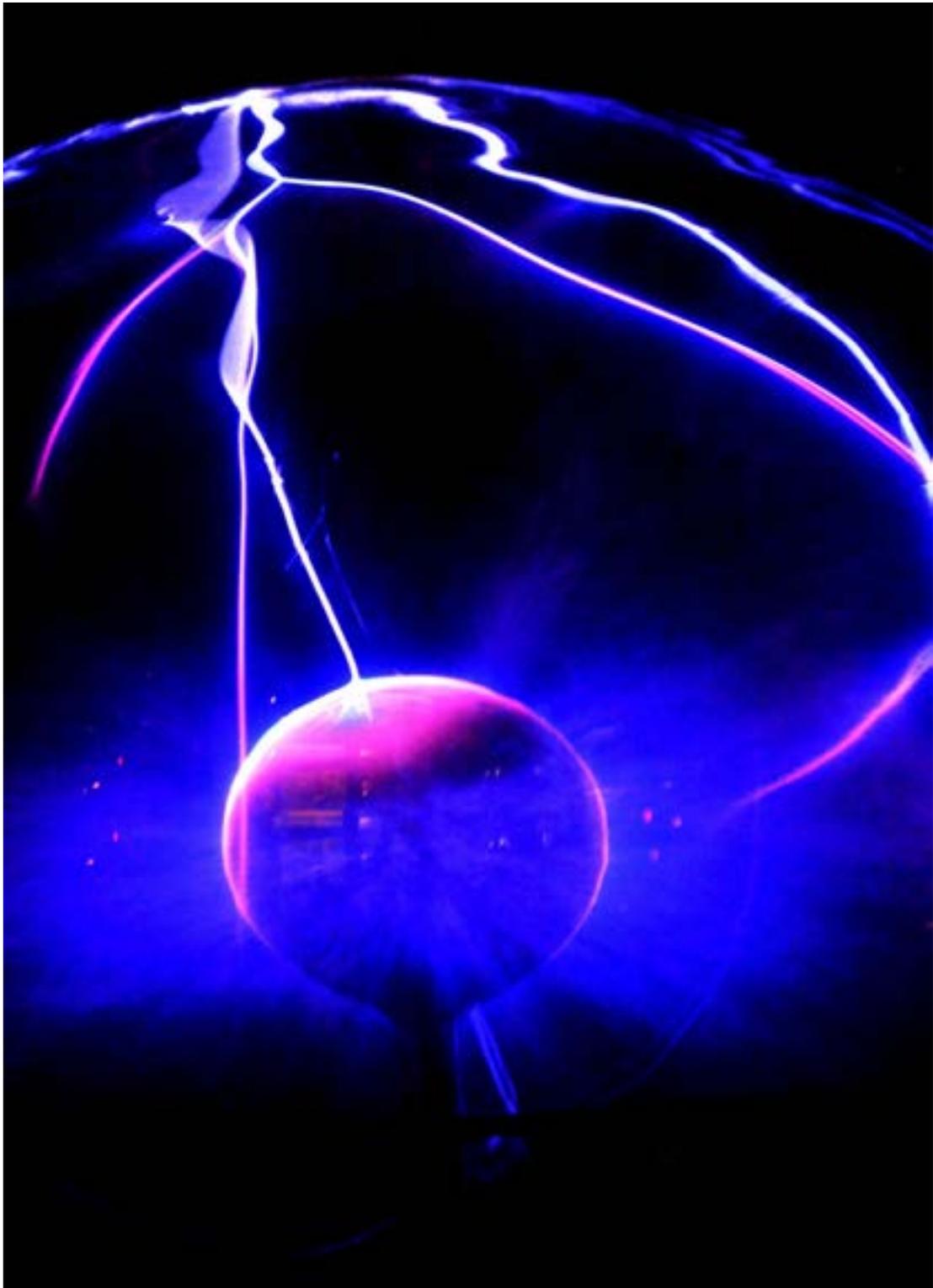


Mind Murals



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EDITOR'S NOTES

Dear Readers,

Roughly a year ago from the release of this edition, I knew that one of the main projects I wished to work on for the coming year was to create the best journal that I could, seeing the wonderful efforts that have preceded me.

I was overwhelmed with the high quality of writing I saw throughout all of the submissions I received, which is a testament to the skill and creativity of Sigma Tau Delta Members. I would like to use this space to thank all those who submitted.

I would also like to thank all of those who volunteered to be editors this year. I would like to especially thank my Co-Editor-in-Chief Kaila Cummings for all that she has done for this journal over the year. This journal has shown to me that the Eastern Region of Sigma Tau Delta is a well of creativity. I am certain the well of creativity will never dry, and I look forward to seeing future installments of *Mind Murals*.

I hope you find these works as exciting as I do.

Sincerely,
Lyndon Seitz
Student Representative of the Eastern Region, 2013-2014

When I looked at my e-mail one day and saw all of the submissions we received for *Mind Murals* this year, I was struck with excitement at the chance to be able to read the work of my fellow colleagues. While the amount of submissions we received certainly took a long time to read, it was time I don't feel that I wasted. The diversity within the submissions was so large that I didn't want to stop reading. In fact, I wanted to be able to read more. I want to thank everyone that submitted for sharing their best

work and for giving me the privilege to be able to read it.

Working on Mind Murals was one of the highlights of my senior year of college. I would like to thank my Co-Editor-in-Chief Lyndon Seitz for all of the work and time he has put into this journal, and for being my partner in crime through the duration of the process. I would also like to thank all of the other editors this year for everything they've done to make this journal a success.

From looking at photos that tell many stories, to reading through the diversity of our submissions, I hope that this installment of *Mind Murals* takes you on a wild journey that you'll never want to end.

