his father, threatened to disown Benjamin. *You can’t run from this*, he yelled at a diner during their final days in America. *This is your home. This soil fed you, me, your grandfather, and everyone that came before you.*

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

John was a lifelong activist. He inherited a plot of land just a two-hour drive south of Atlanta from his father. Natasha remembered the first night she met John, he talked about how the plot of land had been passed down in the family line since slavery. How the land sat untouched, trees still standing from before the country was founded, soil still rich. An untamed wilderness that James Oglethorpe hadn't explored, and William Sherman hadn't scorched. Real estate developers had sought to buy the land from John. After the new industrial plant was announced in the next city over, they needed new housing for an endless sea of transplants, restaurants for them to taste the world, and shopping centers for them to spend their new excess of money. John's was the last plot of land in town for the developers to buy. He refused to sell. The others needed the money. They were parents who needed to send their kids to university or widows who couldn't bear living in the same place any longer, their land left to kids who already moved states away.

Since they arrived in West Africa, John refused to call or answer their calls. He took their departure as their refusal to continue fighting. The few times they talked to John were when Jubilee, John's younger sister, attempted to remedy the situation herself.

*

Natasha stayed home the next afternoon while Benjamin was teaching at the university and Alameda was at school. She was baking a cake for the students at the school where she volunteered. She felt that after the stir with the boat in the Mediterranean, this might ease everyone's mind. She was scrapping the last of the frosting across the steaming cake when her phone rang. She picked it up to see a text message from Jubilee in their group chat with her and Benjamin: *John passed away this morning.*

When's the funeral? Natasha replied.

This Sunday, Jubilee texted back.

Natasha dropped her baking materials and started looking through flights back to Atlanta on her phone. Although they had never returned to America, they had a savings account for their inevitable return. She looked for flights and rental car rates.

When Benjamin finally came home with a still silent Alameda, she was surprised that he wasn't remorseful or grieving for his father. He went to the kitchen and started cooking like any other typical day.

"I think it's cheaper if we leave on Wednesday instead of waiting till Friday," Natasha said from the kitchen island. She had three tickets in her cart. She was waiting on the final word from Benjamin.

"Tickets for what?" Benjamin said. He pulled out leftovers from the previous day.

"Tickets for your father's funeral."

"We're not going," Benjamin said.

"What do you mean we're not going? It's your father's funeral."

“We’re not going. I haven’t talked to him in five years. For five years we’ve been calling him. No response. No letter. Not even a call to his granddaughter. He doesn’t want us there. He’d say as much if he were alive.”

She didn’t want to pressure him to change his mind. She let him eat and cool down in front of the TV. He was stubborn. She knew he would come around to the idea. When he retired for the night into the bedroom, she bought the tickets on her phone.

*

The next morning, Natasha dropped Alameda off at school. She sat in the passenger seat staring out the window. The light flickering from the towering building’s windows was like a mosaic on her skin. Natasha had told her about her grandfather the previous night. Alameda nodded. Natasha asked if she wanted to talk about it, thinking that if there was ever a time to break the strike it would be now when her own flesh and blood had died, but Alameda went back to her laptop.

When Natasha dropped Alameda off at her school, she noticed Jubilee calling her.

“Hey, Jubilee,” she said after answering on the third ring. “How are you holding up?”

“When are you all coming to the funeral?” Jubilee said. In the background, Natasha heard the commotion of her two toddlers playing.

“We’re still working on a day and time to fly out.” Natasha tried to sound convincing.

“He doesn’t want to come?”

“We’re coming, I promise.”

If it weren’t for the commotion from the kids in the background, Natasha would’ve thought that she lost service. She knew Jubilee was as stubborn as Benjamin. They all refused to listen to anyone other than themselves. It ran in the family.

“He willed the property to him. He needs to come to sign the paperwork, or the land will be forfeited to the state.”

“What do you mean he left him the land? Why would he give him the land?”

Jubilee had already hung up. She redialed Jubilee’s number between traffic lights, but the calls went straight to voicemail. After the fifth attempt, Natasha threw her phone onto the floorboard and slammed her open palm against the steering wheel.

*

They flew into Hartsfield–Jackson on Wednesday afternoon. Benjamin refused to talk to Natasha on the flight. He popped the airline headphones into his ears and stared out the window. On the airplane, Natasha read over the draft of the will. She hovered over every sentence, pondered every word choice. He left the entire property in The Hollow to Benjamin. She wondered if these were the words of a man who knew he was close to dying or one planning something greater than himself. In the early years of their relationship, Benjamin would take her back to his home some weekends. She remembered the way the sun danced

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

in between the leaves, the way she could hear the rustling of the blades of grass against the wind.

“What are you going to do with the land?” she had asked him Monday night after she broke the news to him. He’d been in disbelief that his father had left him anything.

“I’ll probably sell it,” he said. “We don’t need the land. It’s not like we’re moving back to America anytime soon.”

She knew there was no use stopping him. There was no use stopping anyone in that family. Once their mind was made up, it was made up. The land would be as good as sold, regardless of the repercussions.

“How do you think Jubilee will take this when you tell her? This is as much her decision as it’s yours.”

He didn’t have an answer for her, and he wouldn’t until he saw Jubilee waiting for them at the airport terminal.

It had been five years since she last saw Jubilee, and, in that time, she had gone through three job changes and had a set of twins. She stood there waiting for them at the edge of the security perimeter with her arms folded over each other, staring daggers at them.

When they were close enough to her, she bent down and wrapped her arms around Alameda, playing the role of loving Aunty.

“You’ve grown so much since I last got the chance to see you,” Jubilee said. She gave Benjamin a stare as if saying, *and you’re the reason why I haven’t seen my niece*. Once she finished hugging Alameda, she took her suitcase from her and led them out of the terminal.

*

The trip from the airport to The Hollow took two hours. Natasha fell asleep, exhausted from the plane ride, before they made it out of the city. When she opened her eyes, they were parked outside of Benjamin’s family home. It was everything she remembered. The house sagged from age. The field surrounding the house was vast, and the tree line surrounding the property was almost half a mile from the house itself. Along the other side of the trees, Natasha made out a handful of construction equipment. She could hear moving dirt, reverse sirens, and motor engines. The once quiet place she had imagined was gone.

Jubilee said she’d cook dinner for them once everyone was settled. The house was divided into two sections, each section with three bedrooms. In the middle of both sections were a modestly large kitchen and living room. Jubilee, her husband, and the twins had already unpacked into the section on the right, so Natasha, Benjamin, and Alameda set up their belongings in the section on the left.

Natasha unpacked her clothes into the bedroom drawers. She could hear Jubilee searching the cabinets for pots and pans through the walls. Jubilee’s husband had stolen Benjamin away from her, asking him questions about Africa. *Was it indeed the motherland?*

Was the sun as bright, the stars as clear?

When she finished unpacking, she strolled into the kitchen to find Jubilee washing chicken meat and waiting for the oil on the stove to get hot. Alameda was in the living room ignoring her twin cousins' questions. They criticized her silence.

"We were thinking about keeping the house for the children," Jubilee said. "It would be a place for them to visit during the summers. We could re-furnish it for them, so it doesn't look so dated."

"That would be lovely," Natasha said.

"We all need to see our family sometimes. It's healing. I know y'all must get lonely all the way out there by y'all selves."

"You should come visit sometime. Keep us company. We could take the kids to the zoo. I can take you to some of the cocktail bars I've found."

They smiled. Jubilee tested the oil by splashing the water on fingertips into the grease. The oil fought against the grease bouncing out of the pot. She laid the chicken strips into oil, watching the bubbles engulf the meat.

Jubilee's husband stormed into the kitchen. "What's wrong with you?" she said, laying the last strips of chicken into the grease.

"He's selling the house," Jubilee's husband said. Benjamin appeared behind him.

Jubilee whipped around from the kitchen stove. "What do you mean you're selling the house?"

"I don't want to talk about this in front of the children," Benjamin said.

"I'm sorry. Would you rather we have this conversation when you sold the land and moved back to Africa for the next ten years?" Jubilee dried her hands with the kitchen rag. "This house has been in our family for generations. Father fought the entirety of his life to keep this house for us, and you'll sell it the first chance you get."

"If our existence on this land is built by our fight to keep it, are we truly living?" Benjamin said. He stepped into the kitchen and stood over Natasha. "Nobody knows better than me how hard Father fought for this land."

"Like hell. Where have you been for the last five years, Benjamin? Where were you when they served him papers on his deathbed? Where were you on mornings when he had to get up to drive an hour to the county courts to fight to keep this house in our name? You weren't here, and for him to give you—" The skillet boiled over, and oil and chicken fat poured onto the countertop. Jubilee turned the fryer off before a fire started. "Get out. You don't deserve to be here. He's not even on the ground yet, and you're trying to figure out the best way to defile him."

Natasha watched Benjamin stand there with his mouth open, ready to form another word and fight back against his sister, but instead, he said nothing. He went to the room where

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

they were staying and slammed his clothes back into the suitcases. The rest of the family stood there in the kitchen listening in horror to the sounds of wood splintering, drawers closing, doors slamming. Once he finished, he commanded Alameda and Natasha to follow him out the door before storming out of the house.

"I'm sorry," Natasha said. She didn't know to whom or what she was apologizing. Jubilee scrubbed the oil from the countertop with a rag. Natasha followed her husband to the carport. Soon after, Jubilee's husband drove them ten minutes to the nearest hotel.

*

The following morning, while they were eating in the hotel's all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet, Natasha urged Benjamin to apologize to his sister. Benjamin rolled his eyes, grunted, and chewed on his paper-thin bacon stripes and dry, puffy eggs. Alameda silently stirred her bowl of blueberry oatmeal.

"I miss hearing your voice, hummingbird," Natasha told Alameda in the morning as she brushed her teeth in the hotel bathroom mirror. There was a convention in town, so the hotel was near capacity. The only room they had left was a king-bed suite, so they all lay there next to one another. "Are you excited about being back in America?"

Alameda pointed her thumb in the air. This was becoming their new system of communication. Whenever Natasha asked a question, Alameda would put her thumb up for yes or down for no. *Do you want to talk about last night?* Thumbs down. *Would you keep the land if you were inheriting it?* Thumbs up.

Benjamin arranged to meet with Uncle Daryl, the lawyer handling the will, early in the morning. The lawyer was a family friend who had worked alongside Benjamin's father. Natasha met him once, on their wedding night, so long ago. He handled the countersuit against the developers who were building alongside the edge of the family's property.

His office was in the historic downtown section, from their hotel. When they arrived at his office, Benjamin paced around the lobby. Natasha watched him dance his fingers across the picture frames that decorated the walls. There were pictures of Uncle Daryl in D.C. giving speeches in front of small rallies and pictures of Uncle Daryl with politicians, elderly civil rights leaders, and activists whose charges he helped clear. Uncle Daryl exited his back office and wrapped his arms around Benjamin. They embraced as if Uncle Daryl was hugging him for every year he had missed.

"Wait out here," Natasha said to Alameda. Benjamin and Natasha walked behind Uncle Daryl into his back office. If his lobby was meant to give the sense of his work in activism, then his back office was to give the sense that he was an underpaid, overworked lawyer. Stacks of papers rested across his desk and spread off onto the floor. The only spot in the office that didn't have a stack of papers sprouting from it was where he placed his coffee mug.

He offered them each a cup of coffee by pointing to the pot in the corner. But Natasha

and Benjamin both turned it down. They sat across the desk from Uncle Daryl. He pulled out a legal pad and scribbled in cursive. Once he finished, he turned the pad to them. It took them both a moment to decipher the letters on the legal pad: *I can't talk. I'm participating in that silent strike.*

"What do you mean you are participating in the silent strike?" Benjamin said. "You're our fucking lawyer. We need you to talk."

Uncle Daryl ripped the previous piece of paper from his legal pad and crumbled it into a ball. He started writing furiously on a new sheet. *I can't. One of the rules of the strike is that we can't talk.*

"I know what the strikes are. I flew halfway across the world to review these documents with you. I haven't seen you in almost twenty years. I want to have a conversation with you about a will that could change the entire course of my life."

"I'm sorry for my husband's yelling," Natasha said. She hated apologizing for her husband, apologizing for a grown man who was more than capable of regulating his tongue. "We've been under immense pressure these last couple of days."

"I'm not yelling," Benjamin yelled. "We need to return to Ghana on Sunday after the funeral. I don't know when we'll be back in the States, so I would like to finalize the will and get this as prepared as soon as possible, in case I can't return."

Don't worry. I can continue to represent you in the case against the developers.

"No, we don't need protection from the developers. I'm selling the house, the land. It's not worth fighting for now that—"

"You will not," Uncle Darryl yelled. His voice reflected off the walls. They all sat there like a bomb had gone off in the room. Uncle Daryl flipped to a new page in his legal pad. He scribbled as fast as he could.

"You know what? We can find other legal counsel for this case," Benjamin said. He rose from the chair and made for the door.

Uncle Daryl slammed his open palm onto the table, returning their attention to him. Natasha grabbed the pad off the table and brought it closer to her face. Benjamin read over her shoulder.

I helped your father fight for that parcel of land for my entire life. He thought by giving you this land, it would bring you home, not push you further away. I can't help you sell this land, this final claim on the soil that you were here. I can't change how you feel about growing up here, but please think about what you will leave behind.

When Natasha finished reading the letter, she looked up at Uncle Daryl, or what was left of him. She saw a man who sacrificed his life laboring at the expense of his health. An unkempt beard, hair that had fallen from his head, and teeth that had eroded to sticks from the amount of coffee he drank. She looked behind those pleading eyes and saw a man tired of fighting,

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

who wanted so desperately to call it quits but couldn't because there was always one last fight. Benjamin left the back office, grabbed his coat, and left the building.

Natasha sat in the office chair, holding onto the legal pad. She ripped the piece of paper out of the notebook. "Thank you," Natasha said.

*

When they returned to the hotel, Benjamin went to the room and lay down. He was still jet-lagged from their arrival. Natasha went with Alameda to the front desk to order a rental car from the receptionist. She planned on taking her out to the movies and for ice cream so that her entire trip wasn't spent chasing behind the coattails of adults.

"Can I get a rental car from you all?" Natasha said at the receptionist counter.

The receptionist nodded. She handed Natasha a brochure. It didn't take long for Natasha to notice that the girl wasn't talking. "Are you silent, too?" Natasha said. The receptionist nodded. "The cheapest car you have is fine."

To Natasha's amusement, they finished the transaction without the receptionist needing to talk. When the receptionist needed details like her address, driver's license, and payment, she turned the screen around, and Natasha typed the information herself. When they finished, the receptionist unlocked a box of keys behind the counter and handed Natasha a set of car keys.

*

The movie theater was a twenty-minute drive from their hotel. Natasha's GPS told her to take the state highway north through a handful of small towns her parents would've told her never to travel through alone at night. Alameda was in the passenger seat watching TikTok on her phone, looking out the window occasionally, watching the trees whoosh past the car.

"Do you want to watch a horror movie?" Natasha said.

Thumbs down.

"What about a comedy?" Natasha said.

Thumbs up.

Natasha bought the tickets, and the pair walked into the auditorium, turned their phones off, and watched some lousy comedy movie with some actors Natasha would forget existed. They laughed. For the first time in the week, they shared a utopia of happiness where they were comfortable in each other's silence.

As they walked out of the theater and Natasha turned her phone on, she received an onslaught of notifications from Benjamin. She opened the most recent message from him. *We must get to the house; one of the contractor's trucks caught fire.*

*

When Natasha, Benjamin, and Alameda arrived at the house, a dozen fire trucks were along the property line, putting out a fire in the trees. Jubilee watched the chaos from the

porch, rocking her sobbing twins. Benjamin parked the car, hopping out of the rental. He yelled at the police chief about how the fire was spreading, that they weren't doing enough, that the developers had planned this all along, how John's body wasn't even in the ground yet, and they were attempting to kill him again.

Natasha saw a construction crew gathered at the far side of the fence, watching from the distance. They held their hard hats against their chest. The excavator that caught fire now stood as a burnt ornament on the edge of the property line.

"When does it end?" Natasha said. The firefighter chief refused to talk to Benjamin. He was participating in the silent strikes.

Natasha watched as her husband fought for the property. He yelled at the fire crew. He offered to donate to the fire station. He yelled until his voice was coarse and dry from the smoke rising from the tree line. Finally, like the rest of them, he sat on the porch silently and watched as the fire brewed, burning everything it touched.

They sat as the back half of their property was burned. Once the fire was nearing the house, the police tried to move them from the porch, but they refused. Jubilee and Benjamin wrapped their arms around one another. "The trees will grow back," Benjamin said. Natasha watched the fire rage and wondered whether they could escape it or if they would be putting out fires for the rest of their lives.

Nonfiction

Ad Astra

Sofia Navarro, *Georgia Southern University*

The Hubble Telescope

In May 1990, NASA's Hubble Space Telescope produced its first picture. The image displayed the star HD96755 of the open cluster NGC 3532, found in the Carina constellation. NASA created the Hubble Space Telescope to compare images taken from space to ground-based images taken by telescopes on Earth, which were heavily affected by Earth's atmosphere – ground-based images were fuzzier by comparison. With Hubble, the expanse of our universe became much clearer and vaster.

I am five years old.

It is 5:53 a.m. on a Monday in October 2005.

My father left for work two hours ago, and my mother, typically active in those early hours of his absence, can't sleep. I'm outside our two-bedroom apartment in Columbia, South Carolina, wearing a Blue's Clues-themed nightgown, once-bright teal, and a picture of Blue the Dog faded from too many cycles in the washing machine. My feet are stuffed into baby pink chunky tennis shoes a half size too small, without socks, and my toes curl at the top.

Beside me, my older sister, Nati, leans against the dark beige vinyl siding of the apartment's front porch, wearing a metallic pink Strawberry Shortcake pajama set. Her hair sticks out in a million directions, a bedhead of light brown curly-q comets arcing

around her tired face.

There is a partial lunar eclipse this morning.

My mother is fiddling with a black and silver standing telescope that rises far past my head, extending farther than my short and stubby fingers can reach. Her fingers are working the black focus knobs, and her dark brown eyes squint in the darkness of the morning; she checks to make sure the scope is working.

After a few minutes of focusing and fiddling, she looks up at the full moon with her hands on her hips. The moon has a yellow tint much darker than its usual ivory glow. My mother is quiet, her eyes still squinting as she takes in the sky. It's an hour from sunrise, and the morning is dark. Her lips purse the way they do when she can't find her car keys or when she folds laundry and can't match any of the socks. I look up, too, thinking perhaps I will see the same things she does—perhaps I can find whatever she is looking for.

"Who wants to go first?" Her voice is a whisper. She doesn't want us to wake the neighbors, even though some lights in the apartment windows around us are already on. She takes my sister first, lifting under her arms so she can squint at the grey-scaled craters of the moon's surface. "Do you see it?"

"The moon?" my sister asks.

My mother hums an affirmation.

"I kinda see it."

She yawns, and my mother puts her down, grunting softly from holding her for so long.

“You’re getting so big, Nati,” she tells my sister.

“My turn?” I ask her, arms already up and raised for her to pick me up, to show me the secrets of the universe through the lens of a telescope. She’s looking at the moon, and she’s frowning now. I can’t tell if she’s upset because Nati is getting bigger or because she can’t pick up Nati like she used to. Maybe both. She catches her breath, and within moments, she picks me up so I can look into the scope.

“Close one eye, mija,” she tells me. I listen, closing my left eye and squinting through the scope with the right. It takes a few seconds of her adjusting her grip on me, centering me over the telescope. My eyes are heavy with sleep, but I find the fuzzy pale surface of the moon, deep grey splotches of its craters scoring the face like pockmarks. I notice how the moon’s hue is unusually yellow, and a deep rusty color creeps in at the corner—as if someone tore into the moon with their teeth, leaving behind a bite mark impressed in the bloody flesh.

My mother pulls my hair behind my ears as I look through the scope, a quick maneuver so that no strands get in the way. She puts me down after a few minutes and tells us about the eclipse while she starts to pack up the telescope, and the sky lightens from smooth obsidian to inky purple. My sister and I help her pull the telescope back inside, tucking it in the space between one of the black leather couches in the living room and the walls decorated with my father’s art.

She tucks us back into bed, letting us

sleep the rest of the morning. Around noon, she walks us to school and hugs us both when she drops us off at the front office. She kisses our cheeks, leaving berry-colored lipsticks on our skin and nail salon perfumes on the crisp collars of our school uniforms.

On clear nights and mornings, this was the routine. When my mother’s insomnia forced her to make the best of a rare moment of peace and take advantage of the quiet that reigned without my father, we pulled out the telescope. On mornings when we were all too tired to drag out the colossal telescope, she took us outside to sit on the curb instead, explaining the stars, planets, and constellations above us.

Oftentimes, I traced the shapes between the stars, and I made up my own constellations. In those days, the Big and Little Dipper were the only constellations I found in the night sky.

It’s 2005, fifteen years after the Hubble Space Telescope sent its first image to Earth. My mother’s love for the stars is passed onto her children, who draw shapes in the sand with sticks and try to count every discernible glowing dot in the sky.

The most recent image taken by the Hubble Space Telescope depicts three galaxies in a dance – two discernible galaxy spirals known as the Arp–Madore 2339–661 are pulled together by gravity and a third galaxy hidden between the two is nearly invisible to the eye.

The image was taken on October 27, 2023.

Thirty-three years after the Hubble

Space Telescope's first successful image, our standing telescope is long forgotten.

A love like gravity still pulls me to the night sky. Miles away from my sister, even *farther* from my mother, and I still look up to count the stars. I still raise my hand and trace the shapes of familiar constellations—I can find more now than ever before.

Eighteen years of practice will do that.

The Invisible Supernovae

When a star dies, we, on Earth, don't notice it happens.

The sun in our solar system is 92.313 million miles from Earth and 4.603 billion years old. If you tried to reach the sun by plane, it would take 19 years. By car, the journey would take 177 years. Light is much quicker; a photon of light from our sun needs eight minutes to reach our planet. If the sun ever died, it would take eight minutes before we'd notice.

My mother is no longer a stay-at-home mom; my father left in 2009 after making us move to a large house beyond our family's means. The separation created a vacuum my mother needed to fill, so she got a job. One job turned into two, and as the market began to crash, my mother decided to go to night school. A degree would get her better jobs, more money, and more time with us. The only comfort in her absence was knowing no matter where she was, we were under the same stars and the same moon.

Despite the long hours my mother worked, we still could not afford the large house.

In 2012, my mother, sister, and I moved to a small duplex ten minutes away. All the while, my mother's telescope traveled each time with us. From living room corners to gathering dust and cobwebs like an unloved gravestone in the garage, the telescope was a constant no matter where we went.

The duplex was a yellow building with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, complete with a stifling kitchen and a long hardwood-lined living room space for couches and a dinner table. There is hardly any room to breathe for two teenage girls, let alone any space for a standing telescope.

My mother stowed the telescope in a storage unit twenty-five minutes away from home. Its once-silver legs were stained orange and brown with rust, and the lens shattered in the move to the unit. It leaned precariously against bulky wooden desks and stacks of DVDs and 18-gallon Tupperware storage bins filled with books, childhood toys, photo albums, and various junk no one had the heart to throw away.

A year later, it wasn't ours anymore—along with everything else that filled the storage unit when all the contents were pawned off to anonymous buyers. The rest, the refrigerator drawings of our little family, the boxes that preserved my and my sister's milk teeth, and all those things of little monetary value that were priceless and irreplaceable to me, were taken to the landfill.

I am twenty-three years old.

I haven't thought about the telescope in years.

I see my mother seldom, if ever. There's

always too much work, too much school, too much else to complicate what was supposed to be a simple little life.

The night sky remains—over every roof of every house, apartment, or car. There are the same stars, the same moon that went through the same phases, and the same constellations that came with every spring and fall, summer and winter. The stars remained throughout the years, ever—constant and easily found; all I needed to do was look up.

This, I depended on. I always found the stars I traced long ago, and the moon, in her endless cycles, never changed.

While the stars remained unchanged in the night sky, the woman who held my silky black hair while I counted the stars died. She's alive but *different*. At five, I depended on her—to feed me, help me get dressed, do my hair, take me to school, keep good on her promises, and love me. This was easy when her only responsibilities were her children; it was harder when my father left, and his responsibilities fell on her.

Back then, her love was never a question—it was a promise. At twenty-three, I barely need much from her – just to keep good on her promises and to love me. Yet, she somehow lost that sense of responsibility once my sister and I got older.

She never makes good on her promises now. I've had to learn to not hold it against her; I've learned not to hold it against her when she promises to come to see my new apartment, visit for my birthday, or spend Valentine's Day with me but never makes it.

Eighteen years ago, she made birthday cakes from scratch, painstakingly icing colored buttercream over spongy loaves shaped like Barbie and Winnie the Pooh, and we *always* went to McDonald's after a dentist's or doctor's appointment. She kept her promises. My mother proved her love with every word and action, and now I search for that love the way I search for stars—but it is so much harder to find.

At times, I wonder if it is even there.

According to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at NASA, some stars die in brilliant cataclysms, “or supernovae, flinging abundant amounts of hot gas and radiation into outer space.” Despite their long life span, stars do indeed die. While some deaths are spectacular, others aren't quite so glorious.

Some stars, like the one found in the Cepheus constellation, die quietly—invisible to the naked and untrained eye. If it were not for the Spitzer Space Telescope, we'd have no evidence this supernova ever happened, and the star might have disappeared without witnesses to trace its death, thirty thousand light years away.

My mother lives an hour away now in a townhouse decorated in pictures, storebought and handmade artwork, honeybee-themed tchotchkes, and vine after vine, pot after pot of houseplants. Her death is false and far away like a collapsed neutron star—no one witnessed it when it happened. Her body is still here on earth, working, breathing, and living despite it all, while pieces of the mother I knew who loved without bounds or reservations died in a supernova millions of

light years away.

The Cepheus constellation is invisible at most light wavelengths like infrared, and its death nearly went unnoticed. It is easier to witness a supernova when the aftereffects collide with surrounding dust in space. However, the Cepheus constellation supernova occurred “away from the [Milky Way’s] dusty and crowded disk.” There was nothing nearby for the supernova to collide with, so there was nothing to witness.

My mother, once a star found in a sea of sky, is now a void. She is a wide and empty space, promising that the remnants of her light and love will reach across the expanse of rocks, gas, and stardust—but it is in vain. The love I knew eighteen years ago, fifteen years ago, ten years ago, has dissipated in silence. Her death was invisible but not unfelt.

The Twin Rovers

On June 7, 2003, NASA launched two rovers on a mission to Mars.

Their names were Opportunity and Spirit.

Opportunity’s mission revolved around studying sites on Mars with her twin. Together, they tracked through red dust on a distant planet far from home in search of evidence that water had existed on Mars. They tested if the copper-colored wastelands were capable of sustaining any life at all. Opportunity was only supposed to last 90 days. She lasted for fifteen years on Mars, exceeding her predicted expiration date.

Opportunity made many discoveries in her lifetime. She found evidence that Mars

may have been able to sustain microbial life at one point and traces of water in Mars’ mineral deposits. Opportunity’s sister, Spirit, lasted longer than her supposed 90 days as well; she lived until 2010, when she became stuck in a sand trap, ceasing all communication afterward.

Perhaps there is a language indiscernible to humans between rovers.

Perhaps these sisters spoke in radio waves and robotic twitches of their apparatuses.

Perhaps they watched the stars and counted them like I did with my sister, sitting on the curb at night.

Perhaps their lenses traced constellations and charted the ways back home...Did they ever wish to go home?

The last images provided by the Opportunity rover depict a darkened sky, with the faint white dot of the Sun in the middle. Dust storms that covered the entire planet of Mars blanketed her solar panels and buried her. Opportunity sent her images and last transmissions as the storm drew closer, with a final message to her handlers: “My battery is low, and it’s getting dark.”

Opportunity’s low battery caused her to enter a low-power fault mode. This causes everything but the mission clock to turn off. However, after some time, the clock stopped as well.

Opportunity never woke up.

She spent years with her twin, trekking through craters and hills and expanses of spice-colored earth until Spirit’s demise. The unfeeling machine of carbon and metal and

lithium batteries did not mourn in her solitude. She spent the rest of her lonely years sending transmissions back to NASA, her creators, and their teams – ever the dutiful daughter, sharing her findings in space and of Mars.

Sometimes, I wonder if there *is* a language that only the stars understand. Did the rovers decipher the language of starlight and solar winds? Sound cannot travel through space—there is no air for soundwaves to vibrate, but maybe this language, unlike human language, needs no vibration or sound. I wonder if speaking the language of the stars would feel ice cold on my tongue or if the taste of milk and honey would linger in my mouth afterward.

Perhaps it would be better than any language I learned here on Earth.

The stars' language is grander than holy tongues speaking to apathetic and omniscient gods; it transcends the clicks, whirs, and whistles of two twin rovers stranded by their creators on a planet that bears no love but theirs; it binds the darkness of space, the glow of stars, and keeps the galaxy from tearing into a million pieces as it hurtles so quick and simultaneously slow that we pay taxes, drink, and watch Tiktok videos of cats to not think about it.

Perhaps this language is more than the English and Spanish words I grew up with, the silver tears, and the fluent tongue of “I love you’s” and “sorry’s” that my mother mastered.

Perhaps apologies and empty promises are the one language that my mother learned that will make her less lonely.

I am beginning to feel empty, as if

being older lessens the weight of love. It takes more and more of it to feel full, and I starve every night.

Those already-empty promises to love me are pushed through space from the death of a star, and they become emptier and emptier the more she speaks them aloud, as if her supernova is beginning to catch up with her.

I hope that the language of the stars will teach me more than merely holding onto memories I can no longer bear to remember.

The Big and Little Dipper

Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, more commonly known as the Big and Little Dipper, are two of eighty-eight known constellations recognized by the International Astronomical Union (IAU). The familiar patterns that match their names are easy to find in the night sky, making them asterisms. Other examples of asterisms include the Summer Triangle, the Winter Circle, the Winter Triangle, and the Teapot.

The North Star, or Polaris, can be found at the end of the Little Dipper's tail. Forever fixed in the night sky, Polaris has many cultural and historical ties to humans. The North Star has been used as navigation for sailors and travelers and was, at one point in history, dubbed the “hub of the heavens” because it always pointed to the northernmost pole of Earth.

The Greek mythological lore on the constellations explains the name “Ursa,” which means “bear.” In one myth, Callisto bore a son with Zeus named Arcus. Zeus' wife,

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Hera, found out about their affair, and in her jealous rage, she transformed Callisto into a bear. When Arcus grew older, he came across a great bear during one of his hunts. He aimed his spear, unbeknownst to him, at his mother and readied himself to strike a deathly blow. Zeus, wanting to save both mother and son from impending tragedy, placed them in the stars, forever binding them to each other in the form of constellations.

Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, mother and child.

Perhaps who my mother and I were eighteen years ago remains in the constellations I love so much. I like to believe who we were is saved, our light traveling through space, reaching an unknown destination. When my mother's soft hands wrapped around mine and pointed out the arcs of the Dippers' panhandles, she left behind a subliminal message of love in the stars for me to find, but I can't seem to find it here on Earth.

Perhaps something else—*someone* else beyond the reaches of space watches us with a magnificent telescope as my mother and I count stars. The present has yet to reach them, and they have yet to experience the eighteen years that have passed. To them, we are still a mother and her two daughters in pajamas with bedhead and stale morning breath, pulling a telescope from the small entryway of the only place that ever felt like home.

Perhaps who we were then exists now only as the Big and Little Dipper, mother and child. We are forever fixed in a night sky

of changing colors and shapes. The hub of the heavens starts and ends in the invisible lines that connect us. Hub of the heavens, for a mother's love—a love I cannot begin to understand, despite it being a part of me, is encoded in the stars.

My mother's love at times feels small and fleeting, a shooting star burning through the atmosphere before I can make a wish. How devastating for that shooting star to have journeyed so far, seeing what it's seen, only to burn upon entry. Maybe small fragments of it make it past the atmosphere to the surface of the Earth, like gold sifting through sieves filled with sand and river water. Perhaps the pieces of her love that matter the most still find their way to me.

I have to believe those little particles of love are embedded in the same leather couches from eighteen years ago that have survived the tests of time, movement, and space. Now, the couches are covered with evidence of love in the form of pet scratches, broken and creaking springs, and small, nearly undetectable paint splatters. I spend more time now wishing that despite how much I've grown, the length of the couch does not feel as far as the light years between planets when I sit next to my mother.

I wish that the home I occupy now feels like the home I'm chasing and trying to remember before my mother's love no longer felt like warm and tight embraces in the early morning. I wish the feeling lingered like the scent of cheap perfumes on the collar of my kindergarten uniform even when they sat at the bottom of the hamper.

Perhaps I am undeserving of such wishes.

Maybe it's unfair to ask for wishes, knowing that while stars remain constant, life on Earth and in the universe is always changing. Maybe wishing for my mother to be who she was before my father left and before the world started falling apart comes with a price I cannot afford to pay.

I am light years from the girl I once was, and it's unfair of me to ask her to be unchanged.

The black holes in my heart that threaten to bend my soul along time and space beckon me closer and closer into the gravitational abyss of the unknown. Perhaps if I ever succumbed to it, and made it to the other side, I would find a past I can inhabit with her.

I would find a time when I didn't have to mourn the mother who made those birthday cakes from scratch, always lamenting that she wasn't an artist like my father was, and yet still taking hours to create the perfect shades of pinks, yellows, and blues like a painter mixing pigments on a palette. She would not forget Valentine's or birthday cards and would come to visit me when I asked.

I wouldn't have to mourn the rusting telescope, unloved and forgotten in a dark garage, a pawned-off small and humid storage unit, or tossed in large green metal dumpsters at the very back of the storage facility. The telescope would still be in the corner between the wall and black leather couches on rainy days and cloudy nights, its surface still glossy and the silver still shining

along its legs.

The Big and Little Dipper are close to one another in the night sky—never touching.

They are similar in shape despite their size difference, like mirror images reflecting off of each other in a sea of shapes and stars and dust.

Sometimes, I wonder if Arcus looked like his mother, or if Callisto saw her eyes and nose in his face. Perhaps he looked like his father but had his mother's heart. Perhaps she understood in those woods, at the sharp end of a spear as she awaited death like an old friend instead of endless darkness, what a mother's love encompassed.

Did they ever argue like parent and child?

Did they ever reconcile?

Do they speak to each other now in the language of the stars?

Is their shape in the stars just a memory of what they used to be, or a reminder for Zeus? Are they cautionary tales of the tragedy that human love brings?

Does my mother always forgive me because she sees her face in mine? Is it easier to love me when the proof that I am part of *her* is there? The round shape of our faces, the deep brown eyes wide and lined with thick black lashes like a doe's; my nose is her father's slightly hooked nose—generations' worth of evidence of love in the same features I hate. Her laugh is in harmony with mine, nearly identical echoes ringing in cars, crowded living rooms, and through the open sky we sit on the curb at night. It is the same as mine.

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

She speaks in love and apologies,
whereas mine always stay on the tip of my
tongue.

Have we ever reconciled?

Perhaps there is a graveyard among
the stars where mothers go to die quietly.
Like my mother, they persist on Earth as
emanations of who they were before their
children. In the stars lies a graveyard of the
dreams that never came to fruition, of the
loves that got away, and of their childhoods.
Perhaps my mother found her mother there
too, and so did her mother, and on, and on.
Perhaps these trials between mother and
daughter are infinite like space, with no end
and no beginning.

Perhaps there is no place in her mirror
for me just yet.

Perhaps I can only look up.

Perhaps daughters can only look
up to the stars to see the graveyard of
memories—staring eight minutes into the past
to reminisce on life before the supernova.
Perhaps the infinite can be made finite if
you choose it. I will never have daughters; I
learned too much from my mother to ever be
so foolish.

Facing forward means to leave
mothers behind—as a daughter, you're meant
to. You are not a child anymore, rubbing
dust and sleep from your eyes in the break
of dawn; you're not an old and dying star
just yet, eyes wet with running mascara and
children who've outgrown you; you're just
twenty-three, and you've got taxes to pay,
resumes to update, and you're light years
behind schedule to graduate.

Enough

Florine Jordan, *Agnes Scott College*

I was seven years old when I learned the definition of the word opiate.

Opiate n. a drug derived from or related to opium

My grandfather lay in bed, lips blue and fingertips gray. It wasn't an opiate overdose, it was an opioid overdose because Oxycontin wasn't a natural substance. They made it in a lab.

I was thirteen years old when I wondered if the people who made Oxycontin felt any guilt about what they'd done. I was sixteen years old when I learned that no, they didn't. I watched them stare into the camera and say that even if given the chance to undo the harm they caused, they would not.

Do No Harm is a multimedia project about the opioid crisis, part documentary and part novel. It's a little disjointed to watch, the narrative is twisty and difficult to follow unless you already know the subject.

I know the subject.

I've read dozens of books about the epidemic. I say it's about trying to understand the issue beyond what I witnessed firsthand in my childhood home. My parents say it's some distorted kind of self-harm. I'm starting to think they're right.

So many of these books and documentaries look at drug addiction as an issue that affects those people. The poor. The marginalized. The disenfranchised. The uneducated. As if any of that make their lives worth less.

"Where is your family from?" she asks me, sitting across from me at a small coffee place in my hometown. I tell her my mom is from Tampa, and my dad is mostly from Boston. "Your accent is so strange, almost southern but not quite." I smile tightly, all teeth, and ask her to pass the creamer. We've been sitting here for two hours. This is the first time she has asked me a question about myself.

I can point out where in Appalachia my grandfather was raised. I can talk about overdose statistics and the state of the healthcare system in the neglected communities there. I've never seen the holler where he grew up, though. I've never seen the river where his mother did laundry.

I am a public health professional in training. I am a former healthcare worker. I am educated, I am middle class, I am from the suburbs. I am supposed to identify with the doctor in the creased lab coat talking about the economic drivers of the epidemic, and I am supposed to grimace and look away and pity the people who do laundry in the river and use instant packs of mashed potatoes and powdered sugar to make dessert and take

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Oxy 60s three times a day.

I am Appalachian, born but not raised. My mom tried so hard to work the accent out of my voice, correcting me when I said “ain’t” or that I was “fixing” to do something. She didn’t want people to make snap judgments about me based on my voice. It worked, mostly, but I still tend to drawl when I get tired. I still sneak in the occasional y’all. Even still, I grew up eating potato candy at my grandmother’s house and making sweet tea in a saucepan. I don’t know the recipe, though.

Sometimes, when I read about the lives of people in Appalachia, the lives that have been destroyed by addiction and shaped by generational poverty, I feel like a voyeur. Like I am looking into a world that I could have been a part of, had just a few things gone differently.

I watched my grandfather overdose in the basement of a house in the suburbs. When I called 911 and asked them to come to the house, reciting the numbers in my address in a voice that shook so hard they asked me to repeat it multiple times, we waited just three minutes. There was a hospital just seven minutes away.

The nearest hospital to where my grandfather grew up is 70 miles away. It opened in 2019.

I was nineteen years old when I delivered my first dose of Narcan. I was at

a party. Someone was lying on the couch, his lips blue and fingertips grey. He was breathing, just barely. I was not the one who found him. I was not the one who recognized the overdose. I was the one who was given the small plastic cartridge because I was the only one who knew how to use it. I remember clawing at the foil packaging with shaky hands and I remember telling someone to tilt the man’s head back. I remember praying to a god I wasn’t sure I even believed in.

I didn’t cry until after EMS came and took him away. He lived. I sobbed into a stranger’s shoulder; my brain filled with static that tingled down my arms into my fingertips. I fell asleep on the living room floor, surrounded by the bones of a fun night picked clean, because I was too weak to drive home. I haven’t been to a party since.

I do not identify with the doctor in the creased lab coat. I will never be one of them, looking at the problem from a distance. That decision was made for me in the 70s, well before I was born, when a doctor prescribed my grandfather an opiate for an injury he sustained at work.

The decision was made for me then, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t get to decide what to do now. So, I research and I volunteer and I carry Narcan around in my purse. I write letters to my representatives asking them to vote in favor of harm reduction legislation. I helped my friend’s mom find a safe disposal site for the rest of her Tramadol

prescription after she didn't need it anymore.

I do what I can with what I have, and at the end of the day, I hope that's enough.

Anything but Light

Willow Crabtree, *Mercer University*

There is a shiver in the bones of Night; organs that groan and hiss at the whisper of candles; voids of endless gravity and infinitesimal souls ripped apart beyond where the light can touch; a cold so raw we will never understand. Not in one lifetime, not in 107 billion lifetimes.

For creatures such as us, we base up to 80% of our perceptions of the world on our ability of sight.

Sight is also our least-developed sense. Just to mock us, defining us for discovery, for wanderlust amongst senseless patterns of everything you could possibly imagine and absolutely nothing at all to grasp. The nature of darkness — to have the possibility of everything and the probability of nothing you'll ever want to know. Shadows stretch and pull, blur and distort, never truly one way or another, never honorable in solidity. Always cold.

A cold that starts at the tips of your fingers, clutching your joints into limp fists,, baring at your neck — eventually settling in your gut and sitting on your chest, starved and covetous. Drowning without water. Burning without heat.

A fire so desperate to breathe, it'll do anything but light.

Memory 1

“...and when we're lost in the stars, I hope they fill your heart with all of their light.” — Ruth B., *Spaceship*

I hate pink. I don't know why yet, but I do. It crawls on me, gnaws and pierces like bitten fingernails — reckless and belligerent. And it smothers my room. I'm only five years old, but I crave change. Polka dots to horses and fairies, Care Bear bedsheets to blue-fuzzed blankets, pink-and-green wall paint for their baby girl to blue-and-green for their nature child hell-bent on bringing imagination to life. Shoving dreams into the darkness of the mind until all that's left of them in the morning is a wet baby blanket and burning eyes. I need change like turtles rising to the surface after waiting too long; waiting for the right moment, the *safe* moment.

I remember I wanted my room to look like outside. I wanted it to mirror my older cousin's, how she divided her wall into green grass and blue skies with animals and butterflies crawling and soaring. I wanted her nightlight, a “sky projector” that let the stars dance among her ceiling, gone in the morning. Never too permanent that Mama would scream and give those hard eyes which spoke *No Blanky tonight*, never too permanent that Daddy would pry them off and confiscate all glue, tape, or playdough in the room. I just wanted a bit of light to keep Day with me, because maybe then the Nightmares couldn't follow. I hated pink, but I *really really* hated skeletons. And zombies. And bugs, shadows,

darkness, being alone, never being enough—

I hated the creatures that danced along my walls when the Sun fell. I hated my nightlight, too bright to move out through my room yet too dull to show the decrepit hand reaching out as just a Barbie doll dress crumpled in the bucket.

Tonight, my parents will paint my room until the hours I've only known from after nightmares. I'll share a room with my sister B — never Brooklyn, she says I can't pronounce that right; and certainly not "Brooke," that is not and never will be her name "so stop calling me that before I yell for mom"; and never even dare to say "sis" or "sister" because that reminder is too much responsibility and constraint for a ten-year-old desperate to escape to somewhere she's "actually understood." B hates nightlights, too. She likes it better in the dark when she can't see what's around. Sleeps more peacefully in blissful ignorance than in paranoid curiosity.

"Not even one? Mine's not too bright, I promise!"

"No. I said *no*. Just close your eyes and *stop talking*."

"But I'm not even tired! And I can't sleep in the dark."

"You can't sleep in the day, either," she rustles her pillow, and I know she's clutching the corner of her own baby blanket she's buried away inside the case. "You never sleep. Just be quiet and let *me* sleep, you're in *my* room anyway."

"But!"

We went on like that, a conversation we've had a hundred times before and will

have a hundred times more — this time for almost ten minutes. Or maybe thirty. Or maybe just one. I couldn't tell time well, and I couldn't see her clock from my spot on the floor; it was turned all the way to face the bed like me, unblinking and burning as it pressed my sister for a glance. Just one. Just open your eyes a bit and *look*, gosh. She doesn't.

Instead, she tossed her hand onto the night table and shuffled it around until it came back up full and glowing. She chucked the items in her palm over her bed, most scattering on the floor or onto the bed with her, but a few landed with me — albeit one still nicked below my eye. An improvement, I must say, to the water gun she lassoed to hit right *above* my eye — got me stitches and my favorite scar. I guess that accident really cut deeper; neither of us expected it.