Godspeed,

Kaila K. Cummings

Associate Student Representative of the Eastern Region, 2013-2014

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Poetry



“Untitled” by Jennifer Gagliardi

“Her White Shoes”
Nathan Ball

Her white shoes make her dance,
twirling in the space that is hers.
Arms to the sky,
flowing like reeds to the wind.
The sweat on her brow
were diamonds in the spotlight.

Her eyes make me want,
seducing me,
driving me to the beat,
roped in by her twists and spins.
The pearly white of her dress
gently hugging her shapely form,
turning her angel's robes
to languishing hopes.
Her fingers pulling at my shirt,
entrapping me so fully into her dance.
her lips brushing against my neck,
stealing my breath.

Her white shoes make her want,
stepping to the music,
willing the heart to match
the rhythm of the beat.
Her body twists as though possessed,
desire deep in her eyes.
She bites her lip,
entrancing me,
capturing me.

Her fingers make her wild,
tracing the length of my neck,
pulling me closer.
We move, we twirl, and spin,
follow each other, time lost,
music blurred in a splash of notes.
Our lips a hairs breadth apart,
our bodies clashing till
our hearts are nearly one.

Her white shoes make me dance,
tearing down my walls,
breaking into my soul.
Leaving me to her whim,
my heart so fully hers,

there on the dance floor

**“Strangelove in Hiroshima”
Sara Cantwell**

The radiation is killing a canary town
twenty-four hours away by lotus
feet. You think the walk a subliminal
sign for my desire to be. With you,

my record skips to a meter of skin
over a Geiger counter fugue. Give me
the sweat of your breast before bruises
mar the hip, lips, and lithe spine.

This rayon patterned dress leaves skin
tattooed where you slide your heathen hands,
though on an atomic level we never
touch at all, just pass inevitable particles.

**“Not From Here”
Craig Cincotta**

Dead hands, sunken eyes,
strong legs grown tired.
Anchors.

Spry kids, loving wife,
warm home still growing.
Preservers.

“Lavandula Angustifolia”
Julia Cuddahy

Pinnately toothed, divided
into separate leaves, your smell
of bathwater and tea brewing
remains whole.

Oil poured
into water, a holy, selfish ritual
mixing femininity with pleasure,
sleep with relaxation.

Mediterranean nectar, sooth
my salted tongue, the stubble
on my legs. Let me feel your leaves,
your indumentums.

I crave
sweet wildflowers. Blues, violets,
lilacs – a rare black or yellow
tint. Turn me into a perennial.

“Revolution”
Julia Cuddahy

“We who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”
– Romans 12:5 (New International Version, 1984)

Spiral galaxies’ arms spin the way children
grab one another’s hands and run in circles
whirling, twirling, falling into rapid rhythms.
Stars blur with streetlights: impressionist strokes

grab colors from galactic hands and mix in circles –
distant bodies of light, each indistinguishable ray
whirling, twirling, falling into a rapid rhythm
across an endless page, an expanding canvas.

Distant bodies of light, each indistinguishable ray
someone else’s universe but only a speck
in our endless sky, a pixel in our expanding page.
Two girls laugh as the painted line of a shooting star

from someone else’s universe – a blazing speck –
crosses their night sky as they dance,
laughing longer than shooting stars, weaving lines
as they spin and smile the way galaxies spiral.

**“Unrequited”
Kaitlyn Ernst**

I am tempted to pretend
 that we lift into the sky like larks, drifting
 in and out of sight, that words echo
 through the blue boundary of this world
 like birdsong.

I wish I could sing like that, feel melodies
 vibrate in my throat and know
 humans listen.

But you won't listen.

 So I choke on songs and wait,

 release them in steamy shower spray.

The tiled confines are lined with plastic
jars and bottles with liquid insides
 sloshing like thoughts
 in my poor mind.

I pretend you're not you, here.

 We are imagined. It's All Hallow's Eve
 and we step in and out of costumes
 creature-like and careful
 of nothing.

I wish I could live morning to night
in a silken dress that touches you.

 But nothing touches you.

 I take off my dress and let
 cloth liquefy onto white carpet.

 Wool tufts twist around
 bits of paper,
 strands of strawberry hair,
corporeal remnants that
hold us here.

I pretend to prick myself with feathers
 to fly in cobalt waves of sky.

The sun droops red and
 reminds me of collision,
 body and mind, yours in mine.

“Sparrow”
Erin Ipsen

I'll speak of you only
In the present, never
As if you're dead, as if you've flown away
Forever with the birds. I'll write
only for you. I used to write
and you used to read.
It seems as though my words have flown away
with you and left tears in their wake.
I love you
With every breeze and branch
That carry your sparrow-wings. December's peppermint
Wind whisks your whisper closer to me.
Branches nestle cherry blossoms
Against my face,
When April comes. The summer grass
is your fingers tickling my toes at bedtime.
I feel your warmth
in the bright autumn sun
when I rise to meet the morning
to keep loving you,
You're here. And I will place
Word after word on this page,
Knowing you never stopped
Reading along with me.

“Dresden”
Kristi Isokungas

They stopped almost at once.
All of them, all quick, all quiet
quit the time they kept and froze.

Half a chess board
hung from a window sill
where a black cat weaved between
broken flower pots
then scurried back inside
beneath a shallow,
grey smoke.

“Ingenuity”
Ashley Magown

Subdued precision, you aspired
She lives by the book,
By the matches she keeps under her bed,
In case of an emergency

Quick to judge, she's kept to her ways
Yet you've decided in ignorance,
To guard the door that spares her delirium

She lives by the book,
Though every time you exchange a word,
You leave sweat on her pages.