The glowy stuff is fading, not as blinding as when it flashed over my eye like shooting stars. Sharp edges — unfired plastic from careless manufacturers obviously not considering that children's toys might be used against their younger siblings as bey blades. Five points, light and grainy, like those sand-art box kits I try to glare through in the store as Mama drags me back to the picture frame aisles. They're small, yet somehow still so much bigger than the real thing — more tangible, more reachable.

I didn't even know B had glow stars.

"Can I keep them? *Pleeeeeeeeeease!*"

"Fine. Just go to sleep already!"

Another thump and scuttle of fabric and I know she's turned away again. Not like she really can, the way we both lay. She can flip

right or left, towards the headboard or away, and I'll always face her. I don't dare look away, only to glance down at my palm that cradles the glow star until it's etched into my own skin.

The next morning, I brush them all up — the stars she's forgotten — and stash them throughout all my things. In my pillowcase for future sleepovers without nightlights. In my everyday bag for any dark moments where I can't find a light. In my bookbag for school in case of a power outage or a hard lockdown. In my closet for times I hide deep behind my clothes when the voices downstairs carry too loud and the ones in my head can't take the cold of my room. And on my own nightstand to watch as I fall asleep, now with shadows cast against blue walls. The hue's still off — not quite real enough — and the green below is still too flat to really be grass, more like western desert than the plateaus of Georgia. But it'll do: if I can't put plastic stars on my ceiling, at least I can still see them beside me. Not quite the Milky Way, but it'll do: something of my own still. I hold one in my palm again, all five points of grainy dead-grass-green, and wonder what a real star would look like right in front of you.

Memory 2

"Look at the stars. Look how they shine for you and all the things you do." — Coldplay, *Yellow*

In 5th grade, they finally trusted us enough to learn about Life Sciences. Ironically, we learned about weather patterns, geological formations, and the phases of the Moon. We

learned that the Sun is also a star and that we and the other seven "real planets" orbit around it. We learned that the other stars, too far to ever reach, are balls of gas and fire — glowing bright against our murky atmosphere.

Today, we're supposed to "create our own constellations". Sketch out dots with white crayon against black construction paper. Poke said dots with the help of Mrs. Bell, our teacher, until you can see through. Then, taking turns with Mrs. Bell in the corner of the room she has set up like a little cave, shine a light against your paper and see your constellation glow against the wall.

By now, I love the stars more than I know how to express yet. I fell in love that one day in the dark field of the Hunting Property with my dad urging me to "look up" from the clear grass under my flashlight to the dark, vast sky of midnight. I remember clutching that flashlight like a lifeline; truly felt like it was the only light left for at least six miles, searching the ground for snakes and bugs and wolves. But, finally trusting him (plus the fact that he literally pulled the flashlight from my hand and switched it off before stuffing it in his pocket), I had let my eyes adjust to see the billions of lights hung in the sky.

Years later, I'd read in a webcomic that people once believed the sky to be a blanket or a cloak draped over them at night, the stars being little pinpricks in the fabric allowing the outside light to beam through. Others believed they were jewels that had been sewn on, covering our world in glittering, priceless beauty — gems never to be held by the hands of man. Others, as I had learned in 3rd grade

in our mythology unit of FOCUS — our Gifted Program — believed the stars to be spirits placed in the sky by gods, constellations as the bodies of heroes and monsters carrying their stories out for millennia to come. The Great Orion with this mighty bow and arm bent to draw back the string, arrow pointing into nothingness. Heracles the bold and broad, lionhearted man facing the creatures of the night with his club raised and ready. Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, Mama Bear and her little cub, destroyed before they ever got the chance to know each other, preserved together as the gods pleaded for forgiveness. Cassiopeia, mother of Andromeda, too proud and vain to see the fault in her own stars — the great will of gods unparalleled to strike her down. Vega and Altair, the two bright-eyed lovers separated by the river in the sky as punishment for bridging the gaps between their two worlds, though, on the seventh day of the seventh moon, crows would lift Altair over the river to his princess. On years too dangerous to cross the river, Vega’s tears pour down on the earth. Names noted down in history throughout the Northern Hemisphere, no one agreeing on what to call them but understanding this distance across the Milky Way spiral to be nothing but grief and longing for a love never meant to be.

I hated the assignment. I barely finished, if I’m honest. I took right up until the bell, only able to glance through the lights for a few seconds as my classmates hustled down the hall to lunch. How could I possibly try to rival the stories of history? Create my own constellation when I didn’t even know

yet what type of stars it would hold? Which ones would be brightest? Biggest? Did it even matter when Mrs. Bell poked all the holes the same, a simple dot clear enough to hopefully let the flashlight through? I felt like throwing up. When I got the grade back, I tore up my constellation into pieces — as many as the stars these kids will probably never see out in our suburbs. I had gotten a 100%.

Memory 3

“At the coast, every star seems so near, but you wouldn’t know each had been gone all those years.” — Sam Airey, *Stars*

I don’t know how old I am here. I can pinpoint the moment, the words, and the feelings — but for the life of me I can’t remember the year.

I guess it happens too often to count each time.

Every Christmas since before I was born, and then around 2017, every Thanksgiving, my mom’s side of the family rents out a house on Jekyll Island where we all stay — my grandparents, my parents and sister, my aunt and uncle, and eventually their two kids. God, was Joe even born yet at this point?

It was something stupid — I remember that much. Something like my sister staying up till 2 am and sleeping in until 12pm. Or maybe she didn’t wanna put on makeup for the family pictures, and Mom said she needed to “fix her face.” Or maybe Dad didn’t hear B right

and shot back something sharp and loud — maybe then she shot something back herself, not bothering to clarify or not realizing there was anything that even needed clarification. Maybe it wasn't about them at all; maybe it was about me. B controlling me, our parents treating me differently because I'm younger, me changing 'cause I'm probably in middle school and *God, my whole life is falling apart!* It was something stupid, though, something that isn't really something until you keep talking and talking and, eventually, you realize that you're not talking about your something at all — you're talking about everything.

Every pinprick moment; the little jabs under the dinner table, the missed beach walks during the day, the too-tireds and not-eating-enoughs, the *you just don't get it! It wasn't like this for you!* Because it wasn't, it really wasn't, but *you still can't say that. They're our parents.* My sister wouldn't take care of herself and end up passing out or in a self-destructive spiral as every Winter and Summer — a seasonal depression that lasts all year, just changes themes with the weather. Then my parents would try to fix her — hair, eyebrows, acne, *'tuck in your shirt'*, throw out old boots, weekly planners with pack-of-12 highlighters. One would push, and the other would push back harder.

We go for walks on the beach at night. It's quiet — the wind's howling drowns your breath if you look the wrong way.

I remember it was a nice night. That classic "Jekyll Sky" with clouds scattered like a big, soft quilt, still clear enough for the waxing gibbous Moon to kiss the ocean, her tears

sprinkling in with the few stars she let shine past her own gown. The wind froze my bones — we were going the wrong way, air hurtling towards Brunswick as we walked towards Cumberland. It bit my ear, scraped my nose, spat on my eyes till they were stained dry with the shit of the salt marsh nearby. That was still an inside word, *shit*, my spoken language still too much my parents' to be so coarse.

I wanted to find Orion — it was November and late night, so he should've been rising just over the Atlantic by now. They let me stop to use the guide on my phone, hushed chuckles brushing up against me from behind. I found them all: Orion, Ursa Major, Cassiopeia, Corona Borealis with my star Gemma (the gem of the crown), and even Sirius had started to peek over with his companions not far behind, Jupiter, as always with lovely Saturn following. I was soaking up the moonlight, like floating in its waveless lake. The tide was pretty low, so the crests were whispers against the ocean breeze, but still there — always still there. And the hushed chuckles—

No. No, they weren't laughing anymore.

Don't turn around, don't turn around, *don't turn around.* The lovely ocean, stars cascading over above my head, my—

"YOU WANNA SAY THAT AGAIN?"

Breathe.

The insects were loud, I think. They usually were. And the sand... it was soft? Grainy? I had taken my shoes off, thanking the moonlight for making it clear enough to still avoid sticks and crabs and the occasional jellyfish—

"Well, *sorry* that I'm not perfect! *Sorry*

I'm a fraud! I'm a stupid little bitch who's never gonna make it in science and GOD KNOWS she's not *creative* enough to do anything else!"

Breathe breathe breathe.

I felt light on my feet, like a fae recharging, finally falling into the nature of the world that raised them. Returning to the dust of my bones, the atoms of my organs, the breath of my starbursting supernova soul, I was a part of these stars, this moon, the ocean. We were one. They flooded my veins, a trick I learned from my dance teacher. A little blue light started at my temples and slowly trickled down to coat my eyes, neck, shoulders, wrists, fingertips, knees, ankles, the tops of my feet. I was cerulean blue, running on a frequency unheard, unseen by humans. I was the stuff of stars. I was the dreams themselves — good ones, like eating your favorite meal or defeating The Bad Guy with your super-spy best friends. Ones I never sleep long enough to see anymore.

"Then maybe I'll just quit! Drop out! Oh, *wait*, I can't do that, though, 'cause you all spent so much time and money and goddamn *stress* just trying to get me here! Sorry, guess things don't work out."

Then a "Watch your fucking mouth—"

Eventually a "JUST SHUT UP! SHUT UP!!!"

Maybe a "You're not listening to me!" and a "You're not listening to us!" and a "Just listen for once in your life!"

How anyone could listen with all that screaming... *tombe pas de bourrée, chassé tour jeté, jeté jeté tempe levé pas de bourrée*

changement changement. Repeat. Repeat, repeat, repeat. My foot can't catch a grip against the sand, grains flying up into my eyes and over my clothes. I stumbled, rolled my ankle at some point, the sudden snap of my foot misaligned with my leg — after a *tempe levé* probably, I always hated those with my non-existent arches.

"You never treat *her* like this!"

Ah, there it was. The classic push-back, the argument-shifter, the '*who do you love more, but we all know what you really mean.*' Cause I don't scream into the vast and endless night, don't know anything outside my parents' realm of education, don't know what it's like to lose your best friend because *you just weren't enough to keep them here.* I haven't had heartbreak yet, my only loss being my aunt's old dog that carried my secrets to her grave — wherever that is. My life is a series of constants, with the only change being the shift of the night sky throughout the months, mapping out the motions to track the slow progress of maybe twelve years.

Sniffles now, rustling of windbreaker nylon and polycotton. Soft murmurings. A scoff.

Safe. Breathe. Turn.

I glance over my shoulder, back at my family. My parents stand on either side of my sister, my mom with a hand on her shoulder, my dad with his arms around her own, my sister with her head against his chest, and a hand reaching up to my mom's. They're just a few feet away, I know this, but for a second, I think they're back at the dunes,

and I'm drowning in the ocean. I look back at the water, the moon, and the stars combing through the surface.

Yards away — the tide's still collapsing back into the ocean.

Memory 4

"Though my soul may rest in darkness, I will rise in perfect light. I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night." — Sarah Williams, *The Old Astronomer to His Pupil*

Ever since my dad first showed me the endless sky above, I had fallen in love with them. Their light, their stories, their consistency. The stars require darkness to burn through. How could I have ever not loved them? How could I have ever recoiled from the darkness that gave them a place?

I should never hate that which makes us whole.

We're at that field again, the one I stood in when I first saw the Milky Way spiral. Just me and my dad, as we've done every year since then — the road beyond grocery stores and HOAs, camping out with s'mores and hotdogs, waking up with the forest as sunlight burns the tips of trees and sets the world ablaze to uncover the Night's shadows. I feel like I'm dreaming.

If only I could.

I spot another plane, green against the blues and yellows. I think it might be the seventeenth one tonight, I tell my dad. He counts it as twenty-two, scolding me again

for not wearing my glasses. I hate them, though. I feel like I'm always looking through a glass, a window to everyone else's life. Like I'm watching a movie, but I've been sitting for so long that I can't tell where the screen ends and I begin. I want to tell him, "It feels like they're not my eyes. I don't wanna see the world with fake eyes — I want my own," but I don't. Instead, I give a noncommittal hum and let the topic drop.

"It's crazy seeing them like this now," he says, pointing at plane number eighteen/twenty-three. "After 9/11, all the planes disappeared for weeks. It was creepy, the sky was still."

I think on that — a still sky. No blinking humans flying by, no wondering if they could see you as the speck you are or if you stuck out to them like green against black and yellow and blue.

I think I asked him if he was scared. Maybe I didn't have to ask, maybe he just told me. He does that with me; just lets it slip like a wish whispered to a chunk of rock burning up in our cloggy atmosphere.

"It was terrifying. Everyone was scared. You'd watch the sky all night just waiting for one to fly by. Waiting for it to crash or something."

"How long was it like that?"

He pauses. He said it's always like that now. That it was the pinprick moment that burst the bubble America had been living in since the 60s — the moment we realized we were tangible, reachable.

"How do you trust big places then? Like Disney? Or Six Flags? Wouldn't that be a good

place for someone to attack?”

He said yes. He didn't want to, though. He gritted his teeth, poked the fire a bit too hard, wood crumbling beneath the stick he used.

“You can't be afraid of it, though,” he said. “You know that, right? It's good to be cautious, but you can't live your life in fear. Bad shit happens, but you can't let that control you to the point that you never go outside. You need to have balance.”

I say I do have balance. I say I'm not scared.

He stares at me for a moment, something flashing across his face that I can't quite place. I don't see it often — it's a look reserved for when my sister's first boyfriend broke up with her, or for when our dog ate all of my Reeses' cups that I left out one Easter, or for when I got a B- on a math test that I had studied all night for.

He looks back to the stars.

“Twenty-four.”

Memory 5

“*Per aspera, ad astra*” — Latin phrase, possible origin with Virgil's *Aeneid*

It's been two weeks since she died.

We didn't plan it and didn't have the day to think on it.

Right then, right there, they said. She only had hours left, and it was already well after midnight.

Maybe if it had started in the Day we

could've had more time. Maybe there would have been a doctor ready, somewhere else we could have taken her, someone willing to cure a bleeding, cancerous lump in a dog's lungs.

I didn't notice it immediately. I try with everything I have not to think about her at all, but now it's been two full weeks since I've gone outside at night to look at the stars while Dad takes Daisy to use the bathroom one last time before the long stretch of darkness. How could I not have noticed?

Mom asks me to take out the recycling. It's Wednesday now, so the bin is outside at the top of our driveway for the people to pick it up tomorrow afternoon while we're at work and school. *Going to school knowing she won't be there when I walk back in.* I track the concrete on my way up the driveway; it's still warm by Dad's truck, where the sunlight last hit before the trees took over. We really need to pressure wash again — the grains stick to the calluses on my feet. And—

It'll be a while before she's erased. But one day all that hair will be gone. I look up to the sky to avoid the short, tan hair mixed into the browning grass I see still on the concrete.

I hear footsteps behind me, but I can't bring myself to look back down. I don't dare to blink. If I do, I won't be able to stop. I feel it before I understand I'm crying — the drop of rain on my collarbone, big and salty and not alone. A hand on my shoulder. Then another. More rain. Sniffles and shuffling. Toilet paper passed around. *I love you, and it's okay to miss her, and it wasn't your fault. This was never your fault.*

I don't say anything — I don't trust my

voice right now. I just wanna see the stars.
I need to know they're there. I need to know
they won't leave me, too.

It's cloudy tonight, though. It's been
cloudy all week. There's a cold front moving in,
I think.

I scoff.

I want to scream.

Memory 6

"I'll learn to breathe deep and make peace
with the stars." — *Sleeping At Last*, *Six*

It wasn't supposed to be like this. In
all those tedious forms I always wrote how
excited I was for college because "I get to be
around people with my interests! People of
my major, my hobbies." I wasn't supposed to
be the only Creative Writing major in my hall,
of my friends, my clubs. I wasn't supposed to
be the only astronomer that stuck with stars
for their stories rather than their physical
anomalies. I wasn't supposed to want to go
home to a place that's never existed or maybe
died out long before its presence will ever
reach here.

It's the night of the Jupiter Opposition,
and they've set up telescopes for the campus
to view the far-off planet on its closest
trajectory to Earth in over 59 years.

"You should go," my mom tells me
over the phone. She said that about Ballroom
Dance and Spanish Club and all the other
Astronomy Club meetings I never bothered
with. But I go; maybe this time I can get it

right.

"I love you, but hell no," my friends say,
"Dork." I wasn't betting on them anyway.

I look through the telescope without
my glasses — they don't fit with this lens
anyway. My eyelashes are too long, though,
so the image keeps getting obscured by
black lines running over. It's blurry, too, but
at least I can see a few of Jupiter's moons.
Maybe even make out where the lines should
be to separate the different levels of its
atmosphere. It's lovely. I step back, move
away from the line, and go back to the dorm
to finish my homework.

I sit out in the courtyard of MEP with
my *Odyssey* book, marked full of notations
I'll never look at again. Stickers I'll remove in
another two weeks and crumple up into the
trash. Pens that'll run out before I finish my
midterms.

It's maybe 12:30 am now, and the deck
is empty — as it should be. It's cold, too, and
I left my jacket in the room. My tea's lost the
steam, now just herbs stuck to the roof of my
mouth with honey and sugar, too much for so
late. I'll probably have nightmares again if my
therapist's theory on sugar is right.

I wanted to read by the use of the faint
glow of that natural reflector. The moon's not
quite new yet, but still fairly small, so the only
real light outside falls from the fairy lights
above the grass and the motion sensor LED
by the main door. No one has walked by for
twenty minutes now.

I look up at the stars, now quiet without
the bustling of people straining to see *which
one's the big dipper and how many stars are*

there actually right now to pull me. I look at those globs of fire, and I wanna cry. I wanna scream until my wretched threnody reaches them; break the laws of physics this Universe demands and travel sound without a medium, through the emptiness of Space; connect me to the dust of my bones, the atoms of my organs, the breath of my damned and cataclysmic soul. I want to make them close. Make this real. Make it home.

I glance back down at the assigned book. I read about a third of the next page, marking a new epithet with a light green sticky note.

Cemetery

Audrey Gleason, *University of North Georgia*

The sun ebbs below the mountains' peaks. Golden beams glaze the tombstones. I breathe in the air. My heart is a thousand pounds. It is an off-beat melody. A fresh mound holds old hopes, feathers folded. There is a family memorial just beneath the hill; its walls are marked with Emily Dickinson's words. A wrought-iron bench is poised on the hill, beneath an oak. Some grass might grow a little greener underneath the oak, for watering that did not come from rain. Here, the clouds eddy away. The darkness shifts, even when the sunset leaves the world enveloped without light.

I pass through the cemetery. Stones blackened by decay. My heart begins to tune.

The plots are filled with those who could not stop for death. Maybe some names sound familiar from times past. Though many routes death does take, "frugal is the chariot that bears the human soul."

*

Concrete borders each plot. As sunbeams spread across the grass, they glint off unnamed markers. Flags swing over headstones. A red-tailed hawk hunches on a light post. As I approach, he takes flight. He lands again on the branch of a low-hanging tree, swiveling his head. Once more, he takes off and lands, this time on a tombstone.

"Audrey." The 2016 voicemail plays against my ear.

"I can't get you off my mind. I have missed you here and anywhere. Give me a call, and tell me how you're doing. Okay.

Bye-bye."

The world blurs. A year and a half ago, she told me about the lung condition. A little over a week ago I sat with her on her couch. My friend. Grey hair. Now, in November 2023, we might not have another year.

"You'll have to do most of the talking," she said.

I sank into the couch beside potbellied Zoey, the little black dog stretched out between us.

Then, I listened to her my friend talking.

"Well, it's time."

I huddle against the oak tree. Time went on and before we knew it, it came for what I love. It doesn't do anything but trod out among the graves. Some people are immortal. Maybe it isn't right to think of what is not yet. I sink into the grass, where the sky shrinks. A large ant crawls down my arm.

*

Mount Hope Cemetery was established in the 1800s. It holds civil war officers, unmarked graves of Americans denied citizenry, and infamous members of the Blue Ridge Rifles. It overlooks the baseball fields, the intersection of highway GA-9 and Main Street. It is a historic landmark. The place lives on. Just below the right side of the hill, facing the woods, a little lamb marks a couple of days of life. In an opposite corner, a woman and her husband are laid to rest. The one who remarried lives on. Names. Families. Markers.

Silence.

Stones worn unreadable.

Forgotten. Unknown.

"A mist that vanishes at dawn."

*

Since freshman year, with feelings too big to feel, my feet walk here. I find my feet carrying me without thinking too hard about it. The groundhog makes his home in the bushes. He jumps between the gap in a chain link fence behind Donovan Hall. When I was on the cross-country team, we ran through the switchback road on the front of the hill, the path that climbs nearly vertical on the wooded side. On the morning of a canceled practice in March, I huddled on the bench in the cemetery with a bible. The wind whipped my pages. The “thing with feathers...[perched] in [my] soul.”

In years it has been here. It’s been here. The hard bench is the couch in a therapist’s office. Phones don’t exist here. My lower back aches. But it is too sacred to leave before it’s time.

It is here for the anxieties and diagnoses, quitting teams, broken hearts, the ending of three-year relationships and long-distance ones. For the final flight of wings for a friend.

*

More than many nights, my heart yearned for the place where my feelings could reorganize. Recently, I passed beneath the newly shorn trees. Bald stumps exposed the hillside. I passed the autumn-embered leaves up top around the bend. Rounding the corner, I saw a young man sitting on the bench. His jacket hung about him. Arms crossed. Holding nothing.

He looked at me. I smiled and went on. He would sit where thoughts are memorialized. Where hope “sings the tune without the words – And never stops – at all.”

Death and Rebirth

Lauren Miller, *Agnes Scott College*

March

A rope of words—*I'm going off my medication, Lauren. It's been years since my last manic episode*—tightened around my brain. Mom pieced her memories together to find the person she should be. After my track meet, we drove away from my rival school's stadium track, back toward my high school. I sat in the passenger seat, counting down 15 more minutes until we arrived. I never got a chance to speak; she spoke only of childhood memories.

Mom could be adventurous like her father, Harlan, she said. He used to test military planes, ejecting himself as malfunctioning planes crashed into the ground. He saved every baseball card and purple rock, and hoards of amethyst overflowed from the filing cabinets. He hung one hundred paper planes on the popcorn ceiling and watched them wave their wings against the ceiling fan current. Maybe she was him. Eccentric, but just like Harlan.

Thirty minutes had passed. I couldn't make out the names on the street signs; everything blurred as trees obscured the moonlight. I wasn't sure where she was headed, and I wanted to get out of her car.

Harlan was more than adventurous. Maybe even a little crazy. He would scream as he swerved the car toward hairpin mountain edges. The kids cried in the backseat, though it was just a joke. He floored their car up a runaway truck ramp, spraying rocks that

cracked the undercarriage. He let a swift river take her in her tube away, him laughing, as she thought she would drown. He invited an international student to live in their house for the year. Surprise. He traveled at length across the Atlantic Ocean, taking only his wife. He traumatized my mom. He caused her brain to explode. Caused—causing? Harlan was a bullet into her brain. That trigger had been fired in childhood and the bullet had finally caught up.

Maybe mom is her mother. Frankie sits near the front of her Baptist church every Sunday and knits ornate quilts at home. She bakes the best sugar cookies and strawberry pies, recipes from her childhood on a southern Georgia farm. She spoils her grandchildren—buying overpriced dolls and historical coins—and hoards family photos clipped with magnets on the old, off-white fridge.

She has a way of talking, deeming grandchildren's girlfriends as "*fun*" as she disapprovingly watches them sip alcohol. She blesses her sister's hearts when they fight over the inheritance. Frankie refused to acknowledge my mother's divorce. She laughed when my mom told her my dreams of acting. She comments on how much food my mother gets for lunch. Her TV always blares FOX News or football. She prays over her queer grandchildren, and dead names people to their faces.

An hour passed. I didn't recognize any of the street signs. I told her to turn, but the map rerouted and rerouted, and she didn't listen. She barely made it to a stop before each stop sign. The car jerked

back and forth. Pedal. Break. Pedal. Break. I considered jumping out if a couple more hours progressed. The more mom pieced her parents' images together, the more they fell apart.

Frankie is a bloody spot on the wall. Finding yourself is picking pieces of an exploded brain off the wall. That's how mom described it.

"What do you see in my explosion?" she asked.

I didn't know how to respond.

She analyzed each chunk and described the blood dripping from each memory as we passed unfamiliar street signs. Harlan and Frankie splattered across the wall and slowly dripped down. They puddled on the floor. In the rich, dark pool, my mother reflected with only half a skull. Red is prettiest as blood, not oil paint. It's more real.

The stop light next to my high school turned red. We sat, wishing for green. Seconds dragged on. Closer to school. Closer to collecting the pieces. Cleaning the wall. Scrubbing the stains. The stains won't come out. The doors automatically lock. I couldn't get out, even in the parking lot. She said I couldn't miss the reconstruction of her personality. Couldn't leave her. In case the wall turns white once more. If it ever does.

At a standstill, in my school's parking lot, I didn't want to anger her. I compromised, making excuses for why I needed to leave. But the revelation was coming. I needed to be patient. To wait. Wait. Wait. Listen.

We had spent over two hours in her car. Now alone in mine, I cried the whole way

home, glancing at her in my rearview mirror, replaying that first conversation over and over again: *I'm going off my medication, Lauren. It's been years since my last manic episode.*

April

Mom didn't believe in God until she heard him call her a liar. He said she was acting like someone she wasn't so, then, she didn't know who she was. She tried several loud, boisterous personalities. She'd start sentences in a slow whisper, wait until I leaned in, and then raise her voice. Scream. Throw objects at the walls. Stomp barefoot through the house, knocking on our doors. She'd grip my arms at night, begging me for her personality.

"I don't know who I am, I don't know who I am, I don't know who I am..."

I'd lay pinned to the bed in terror, pretending to sleep.

She'd scream, "Why do you fucking disrespect me! Do you know who I am?"

She wrote through journals at a time, trying to find out. They offered no answer.

Sometimes, she'd panic. "Lauren, I'm trying to find my voice. I don't know where it's gone. This isn't my voice. This isn't my voice!"

When the screaming ended, her voice raspy and fading from overuse, she'd slow into a whisper. Her words became quieter, almost soundless, and her arms dropped to her side. Her knees would buckle, and she'd collapse to the hardwood floor. Sometimes she'd convulse. Her limbs shook until they couldn't move. Her speech slurred to a stop. Eventually, she'd get off the floor and turn to me. She'd

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

ask where her voice went. I never had an answer; I didn't know either.

The next week, Mom tried different occupations. Photographer: She took over 1,000 photos within four miles of lake trails. Leaves, twigs, branches, dirt, pavement, grass. Every subject dripped with artistry. Real Estate Flipper: She bought a quarter million dollars worth of land at Lake Jackson. The property, intersected by pipes and faulty ground, could never be built on. Yet its danger never made it in the plans for a cottage construction. Preacher: She wrote the messages she received in incoherent scribbles. The papers lined her floors and desks, thrown against stacks of Bibles taken from each room of the house. Horse trainer: She found a black stallion in an old red barn and hopped on inside the aisle. She couldn't start his training, however, as the police came and told her to never return.

Easter weekend gripped her with revelations of her rebirth. Her renewed outlook took on an animalistic spirit. She bought twenty porcelain bunnies and birds. Clues to the enigma of her brain heaped on countertops. Drawings, DNA tests, candies, binders, Bibles. Untouched packages of yellow Peeps observed the coming and going of sin, condemning the household with their beady black eyes. A wide, melted red candle held lithium pills in its dried wax embrace.

Jesus is a man. Mom didn't want to be a woman. Acting male is closer to God. Her spirit is chained. *Shackled*. Freedom of one's spirit cannot be retained by stolen keys. She transcends. Driving is *always* holy as

Jesus grips the wheel. Need to drive to the therapist. There... Are there three? It's two in the morning. Is the therapist a therapist? The shrink! Who pronounced her "malady." The boyfriend: Keith. Energy sucker. Freedom hater. *He's* a vampire. Kill the boyfriend. Cook garlic. Grab a wooden stake. God isn't a match for vampires. Help us destroy. We are *family*. God doesn't need individualism. The family needs a personality change. Who is the family? Personality doesn't matter. She's a martyr. How can no one not know who she is? Society. Has. Gone. Mad.

If the matriarch is lost, the family is lost. Chewing should be done at a rate of fifty beats per minute. Should we set the metronome? Loud ticking, ticking, where is it coming from? Chewing disrupts the connection. *Tick tick tick tick tick*. Chili is a God-friendly food. The sound of my chip penetrates her skull, the loudest crunch. Then Ella's chip breaks a window. Keith's chip screams like a cat. Too fast. Not fifty bpm. *Tick Tick*. Slow down. Put the fork down. Her ex-husband used to eat fast. We are her ex-husband. He's going to die. My sister, her boyfriend, and I are her ex-husband. We are her ex—eating our way towards the coffin. Crunching on gravestones for cereal. Eating too fast is death too fast is food too fast is *chewing*. Too fast. Tap out the beat. fifty bpm. fifty bpm. Slow down. *Slow down*. We are going to die. The food lodges itself in my esophagus as I shove my fork into my mouth faster and faster. She sees the chili stretch my throat and chest. My hands turn into the wind and the fork, a tornado. Death is coming. *Stop*

eating. I'm a child at the knife of the devil. We consume with our forks too fast. *Slow down.* Stop, stop, stop stop stop. Tears salt the chili. Seasoning. Our chews kill us. Mom drummed to the beat of our chewing. I crunched a chip. A crack jutted through my water glass with the noise. I didn't know myself well enough. No more chips. I am banned from the dinner table.

May

Ella moved out first. She tried to hide our mom's car keys the night my mom wanted to visit a stranger at 2 am. Mom called the cops on us. Unjustified theft of her property. Nothing happened but a few screams and some flashing blue and red lights. Ella didn't come back. Keith, mom's boyfriend, moved out second. He spoke of 9/11 conspiracies and the poison in the water and wore the same khaki shorts with a gray t-shirt every day. He said he had a job, but it wasn't playing video games ten hours a day. He couldn't take her level of crazy. He packed a suitcase and started the car that had slept motionless for months in the garage. He started driving that night, and within two days he made it to an apartment in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Keith disappeared. Vanished. Gone. Dead? Alive? Where did Keith go? Keith, gone, dead, alive? Not here. Not in Newnan. Not in Fayetteville. She drove in looping circles around Canoe Club, searching. She had gotten her car keys back. None of the license plates were his. Not in Canoe Club, Fayetteville, Newnan, or Atlanta. None of the faces were his. No gray shirt, no khakis. The salt and

pepper beard belonged to someone else. She brought the salt and pepper shakers for inspiration. She thought he died. Where would he be but dead?

I only lasted two nights alone with her. She lay on the floor screaming, mourning. I texted my dad that I didn't know what to do.

My dad texted back: "Leave."

I stuffed clothes into my bag between binders and textbooks. I didn't tell her where I was going, not that I knew myself. By nighttime, she wouldn't even think of me.

I used a GPS to find my dad's house. The small house sat fifteen minutes from my mom's, but he spent the weekdays working across the country in Montana. Spider webs lined the house's outdoor lamps and the gray driveway needed a pressure wash. I had visited him there, but without him, it wasn't home. I sat on an unclothed bed surrounded by blank, gray walls: my new room.

I heard her screams in my dreams, her face imprinted behind my eyelids. I saw her—I looked into her brown eyes and grasped for recognition, but her pupils swirled, the colors changed, and I looked at a different woman. I saw her dirty blond curls leave the dark pantry, but she turned and looked across the room and saw the lady with the brown eyes. Her pupils widened, and she let out a scream. I turned to the shriek of scratching glass from the dining room door, but it wasn't the cats. Was it her, or that other lady, or the same lady from the pantry, or the lady with brown eyes, or was it my mom? I looked into all of their eyes. None of them were my mom. I woke up gasping for breath each morning and then

curled between my covers to mask the pang of guilt in my stomach. I had left her.

She mourned a false death. I sat in an empty room. She sent frantic texts and emails. I went on walks at midnight and blasted music in my headphones. She bought more and more, so plastic bags lined her counters. I cried over having to go to the grocery store. I ignored messages asking why I abandoned her. I listened to her screams repeating through my head. I had left her all alone. I let her stay in the tomb of her house, the womb of her rebirth. Maybe she didn't need me. The only things that could be of help were the lithium pills still scattered on the counters and the resurrection of a man who never actually died.

She started spending days in Atlanta, an hour from her house. I don't know who accompanied her or what they did. In these moments, I returned to her house. A key hung behind a decorative angel on the back door. I filled bowls of food for the two cats. I looked into their green eyes, looking for signs of sadness. I laid on my bathroom floor, crying as I took more toiletries from my cabinets. I ran my hands through paint brush bristles from childhood nights of "craft-ige." I walked around the maze of grocery bags and scattered statues. I wandered through her room and sat on the carpet, staring at the framed photos of her and her boyfriend. I thought of how we'd ride in the car each day to the barn as she screamed and laughed at ridiculous middle school drama. I looked through the window towards the neighbor's house and wondered what they thought of us.

I sometimes listened to music, just like she'd sing musicals around the house, but never for long; I needed to listen for the garage door.

Poetry lay scattered throughout my bedroom carpet. Her computer sat on my desk. The bedsheets lay crisply tucked into corners. A thin layer of black cat hair covered the white pillows. My picture frames and drawings still hung on the walls. I didn't know if she missed me, or if she thought I was never coming back. Her images flooded my head, my guilt-filled stomach waking me all alone in an empty house; all the while, she took the posters off my walls, removed the clothes from the drawers, and wiped my desk clean, all in preparation for the next revelation.

June, July, August, September, October, Novem—

I thought I found my mom a few months later, although she didn't look the same. Her eyes had sunk in, and her house had become a barren cave. She had thought her job was raising kids, but now she had none. She sent irate texts asking why we had abandoned her, as she cleaned her Facebook walls of posts. She jabbed a for-sale sign into the yard in between weeks and days in bed. She took her meds, trying to alleviate the pain. I drove up to her house every week, but my energy drained as I opened the door. I often didn't want to go back. Rebirth is a lonely process.

I recently visited during college break, six years after that episode. We meet once a month, and text in between. She says she's happier now. I opened her new door—this time, using a different code instead of the

usual. In her living room, dolls, paintings, and odd pieces of thrifted furniture were scattered across the tan carpet. Shades of blue splotted her kitchen walls, and paint cans cluttered the corner counter. A massive, green frame hung on the wall, underneath which lay two flashcards spelling L-I-O-N as if they were laid for children learning how to read. My chest tightened. I looked into her eyes, searching for the same dilated pupils or the eyelids that never closed. I'm always fearful that her mania will come back, and I look for signs every visit. She started to tell me the backstory of the lion flashcards.

The dream started with a kitten. Then a snake. Then a soft, yellow-gold lion cub nestled in her arms. She shook as he stroked his long claws against her blouse. The cub's muscles flexed and relaxed. She couldn't foster him. He could hurt her or everyone she cared about. But a voice told her she could. She raised him with her new confidence. Her reborn self.

She said she screamed when she found a lion flashcard in the grass at the neighbor's garage sale. It had to mean something. She thought of the lion as she signed up for the community theater for the first time in ten years. Later, the director selected her for the lead role. She thought of the lion again, as she started her first real estate business after years of pushing off the exam. She flew across the country and reconnected with former friends from high school. She spends time helping her mother navigate old age, and for the first time in years, she feels like she's doing alright.

I release my breath. She knows the lion isn't a prophecy, despite it being the largest frame on the wall. Images, symbols, messages—her encrypted worlds of creativity—aren't the only foundations of reality. She knows that. I look over to the lion, uncertain that what's helped her most is not the pills, the hospitalizations, or her support network, but an absurd dream. Maybe changing her life because of a lion is crazy. But it seems to work, so maybe it's not. I have to stop analyzing. She's stable. She hasn't turned the backyard into a zoo, nor do I see any fursuits on the couch. She's happy, and the lion helps her out. There will always be a side of her that can turn my stomach into jagged edges and my heart to pins, but she's my mom again too. Fixing broken pieces of a brain means piecing things back together. Some parts stick and others take more time. Rebirth isn't that simple.

The Story of Dad

Antoinette Milcherska, *Agnes Scott College*

The first time I saw my dad as a child, it was on a slideshow at his funeral. For the first time, I saw my dad not as my dad, but as a kid with bleached straight blonde hair, in heavy contrast to the way I knew him; with a bald head with very few straight standing black hair poking through his skin. His child skin was bleached white, different from the memories of my father's scarred olive skin. He only cooked in heavy oil and butter and told me a few times that I would try to see the top of the stove from the tip of my toes to see him sauté onions, that he had to shove his arm in front of my face so my pretty porcelain skin wouldn't be scarred and blemished like his. This only resulted in more burns on his skin. His child eyes grew from honey brown to murky green-water swamp eyes. Like the swamp water I grew up in, I was stuck in the bottomless abyss of his dim, muddy eyes whenever I looked into him. When he was a kid, his lips were pink like mine, and his toothy grin had a gap between his two front teeth. He looked happy. He looked like a child I'd see at the beach, toes and hands dug into the wet, grainy sand. I'd probably look a little too long at that kid, remembering my own younger days of flicking sand with my toes up into the air and shrieking laughter when it plopped back onto the wet sea foam. Dad was a kid like me, once. We were both connected by the features of an uneasy life; both of us were scarred by our fathers.

Dad's dad was a Polish immigrant who

married his high school sweetheart at the age of seventeen, with the permission of his adopted father and the permission of her Italian immigrant parents, who owned a pizza shop in Chicago and delivered baked bread in the mornings to send all their girls to Catholic school. They wouldn't have accepted a high school dropout marrying their youngest girl had she not been pregnant, and because they were Catholic and did not believe in abortion, my dad came popping out six months after their wedding. Dad's dad didn't have any talents or plans, so he joined the Navy only to be dishonorably discharged due to heavy drinking and violence against his brothers-in-arms. Dad's dad would come home drunk to his little wife chain-smoking and blonde-haired son. His son would look up at his father with nicotine-stained clothing and smell the alcohol on his breath. Dad knew how to hide underneath the bed until the screaming of his mother stopped, and his dad would stumble back through the front door to the closest liquor store.

Dad had learned from last time to make himself scarce, or he would see his dad bruise his mom's skin black and blue so she would be forced to wear sweaters in the burning summers. Dad had learned to hide so his father wouldn't see him cry. If his dad saw him cry, then dad would think he was a fairy. Or a girl. Both of those things were not allowed in this manhood of Catholicism, the military, and the self-righteousness of marrying the girl he got pregnant and raising his little mistake. Dad's dad would need to demonstrate why boys who cry end up being a waste of breath.

So Dad's dad would hit him until he lost his voice, and his tears couldn't bring themselves any lower down his face. Dad had learned to cover his ears when he heard his mom wail his name as his father rattled her like a drum. Instead of crying, Dad would learn to laugh later on because he shared the same name as his father. Dad would laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

The only time I saw my dad cry, I was running up and down the hallway to the front door. Daddy was supposed to be watching me. I was three years old with chubby legs. I'd try to run as fast as I could to the front door and back down the hallway in three seconds. I could not count higher than three. The house was dark, except for the hallway closet's orange beam. From underneath the crevice of the wooden door, I saw shadows dance, and instead of being frightened by the dark, I was interested in the rattling sound behind the closet door. It sounded like the rattling of plastic keys. I smiled as I opened the door for the toys. Yet, instead of blue, red, and yellow plastic keys, I saw Daddy. He was sitting in the middle of the hallway closet, cramped with his knees drawn together, and next to his shivering body were empty orange pill bottles and an empty carton of Marlboro cigarettes in his hand. Daddy's head was caved into his sopping wet chest, and through his sobs, he begged my three-year-old self not to look at him. I didn't know why Daddy was crying. But Daddy knew why he was. Daddy shoved me out of the closet, and because I was three years old, my tiny body crashed into the wall. I cried and wailed while Daddy slammed the

closet door shut. Through my wailing and bruising, Daddy cried harder. I would learn later that Daddy knew he wasn't becoming any better than his own father, and he knew that sometime soon, I'd make myself scarce when I felt the walls tremble by the slam of the front door.

Dad took up drinking at the age of thirteen, after his mom had left his dad, but forgot to take him with her. Dad never really got over that, so to not cry, he smothered his tears down with dark amber liquor and drank like a man. He drank like he watched his Dad do all his life, and because Dad was tired of feeling scared like a child, he poured the liquid into his mouth and smothered the burning tears as the liquor heated his throat and left a daze in his chest. Dad felt warm and light while sad and alright. Dad's dad would come home later that day, drunk and angry, but when he saw his boy passed out on the couch, he'd rouse him awake with his big, burly hands, tugging his hair and asking where his mom went. Dad would shrug and spew nonsense about nowhere places until he settled with the final statement: Mom's not coming back. Dad's dad would grab a beer and settle on the couch with his son, palms rubbing over his face and scruffy black beard. For the first time, Dad's dad reassured him that they would be fine. Dad tried to feel nothing. Dad tried not to feel the ache in his chest for his mom's departure. Dad tried not to feel the ache in his scalp from his dad's burly hands. Dad tried not to feel the warm sweetness of his father's bitter reassurance. Dad tried not to feel scared in a whole new

way. Dad only lilted his head back to the couch and tried to sleep off his haze.

After Dad's mom left, she returned right when he turned seventeen. He had just dropped out of high school to find a job after getting his high school girlfriend pregnant. While Dad was out finding a job at a butchery, Dad's mom came home to find stale cigarettes littering the house floors and empty bottles with yellow piss in them. Dad's mom deep-cleaned the house and washed Dad's dirty bedding he used to hide under. Dad's mom returned after she found out her husband had fucked off the edge of the Earth and left their son alone. Dad's mom would never do that. In the years she had been gone, Dad took up more than just drinking.

Dad would find crack, cocaine, and meth are the most extraordinary cures for loneliness. Dad got the job at the butchery and called his girlfriend from work. She told him she got an abortion, and Dad broke up with her afterward. Through the years without his mom, Dad learned more from his dad. He learned about self-righteousness and manhood, so when Dad's girlfriend told him she was pregnant, he was excited to be a good man. He thought of his father. He promised himself and his girlfriend that he'd do things right. So when Dad's girlfriend told him she had gotten an abortion, he started to hate her. Dad learned to hate his mom for leaving, and now he had learned to hate his girlfriend, too, for not giving him a choice to be a good man.

Dad came home later that evening to find his mom cooking goulash, the familiar and

distant smell of sauteed onions, bell peppers, and garlic, perfuming the thick air with the savory hint of relief. Dad leaned against the wood countertop beside his mom, watching her callously rustle the wooden spatula into the vegetable mixture before asking her son to pass the salt and pepper. Dad grabbed the salt and pepper from the wooden cabinets, and as he was handing his mom the salt, he clenched his fist against the plastic carton and threw the salt against the wall before yelling obscenities at her. He described how badly he wanted to punch her and how badly he missed her curly brown hair. All the things that had boiled like a pot of water reached the surface, and Dad slammed his fists into the counters and broke their hinges. Dad felt as powerful as he did, scared, once like the little kid he was. Dad didn't cry. He kept slamming his fists all over the kitchen—away from his mom before he collapsed on the floor and begged for a cigarette. His mom cried as she handed him a lighter. They both smoked while the goulash was finishing.

Dad and my mom stayed together after he had gotten her pregnant with me. They met four years earlier at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings where a room full of strangers would one-by-one tell their names and admit aloud they were alcoholics and why they were. It always began from their own moms and dads—how their parents would yell a bit too much, hit hard and often, and they saw things kids shouldn't be able to see. It felt good for Dad at first. Dad found people he could relate to, but bitterness began to spread when Dad figured out he wasn't unique in his pain

anymore. Only a few months before did Dad start going to meetings. He was pulled over, drunk on the highway, and charmed the judge long enough with his own addiction story to only be sentenced to a fine and mandatory A.A. meetings for the next year. He went as he was supposed to, and a few months later, Dad saw my mom across the room. My mom shared her story. She admitted aloud that she was an addict and she knew her mom never really loved her. Mom admitted that she was only here because she had been kicked out of another homeless shelter during another withdrawal. This time, her withdrawals had become less physical and more mental. She admitted aloud she had shaken the staff at the homeless shelter and began having near-constant breakdowns because she knew she couldn't be a mom. She was five months pregnant with my older brother, Daniel. When she stood up to talk, my dad saw her protruding belly stretch, the lead singer of Sublime's face, and her long blonde hair was like a nineteen sixty's hippie: luscious and long. She wore black plaid pajama pants because they were the only ones she had left, and her red flip-flops, where her feet were already beginning to swell. Dad would tell me that's when he fell in love with her. He told me on their thirteenth anniversary at the race track, his own swollen fat belly leaning against the railing, glasses pinned to the fenced enclosure of the race dogs. After the meeting, Dad offered his bed at his one-bedroom apartment. Though Dad knew he was never good at sharing.