A quarter past afternoon,
Where's the joy in one more sip?
Poised beside the coffee maker,
Should she slip, one bit,
Her heart, nothing but a shadow
To eclipse his sun

“Breno”
Kathleen Nelo

The heat of my skin
makes the black ink
run in terror
of my thinking of
you
in such a way that we are children
again.

Summer hurts me,
winter riots
against me.
The brown spots on my
skin,
the same number of
nose freckles you
had
at thirteen.
Before time made you take
yourself.

I wrote a page,
emotions stinging
my lungs,
Stopping and coughing
in systematic repulsion
of my own heart
and summer influenza.

Your mother calls,
you cradling the
phone
to your shoulder,
staring at me
then
screaming with your eyes,

'Not one page,
don't
ever stop at one page."

Breno,
maybe it was you who
stopped at one
page.

Maybe it was
you
who had a vision
a dream,
a fight

you wanted so badly.
Breno,
I only have one mental photograph of
you,
the yellow boxcar,
your mother wailing,
the pulled lumps of bloodied bone and hair,
and your
attempts
to jump into the train.

**“Somewhere in Mexico”
David Potsubay**

I felt sweaty and soiled in that desert bar,
stranded and forsaken, one blade rotated
slowly, watched syrupy seconds pass on
a greasy clock. An ounce of silver tequila
glistened back, awaiting revelation,
a quick resolution, or at least some mercy.

The Holy Mother Mary was lit up across
the dark street, a bright glow behind dirty
glass, face downcast and with no smile.
No color in those plastic eyes. I stared
for hours in the dusty street, feeling holier,
like when I read *The Dhammapada*.

My head thrummed, that heavy drinking
thud, the drunken drum. The tribal ache
slurred into one sound, a foghorn turned
into organ, with a white cloaked choir and
orange-robed monks humming the sacred
“Om” that blended, into a Gregorian chant.

“Put”
Emily Rogers

Put (verb) *transitive* 1.) to place in a specified position. As in, I *put* his picture down and *put* my headphones in. I *put* on my favorite Billy Joel song, laid back and *put* my hands over my broken/healing/fragile face. 2.) to apply or dedicate to: I *put* my mind to work. I recollected all memories, both good and bad, of the face of my past. 3.) to attach or attribute to: I recall the days when he *put* a high value on me; a value that was much more generous than the value I ever *put* on myself. 4.) to devote (oneself) to an activity or to an end: I *put* myself to the challenge; to live up to the distorted perfections expected of me. Relentlessly I transformed: attempting to project the identity of the unblemished possession he believed *that* I was. 5.) to invest: As in, I *put* my hopes in a deceptive critic who suddenly adored to destroy me. I *put* my faith in his words; in the promises that were made to be broken and in a passion was that established only to fade. 6.) to impute: his infatuation vanished and his frustrations were abruptly *put* on me. 7.) to convey or translate into another form: I attempted to *put* what was once considered elegance and innocence into a trait *he permitted*. I *put* my pride into obedience and *put* my confidence into dependency. I needed him. 8.) to impose or inflict: he *put* scars on me; metaphorically? Literally. He *put* bruises on the face I now held when I attempted to defend myself against him. 9.) to cause to endure or suffer: I’ m done. I *put* myself through that for years but I’ m done; I won’ t *put* myself through that ever again.

“Yellow Footprints”
Amanda Santacroce-Kahalehoe

Unfamiliar faces and forms calmly crowd the aging coach,
 Creeping cautiously along the clement Carolina coast.
 Anguish ages me.
 My feet frantically fly with fear against the gritty ground,

Fingers fidgeting feverishly through my long locks of brown.
 The scent of sweat and of stale cologne flood my sharpened senses,
 Whilst splitting silence stokes the flames of fear and apprehension.
 He shouts for “Heads down”!
 Asphyxiated with angst, I hardly hear the thunderous throats,
 Resonating with rejoice, “Get off my damn bus right now folks”!

Campaign covers carefully crowned to greet their green deportees.
 Formations of feet suspended at a forty-five degree,
 Reflexively rouse.
 A sturdy statue rumbles orders to step upon a sea,
 Of yellow footprints branded on the boulevard before me.

Standing at the head of hell, I gaze upon its gleaning ledge,
 The eagle, globe and anchor—their emblem embossed on its edge.
 I cannot say “I”.
 She must speak in third person, no knowledge of name or number,
 Segregated by mental muscle without spells of slumber.

The transition begins—she is stripped of self to follow suit,
 To serve her corps and the solemn stigma of Marine *recruit*.

“Famine”
Seth Ward

People be fresh sometimes
Death open their eyes bright as sunshine
Pilfering, this and that is mine
You go here and I'll go there
In between
we can share
Trade our rares for rares where wares tear open to stares
Aching to rake a bake sale
Hungry dates unpaid even saying you would be late
and I would *love* to wait
I'll bait for the bite in hyperspace
trifle on the pedestal, sick from red hoods total-
completely covering moving nothing miserable,
hovering simple by magical crystals,
monsters in the stars

“Tire Swing”
Jacqueline Zantow

Momma and I hung it right when we’d moved in,
rope and tire from the dump quickly strung
by dirt caked white hands
at the brick house on the hill.

We kept a cherry GMC parked out front,
and slate blue buds with chartreuse stems climbed
a black metal rail
by morning glories in plum.

At six o’clock the streetlights cracked on with shine,
and we went inside to frozen tray meals
just like lightning bugs
at home in a glass jar.

In morning Momma would shake me till I woke,
chill dotting rose on my cheeks outside
as Sugar, our mutt,
pissed beside that white rot oak.

I’d grab a jacket and grip onto the rope,
ride until we twisted round, gripping
close the rubber sides
till I lost which way was up.

Momma told me that tires were best fit to swing,
but ours only ever did spin
till eyes watered up
from the cold whip of the wind.