Dad and my mom broke up after Daniel

was born. I've seen pictures of Dad at the hospital. He stands in a grey hoodie and cargo shorts, leaning over the hospital bassinet to a pink baby boy who looked more forty-five than a newborn. Daniel had a receding hairline and fat, chubby cheeks that made up half his face. Dad held his son, who wasn't his, and nicknamed the baby Frosty. The old cartoon was playing as my mom was undergoing her C-section. Dad laughed and cried when he saw his boy's red nose. Dad and my mom would break up a few weeks later when she was still recovering from birth. Dad found new habits of sleeping with women since my mom couldn't give him satisfaction. They got back together a few months later. Dad's drinking had spiked, and my mom's withdrawals became physical again. She was feverish and dazed. Her pupils would dilate, and she'd drool over herself. Another man took her into his one-bedroom trailer, and when Dad saw Daniel sitting on the lap of the other man at his A.A. meeting, Dad would break into the other guy's trailer and yell obscenities at my high mom. He wrestled her into the trailer's small brown shower and sprayed ice-cold water onto her dazed body. He shouted obscenities at her. Dad wanted to be a father. It made him feel like his life had purpose, and he could do better than his own dad, and my mom wasn't giving him the choice to be a good man. A few days later, my mom, shivering and dizzy, moved back into Dad's apartment. The next time she tried to leave him was a few years later until Dad got her pregnant with me. A few months after I was born, Dad moved us to Florida. Dad was never

good at sharing.

My dad's flat Floridian house remained the most constant in my insatiable childhood. The house was painted over several times, the once grey cement blocks peachy pink and an angry red door for the house's mouth. It was small as it was dangerous. Outside, there was no telling if it were fireworks to keep rent low or gunshots from the junkies down the street. My mom had left right around the time I turned thirteen, claiming she would've killed herself if she stayed with Dad. She seemed to forget I was still there. I was still there in Dad's dirty kitchen. The air was always humid despite the air conditioning. Sometimes, when my legs would give out from the heaviness in my chest from being left with Dad, I'd give out and press my body on the cool tile. It was the only relief I could feel. Other times, I'd stand behind the window in front of the kitchen sink.

The backyard is in sight. It's big. In the heat, little purple flowers covered the yellowed grass, and vibrant green clovers had begun to sprout. It was one of the loveliest sights in the whole house. Untethered greenery flourishing despite the cruelty of the Florida sun, despite the dead fish I buried only a few months before. Maybe that's why it seemed more beautiful to me. I had nothing else. I had just turned thirteen. Dad left me alone constantly. With my mom, Daniel left. He had grown to hate Dad for beating him. Dad beat him harder than me. Girls get softer treatment. Girls cried too hard when they were hit. I don't think Dad anticipated that his girl could hold in tears and laugh with crack of her neck from the palm of his hand. I'd laugh in his face,

mixed up in the heat of his words declaring his love for me while he hurt me. Dad, I wanted to see good.

It's hard to know where the love and fear met with my father. When I was a baby, he'd sing me Johnny Cash songs to help me fall asleep. He'd tuck me in real tight into his chest, and I'd fall asleep on his soft belly, listening to the rhythmic sound of oozes behind his skin and the beating of his heart. I saw Dad as a man. His heartbeat was like mine; his smile was toothy and wide like mine, and the way he held me close and petted my hair. I loved my dad. I loved him so much.

The silence at my father's house had always had a habit of being faint like it was always waiting for something to crash. I was always anticipating the crash, sometimes by wearing socks to avoid the creaks of the fake wooden floors, my father had put in himself, or sometimes by avoiding my father altogether. Dirty dishes lay in the sink. My father's heavy black plates were covered in dried sauces and crumbs—some glops of ketchup, mustard, and even dried oily butter. The sink smells of mildew as the rest of the house. Like a wet dog had shaken its fur on every inch of the floor. Next to me, the grey and black granite countertops seize the bright orange hue of the lightbulbs against orange wood counter doors and cabinets. The counters are stained with jelly and coffee grinds. Glasses cascaded in buttery prints hold forgotten coffee. The stainless steel fridge is on the side of me, and I am afraid to see how full and empty it is altogether. The only thing in the hunk of metal was cold goulash—macaroni noodles

with tomato sauce. Some coffee creamer, too. My dad only drank black coffee. I scraped the plates with my nails and used bleach to clean them. There isn't any dish soap. I lingered my hands under burning water and scraped the plates so hard, it screeched. I placed them under hot water, and my hands burned. I hate these dishes. I hate this kitchen. I hate this house. I can still smell my father's nicotine smoke. It stains my lungs and brittles my teeth.

I imagine where he is. He tells me he's at work. Sometimes, he works late. Sometimes, he tells me he's taken a second job driving people without cars. I want to believe him. I wanted to believe my father, but the grievances of my mother echoed in my mouth, and I looked around this dirty kitchen and thought I could not help but hate my father, too. I soaked the smelly, bleached plates under the hot water. I hate taking care of him. I had not realized how little he cared for me as I aged. I am no longer a little girl. I don't think my father ever expected a little girl. I have learned my father hates his mom and mine. I have learned that no matter the weight of his love, there is a hatred towards me for being a girl.

Sometimes, I wondered if my dad hated me because he believed he had to hit me less if I had reminded him of his humanity and his own father. If I reminded him of his mother. I was the only girl left in his life; perhaps that is why he held me tight. Perhaps I was the shield from his chronic loneliness.

In the house, in my life, I have become a housewife with no husband, only my father.

I hated the silence. I hated the aching joints of his house. I hated how I opened the dishwasher and stuffed the plates inside. A few mugs, too. I hated that it was because I thought he deserved a mug of coffee instead of the cheap glasses on the counter. I hated I still loved my dad. I hate the scratchy sound of my father's brakes in the long, uneven driveway. I hate the way he slams doors and the way I count his steps. I hate the way he slams doors, and I hate the way he hugs me from behind and asks me to say hello. I hate my father, and I hate I miss him so much.

Dad got diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a year later. I left my father a few months before to live with my mother. She remembered, finally, I was still there, alone.

He was alone when he died two years later. His mother would host his funeral at an Alcoholics Anonymous building. Dad never quite got over his addictions, and lucky for him A.A.'s motto had always been: once an addict, always an addict. She showed me a picture of him as a child, with big brown eyes, pink lips, and blonde hair. We were the only two people not crying. Mom cried when Daniel cried and held him close. Dad's mom smiled when I hugged her, and she melted into my embrace. I've never seen a mother so relieved that her son had died. Daddy wouldn't know that I, too, felt relief when he died. Daddy knew I left him after I found empty beer cans in his nicotine-stained bedroom. They sat together like novelty items. I also found empty pill bottles beside them, and Daddy knew why I had left. Daddy would never know how hard I cried when I left him all alone. He'd yell at

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

me until his death, and sometimes I'd just let him. Sometimes I'd let the anger he gave me boil like water, and I scream obscenities at him, too. Dad hated the way I was honest. He hated the way I stood against him. Dad hated how he knew he didn't do much better than his father. Dad learned to hate the way I'd eventually pity him because he knows he never made it out. Dad would never know what it's like to leave an abuser until he closed his eyes for good. Daddy exists between the cross sections of heaven and hell. When I shut my eyes I hope, Daddy made it to heaven.

Enough

Courtney Wilson, *Agnes Scott College*

“You’re such an Oreo.”

I looked up from the book I was reading, or the work I was occupied completing. It was a day like most in my then–eighth–grade classroom: The teacher assigned work, and students would complete said work and chat amongst themselves, though it was the latter that held the attention of the majority of the classroom as they cliqued up, talking and laughing about whatever or whoever. In my assigned seat, I sat away from my close friends who were all miraculously assigned to sit at the same table. I tried to get the assignment out of the way, and get through the last period of the day. I looked up from my work and furrowed my eyebrows at what I just heard, my heart stopping.

“What?”

Noah sat at a table across from me, with his dirty blonde hair and round brown eyes. He was laughing at his comment with two of his other friends, a girl named Wren and somebody else I cannot remember. I thought to myself for a moment, the word circling in my mind... Oreo: Black on the outside, white on the inside. He thinks he’s funny. And apparently, so do his friends. The small group continued to laugh at the comment, in a way that was not quite at my expense, or at least that is how it appeared; like they weren’t laughing at me, but more so laughing at who I was. How I acted. How I presented myself. As if that were separate from my personal being. Like “*Wow! It’s so funny and strange and peculiar that a black person talks and acts like she does!*” The matter was simply humorous to them, hilarious even. They continued to laugh and laugh, as if the comment said to me was not mean–spirited at all, and hell, perhaps to them the comment lacked those intentions. After all, out of all of my middle school classmates, when people began to twist and contort from sweet, innocent, and simple children, into obnoxious, mean–spirited, finger–pointing, side–eyeing assholes, Noah was one of the nice ones. Perhaps he still thinks he still is just that: *One of the Nice Ones™*. He moves on to one of the other black girls in the class.

“Like Audrey.” She turns around at the sound of her name. “She’s such an Oreo,” he says with a chuckle, just like he did to me. He utters it as if it means nothing, and perhaps to him, it doesn’t. How could it? The words flow from his mouth as if it weren’t an insult, but instead an observation, *a fact*.

Audrey loves Harry Styles and *One Direction*. Some would say she talks “like a white girl.” I never knew where she lived, but she never talked about the struggle of commuting to school everyday from the Southside to the North, like a few others and I did, the long stretch of Lake Shore Drive, peering out the window as neighborhoods flew by with the lake sitting on your right. Audrey was athletic. She was confident. She transferred to our elementary school in

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

sixth grade, which automatically made her cool. At this comment she was unfazed.

She laughs along and jokingly agrees. "Yeah, I'm such an Oreo," she says in a faux-valley girl accent, flipping her permed straight shoulder-length black hair. As Audrey turns from the interaction, Noah and his friends continue and laugh, though I don't understand how. I know it's not right.

"That's actually not cool... you shouldn't say that." It comes out smaller than I anticipated.

He turns back to me. "What? What do you mean?" He looks at me with his big brown eyes, questioning innocently. He's still smiling. How is he still smiling?

"It's offensive."

The small corner of the classroom where this interaction occurred grew quiet. The faces that were once full of laughter dropped into a look of confusion and something else I don't quite have the words for. They glanced at each other with no words.

It began to spread like wildfire.

She said that this was offensive.

Noah said something wrong.

Wait, what happened?

Did you hear?

She said what?

I heard every whisper, I felt their stares. *They were talking about me.* In a space where I once felt invisible, forgotten, and more than anything *alone*, suddenly a blaring, blinding spotlight was on me. Abruptly and without warning, outside of my control, I was its victim. Their whispers crept up my spine, lingering just beneath and behind my ears, with its icy fingertips and freezing breath; I shuddered within its grip. I wanted to be seen, I wanted to be heard, but this was outside of anything I could or would have wanted; It was worse than anything I could have imagined. In just two words, I had spoken up for myself, for my race, and in doing so *I had made them uncomfortable.* Amongst a classroom of roughly thirty students, I was suddenly alone. I had no allies. With no one to defend me or my statement, I was suddenly bombarded with questions. They came at me hard and fast. "*Wait, what?*" "*Really?*" "*How?*" "*Why?*" In mere seconds, I went from being a human to being a spokesperson, an educator, without any regard for my own emotions or feeling of safety. Somehow it was me who was feeling the pressure, feeling the anxiety, the isolation, when I wasn't the person in the wrong. Perhaps it was wrong to make a fuss in the first place. I felt my heart begin to drum against my chest, harder, faster. Who was I to make a fuss? Was what I was saying even right? What if I caused all this trouble for nothing? All of this happened to me in an instant. It happened

silently. Independently. To this day, I wonder what this interaction was like for Noah. The white boy, with the doe eyes and blonde hair, who was nice enough to everyone and nice to me, was also capable of holding racial bias; for making me feel the way I did. The attention suddenly became too much.

“Wait, but I’m actually not sure,” I try to minimize the interaction, to minimize myself. “Just– don’t worry about it...” I trail off and shrink into my assignment. It worked. The situation was, at least to them, squashed, and they could continue their day like nothing was wrong. Everybody carried on with the rest of the class period, with Noah and his friends returning to their own private conversation. Within this isolated moment, Noah’s words don’t stick with me yet, but I know that I’ll remember this interaction forever.

*

In reference to Myles I. Durkee, Tiani R. Perkins, and Richard E. Smith II’s “Longitudinal Effects of the ‘Acting White’ Accusation and Racial Identity Development Among Black College Students,” the act of accusing a black person of “acting white” is a “cultural invalidation derived from a system of oppression that portrays Black youth as a homogenous group and undermines the racial authenticity of individuals who deviate from the norms and stereotypes ascribed to their racial group” (Durkee, Perkins, & Smith 191). Their racial and cultural identity is put into question, which is a fundamental component of human development, and “internal self-concept” (Durkee, Perkins, & Smith 192), prompting conflict between the two parts of an individual’s identity: how they perceive themselves, versus how they are perceived by the world.

*

The grammar school I attended was a K-8 magnet school on the Northside of Chicago. It was incredibly diverse, as students from all over the city attended and were admitted by a lottery system. As a result of my older sister winning said lottery, my younger sister and I were both guaranteed spots to be students there. Years after her admission, my mother and father sat down with a district staff person of Chicago Public Schools, a white woman who was also a part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) to discuss incorporating this plan into my older sister’s learning experience. Here, the woman suggested to my parents a completely different school to attend. *They would have better accommodations for her special needs. It would be perfect for you all!* is what they were told. When looking deeper into the suggested school, they found that it was not up to par with the quality of the school in which we were currently enrolled. I suppose this was *perfect for us* to that lady. My parents were told that *she would stand out academically!* given her apparent academic prowess and potential. That *transferring schools would lessen the stress of the commute*, and that *all three of the girls could transfer!* as if being transferred there would be a favor for us. Her intentions were obvious: She didn’t want

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

us to have spots that could have been given to white Northsiders. My parents didn't fall for this, and my sisters remained students at our then current school. Three spots were filled by us: a third grader, a first grader, and a kindergartener.

The school my sisters and I stayed at was a language academy. Here, students had the opportunity to study either Spanish, French, Mandarin, or Italian during the years they would attend. Then in seventh or eighth grade, students were given the opportunity to travel abroad as a participant in an exchange program. The school's mission was to educate students on cultures all around the world, and to embrace and celebrate diversity. Instead of "Christmas Concerts," we had Winter Assemblies, where students would sing different holiday songs from different cultures around the globe. Along with student-made art, the halls would be decorated with Christmas trees, Menorahs, and Kinaras. During February, a Black History Month Assembly was held where selected students sang different Motown songs to celebrate the different musicians of that time. We all learned to sing the Italian song *Santa Lucia*, watched Dragon Dancers perform to celebrate the Chinese New Year, and so much more. We all played together, laughed together, learned together. Within my early years here, it was perfect. In kindergarten, there's a song that everyone learns that was written by our then music teacher called "The World is a Rainbow." During a kindergarten celebration, when parents were invited to the school and students got to make and eat ice cream sundaes and all wear fun, colorful, or silly hats, we all performed the song for our wide-eyed parents with cameras in hand. I remember holding hands with my best friend and smiling wide as I sang and waved at my mom and her camera.

*"The world is a rainbow, with many kinds of people,
It's many kinds of people that make the world go 'round...
Now you be you, and I'll be me! That's the way it was meant to beee...
Now, the world is a mixing cup. Just look what happens when you stir it up!"*

I remember my mom telling me many years later that she and my friend's mom grew slightly teary-eyed at this performance, not just because of how adorable it was, but at how pure, sweet, and innocent everyone was. The fact that we were all so young, hopeful and naive; That we *had no idea what the world was really like*.

Though we knew of race, we weren't taught how to handle difficult conversations. Perhaps what we were taught growing up was an attempt at stopping that kind of thinking before it had the opportunity to grow. Issues of racial discrimination were taught as though they were issues of a distant past, and in my young mind, they were. Seeing black and white photos of the Civil Rights Movement, meant that it had to be. After all, with only about seven years of life experience, anything longer than that in history was seemingly an eternity away. I

remember being in second grade with my dad in the car driving home after school when I had “the talk.” We were around where Stony Island meets 79th Street and South Chicago Avenue, nearing the six-way intersection where people on the sidewalks sold “ice cold!” water bottles, newspapers, and pies from the nearby Mosque if you were lucky enough to catch them; Where street performers drummed on buckets whose rhythms came alive with the clicking of their sticks for traffic in exchange for some pocket change. It was here that I learned that racism still existed. I remember the street being silent that day, with the performers or vendors gone. As we drove in the car it was just me, my father, and that fact. I was completely baffled. How could there still be racism when we learned about Martin Luther King Jr. in class? How could there still be racism when my school existed? How could there still be racism when my best friend, or “BFF,” was a white girl whose family was so nice to me? What my father told me that day was true about the rest of the world, outside of what I knew and interacted with. Though I accepted these words, this truth, gaining an understanding of the world at large, I was still so young. The world that he spoke where people were still prejudiced and hateful was not mine. *My world* was small. *My world* was my family, my neighborhood, and my school. *My world* was naive. Within this bubble, *my world* was still a safe place.

Something seemed to shift once we got to fifth grade: the beginning of adolescence; where everyone around me seemed to be in such a hurry to grow up, except for me. When I started to feel left behind by my peers. When it became “cool,” “grown up,” and “rebellious” to watch teen dramas or rated R movies, and when it became weird and childish to still watch and enjoy cartoons or kid shows. When people started becoming aware of their own bodies, peering at others with judgemental eyes. When friends became cliques, and when it became funny to criticize others for the seemingly slightest of shortcomings. When I started to feel like I was different because they treated me like I was. In some ways I suppose that was true. To when they treated it like it was a bad thing. It was then that hints of racial bias and overt racism began to show in my classmates. In fifth grade when two boys teased a half-Italian, half-Palestinian boy in my grade by calling him a “terrorist.” Months after my incident in eighth grade, when a white boy would tell one of my black classmates that he “*wouldn’t amount to anything more than a fast food worker!*” because they were fighting over the affections of a girl. How could these students, these kids, my peers, who were taught exactly what I was taught about how to treat others, turn into such monsters?

After what was said to me that day in my eighth-grade classroom, it felt like I was not yet aware of how my race impacted how I was perceived. Those four words uttered by Noah woke me up to something I will never forget. Somehow I was not “black enough,” as though simply being black was not enough. As if being proud of my neighborhood that raised me on the Southside of Chicago was not enough. Like the cornrows that reached across my scalp and down my neck, decorated in beads was not enough. Like the richness of my complexion, the

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

roundness of my nose, the fullness of my lips, the matter-of-factness of my existence and the truth of my life experience was not enough. All because I liked to read. Because I was quiet and kept to myself, except for when I was around my close friends. Because I spoke in a way that was deemed “too white” or “not black enough” to the people around me. Because I didn’t fit the mold of what they, as white people, were expecting from me as a black person. To them, and I suppose to others, blackness was no longer a state of being, but a performance. Someone who speaks *like this* is black enough. Someone who dresses *like this* is black enough. Someone, even if they are white as they come, who listens to an artist that you don’t, suddenly has the capability of “*being blacker than you*” (something that was told to me by my then best friend, or “BFF,” that same year). Elements of blackness created distance between the other peers at the school. It was commodified, yet scrutinized. It became a costume of sorts, shallow and simplified, a means for those outside of the race to appear cooler or tougher. It was “cool” and “different” to know all the lyrics to rap songs. It was rebellious to an extent. Like the white boy who one day seemingly out of nowhere began to sag his pants, “act hard,” and speak with a butchered attempt at what he heard rappers say in music videos or interviews, despite the fact that he was born and raised in Lincoln Park, and most likely never left.

When I left the classroom that day, I started to process and understand what was told to me both within and outside of this moment. I suppose it was easier to dismiss the allegations of Noah this way, within the circumstances that I had experienced it, to brush it off because “*who was he to tell me how black I am?*” As if he knew anything of it. Despite this, the notion, the idea, was already beginning to seep into my young mind. The question, the criticism, the fear, the truth(?), that I, the girl the minute she entered middle school was treated like she was different, like she wasn’t cool enough, wasn’t “in” enough, was somehow also

Not black enough.

*

My high school was black as fuck.

There was this connotation about black high schools, or schools on the Southside of Chicago when they were mentioned to Northsiders. They would say things like “Oh! You’re going *there...?*” trying but failing to mask their racial biases and their idea that these schools somehow couldn’t possibly measure up to what they had. Following my eighth-grade graduation, I originally planned on going to a high school with an IB program that was on the Northside of Chicago, in the Gold Coast neighborhood. The school I ended up going to offered Mandarin classes so I could continue my foreign language studies, had an award-winning music program, a strong athletics department, a mission statement that stressed the importance of hard work and going to college, and a high percentage of graduating seniors that had earned significant scholarships for college. These were all things that the school on

the Northside lacked. It was a no-brainer reason to transfer before the fall of my freshman year.

I began to grow more confident in myself as my eighth-grade year progressed through my graduation and my freshman year of high school, shedding the mentalities of middle school that made me feel small. The timing of finding myself, being proud of myself, and knowing what I wanted, accompanied with being in an empowering environment that only further developed these aspects of my identity. It was at my high school where I met my lifelong friends. It was here where I felt like I could fully express myself. I could be loud. I could be silly. I could let loose. I could have fun. It was here where I didn't feel alone. As I grew more confident, I grew an interest in wearing my hair outside of cornrows but rather in afros and braid-outs. My hair became a declaration of pride and joy and an extension of my creativity and self-expression, leading me to become a member and then president of my school's Natural Hair Club. It was at my school that I was able to see the multitudes of black excellence and the dualities of the black experience and identity. I was surrounded by intelligent, ambitious, deep thinking, hard-working, individuals that were all driven to go to college, a goal that had been instilled in me the moment I began going to school. Everywhere you went, the halls, the classrooms, the building overflowed with black pride and black joy. While I was here, with my newly found confidence and further established ambition, feeling empowered and happier than ever, I still kept to myself aside from when I was with my close friends, having shy or quiet as somewhat of a default mode before I was directly spoken to. I still liked to read. I still spoke the way I spoke. I still liked what I liked. At times, I was still a little bit awkward; I was still myself. Here, I was never told that I was not "black enough." I simply just was, alongside mostly everybody else. Here, aspects of my culture and day-to-day life were outwardly celebrated, while also becoming the new status quo. It was the norm to perform gospel music in the school choir, or to wear durags and bonnets (though it was against the dress code at school). In roaring pep rallies with performances from the marching band, poms team, and majorettes, during homecoming season, a strong sense of pride came with shouting our school cheer. The roaring, rhythmic, energetic sound of your voice blending with others makes a singular person a part of something that is large, full, and proud. Being academically immersed in the important voices of black literature, music, activism, and art, all while being surrounded by peers of talented young black writers, musicians, activists, scholars, and artists was truly inspiring. In high school, black pride and joy became integrated into our everyday lives.

I am proud of who I am and where I've gone to school. They've all played integral parts in shaping me into the woman I am today. While imperfect, I am grateful for my grammar school, the opportunities it gave me, and the mentalities and ideals it instilled in me. I too am grateful for my high school. While this too was imperfect (trust me, I say a lot of good but it wasn't perfect), the overwhelmingly positive aspects of this experience are things that I will carry with

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

me forever and treasure in my heart.

The things that I know now are perhaps things I couldn't quite articulate when I was thirteen, though I knew it deep within me. It wasn't within the right of Noah or anybody to tell me how black I was or am. To be black is not just one thing. It's a shared history, culture, community, and identity that takes on a multitude of faces. It's to be connected to a long rich lineage steeped in strength, beauty, heartache, artistry, and determination. To be a part of that, to be proud of that, and to simply just be, is to be black. And that is

more than enough.

Playwriting and Screenwriting

**The Carnevale Conundrum;
or, The Libertine's Progress**

Jessica DeMarco Jacobson, *University of Georgia, Athens*

PROLOGUE

Before the Curtains draw and the scene unfolds,
For the stage shall reveal all mankind's molds:
Love, Desire, Passion: these just at surface,
And upon it, our actors shall piss!
Comedy is but a Writer's Patchwork:
Pieces bought, pieces found, sewn all berserk!
One might question the Seamstress's intent;
For her creat'd pattern seems Hellbent!
Surely, this play's some father's bastard—
English or Italian: we know not!
The plot's design goes wayside and wayward,
Turning the play into the Author's inkblots...

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

WOMEN.

Cristina de' Virtuosa¹ – twin daughter to a Major Councilman

Buonadolce² de' Virtuosa – twin daughter to a Major Councilman

Anna Maria di Santa Eberardo³ Focosa⁴ – daughter to a wealthy Muranese glassmaking family

MEN.

Godfree Hedonn, 9th Baron Wantage – royalist rake partaking in The Grand Tour

Wolfric Randysome, ⁵ Esq. – friend of Godfree partaking in The Grand Tour

Maxime Boulevardier, ⁶ 2nd Vicomte of Valmont – friend of Godfree partaking in The Grand Tour

Ariodante⁷ de' Virtuosa – Venetian Major Councilman

Floriano⁸ Focosa – Muranese glassmaker

Venetian Guard – elite unit of the Venetian Army

1 Virtuosa means “virtuous”

2 Buonadolce literally means “good sweet”

3 Eberhard of Friuli was the Frankish Duke of Friuli from 846 who was later canonized as a saint.

4 Focosa means “fiery”

5 “Randy” is slang for being sexually aroused.

6 A “boulevardier” is a wealthy and fashionable socialite.

7 An opera by Handel, which was a failure.

8 Floriano is related to blondness, or most commonly, flowers. St Florian is often invoked against fires.

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Act I Scene I

A Venetian square. Enter ARIODANTE and FLORIANO, dressed as il Dottore and il Pantalone, respectively. They play scopa and drink aperol spritz.

ARIODANTE
Scopa!

FLORIANO
You cheat, *matusa!*

ARIODANTE
No, no, I just know how to play, and you don't!

FLORIANO
Ah, to the Devil with you!
(He spills ARIODANTE's drink.)

ARIODANTE
You cannot take a loss. That is the issue with Youth.

FLORIANO
And you cannot take a hit to your Pride. That is the issue with Age.

ARIODANTE
How does your daughter fare?

FLORIANO
Why, why, you should know that my beautiful Anna Maria is visiting your very daughters at this very moment! They are virtuous girls, certainly, the Sin of Carnevale interests them not.

ARIODANTE
What I would do if Sin ever threatened my girls! I would battle the Devil 'imself!

FLORIANO
And I would join you! For your daughters are as well as mine own, they be so close to my true daughter, it makes it so. Consider us brothers-in-law, then.

ARIODANTE
A brother would not owe his brother the scopa's wager still.

FLORIANO
Already, I admitt'd my loss. But take the money, as if you need it.

(FLORIANO gives him ample coin.)

ARIODANTE

Now, away with you! I have business to attend.

FLORIANO (aside)

Surely, he means to spend his new Wealth, Wealth that I Labour'd for! What a beast.

(Exit FLORIANO. ARIODANTE counts his coin, scoffs, then exits.)

*

Scene II

A Venetian square. Enter CRISTINA, BUONADOLCE, and ANNA, costum'd.

ANNA

I think we've exhaust'd Carnevale's Pleasures, good Ladies.

BUONADOLCE

Have we? Certain I am there is more Pleasure to be had!

CRISTINA

I think not more Pleasure remains for Women of our Kind.

BUONADOLCE

Very well. Shall we part, then? And return Home?

(Enter GODFREE as Innamorato, WOLFRIC as Brighella, and MAXIME as Coviello.)

GODFREE

Ah, women!

WOLFRIC

Ah, women!

GODFREE

Which woman to pursue? Their beauty is Sublime!

WOLFRIC

And we must taste the Sublime!

MAXIME

Simply a taste? Methinks you both've glutton'd upon the Sublime at this Stage.

GODFREE

It matters not how or why. Look, another Lover! She shall be mine!

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

WOLFRIC

Burrattino is mine!

MAXIME

I suppose the last is mine.

(They approach the women.)

GODFREE

Good women, it is a pleasure to meet you at Carnevale. How do you find the City?

CRISTINA

Good sirs, we are Venetians; we *are* the City.

GODFREE

Surely, that means you must show us tourists its greatest pleasures?

BUONADOLCE

I am certain if you have seen Carnevale already, then you have seen already the City's greatest wonders.

WOLFRIC

Venice, the City of a Thousand Bridges, each Bridge with a secret. We wish to row under the Grace of each Bridge with a Venetian as our guide, to learn the secret of each.

ANNA

I think, good sirs, you speak not of a city's pleasures, nor a bridge's secrets, nor of truly learning the city.

MAXIME

You would not be entirely mistaken.

CRISTINA

Whatever else should they mean, Anna? We should be good hosts and welcome these gentlemen—surely of good stock—to La Serenissima.

GODFREE

How can I admire the City's Beauty with her ever so close to me?

ANNA

He tries to Charm us, ladies!

CRISTINA

I think Venice the City—her beauty is so great, like the Light of the Sun—shall eclipse all else in't!

GODFREE

Why, good Lady, if that true, you appear to me Venice Herself!

CRISTINA

Nay, sir, you do flatter me, nothing more.

GODFREE

If that true, why doth thine eyes shimmer as the Adriatic? And your arms and shoulders, so graceful they are, they seem to me the City's Bridges that connect one Beauty to the next.

CRISTINA

You know not of what you speak, sir, for I must show you the Truth behind the City. She is Wondrous, but you know her not! Her History is greater than her Beauty.

BUONADOLCE

Indeed, this woman to which you speak possesses not only Beauty, but also Mind unrival'd.

GODFREE

You think me only interest'd in what sight has to offer; nay, nay! That is not the case, for if you only heard my friends and I philosophise earlier.

MAXIME

Whilst drunk, that is...

CRISTINA

Philosophise now, then, for my ears.

GODFREE

The Form of Beauty is Form enough, for it exists in itself, but also in relation to its beholder. But you are the Form of Beauty. The Beautiful, then, is innate and external... I know not what I say, dear, because thine Beauty overwhelms!

CRISTINA

How eloquent he is!

ANNA

I wonder if his Words suffice; can he substantiate with Action?

MAXIME

Likely not, my good Lady.

GODFREE

I shall seek to prove myself to thee. May I know thy name?

CRISTINA

It is Cristina de' Virtuosa. And this is my sister, Buonadolce, and our mutual Friend, Anna Maria Focosa.

GODFREE

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Cristina... It is a magnificent name!

WOLFRIC

It is pretty-sounding, indeed!

CRISTINA

Will I see thee again?

GODFREE

If thou wisht it. I'm thine most humble admirer, Godfree Hedonn. But I must depart now.

CRISTINA

Until we see another again.

GODFREE

Until then.

(Exit GODFREE.)

CRISTINA

What a pleasant fellow!

ANNA

There are a thousand like him.

MAXIME

Your friend doth speak the Truth. 'Twas a pleasure to meet you three Ladies, but alas, I must part as well.

(Exit MAXIME.)

WOLFRIC

And then there was one.

BUONADOLCE

We've heard you speak not much.

WOLFRIC

That is because your Beauty leaves me speechless.

ANNA

How original.

BUONADOLCE

Your choice in friends is sound, surely you must be as interesting as him?

WOLFRIC

I can only hope to be. We shall meet again, and I will make sure of it.

(Exit WOLFRIC.)

CRISTINA

'Tis late indeed! We should retire too, before our fathers catch us out so late in the City!

(Exit CRISTINA, BUONADOLCE, and ANNA.)

*

Scene III

A dark Venetian alleyway. Enter GODFREE, WOLFRIC, and MAXIME, all drunk, uncostum'd.

MAXIME

What pleasant Ladies!

WOLFRIC

Pleasant indeed, but I know what'd be pleasanter still!

GODFREE

O Hell, O Great Heavens! My friends, I must have her, my Lover, my Lover who mirrors me so. But how! How shall I gain her Love?

MAXIME

It depends: dost thou wish for her love or her *Love*?

WOLFRIC

Why not the best of both worlds, Maxime? Methinks your mind is too narrow.

MAXIME

Says the narrow-minded! O, I'm sure you both will have your women and their Love.

WOLFRIC

Don't you want the same of the sweet Anna Maria?

MAXIME

I am indifferent.

GODFREE

Indifferent! Indifferent! Surely, she is enamour'd by your charm.

MAXIME

Well, it matters not.

GODFREE

Very true, it does matter not. For what you lack in Love and want of love, I've surely gain'd, tenfold!

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

WOLFRIC

And how to achieve their loves so, master?

GODFREE

Simply. We shall make our love known to them!

MAXIME

Is that all?

WOLFRIC

Why, you underestimate the pow'r of Words.

MAXIME

I do doubt thee. What of her father's permission to marry?

GODFREE

Can he deny our Love, which we will make known? Else, his daughter's Honour'd be besmirch'd indeed!

MAXIME

And why marry, if you can continue finding love elsewhere?

GODFREE

Who says I cannot marry and continue my whoring?

MAXIME

The contract you will create with her and God Himself, surely.

GODFREE

Ah, it matters not!

MAXIME

I see you are truly set on Love, my friend. Is there Hope of stopping Passion?

GODFREE

I think not.

WOLFRIC

O, let 'im be. He thinks it what Fate decid'd.

MAXIME

I shan't fain care for the matter at this late hour—shall we retire to our chambers?

WOLFRIC

Yes, yes, come along, we'll leave 'im to 'is devices, I suppose.

MAXIME

His device'll be his own hands tonight!

(Exit WOLFRIC and MAXIME.)

GODFREE

I find myself entangled in Thoughts of my Love for her! She is the Wind which gusts my Passion and Sun to my Thoughts, showering my mind with her warmth!

(Exit GODFREE.)

*

Scene IV

A Venetian canal. Enter GODFREE and WOLFRIC on a gondola; Wolfric drives to a villa.

GODFREE

There, there! That is where Love resides.

WOLFRIC

Very well, Hedonn; I'll put th' boat aside the villa for thee. Go approach Love; I shall approach mine thereafter.

(GODFREE approaches the villa balcony, knocks on its doors, mimicking the sound of a heart-beat, kneels, then looks through a crack. Enter CRISTINA; remaining behind the doors. She knocks in the same fashion, then also looks through the crack.)

CRISTINA

O, Godfree, seeing your Visage in the Night excites the same overflow of Emotion as does an Astronomer experience when she discovers a new Constellation in the Sky.

GODFREE

And if I am a Constellation to you, you are the Sun, greater than I in Brilliance. Your Beauty is Truth—too bright for my infirm Delight. Indeed, the Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.⁹ Your Beauty—Truth itself— is too much for a mere Man to bear head on. It can be glimpsed only indirectly, through this crack in the wall.

CRISTINA

Ah, my Moon—and Star
You are very far—
Do you think I'd stop
For a Firmament—
Or a Cubit—or so?
And be with you—Tonight!¹⁰

GODFREE

Though I fear your Brilliance will Blind me, my Will can find a way to be closer to you, surely. You, the Sun, and I, the mere Moon who purely reflects your Brilliance, can surely meet and cause Eclipse.

9 Emily Dickinson's Poem 1263, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant —."

10 Emily Dickinson's Poem 240, "Ah, Moon—and Star!," with some parts left out...

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

CRISTINA

I do love thy poesy, but I know not your meaning now.

GODFREE

Let our Passions meet, dear Cristina, how I desire that so!

CRISTINA

'Tis not proper. You know this, Godfree.

GODFREE

According to what or who?

CRISTINA

'Tis God's Will that our Passions not yet meet until we marry one another.

GODFREE

But how can we marry if we do not test our Passions?

WOLFRIC

Godfree! Get down quickly! The Nightwatch approacheth.

GODFREE

Another time, I hope soon, there shall be an Eclipse o'er Venice.

(He presses a kissed hand against the wall; CRISTINA mirrors. GODFREE returns to the gondola.
Exit GODFREE, WOLFRIC, BUONADOLCE, and CRISTINA.)

*

Scene V

A Venetian square, morning. Carnevale games ensue. Enter CRISTINA, BUONADOLCE, and ANNA, all costum'd and mask'd.

CRISTINA

Another day of Carnevale!

BUONADOLCE

Whichever games shall we play?

ANNA

Indeed, but I do think there's another Game at play, rather. And so many of the pieces have been set now, that we no longer need to play mere Carnevale games. Just as our Womanly Fates hath been decided, so have the moves of the board.

BUONADOLCE

How has your Fate been decided? Or our Fates for that matter?

ANNA

As the Fortuneteller did tell, we chose our own. But I speak of another matter.

CRISTINA

Before your news, I wish to share mine! I cannot think clear. Last night, Godfree came to me on the balcony and declar'd his Love for me! But more than Love he want'd, he desir'd our met Passions!

BUONADOLCE

Wolfric came to my balcony and profess'd his Love too! But he ask'd not of Passion; nor did he deny Passion.

(Enter GODFREE, WOLFRIC, and MAXIME.)

GODFREE

My love!

WOLFRIC

My Love!

MAXIME

Greetings, ladies!

GODFREE

Zounds! Cristina, how good it is to see you at the square today. Like a siren, I do believe the lutist's music is calling for us to Dance in the square.

CRISTINA

Like a siren? Aren't we to disregard the calls of such beasts? For they'll lead us astray.

GODFREE

I fear I've misspoken every time I've spoken to thee. But nay, nay; some pleasures are worth risk. When you play Carnevale games, is it not the same? 'Tis nigh gambling, and that's a sin to some, but I see thou dost not protest against such things. Nay, you take great joy in it!

ANNA

We've not yet play'd many a Carnevale game because of thee.

MAXIME

A distraction for a distraction, mayhaps.

GODFREE

O, Cristina, allow me to see thine face again! Thy mask is like the Earth, stealing upon the Moon's lustrous shine. How shall I recognise thee, now thine profile, placid as a brow divine, is cover'd with some miserable continent?¹¹ Allow me to kiss thine cheek!

CRISTINA

11 Thomas Hardy's "At a Lunar Eclipse."

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

If I'm the Moon, then Actaeon, thou shalt avert thine eyes, or a rising horn on either brow thou shalt wear, stretch'd'll be thine neck, with sudden hairs o'er-grown.¹²

ANNA

Nay, only one horn'll grow, to a pitiful length, too.

MAXIME

Aye, I think you've best'd him now, signorina.

GODFREE

Nay, Cristina. If I Actaeon, then I'm fated to feel my rav'nous dogs tear me apart to pieces with their griping paws.¹³ But I'm no Actaeon; my dogs are loyal to me and the Hunt. I wish to love you not from afar, like Diana's two admir'rs.¹⁴

WOLFRIC

I'll not speak of Ovid and stories I know not, but I'll speak from my Heart. And my Heart sayeth it loves Buonadolce and all her sweet goodness. To speak poesy of her would be an injustice; nay, my coarse Truth serves better than 'is flow'ring flatt'ry.

BUONADOLCE

I prefer it so anyway, dear Wolfric.

MAXIME

Wolfric, thou needeth not flow'ring flatt'ry, for when Godfree speaks his, it sounds of flatulence, born upwards by a subterranean wind!¹⁵

GODFREE

Some friends ye are.

MAXIME

We only jest, we think well of you, friend.

WOLFRIC

I was 'bout to break it off. I hope you enjoy whatever it is you seek at Carnevale, Buonadolce.

BUONADOLCE

I sought thee, and thine company I'll enjoy. Let us take a turn about the square?

WOLFRIC

Gladly.

ANNA

I ought to return home myself.

GODFREE

¹² "The Transformation of Actaeon into a Stag" from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book the Third), translated by John Dryden.

¹³ Mix of the Dryden translation and the Arthur Golding translation.

¹⁴ Actaeon and Endymion.

¹⁵ John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*.

I fear I've my own business to take care of. Excuse me, dear Cristina.

(Exit BUONADOLCE, WOLFRIC, ANNA and GODFREE.)

MAXIME

I say, Cristina, I was once a man like Godfree. But I've left that life behind, as it corrupt'd my Mind and Body all at once, like some consuming Hellfire ravaging Trinovantum.¹⁶

CRISTINA

I doubt not his feelings, sir. Nay, I question the Nature of such feelings. 'Tis not Love he seeks in me, but making it with me.

MAXIME

And of this, you want not?

CRISTINA

Some'd damn me to the pyre if I were to admit it, but I know you've intellect enough to understand me—and likely agree. Women, too, desire what men such as Godfree desire, but he desires it to prove something, I think. 'Tis not true *Desire*. I cannot explain it well. I hope I do not seem a hysterical madwoman in the attic to you.

MAXIME

Never thee would, madam. I think I know what thee sayest.

CRISTINA

Oh?

MAXIME

Godfree desires Desire not for Desire's sake, but so he can look into his Looking Glass and see himself a bigger man.

CRISTINA

Yes! That is what I mean.

MAXIME

But you know him not well, perhaps give him a chance to prove himself better? And maybe he's not the man he immediately seems.

CRISTINA

I fear I see him for what he is; I should've listened to Anna long ago. For I think she knew this when Godfree and his gaggle first met my friends and me. But I will give him some time, and perhaps there is more that lies beyond the Surface that I know not.

¹⁶ According to medieval British legend, the great grandson of Aeneas, Brutus the Trojan, founded "New Troy," or "Trinovantum" on the Thames. Some people believed the Great Fire of London in 1666 was caused by an increase in sinful behaviour, that King Charles II supposedly encouraged.

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

MAXIME

Yes, yes. There are plenty of eligible men for you to choose in Venice. Worry not, Cristina. I think you're meant to find love, for who could not love you? But now, I must part to rejoin our Merry King and my good friends. Our paths'll cross soon again, I do think.

(Exit MAXIME and CRISTINA.)

*

Scene VI

A Venetian square, afternoon. Carnevale games ensue. Enter CRISTINA, BUONADOLCE, and ANNA, all costum'd and mask'd.

BUONADOLCE

Remember last year, when we spent the whole of our days at Carnevale, and our fathers worried so about us?

ANNA

Yes, they've not to worry this year. This is our second Carnevale, and surely we know the ropes by now.

CRISTINA

This is true. And they worried not just because we are their daughters, but because we are the daughters of Venice!

BUONADOLCE

And as we've establish'd, the Fate of the City is in our hands as much as the Doge's who leads us, as much as the Venetian Guards who protects us, as much as the fishermen who feed us!

CRISTINA

And what is a Republic without its dear citizens?

ANNA

Indeed, Venice has been far feebler since she acquired Lombardy. Once she was content being Mistress of the Seas,¹⁷ but the Lion's paw sought to conquer more, with what spark of valour lied within. She needs her citizens to stand strong, even during Carnevale. Lest she'll fall to some outside Forces I know not.

BUONADOLCE

Look, here comes Godfree!

(Enter GODFREE.)

GODFREE

Cristina! Is it the tender star of love? The star of love and dreams?¹⁸

¹⁷ From Niccolo Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, Ch. 19 & 31

¹⁸ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Light of Stars"

CRISTINA

I deny my place in any Constellation, but it does seem something within me attracts thee thus and makes thee stream and flow, and wind and curl, and wink and smile.¹⁹

ANNA

But not shifting thy gate and guile?²⁰

BUONADOLCE

What brings you here?

GODFREE

The Beauty before me! This Proud Evening Star, in thy glory afar.²¹

CRISTINA

Look out! Our fathers approach!

GODFREE

What?

(Enter ARIODANTE and FLORIANO, followed by VENETIAN GUARD.)

ARIODANTE

There's the debauchee!

FLORIANO

Some bold admiral he is!²²

(The VENETIAN GUARD arrest GODFREE.)