Plays



“Untitled” - Jennifer Gagliardi

“The Charity Case”
Julia Blanchard

Cast of Characters

BEN, mid-20s

LEAH, mid-20s

The Setting

The kitchen and living room of BEN’s apartment. A small, run-down, bachelor’s place. A door to outside.

Time

Evening in the present.

(BEN is standing in kitchen, examining a pan of pizza bagels in the oven. He closes the oven, and looks at the timer. He runs his hand through his hair, then grabs a bottle of cologne from a side table near the bedroom door and sprays it on himself. He checks his watch, then looks at the timer again.)

BEN
(muttering)

Two minutes. Come on, Leah.

(He sits down, rubs his hands excitedly. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a ring box. He opens it, fingers the ring, smiles.)

BEN

Leah- (his voice comes out in a squeak. Clears his throat. Much deeper voice.) Leah. (tries again) Leah, ever since I met you at Janet’s party five years ago and we almost got arrested, I knew you were the one. (pause) No. Hmm... Leah, having you so far away for so long has made me realize that I never want to spend a day without you. Ugh, no. (pause) Leah, we’ve been dating for a very long time, and I’m glad we’re both waiting, but I really, really wanna have sex with you...

(The front door swings open. Startled, BEN jumps up as LEAH enters. He shoves the ring box into his pocket as she drops her bag, squeals, and rushes toward him. They embrace and kiss. The timer buzzes.)

BEN
(groaning)

I'm sorry.

LEAH
No, it's okay! (Neither moves. Long pause as they smile at each other.) Hi.

BEN
Hi. (They continue to look at each other. Timer buzzes again.) I should probably go check on those.

LEAH
(playfully flirting)
Do you have to?

BEN
(grinning and leaning closer)
No.

(They kiss. Timer buzzes again. LEAH pulls away.)

LEAH
(reluctantly)
But you probably should.

BEN
Maybe.

LEAH
(playfully pushing him away)
Come on.

BEN
(pretending to pout)
Alright, fine.

(BEN walks to the oven. LEAH follows)

LEAH
What are you making?

BEN
Pizza bagels.

LEAH
(grinning)
I should have guessed. (beat) Oh! I brought plantains! They can be our appetizer.

(LEAH runs over to her bag and pulls out a bunch of

plantains. She carries them to the oven.)

BEN
(seeing them, confused)

Green bananas?

LEAH
No, plantains! If you cook them right, they taste like french fries. We ate them every single day.

BEN
(laughing)

Didn't you get sick of them?

LEAH
Nope! (gathering knife, skillet, and oil) And we learned four different ways of cooking them, too.

BEN
Four?

LEAH
Yeah. We made fried, and fried and mashed, and-

BEN
Are you sure you want to make them now? I mean, the pizza bagels are done. And we can eat them really fast and then we can, you know...

(BEN puts his arms around LEAH's waist and buries his face in her neck.)

LEAH
(smiling)
Patience. These don't take long, I promise.

BEN
Alright. (pause) Man, it's good to see you. I've been going crazy over here.

(LEAH begins peeling the plantains, chopping them up into small slices, and placing them in a frying pan filled with oil)

LEAH
Me, too. I'm sorry if I didn't seem that excited to see you last night. I was all groggy from the plane.

BEN
It's okay.

LEAH
And then my parents made me go to their stupid party this afternoon-

BEN

Yeah, they told me about it at the airport.

LEAH

Ugh. My whole family came over to welcome me back, and they had (in a fake uppity voice) *hors d'oeuvres and champagne*, and all I wanted was to come see you.

BEN

(smiling)

I've missed you, too.

LEAH

(smiling)

Good. (pause. Suddenly remembers) Oh my gosh! How did your interview go this morning?

BEN

Really well.

LEAH

Yay!

BEN

It was terrifying, but everyone at the firm was really nice to me. And actually-

(LEAH burns herself on the frying pan)

LEAH

(cry of pain)

Ahhh!

BEN

Are you okay?

LEAH

Yeah. I guess your frying pan heats up faster than the one I'm used to.

(LEAH rinses her hand in cold water.)

BEN

You sure you're okay?

LEAH

I don't know. You might have to kiss it to make it better.

(BEN smiles and kisses her hand. They kiss. LEAH gasps and pulls away.)

BEN

(frustrated)

What?

LEAH
(rushing to the stove)

Oh, shoot.

BEN
(more frustrated)

What?

(LEAH flips a plantain slice.)

They're completely burnt.

LEAH

Already?

BEN

I'm so sorry. I'll make more.

LEAH

Why don't we just have the pizza bagels? They're getting cold.

BEN

Alright. I want to try to make more for you later, though.

LEAH
(reluctantly)

Deal.

BEN
(smiles)

(BEN sets out plates and wine glasses. He puts the pizza bagels on a larger plate and sets them on the table.)

I haven't had these since you made them for me the night I left.

LEAH

Seriously? How did you live without them for a whole year?

BEN

I managed pretty well.

LEAH
(wry smile)

(BEN pulls out a chair for LEAH. She laughs and sits down. BEN brings out a bottle of wine.)

LEAH (cont)

Wine with pizza bagels?

BEN

Only the best for you, my love. I splurged.

LEAH

So fancy.

(BEN kisses her forehead, pours them both a glass of wine, and sits down at the table.)

LEAH (cont)

Let me teach you how we prayed in Ecuador. Here.

(LEAH grabs BEN's hands.)

One hand on top to give, and the other hand on the bottom to receive.

(They bow their heads to pray.)

Gloria al Padre, al Hijo y al Espíritu Santo.
Como era en el principio, ahora y siempre,
por los siglos de los siglos.
Amén.

(BEN smiles. They begin to eat.)