GODFREE

By what cause do you have to arrest me? I'm the Baron Wantage!

ARIODANTE

A baron! Clearly a baron who is barren of any honour.

FLORIANO

He knows what you planned for his daughter.

GODFREE

And what of it? Is it a crime to love?

ARIODANTE

It has been revealed you wanted more than love, sirrah. Take him now, guards, and justice shan't be restrain'd, now a cold cell'll hold thee bound and imprison'd by the feet and hands,

19 Henry Vaughan's "The Star"

20 A negation of the following line within the same poem.

21 Edgar Allan Poe's "Evening Star"

22 Rochester's "The Disabled Debauchee"

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

and so you'll be, long as it pleases the just Lord!²³

GODFREE

Depriv'd of force, pressing with courage still; past joys have more than paid what I endure!²⁴
Justice shall seek my Freedom!

(Exit VENETIAN GUARD and GODFREE.)

FLORIANO

And the future of Venice is saved.

ARIODANTE

Beware of the thousand more like him, daughter. Return to the Council I shall.

FLORIANO

And I to the foundry.

(Exit ARIODANTE and FLORIANO.)

ANNA

Aye, there's the rub! Those men decided all your Fate.

BUONADOLCE

I do think our fathers have good intention.

CRISTINA

Shame upon Godfree! That Godless man sought something else of me.

ANNA

He'd express'd his Desire upon your first meeting, did he not?

CRISTINA

Yes, but...

BUONADOLCE

We always assume the best in folk, and perhaps this is our greatest fault?

ANNA

Nay, nay. 'Tis not your fault that men take advantage of your greatest Virtue.

CRISTINA

One can love too much, one can hate too much; if one can doubt too much, surely one can trust too much?

BUONADOLCE

Perhaps, but you rejected his intentions, and he ignored.

²³ Dante's Purgatorio Canto XIX, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow translation

²⁴ Rochester's "The Disabled Debauchee"

CRISTINA

I suppose Love's not meant to me.

ANNA

There are a thousand like him.

BUONADOLCE

And there are a thousand unlike him; perhaps it's in this pool you should fish.

CRISTINA

I ought to do the man one last kindness and visit him in his lonely prison cell.

BUONADOLCE

Would you like our company?

ANNA

At least for safety's sake?

CRISTINA

No, I shall go alone.

ANNA

As you wish, but do not fear to change your mind.

BUONADOLCE

We shall always be within your reach, sister.

(Exit CRISTINA, BUONADOLCE, and ANNA.)

*

Scene VII

Piombi prison cells, at night. Enter CRISTINA, dressed finely, and GODFREE, in a torn shirt.

GODFREE

The good gods mock me presently;²⁵ I hope thou'll mock me mercifully, gentle lady, for I love thee cruelly.²⁶

CRISTINA

I mock you? No, by Heaven, bear your Fortune like a man!²⁷

GODFREE

What fortune? I lie near stark-naked in a prison cell.

CRISTINA

You live.

²⁵ *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act III Sc IV

²⁶ *Henry V*, Act V Sc II

²⁷ *Othello*, Act IV Sc I

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

GODFREE

I've not ate, nor drank, nor slept. I'd rather die my death in an English ditch than in this Muranese Malebolge, this Venetian palace-made-prison. Make Stonehenge my crucifix,²⁸ and I shall think haply of my deeds.

CRISTINA

Your sentence'll not be long. I will make sure of it.

GODFREE

A fortnight here feels like four years in a fiery pyre. A living Hell.

CRISTINA

Why?

GODFREE

That's how it feels for any man, separated from their homeland.

CRISTINA

Was it not of your choice to visit Venice?

GODFREE

Yes, but I never wanted to remain!

CRISTINA

Then what was your purpose?

GODFREE

The purpose of any man my age... The Grand Tour! The situation of the city is the most extraordinary of any place in the World! The impregnable city, with its lofty and beautiful buildings!²⁹

CRISTINA

Your true purpose?

GODFREE

The purpose of any man my age. The handsome, witty, revengeful women, inclined to amours with strangers, the Virtue and the Vice!³⁰

CRISTINA

I come to know what injuries I have done you.

GODFREE

A man in my circumstance—to plead Innocence,—would look like Fear—but view me well, and you will find no marks of a Coward on me, nor any thing that betrays that Brutality you accuse

²⁸ A play on Cleopatra's brief monologue in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act V Sc II

²⁹ *The Grand Tour* (1749), Vol. III, pg 68-113

³⁰ *The Grand Tour*, pg 43

me of.³¹

CRISTINA

I do not think you a brute.

GODFREE

I am but a Stranger in a Nation without Mercy. Yet this is nothing to the Torture my Soul'll bow with when I think of losing my fair, my dear Cristina...³²

CRISTINA

You designed your own demise; I think you wise enough to know your own faults as you committed them. However, I think you deserving of Mercy.

GODFREE

Then that shall be Salvation enough, I suppose.

CRISTINA

Worry not, dear Godfree. There are a thousand more like me.

(Exit CRISTINA. GODFREE weeps. LIGHTS DIM)
CURTAIN.

31 *The Rover*, Act IV Sc I

32 *Ibid.*

Elmer and Paul

Theodore Golden, *Columbus State University*

[eäp;]
.[[{\Ü\ [&]}&[[(:ÄND-&.s-iNG-\.{+}./..\.\.-x\=x:*)]]&{/ë\}],

[;ANDINGS*]
{[ör, ëlmër :&nd* päü:]}

(.a play, .of po, .e try,)

,@.?!|\|/|{[(1-&ë&ä&Ü\&.&.&]:[&?:[[(\U)]]&I.i&*R*&*B*&*Y*&-0)]]|V|!\, @.

.M,
*For mine shell'd nut/
that mad sound, sunny mistress mine eyes doll,
my nut shell,
mine other whole.
Was me whom she taught on to hold and let go.*

. ; Thesis statement : ,

Plays are meant to be played.

.. ..

This play is written in proscenium style. The aspect ratio of the stage should be squared: 1.33:1, or a mimicry thereof. Achieved by lowering grand a bit (enough to call attention to its simple floating self), bring in all wings in to squarer proportions to match. Accommodations for other venue styles may be made (would like to see how small someone could make the squares of the play space, but of fights that is another's). Each scene is a new painting of the stage: it should feel like a picture from a graphic novel. It should look like a block is missing from its place in the universe when the stage is naked. There is enough room for the actors to play around, but still a cramped play area.

Stagehands, if used and visible to audience, must wear a black bedsheet (with black eyes); this is for aesthetic purposes.

Preshow: Cool music. Classic rock. Beatles, Beach Boys, Queen. Nothing out of the ordinary. Curtain closed, with a double door in front of it at center, closed. When show begins, blackout; remove doors and open curtains in darkness. Market as "Elmer and Paul."

IV.

a18.

[Begin in the dark. Silence. Hold half note of a diminished chord played by an organ. Silence again. Lights up. Elmer is center stage, staring out into audience. He's squinting. A tall, thin wall of candy looms upstage behind him, on either side accompanied by two smaller shelves of candy (it looks very phallic); the barf of color washes him out. Elmer is dressed like a senior in high school. His best friend, Paul, a bedsheet ghost, waddles around the aisle behind him.]

Elmer: Am I ugly?

Paul: Is that why we're here? That's a bad reason for us to be here.

Elmer: It's not why we're here. I'm just wondering. Am I ugly?

Paul: I think everyone's a little bit ugly—

Elmer: You know what? Never mind.

Paul: But I think that's the point.

Elmer: Okay, but I just don't want to be ugly.

Paul: I don't think being ugly is a bad thing. I think being ugly is a good thing. I think it builds character. I think you're very interesting, Elmer.

Elmer: Nobody else is going to want to find me interesting if I'm ugly. Just tell me I'm not too ugly.

Paul: There's never been an attractive president.

Elmer: Uh, that's incorrect. And also besides the point. I don't want to be president. I just want people to like me. But nobody likes ugly people. In fact, people actively dislike ugly people. I know I do. I hate being ugly and I hate myself.

Paul: Is that why we're in the candy aisle at Piggly Wiggly?

Elmer: We're in the candy aisle because the candy aisle is pretty.

Paul: Okay, well, hurry it up. We need to get back. My show's about to be on.

Elmer: I'm not done looking at the candy.

Paul: Elmer, my show's about to come on.

Elmer: You didn't record it?

Paul: I like watching it live.

Elmer: It's not live, it's a TV show.

Paul: I like watching it new, when it's fresh. It's part of watching TV.

Elmer: It's more convenient if you record it. You can just skip the commercials, you dumb bastard.

Paul: The commercials are part of watching TV.

Elmer: You don't want to skip the commercials?

Paul: No.

Elmer: Why not?

Paul: It's part of watching TV.

Elmer: What does that mean?

Paul: Watching TV is important to me.

Elmer: Okay?

Paul: I have to do it in a specific way, and if I don't do it that way, it pisses me off. So, we need to hurry up this little quest so I can experience watching TV.

Elmer: You just watch the commercials when you don't have to?

Paul: It's part of watching TV. It's an art form.

Elmer: It doesn't need to be.

Paul: You don't get it.

Elmer: What's there to get? You're just sitting there watching TV.

Paul: Watching the commercials is part of watching television. It's a performance art. If you weren't supposed to watch the commercials, they wouldn't make them. You don't get it.

Elmer: They're not supposed to be watched.

Paul: Then why do they make them?

Elmer: Because they want you to buy their bullshit.

Paul: I don't know. It looks interesting. Maybe I wanna buy it. Maybe there's something out there I'm supposed to see.

Elmer: You can't buy it. You're dead.

Paul: You could buy it, and we could share it.

Elmer: I don't have any money.

Paul: Then why are we at the grocery store?

Elmer: To look at the candy in the candy aisle.

Paul: You're not going to buy anything?

Elmer: No.

Paul: You're just gonna look at it?

Elmer: Yes.

Paul: How often do you do this?

Elmer: Whenever I have a bad day at school, I come by here. The candy is nice to look at.

Paul: Okay, well, can we go now?

Elmer: Why would you come with me to the grocery store if you didn't have time to go to the grocery store?

Paul: You said you were "running to the grocery store." I thought you were gonna keep up the pace.

[A woman enters from stage left. She is quiet. Elmer does not notice her.]

Elmer: Is watching commercials live really that important to you?

Paul: Is looking at candy really this important to you?

Elmer: Yeah, looking at candy is important to me, Paul. I'm having a bad day. The colors are emotionally comforting.

Paul: Emotionally comforting? You're silly.

Elmer: I'm not silly!

Woman: Um, excuse me.

Elmer: Oh sorry.

[Elmer scoots out of her way. She bends over to pick up a big bag of outdated Halloween candy from the bottom shelf.]

Elmer, cont.: Sorry about that.

Woman: Oh honey, don't worry. I'm not judging you.

[She smiles and exits stage left.]

Elmer: We can go now.

Paul: Awesome!

;

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

[Elmer turns and sprints stage right.]

Paul, cont.: Elmer? What are you doing?

[Paul runs off after him. Sweep: the wall of candy is turned one hundred and eighty degrees, revealing three back halves of sedans: close mid to hide candy wall side behind. Elmer runs on from stage left, stops down right of car butts, panting. Paul enters same, shortly after and stops down left of car butts.]

Paul, cont.: Elmer? Why'd you run that way? That was the longest way to the exit you possibly could have taken. All those people were looking at you. What were you thinking?

Elmer: I was running away from that woman! She was judging me! And I felt awkward and I was starting to sweat and I didn't want her to be able to have anything else to tell her bitch friends about, about the weird guy she ran into at the grocery store, when they all go out for girls night this weekend! Heyooo! I can't take it anymore! I'm so fucking awkward! And I know, "people don't actually think about you." But the awkward shit that happens to me, makes everyone look at me and actually have to acknowledge the weird awkward shit I'm doing! And then everyone judges me. And I look fucking crazy yelling at something that nobody else can see! Hello? Hello? 911? Send the looney patrol out, we got a runner! And you're not helping! You get me into these really awful situations that I can't explain to anyone else and it's driving me insane. I hate it! And I'm so awkward, and I don't know what to do. And then I go and do more stupid stuff! Arghh! I'm gonna start barking.

Paul: It's never too late to turn your life around. You're eighteen, you have plenty of time to get cooler.

Elmer: No, I don't! I don't have any time! I have a month until graduation, and there's no way I'm convincing anyone to invite me to any graduation parties at this rate. I've thought about it, and I'll never be able to get people to like me if I don't have practice, but I can't get any practice! And even if I could, it'd still take a lot of time. And I don't have enough time, Paul. I'm so alone. I just want people to like me. And a girlfriend.

Paul: Plenty of people like you, Elmer. You've got your whole family. And me! I'm way cooler than everyone else. I'm a bedsheet ghost! Ask me something, I've been reading a lot of Wikipedia pages lately.

Elmer: I want someone else to like me! I want a girlfriend! And I don't want to have to wait until I'm thirty and have enough of a beard to cover up my chin so women will like me.

Paul: I'll help you get a girlfriend. In college. It's easy to get a girlfriend in college, everyone is desperate.

Elmer: No, you won't. You just get me in trouble. I need to grow up, Paul.

Paul: What's that mean?

Elmer: There're things I gotta do as an... alive person. That I've gotta learn about.

Paul: Are you talking about sex?

Elmer: What? No! I'm... not.

Paul: Elmer, when you get a girlfriend, I'll give y'all y'all's time. But until then, there's nothing I can do to help you.

Elmer: SEE?

Paul: But I've also brought nothing but joy into your life since the day we met.

Elmer: No you haven't.

Paul: You don't remember how we met?

a1.

[Sweep: open mid, push up candy wall car butts, close mid almost all the way, save for a sliver for a door, center; upstage lights off. Night. A boarding school. Six beds— three slide in from both sides of the stage, foots to center, opposed. Elmer quickly stuffs himself into nightwear; we can see him. Enter: children (five male ensemble), also wearing nightwear, including pointed droopy nightcaps. They stand saluting at the foot of their beds; Elmer takes the stage right center bed. Framed up center center is the headmistress, Grettle. She is still wearing her uniform. She stands stock. Opposite to each other, down mid, hang two window lights. A beat in moment. Lighting, dark organ chord strike thunder.]

Grettle: Go to sleep!

Children (in unison.): Yes, headmistress!

[The headmistress exits through the upstage door. When she slams it, the lights in the bedroom turn off. The children crawl into bed. They sleep. Silence. Elmer sits up in bed, looks around.]

Elmer: (in a loud whisper, not to anyone or anything in particular) Grettle is a raging b-hole!

[Lightning, loud diminished chord of organ: Elmer dives under his sheets, a lump faintly painted by the tall window lights.]

Elmer, cont.: I'm sorry God!

[Elmer peeks out of his covers. Nothing. He gets up, creeps upstage, and opens the door. Sweep: off all; Elmer crosses through the door, open mid (leave door where it is), turn window lights upstage to paint big window on back wall: outside is night, the stars shine. The beds with the children on them slide off the same way they slid on. Elmer is and is facing upstage center. He presses up against the glass to get a better look outside. He is framed in the doorway he left open. Downstage, a plot of misty graves slides on, covering the apron. The grass around the little stone henges and crosses is untrimmed. Suddenly, a **bedsheet ghost** rises from the mist downstage, rubbing his head. Elmer jumps, turns around/ on slides another closed door, down center, between the current open door and the bedsheet ghost/ Elmer barrels through it, leaving it open. He skids to a stop by Paul. Close grand, cut off rest of stage]

Elmer: Are you a ghost? I've never seen a ghost before.

Paul: What's a ghost?

Elmer: Someone who died.

Paul: I think I died. My head hurts. Ouch.

Elmer: I'm Elmer. What's your name?

Paul: Uh... I can't remember. I fell and hit my head on one of those things.

Elmer: That's not good. I'll call you Bob.

Paul: Bob's not a good name.

Elmer: Oh. Huh, how bout, uh... Paul?

Paul: Okay.

Elmer: Oh, uh, oh, oh, okay, Paul. Paul, it is! Do you want to be friends, Paul? No offense. I don't have very many friends.

Paul: Sure! Let's go play. (He starts to run around the graveyard.) Weeee!

Elmer: Hey! Shhh! Hold on, it's really late out actually. I have to go back to bed. The headmis-

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

tress will spank me if she catches me outside.

[A beam of light shines in from downstage left. A door creak is heard.]

Grettle, O.S.: Who's out there?

Elmer: Bruh.

[Elmer runs rightdown, hops offstage and hides. Paul copies him. The headmistress lumbers on from downstage left. She is still wearing her uniform, but this time with a pointed nightcap (not floppy). She carries an oil lantern and a spanking stick at the read'. She looks around for mischief makers.]

Paul: Are headmistress and spank bad things?

Elmer: Yes. That woman gave birth to satan.

Paul: That's her? I'll put an end to this.

[Paul climbs onstage.]

Elmer: What? You'll get yourself killed... again!

[Paul, chest puffed out, stomps over to the headmistress. She doesn't acknowledge him. He points at her.]

Paul: Hey you big ugly... meany! Leave my friend alone! Or! I'll,,, spank youuu!

[The headmistress doesn't respond. She keeps looking for intruders around and through him.]

Paul, cont: Uh, hey! I said,. HEY! You, big, ugly, stinky, stupid fat meany... bitch! Stinky!

Grettle: Guess it was the wind.

[She turns around and exits stage left. We hear the door creak shut, and then the light turns off. Elmer crawls on, meeting Paul at downstage center (Elmer is stage right of Paul).]

Elmer: How did you say the b word?

Paul: I don't know.

Elmer: Maybe you have super powers.

[They look at each other, eyes wide.]

a18.

[Sweep: the grand up. Elmer tears off his nightgown, throws it offstage. The grassy knoll of graves slides off. The car butts, having been behind the curtain, slide back downstage; Elmer and Paul turn upward and walk to meet the butts. They stop at their spots from just before the flashback (IV.a18).]

Elmer: How could I forget? She locked us out. I had to spend the night under a bush.

Paul: You got yourself into that. I've gotten us out of more trouble than I've gotten us into.

[Three bedsheet ghosts in the exterior top half of a white van, Flintstones-style, enter stage right. They make skidding car noises. These bedsheet ghosts are different from Paul and are distinctly colored. They swerve, skid hop into to a stop by Elmer and Paul. Tuicsirt, a blue bedsheet ghost, launches open the side door.]

Tuicsirt: If life wishèd keep, me with should'st thou come.

[Blackout. We hear a door slide shut, a car skidding off.]

i.

[Mid up. Sweep; centerstage, the interior bottom half of the white van (no walls or wheels), "driving" towards stage left. It is comprised of a large rectangular platform; the van has spots for wheels, but doesn't. The van has the interior of a van: two front seats, then a long J-shaped seat around the inside of the back of the van, with a gap for door to audience. The seats are nicely upholstered. Oht drives; Esiw kneels backwards in shotgun; Elmer, Paul, and Tuicsirt share the J-couch. Esiw is red and Oht is yellow.]

Paul: There's more of us?

Elmer: Does it look like this car is driving itself?

Esiw: Little is time for explaining so much.

Tuicsirt: We three your aunts be, lad.

Tuicsirt am I. My wife, the driver, Oht.

My sister there, Esiw. Here for you, we:

The same universe we all are from, though

A different than our current. To our natural

And ravag'd plane are we rockèt headed!

Elmer: You're taking him to another dimension?

Tirscuit: Aye.

Elmer: What? Paul, you can't go to another dimension!

Paul: I don't know Elmer, if that's where I'm from...

Esiw: Important be it, yourself to return:

Whine universe's hungry, it jove'ly hurr'n,

Will ally with coincidence to back

Bring balance. Must we vigilance enact:

We met, have, prerequisites for times' end

and prophecies. Tho sonnets may be yawn'd,

Awaken do they like dominos. Hurry,

We must, to the portal!

Elmer: Paul? What the hell's going on?

Paul: I gotta...

Tirscuit: Your birth name is Tsirch.

The son of Whitem, the son of Yarm, heir

To the mightiest and powerful throne.

Paul: Where are my parents?

[A beat.]

Tirscuit: They are—

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Esiw: Murdered. Usurped by your uncle. The fiend.
The bastard! I'll kill him...

Elmer: Oh I get it. You guys are joking about all this. Are these sheets even real?

[Elmer reaches across to touch the sheets. Tuicsirt slaps his hand.]

Paul: Are you telling the truth?

Esiw: A sin to lie.

Tuicsirt: Ay.

Oht: Forgive our intrusion of your normal.
Be assured, we are here to help in these
So troubling times. Likewise for us it's odd,
For but a moment yester were thee boy'd.
Now, not a short min later here are you,
A man almost!

Esiw: To him, sing, the prophecies!

Elmer: You're gonna sing it?

[Esiw glares at Elmer.]

“XLII.”

(Very dramatic hymn.)

Esiw: “In the end times, after the death and mud,
After the monster, happens what when does
Destroy he everything? The crying who
Is hear the dying; who cries; who doesn't?”

Oht: “Elsewhere, a child. Lost, but from who's find,
And him, his and self safer than most hims;”

(Tuicsirt joins in with her wife. They are oh-so-slightly off, as if they learned different tunes to the same verses.)

“But he's and sad and doesn't know his kinds
Or self, and thinks him some thin shimmer sin.”

(Esiw joins back in. They harmonize.)

“The bastard child of an entire planet:
He is! And he's the one who will exact
A righteous vengeance those on who damm'd it!
Such is the grace of God: so will He act.”

Esiw: “O evildoers! Fate the might of see:”

(All three of them again.)

“These poems are true: day and one will be.”

Esiw, cont.: Are ye, the Child of Elsewhere.

And fate at stands the ready and glare stares:

A prophecy must we with you fulfill.

Elmer: Holy shit. You guys are serious.

Oht: Aye, lad. Your head on straight?

Paul: Elmer, you need to go home.

Elmer: Dude, what? What are you talking about? I'm not leaving you with these, these nuts!

Paul: These guys are my family, dude. I'm from another fucking dimension— s-uh, sorry for cussing, uh, aunts whose names I can't remember.

Esiw: Okay, it is. To remember did not
Expect you I. Violence stained thine thoughts,
As fearsome mem'ry easy enforgott.