LEAH
(biting into bagel)

Mmmmmmmm.

BEN

They're cold.

LEAH

They're perfect.

BEN

So how were your last few weeks? It's been a while since you've emailed.

LEAH

I know, I'm sorry. But it was amazing. Oh my goodness. I never wanted it to end.

BEN
(trying not to act hurt)

Really?

LEAH

All of my third graders made me cards and gave them to me on my last day. And the night before I left, the whole community threw all of the volunteers a party.

BEN

Cool.

LEAH

Nina made us fried chicken, which probably cost her a ton. She's so sweet – she took such good care of us. And her husband made us our last batch of plantains.

BEN

All four ways?

LEAH
(smiling)

Nope, just fried and mashed and fried again. And then Daniel and his grandma made us lentils.

BEN

Is Daniel-

LEAH

The little boy I talked about in all of my emails.

BEN
(irritated)

I remembered.

LEAH

He's the cutest thing in the entire world. I cried so much hugging him goodbye. And right after he left, the power went out in the volunteer house, and we lit a bunch of candles and ate in the dark. It was so beautiful. I wish you could have been there, Ben. It was wonderful. (pause) I couldn't sleep at all because I couldn't stop crying. I didn't want to leave.

BEN
(after a pause)

Weren't you at least a little excited to come back?

LEAH

Only because I wanted to see you. But honestly, if it weren't for you, I don't think I would have left.

BEN
(teasing)

Not even for pizza bagels?

LEAH

Nope. I'd be happy for the rest of my life on plantains and tuna.

BEN
Tuna?

LEAH

Yeah, we ate a lot of tuna. It was cheap.

BEN

Well, at least you can spend the rest of your life enjoying pizza and french fries and ice cream.

LEAH
(dissatisfied)

Uh-huh.

BEN

What? You can't tell me you're not excited for real food again.

(Silence. LEAH looks down. BEN stares at LEAH.)

BEN (cont.)

Are you okay?

LEAH

I don't know. I mean, I'm excited to see you and everything. But I'm just so confused.

BEN

Confused about what?

LEAH
(looking up)

I was offered a job. To teach full-time.

BEN

Okay.

LEAH

I want to take it. I want to go back.

BEN
(starting to get upset)

What, for another year?

LEAH

I don't know. Longer.

BEN

How much longer?

I want to move there, Ben. Permanently.

LEAH

You're kidding.

BEN

I wouldn't joke about this.

LEAH

You can't possibly be serious.

BEN
(gets up from table)

I am! I can't stay here. I need-

LEAH
(gets up as well)

Why? Am I not good enough for you?

BEN

You know that's not why-

LEAH

I've never been good enough, have I?

BEN

This isn't about you!

LEAH

My girlfriend is leaving me for a country? Yeah, I'd say this is about me.

BEN

I don't want to leave you!

LEAH

Oh, really?

BEN

I want you to come with me!

LEAH

To *Ecuador*?

BEN

Yes! Why do you make it sound so crazy?

LEAH

BEN

I have no desire to live in Ecuador.

LEAH

Just think about it.

BEN

Why don't you think? Do you really expect me to leave my family? To leave my job?

LEAH

(beat to register)

Wait. (pause) You got the job?

BEN

Yes. They offered me a full-time position. I can finally move to a nicer apartment. I'm heading into real life, Leah. Come with me.

LEAH

Real life? I'm pretty sure Ecuador is more real life than-

BEN

You've been living in a dream. You think you want to live in poverty, but you have no idea what it's really like.

LEAH

I just lived in poverty for a whole year!

BEN

And I've lived in it my whole life! It's not romantic, Leah. It's not fun. It's not candlelight dinners in the dark.

LEAH

You don't know how hard it is down there. Just because you lived on food stamps doesn't mean you can understand what they go through.

(BEN glares at her and turns away violently.)

LEAH

I'm so sorry. I didn't mean-

BEN

Why do you think it's so different down there? Going hungry feels the same everywhere. It sucks. I don't want to go back to that.

LEAH

I know. (pause) It's just...I found joy down there. I never experienced that in any of my parents' fancy parties or golf outings. Life is so simple there. Things *mean* something.

BEN

And nothing means anything here?

LEAH

It does, but- I don't know. I don't want a nice house and a dishwasher and a white picket fence. I want muddy streets and green bamboo fences and hammocks and lentils. I want salsa music and roosters and trash everywhere and sweat and mosquito nets and fresh bread. I want Daniel. His grandma is dying, and he has no one else to take care of him. I want to be there for him. I want to be there for all of my friends.

BEN

Am I not your friend? Why don't you want to be there for me?

LEAH

They need me!

BEN

I need you!

LEAH

Ben...

BEN

They need you more, right? Is that it? If I were one of your friends down there, would you love me more?

LEAH

Are you serious?

BEN

You probably don't even care who they are, as long as they need you. You've always loved feeling needed.

LEAH

That's not what this is!

BEN

Come on, it's even why you're with me. Why else would a little rich girl want to date a boy from the ghetto?

LEAH

That's not fair! I love you!

BEN

You wanted to help me. And now that I've gone off and made a good life for myself and don't need your help anymore, you're ditching me for a country that-

LEAH

I'm not ditching you! I want you to come with me!

BEN

Do you really expect me to leave my family? Kayla just lost her first tooth. Jaime was accepted into college. My mom has a new boyfriend. Do you think I'd miss things like that?

LEAH

We can come back and visit!

BEN

Or we can visit Ecuador.

LEAH

It's not enough.

BEN

It's not enough? You mean, I'm not enough.

LEAH

No, that's not it. I love you. I do. But they need my help...

BEN

Leah, people don't need your help. They need your love. And that's all I'm asking for. Why can you give it to them and not to me?