[Esiw stares off into the distance for a while. She hears an explosion, gunfire; Elmer and Paul look at each other. A beat of silence fills the car.]

Elmer: (leans in towards Paul and whispers) Forget who they are, these fuckers are crazy.

Tuicsirt: Still hear you, we can.

Paul: Elmer, stop. I need to go home. You heard them. The universe is hungry.

Esiw: Couldst fall apart at any time;
Irregularity and glitches primed,
Has such been here, since Tsirch first here appeared.

Paul: See?

Elmer: But, Paul... how are you going to come back?

[Paul looks at his aunts.]

Tuicsirt: Is not, he. Sorry about it, I'm. More
The mess, the universe could'st fall apart.

Paul: It doesn't sound like I have a choice. And, besides, maybe you'll be able to make some real friends. I only bring you trouble, remember?

Elmer: But... Paul... I didn't mean that! This is all happening so fast! I don't even understand what's going on!

Oht: I'll take the lank to his safe home.

Lo' to danger, the journey soon be shall.

Elmer: Woah— wait. Let me at least... go with you to the portal! So I can say goodbye.

Tuicsirt: Dangerous it be.

Elmer: I don't care. That makes me want to go more! How else will I know Paul gets home safe?

Tuicsirt: Realize you don't the peril you beset
Upon yourself with these numb-thought ideas:
Into a war zone, for that goal of ours.

Elmer: I'm going. Paul would do the same for me.

Esiw: (crawling over seat, getting in Elmer's face) Aren't your ears working?
Little, silly boy!

This not is time for noobtastical ploys;
It's not! And not will have I a child's death
Upon mine soul, or worry of within
Mine thoughts: cloudies the mind when hot at war!

[Esiw stares at him; Elmer tries to stare back. She's in his face and he's leaning back, sliding down the J. His hand lands on a green trunk; she sees, stops, floating a bit; she stares at him again.]

Elmer: I'm coming.

;

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

[The ghost aunts look at each other, then back at Elmer. Esiw remains in Elmer's face.]

Esiw: Fine.

(She sits back in her seat.)

Then brace thyself for monster.

[Blackout. Shift car off.]

7!

[Close mid in blackout, shift on scary mansion setpiece. We hear the wind begin to whirl immediately as the lights go off, with wind chimes in the air; then rain. Then more rain. Loud, short bursts of minor organ chords accompany flashes of lightning between the grand and the set piece in front of the grand: off right center, silhouetted against the lightning, a to-scale mansion. It sits alone atop a half-wall that looks like empty rolling hills in the country somewhere. It has a crooked crown of dingey lightning rods adorning the scattering of roofs up its skinny figure. Organ: lightning strikes one of the rods. Then again. Then more and more, with even more lightning striking elsewhere around the landscape. The different lightnings are accompanied by various strikes of minor chords, as though the organ is playing the storm. When there's enough lightning for there to be no more silence, blackout as the flashes stop, but the organ bursts into a haunting hymn. In dark, let music play for a few measures. Sweep: off set piece (turn and move so now is at above upstage right, but in dark and unable to be seen), open mid, move on rest of laboratory-brewery. When organ climaxes again, sharp spots on Schumacher and Gunther: Gunther on stage, atop the double (cornered, partially descending towards stage right, the other side straight down towards the audience), adorned with a thick mustache, holding a mug; Schumacher starting in house left aisle, dressed like an intellectual. As soon as lights up, they begin moving: Gunther descends the stairs with his mug, sippingly; Schumacher marches with purpose up the aisle and walks up stairs onstage. When they hit the stage, lights up on brewery-laboratory: it takes up the depth of the stage, between and in addition to the aforementioned stairs. Down mid center: a single door splits the stage; around its frame are light-bulbs, pointing outward like horns. Behind, a wide control panel, all the way across, full of buttons and levers and keys and switches and pedals, and a picture frame on the stage right side. There is a mess of wires that lead from the control panel to the door. The two scientists stop on either side of the control panel, facing each other, split by the panel and the down center door: they glare at each other. The organ thunder abides their talking.]

Gunther (Afrikaans dialect): Is it gonna work this time?

[Organ. Gunther sets his cup down atop the board, mimicking the picture frame.]

Schumacher: We shall see.

[Organ continues tragically onward. They approach the board and begin pulling buttons and pressing keys, flipping switches and stepping on levers. The music begins to swell incredibly, as though the scientists— through their machine— are playing the organ playing the thunder. Smoke starts pouring out of the doorframe.]

Gunther (yelling over the organ piece): Holding steady at maximum power! Steady! Steady still... (He looks at the door.) No portal yet, but she's on—

[Organ. Blackout. Several bolts of lightning strike the silhouetted mansion model upstage right. Silence, darkness. The bulbs around the door slowly summon onwards: they are the only lights.]

Gunther, cont.: Did it work?

[Schumacher crosses downstage of the door. He reaches for the brass handle, slowly, grabs it, turns it; he throws the door open (towards audience). Behind it, darkness. Schumacher looks into it.]

Gunther, cont.: Is that it? Is that the afterlife?

Schumacher: It could be. Wait— there's something there.

[The organ cracks and holds a single diminished chord. Let go. Silence. Spotlight dramatically turns on above crumpled figure in black chains, head hanging lifeless: Killgore, a black bedsheet ghost. When the spot turns on, the black sheet raises its head to the audience: its eyes. are red, and are almost glowing. It is now framed by the bulbous doorway, and the cone of light from above. It floats to its feet. The chains clinkss. Killgore's dialogue is sung hymnically and without accompaniment (though it sounds like an organ playing a single note at a time).]

Killgore: Killgore am I. Traptment in this darkness
Have hundr' been two years damn'di. Whære once'd,
A king was I, and with a wide fortress
A powerful portrait didst I o'ersee.
But then are there those, foolish lifeless bots;
And twust I stern; say I to the weak will'd,
To who society adjust could not:
Struggle! Are there, those who die and those who kill.
So to your queries and your questions speak
That I, the am of your aid, here are will'd;
I can your wishes grant, if ere thy think
A worldly anything, anyone, where!
Haste wish! Help me help you! Your friend I'll be,
If simply from these chains you will me free.
Schumacher: Can you help me find someone? She's dead.
Killgore: Of good at people am I hunting. HARK!

[Hold catastrophic notes of diminished organ chord; blackout.]

iii.

[We hear skidding noises. Lights up. The bottom half of the van is on center stage left, butt to the audience. Oht cuts the engine.]

Oht: We're here.

[They exit the van. A pair of double doors with a derelict Star of David above it are upstage center. The sheets walk around to the trunk; the half car spins ninety degrees, the butt facing center now, making the actors have to walk just a bit further for no reason; its headlights now

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

just offstage. Two aunts open the back doors, pull out the large green wooden box, set it on the ground behind the van, open it. Inside are three otherworldly-crooked guns, several long circular sashes of machine gun string bean shotgun ammo, helmets with sheathes hanging from their backs like war braids, and meaty swords without hilts, romanesque. All of the equipment is a weird black, same as the guns.]

Tuicsirt: Here we're.

Elmer: Holy shit. Guns?

Esiw: Did not we tell you? End our times in stride,
And dangerous, quiet. Eyes so keep wide.

Elmer: Do I get a gun?

Esiw: No.

Paul: Do I get a gun?

Tuicsirt: No guns for little boys.

Elmer: What's so dangerous?

Esiw: His uncle. In the air, the it I smell.

Last known, in hell were he, by us. Of mal
And violence must we likewise be: he shall.

Elmer: Should you be doing this? Out here, I mean, in broad daylight.

Tiucsiurt: Alone you are in 'bility of sight.

No other human can us see. Strange, you,
Peculiar'ty, odd, a normalnot.

Elmer: Right. Thanks.

[The aunts start to get dressed for war; they spread out across the stage to do so.]

Esiw: Oh, Oht. Your voice the sweetest is; Ya Merce!

Ye, sing us the torturous prophecy!

Our minds on death and fate should meditate.

And thine voice, smalls it that incoming death.

Oht: Aye, m'lady.

[As Oht sings, the aunts dress for war: it is ritual. They put on their helmets, slide the swords into their sheaths behind their heads; they load ammo ringlets into the black guns; they attach the spare rings on the stock: this they throw over their shoulder; finally, they wrap around themselves the loaded into ringlets.]

“LVII.”

Oht, cont.: “Sing! Sing! In perils mighty, Song-sing through!

Be powerful the words, moreso in song!

And every ounce the power be of you

Required; when our adverse: cities strong.

In rock, more hard of place, or a pretzel;

In times/ when circles six/ are in prisòn

(Or hell as well might have just been kept swell!),

Keep mind in this: the end time's way its on!

It hurts mine eyes, mine mind to see so dead;

Ne'erending torture, bad for is the heart,

And black as pitch the liver already;
So while ye lungs have still: sing! Sing the art!
Its verse that's worship, poem praise; create
To act Godly: of destroy the act hate!"

Elmer: Ne'erending torture? That's the prophecy? We're gonna be tortured if this... goes right?

Esiw: Be tortured will, if we ones chosen are.

Imagine not could I greater honor.

Alas, but prediction be not concrete

Therefore impartially fulfilled be it.

Well,

Onward!

[The organs begin. This time they are anxious. Frantic. The aunts crouch, guns up, aimed, ammo wrapped and slinked around their bodies, swords dangling from their helmets like tails, all cclinking ttogether; they move soldierlerly upstage; Paul and Elmer worriedly crouch after them. They stand still as the set moves around them. The double doors of the synagogue slide down to meet them midstage. They open, cross over the party as they stand still (at center), leave the doors open: then, come apart at downstage center, slide off to respective sides. The group, past the door, fans out. On slides a few destroyed pews, a few tipped; a dusty empty altar (except for a scattered {though still shiny} Tanakh stand), a pulpit upstage right, no remaining railings. A single strange door center: this slides down from the altar and takes center stage; it has a large control module attached to its stage right side; a cone of light shines from above, giving it a holy resonance: the only other light are beams that shoot from the light windows to the unswept, abandoned floors. The music stops: Esiw throws her fist up; the aunts kneel, so do Paul and Elmer.]

Esiw: Too quiet is it,

And here's where not I'd think I wouldest shit

Not smell. No, not it's...

Oht: Esiw the only one who can unlock

The portal be. Make haste, if thy say nerves

On their ends truly are.

[Esiw crosses to the door machine. She takes off her gun. She begins fiddling with the door machine.]

Tuicsirt: Thy goodbyes say, boy, out the rear we shall

You sneak. Hurry!

Elmer: Well, jeez... Paul. Bye, I... I guess.

Paul: Goodbye, Elmer. I'll miss you, buddy.

Esiw: A piece of junk is this machine!

[Elmer looks at Esiw, who bops the machine with her hand.]

Paul: Elmer, look at me. It'll be okay. (He gives Elmer a hug.)

Elmer: I... I...

Esiw: The panel's loose! Curse of...

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Paul: There, there, it's okay, bud. It's okay.

Esiw: Huh?

[Esiw lifts up the control panel. Inside, the wires have been cut: they have been replaced with C4. It blinks.]

Esiw: Bomb! Get down!

[Esiw dives backward, tackling Paul and Elmer to the floor; Oht and Tuicsirt don't have time to react: blackout. A beat. For a split second: light, very bright, too white, emitting from the C4: the light blinds the audience/ a quick, very loud smash of organ keys in unison with the flash; we see the door portal just begin to explode apart. Blackout again. Silence.]

8!

[Lights up. Dust hangs in the air, the lights are too white. Oht and Tuicsirt are nowhere to be seen; Esiw lies on top of Paul and Elmer: downstage center, all unconscious. The door frame still stands, but the door is barely on its hinges. Killgore stands in the unhinged door; it grips a weird black pistol, and ammo wraps around its hand in figure infinity. Its song echoes through the synagogue.]

Killgore: It work'd! My Plan! Pleased indeed am I,
Although that this explosion massive be,
A single not these ones of its have died!
"The end of prophecy" shall we go meet!
Mwahahahaha! Hahahahaha...
Ahahahahahaha!

Ooooo! heeere, boooooys!
Leave me human and mine wife!

[Killgore crosses to the pile of bodies downstage. Enter four militiamen, wearing large night vision goggles; and Schumacher, wearing high-tech glasses: their eyes all glow green and emit a little bit into the dust around the tips of the goggles. The soldiers grab the two unconscious aunts from behind pews, drag them downstage (out of synagogue doors) and off downstage right. Killgore stands above the downstage trio. Schumacher meets him by the bodies. Killgore drags unconscious Esiw off the children.]

Killgore, cont.: Ere's need we one more.

Schumacher: That's a child—

Killgore: No morals, doctor.

Remember?

[They look at each other. Schumacher doesn't say anything; he picks up Paul. When he does, Esiw wakes up. She scrambles to her feet.]

Esiw: Fiend! Villain!

[She lunges at Schumacher, but Killgore stops her; she struggles against it, but it holds her with one hand by the scruff and hunches.]

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Killgore, cont.: “Happens what when does
Destroy he everything? The crying who
Is hear the dying; who cries; who doesn't?”
Elmer: Why are you... doing this?
Killgore: Such are the fates, the Sonnets I abide,
More than religiously most, add I might.
O, little boy, as squishy as your face:
Will this your mind in leave calamity:
What's real? Know what of dreams which thy partake?
Truth? What's?
 Forget'nt to bury the body.

[Killgore stands; it drops the shovel on Elmer; it exits like the rest. Elmer is still on the floor; he continues shivering: he is alone now. Silence. The double door, closed, slides back— walked by stagehands dressed in pitchblack bedsheets— in from both sides of the stage, engulfing Elmer; with it closes the curtain. Both stagehands cross in front, open their respective doors, cross into, and close door behind. Blackout.]

Mors et Vita

Elizabeth Cooper, *Georgia College and State University*

FADE IN:

EXT. THE WOODS – DAY

A man sits in front of a campfire, watching it crackle. A small black kettle is hanging above it, the bottom red with heat. The man sits on a log, silent. His hands are covered in blood and dirt. This is OWEN WALKER (30s), a man with long, disheveled brown hair and an even more unkempt patchy beard. As he sits, the tent behind him opens. A woman steps out, leaves crunching underfoot as she approaches the fire and Owen. This is SHILOH CAELUM (30s), noticeably younger than Owen, with dirty dirty blonde hair tied back into a messy ponytail. She comes and sits beside Owen on the log. She looks at him, more at his hands than anything else, and they sit in silence together for several moments.

OWEN

I can't do this anymore.

SHILOH

Don't say that.

OWEN

I can't.

SHILOH

I miss him too—

OWEN

Don't.

They fall into silence for several more moments. The only sounds are the crackling of the fire and the ambient animal noises throughout the woods.

SHILOH

I found a new spot. A strip mall, couple miles down by the road. We should check it out.

Owen looks down at the blood on his hands.

OWEN

Why? It'll already be looted.

SHILOH

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

This was a small town. There's still a chance—

OWEN

Stop foolin' yourself.

SHILOH

(getting to her feet)

Well I'm going. You can stay here and feel sorry for yourself if you want, but that's not what Adam would've wanted.

Owen jumps to his feet, turning to face Shiloh.

OWEN

How do you know what he woulda wanted? Huh? Was he your brother?

SHILOH

No, he wasn't.

OWEN

Then you keep his name outta your mouth, got it?

Shiloh nods. She appears calm in the face of Owen's outburst. She turns and walks back over to the tent, disappearing inside. Owen slowly sits back on the log, gaze lost in the flames once again. Shiloh reemerges moments later with a handgun, which she slides into her waistband.

Owen turns back to look at her.

OWEN

What are you doing?

SHILOH

Told you. I'm going to that strip mall.

OWEN

Not by yourself. Not with those things out there.

SHILOH

Well, that's why I've got the gun.

OWEN

Not good enough. I'm coming with you.

SHILOH

You don't have to.

OWEN

I'm going.

SHILOH

Alright. Let's go then.

Shiloh grabs the satchel bag that sits by the fire, slinging it over her shoulder. Owen grabs his own gun, sitting by the fire, and tucks it into his jeans, taking a deep breath.

SHILOH

Hey, Owen?

He looks up at her with an unreadable expression, eyes dull.

SHILOH

Wash your hands.

EXT. STRIP MALL – DAY

Owen and Shiloh walk side by side in the middle of the road, guns in hand. An abandoned car sits on the shoulder. Up ahead is a strip mall – five or six stores visible. Every shop looks closed, with lights off. The parking lot is empty. The air is silent, uneasy. Owen and Shiloh make their way across the parking lot.

SHILOH

Well, it doesn't look like much.

OWEN

It looks like shit, Shi.

SHILOH

There could still be something good. Something worth it, okay?

Owen stops walking and turns to look at her.

OWEN

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Like what? What's worth it to
you anymore?

SHILOH

Owen—

OWEN

I'm serious. Cause I can't think
of a single damn thing in there
that could make any of this
worth it. This is a hellscape.
The only thing worth it now
would be to see my brother again.

SHILOH

You don't mean that.

OWEN

Like hell I don't. He was the
only thing I had left. The only
person that mattered.

SHILOH

The only one?

OWEN

Let's just go. It's gonna be
dark soon. We'll need to set
up camp and do a lap.

SHILOH

We came all the way out here.
We might as well see what we
can find.

OWEN

If you really think—

SHILOH

Look. Some of the shops don't
have broken glass. They don't
look ransacked. There's still
a chance. Please?

OWEN

Twenty minutes.

SHILOH

Thank you.

INT. PHARMACY – DUSK

SHILOH

Anything good?

OWEN

Good's debatable... but I found some medicine. Bandages, couple antibiotics.

SHILOH

We're lucky. This place is still stocked.

OWEN

Guess the crowds haven't come through here yet.

SHILOH

(shoving some of the medicine into her bag)
Small towns.

The two walk out of the pharmacy and into the setting sun.

EXT. STRIP MALL – CONTINUOUS

OWEN

Are you ready?

SHILOH

(looking around)

There. We still haven't checked that one yet.

She points to a shop a couple doors down that appears to be a sort of toy store. The windows are shattered, glass scattered on the ground, but the door remains miraculously intact.

OWEN

Not worth it. Let's go.

SHILOH

What? No, c'mon—

OWEN

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Look at the windows. It's clearly been ransacked already, and even if it hasn't, it's just a bunch of useless junk.

SHILOH

Everything's useless according to you, even medicine.

OWEN

Medicine didn't save Adam, did it?

Silence falls over them for several moments.

SHILOH

Let's check. I have a good feeling about it, really.

OWEN

Y'know what? Fine. I don't know why I bother.

Shiloh leads the way over to the shop. She readies her gun, slowly pulling the door open and tensing as the bells hung at the top begin to jingle.

INT. TOY SHOP – CONTINUOUS

SHILOH

Shit-

Owen steps in front of her quickly, gun pointed as a quiet growl sounds from the back of the small store.

OWEN

Don't move.

They both stand still, looking around carefully as another growl sounds. Then, a different sound. Owen and Shiloh look at each other in disbelief.

SHILOH

Did you hear that?

Owen doesn't respond; without hesitation, he pushes past Shiloh and moves towards the back of the store, ignoring the growls growing louder as he does.

SHILOH

Owen!

Shiloh moves after him slowly, making her way through the shelves and boxes of toys. A silenced gunshot sounds out, followed by a dull thud.

SHILOH

Owen?

OWEN

Back here. It was an Infected.
I got it.

SHILOH

Just the one?

She continues making her way back towards the sound of his voice.

OWEN

Yeah. But I—

He cuts off and turns towards the source of another sound. On one of the shelves hangs a large black backpack. It's moving and squealing. Carefully, Owen reaches out and turns it around. The evening sunlight streaming through the windows hits the baby's face in the satchel back, causing her to coo and kick her feet. She peeks up at Owen with big, curious eyes.

SHILOH

(from a few shelves away)

What is it?

Owen slowly reaches out and grabs the infant, lifting her out of the bag and staring at her quietly. He looks over at the Infected he'd just shot. Though dead and rotting, the long blonde hair and body shape are clearly feminine in nature.

SHILOH

Owen? What is it? Talk to me.

OWEN

(too quiet for Shiloh to hear)

It's a baby.

53rd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Shiloh finally makes her way over to him.

SHILOH

What? Are you—

She breaks off, looking at the scene before her in shock.

OWEN
(turning towards her)

It's a baby.

The infant sits quite contently in his arms, looking around at everything.

SHILOH

Holy shit. Where's—

She breaks off as her gaze falls on the body laid out on the ground, realization dawning.

SHILOH

What... do you want to do?

OWEN

Well, we can't leave her here.

SHILOH

You want to bring her? Owen,
we can barely look after
ourselves right now. And when
she starts crying right at the
moment we most need it quiet—

Owen glances down at the baby and holds her closer to his chest. He looks up at Shiloh. There are tears in his eyes.

OWEN

We can't leave her, Shi.

SHILOH

I know.

She turns to grab the bag, helping Owen slide the infant back in and secure her in place. Shiloh slides the straps onto Owen's arms and tightens them, securing the bag to his chest. His eyes stay fixated on the baby the entire

time. He is crying.

SHILOH

Hey. Talk to me. Are you gonna
be okay?

Owen wipes his face as he watches the infant look around.

OWEN

Yeah. Yeah.

He looks up at Shiloh , tears still in his eyes.

OWEN

Just found something worth it.

Honorable Mentions

Poetry

“the bell” by Julian River, *Agnes Scott College*

“Kin” by Iquadine Osbourne, *Mercer University*

“Mortis” by Willow Crabtree, *Mercer University*

Fiction

“Break One Five” by Adam Forrester, *Georgia State University*

“Cardamom Blood” by Celestine Mettu, *Mercer University*

“Posthumous” by K. Christopherson, *Agnes Scott College*

Non Fiction

“Mature for Her Age” by Alexandra Reece, *Georgia Southern University*

“Room 315” by Kelsey Houston, *Agnes Scott College*

“Things I Wish I Knew Before I Studied Abroad” by Iquadine Osbourne, *Mercer University*

Playwriting and Screenwriting

“Cosmos,” Camryn Bryant, *Georgia Institute of Technology*

“Men of God,” by Julian River, *Agnes Scott College*

“Vampirism,” Sierra Moore, *Agnes Scott College*

AGNES
SCOTT
COLLEGE

141 E. College Ave., Decatur, GA
404.471.6000 | agnesscott.edu