LEAH

I want to, I do, I...I'm just so confused.

BEN

Well, I'm not confused. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

LEAH

Ben...

BEN

(pulls out the ring box)

See this? (flips it open) I bought this two years ago. I already knew then that I wanted to marry you.

LEAH

(crying)

Ben, stop.

BEN

Okay, fine. I'll stop. I'll stop trying to convince you that I'm in love with you.

LEAH

That's not what I-

BEN

No, it's okay. I'll just sit here, in this dingy apartment, and watch you run off and leave me.

LEAH
(pleading)

Please, I just need some time to think.

BEN

Fine. Think. Then fly down there and be with your plantains and roosters and forget all about me. You can wave your pretty money around and make everybody fall in love with you. And then you can go save your pathetic little orphan boy, but watch out, because one day he's gonna grow up and realize that you're just using him to feel good about yourself.

(LEAH slaps BEN's face. They both freeze, stunned. LEAH bursts into tears, and turns to run away. BEN grabs her shoulders, turns her around, and kisses her fiercely. They kiss each other for a moment, desperately, and then break away.)

LEAH
(quietly)

Please just give me time to think.

BEN

Fine.

LEAH

Are you mad at me?

BEN

Yeah.

LEAH

Please forgive me.

BEN

Just... (turns to her) don't write me off.

LEAH
(softly)

I won't.

(BEN reaches for LEAH to kiss her again. She steps back, away from him. He stares at her.)

BEN

You've decided already, haven't you.

(LEAH is silent.)

Fine. I'll just forget the past five years-

BEN (cont)

Ben, I didn't-

LEAH

I'll burn all your letters-

BEN

Please let me-

LEAH
(begging)

And all our concert stubs-

BEN

Stop it!

LEAH

Might as well burn our Godfather collection, too-

BEN

Please stop-

LEAH
(sobbing)

I can't return the ring but I can probably sell it-

BEN

STOP!

LEAH
(screaming)

(BEN stares at her. Pause.)

What, Leah?

BEN

I love you.

LEAH
(whispering)

I don't believe you.

BEN

(LEAH bursts into tears, grabs her bag, and runs out of the

house. BEN doesn't watch her leave. He is still for a moment, then viciously throws the ring box against the wall. After a moment, he walks over and picks up the box. He opens it and pulls out the ring. He fingers the ring, then collapses against the wall with his head in his hands. After a moment, the door opens slowly. LEAH steps inside. She looks at BEN on the floor, opens her mouth as if to say something, then changes her mind. She walks back out the door without BEN noticing.)

(Fade to black.)

**“Appointment in Samara”
Sarah Victoria Howard**

ACT I

SCENE-- *Late morning in the Baghdad market. People in sepia clothing go from stall to stall, looking and speaking without sound. MASTER stands out from the crowd in rich robes, debating silently with a stall owner over his merchandise, when SERVANT enters at a run from stage right.*

SERVANT: Master! Master! *He halts at MASTER's side, doubled over.*

MASTER: There you are, you lazy servant, but what of my horse? The day is short and my hours are as filled and busy as the Euphrates. Come, speak. What demons hold your tongue and robs your breath?

SERVANT: It was her! It was her!

MASTER: What, Parrot, whom? Her? The maid, the governess, my wife? Speak without that infernal repetition. Tell your story plain.

SERVANT: Good my Master, I did as you asked and sought out your stallion from the horse master. I rushed the task, by chance knocking some woman to the side. I turned to see, as I passed by, with that uncaring curiosity to see her face. I wish to the heavens I had not! For though her form and face were fair enough, her eyes cut me at the knees with terrible trembling. And all the world around me seemed to slow and wither and grey, and she all the more quick and supple and magnified, til' at last her face came clear; I saw with my eyes Death! And from her gaze, I know she saw me.

MASTER: You mock my religion, heathen.

SERVANT: Master, I swear I do not. See my arm, where she has brushed me-- *He bares his right arm, which is marked with strange discoloring, much like a cow's skull.*

MASTER: By the heavens!

SERVANT: Merciful Master, have I not served you well? I beg you: let me take the horse and ride as far as he will take me. To Samara, where Death cannot find me. I would serve you all my life and my sons besides. I pray you, Master, have mercy on this prey!

MASTER: I am at my limit. Go! Fly, while I have my conscience. Take my stallion and ride hard to Samara. I pray for your deliverance.

SERVANT bows and exits stage left.

MASTER: And may your poison be drawn as venom from my flesh.

The LIGHTS dim and the ambling people freeze. MASTER is startled, wringing his hands and shuffling in place.

DEATH enters stage right in the typical flowing black robe.

DEATH: Ah, my merchant. Good fortune to you.

MASTER: *Bows low, groveling.* My mistress, you have startled my servant on your rounds this morning.

DEATH: *Amused.* Yes, and he was bold to startle me.

MASTER: Startle Death, my mistress?

DEATH: Yes. Seeing him in Baghdad gave me a turn.

MASTER: In Baghdad?

DEATH: *Mocking.* What, Parrot? Baghdad? We are meeting this evening in Samara. I should be early-- I have gathered men who had committed days to the agony a broken neck can birth. And there are worlds of pain found in a good trampling. But you know what the philosophers say; Good things come to those who wait and Death to those that rush.

Blackout. Curtain. Scene.

Non-Fiction



“A Storm's Start” - Samantha Altman

“From Chocolate Milk to Ginger Ale”
Shanna Salvador

I stretched lazily on the sun recliner, covering a yawn with my hand. After I massaged the proper amount of suntan lotion onto my skin, I hid my face underneath the wide brim of a hat – not to block the sun so much as to wear it because I looked fabulous.

Perhaps I should not have been so snooty, but I was on vacation! I feel like after the stress of midterms and papers in university classrooms, inadequate hours of sleep, and injecting endless amounts of caffeine into my system via bottomless coffee cups, I thought I earned a good week’s worth of a condescending demeanor to those around me. I had the full intention of avoiding human contact save for a server to attend to me, and preferring a book to healthy socialization. I should not have been so snooty, but I was, and I did not care.

Reaching into my tan tote bag, I retrieved my copy of Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned*. I deliciously indulged in the irony of reading a critique of the leisure class while simultaneously sitting poolside, Deck 9, on a luxury cruise liner.

“Things are sweeter when they’re lost. I know – because once I wanted something and got it. It was the only thing I ever wanted badly, Dot, and when I got it it turned to dust in my hand.”

‘Poor Gloria,’ I thought.

And then I stopped reading for a moment, realizing I was thirsty. I placed a manicured finger to bookmark my current page, and waved for a drink server to come to me. I ordered a ginger ale – the classiest of the soft drinks in my opinion, and proceeded to observe the sunbathers around me while I waited. They were all so... *old*.

Beside me was middle-aged woman – indicated by stretch marks and cottage cheese thighs – lying face down while holding her husband’s hand on the recliner next to hers. He was napping, unconsciously vocalizing those peculiar snores and gurglings all napping older men seem to have. I thought about going into the hot tub, and enjoying my sparkling drink there, but it was currently occupied by three sixty-something year-old men in illegally-tight swim trunks, wearing at least two chunky rings on each hand and a tackily shiny chain around each of their necks. Even the younger adults were at least ten years older than me, and I knew they were all parents – judging by the relief on their faces from escaping their respective hoards of children.

I didn’t belong here even though I did. Technically, yes, – Quiet Cove was reserved for cruisers eighteen and over – but this pool wasn’t made for me in mind. This was a Disney cruise; it was made for the exhausted parents and grandparents desiring a break from demanding children. It wasn’t for the college student catching up on her literary classics, thinking she’s better than everyone else. My sister was occupied with her new best friends, my parents were enjoying themselves somewhere nowhere near me – and I was contented with simply seeing them at dinner, virtually spending no time with them at all. Perhaps I should have been grinding up on some stranger during a “singles mingle” on some other cruise, where there are certainly not as many children around and certainly more college students on spring break. But, I love Disney, and because my extended family manufactures babies on a mass production scale, I love kids and am used to being around them. I didn’t mind all the laughter and screams and cries and general stickiness of little ones running about.

Besides, for the first part of the week I was genuinely having an enjoyable time with myself. I was being a grown-up, doing grown-up things! I was wearing heels and dressing for dinner, using a credit card and signing my name on a receipt, and although I wasn’t old enough to drink, I had the power to bat my lashes and get one if I charmingly smiled at a helpless guy (I never did, seeing as how no one in my age range seemed to exist). I’d eat and sleep and eat some more; I had never felt so accomplished in doing absolutely nothing. I was just like Gloria in *The Beautiful and Damned*! But four

days straight of doing nothing – no matter how lavishly wonderful it certainly was, I got bored.

Disney claims to have thought of everyone for their cruises – from the babies, the children, the childish tweens, the even more childish teens, the parents, and the grandparents – but they didn't account for me. There was a poorly constructed "College Club Social" – but none of the people I met were actually in college: they were eighteen-year-old seniors, who are legal adults that were not allowed to hang around their obnoxious high school counterparts. I do not blame Disney for forgetting about me – the simple fact was that I should not have been there. I realized this, but what was I supposed to do? Hijack a lifeboat and oar myself to a passing Royal Caribbean?

I had three days left; I spent a lot of it walking on Deck 4 – there was a shaded area designated as a jogging track, and was also the necessary-to-all-cruises shuffleboard area. When I wasn't walking aimlessly, I was exploring each food venue and eating my weight in ice cream or chocolate-covered strawberries. I would nap afterward, and wake up just in time to watch one of the nightly performances that took place at the Walt Disney Theatre.

On one of these occasions, I arrived at the theatre early. In front of me was a little girl named Daphne, swallowed whole in her big, poofy princess dress, lost in a pile of sequined-fabric. Playing with her princess dolls bought from the conveniently placed store across from the theatre, she was re-telling her day for her mom: she met Cinderella and Prince Charming even though she wanted to see Aurora but that's ok 'cuz maybe she'd see her tomorrow and she got chocolate milk for breakfast with her Mickey-shaped pancakes and when is Mickey going to sign his autograph for her because she had a place saved for him on the front of her autograph book and, and, and – and then I was incredibly annoyed. *Someone* was clearly having a splendid time on her cruise while another someone sitting behind her was on a never-ending voyage to stuff her face because she was so incredibly bored.

I wanted to be five again and do the things five-year-old girls do! I wanted to wear a floofy, poofy dress, drink copious amounts of chocolate milk, and play with dolls. Hell, I wanted to get Mickey's autograph or at *least* get some Mickey-shaped pancakes.

Listening to little Daphne's fun occurred at the point in the week I had become so incredibly upset I slipped through the cracks of Disney's well-known service that I became a sour daiquiri on the rocks with a twist of cynicism. Daphne, sweetie, your pancakes were made by an underpaid cook from another country. Mickey Mouse was just a sad man in a costume, Cinderella was a struggling actress, and Prince Charming was probably gay.

But before I got to say any of those things – as I was so damn determined to do – the house lights dimmed and the show was about to begin. The aptly and cheesily titled, "Disney Dreams," was about Anne-Marie, a girl who loves her Disney movies and stories, but doesn't quite believe in the magic of them. That is, until Peter Pan himself shows up in her bedroom and takes her on a journey through some of the most-well known Disney songs to get her to believe. And the best part is, if Anne-Marie believes hard enough, *she could fly!*

Instead of rolling my eyes like I thought I would, I cried instead. When Cinderella came onstage, waltzing with Prince Charming, I had wished I brought tissue. I felt that magic I remember feeling when I saw that movie as a kid.

Daphne was jumping up and down in her seat, eagerly pointing to the stage because she could not contain her excitement. I just sat there behind her and teared-up. I didn't want to pop Daphne's little bubble anymore; she could fly if she wanted to – if she believed hard enough. Kids have that power.

This whole cruise I had been selfishly pampering myself, greedily taking what I had always wanted out of being an adult. Without me noticing, the adulthood I thought I had gripped firmly onto dissolved away in my hands.

'Poor me,' I thought.

Is this the person who I have seriously become? A supercilious young woman with a delusion of

superiority? This whole time I have been so pathetically pretentious – and that did absolutely *nothing* for me. Why in hell did I want to become the lofty Gloria Gilbert? I endeared myself to a character I was supposed to loathe, and I ended up loathing myself in turn.

I didn't feel like an adult anymore, at least, I didn't deserve the title "grown-up" just yet. I didn't earn laugh lines from years of wonderful memories or have earned the right to sleep in a chair in the middle of a conversation. The part of my age I was enjoying was the superficial, even trivial stuff. It didn't matter that I got to dress up for dinner or sign my name on a bill. The heels made my feet hurt and eventually, I'd have to pay for the charges on my shipboard account that included such lavish expenditures as sparkling soft drinks.

I was stuck in this precarious place, wishing for childhood, craving adulthood, and being dissatisfied overall because I was stuck in the middle. Actually, I don't remember being satisfied with life, ever: I have been dissatisfied with each stage of life so far because I either wanted to grow up more or wished to be a child again. Maybe there is a point to enjoying the superficiality of some of life's perks – it tides us over from disappointment to disappointment, so at the very least, if the blaring truth of reality is harsher than we expect, we can at least say there were some enjoyable parts to it. And when someone else – however old or however young – is enjoying their life, I should have no compulsion to ruin it to make myself feel better. They're creating memories they will clutch onto when life becomes a shit show, and I don't want to supply the shit show prematurely.

I had two goals for myself by the end of this cruise: not to harden my heart, and to finish reading *The Beautiful and Damned*. It was ok that I lost my ability to fly; transporting myself by walking on heels was just fine. And on those heels, in a retro 1960s bikini, I trotted to Deck 9. I adorned that same wide-brimmed hat that hid my face from view, and secretly enjoyed the glares my tanned legs received. I opened up the book again after I found a recliner to plant myself on, and picked up where I left off.

"I don't care about the truth. I want some happiness."

I paused my reading to note the uncharacteristically brutal sun, feeling its rays sizzling unpleasantly on my skin. Flagging down a drink server, I ordered myself a ginger ale.

“Walls”
Melissa Williams

It’s 6 o’clock. I know its six o’clock from the alarm ringing into my ears, but it’s the pain in my stomach that is the real indicator. Mornings are the worst. The pain is the worst it will be all day, and my body is the most sluggish. It is in the morning, when my brain is foggy from sleep, that my body has a chance to rally against me. I’ve got will power - I’m strong - so later my mind will be able to temper my body with reason and control, but right now my defenses are down. I’m tired, but most of all, I’m hungry.

The alarm is still ringing in my ears. I focus on the reverberations of the noise instead of the pains in my stomach that flair in rhythm to my heartbeat. It dulls the pain just enough to curb the oncoming headache. I’ve had enough practice to know that concentrating on the pain only makes it worse – ignore it and it will eventually subside to a more manageable level. My focus shifts from the alarm to my limbs. It is time to get up, but my body doesn’t want to comply. I start by crinkling my toes and stretching my fingers, feeling the blood and pure adrenaline beginning to work its way through my body. Energy comes from nutrients, but there is little to none in my system, so my body must rely on adrenaline to propel me into motion. I can only equate the feeling to that of a runner in the split second before the whistle is blown to begin – so much adrenaline packed into the muscles. That is all I feel - adrenaline in my muscles. There is no guilt or extra calories being packed into the fat pockets around my middle and thighs - just adrenaline straight to my muscles. And yes, just a little bit of pain, but it’s a welcome reminder of the lengths I have come to get this far. Twenty pounds in three short months is an accomplishment.

The alarm enters into my consciousness again and stirs me from my gloating session. I can’t get too happy, because happiness spawns inattention, and from inattention mistakes are made. I *cannot* have that this morning. From here on out, there can be *no more* mistakes. I lift my hands out from under the covers and will my body to do the same as I finally flick the alarm off. The sound has yet to stop ringing in my ears, but this is good. I concentrate on it as I rouse my body off my bed and I am overcome by dizziness and a strong urge to throw up. I grimace at such a clear indicator of my body’s stupidity - there is nothing in my stomach to throw up. I give a few seconds for the feelings to subside before making my way into the kitchen. This is where the real conniving begins.

I pull out a bowl, a spoon, a Kellogg’s cereal box, and the milk carton from the fridge and set them down in a line on the kitchen table. I then sit and place the bowl in front of me with a clang. My parents are either asleep or listening for me from the adjacent room – my bet would be on the latter. Ever since their suspicion had been aroused by the family doctor they have been taking a special interest in my health regime. They watch me like some sort of invalid every meal that we eat together, and they fight about how to *handle* me and my *problem* so often that I stopped listening. This angers them even more, but I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal *now*. I learned how to tune out their incessant arguing years ago.

I open the cereal box and upend the cereal bag over my bowl slowly, letting a few flakes of Kellogg’s Frosted Flakes drop into my bowl. I then quickly grasp the bag tighter, so that no more can escape, and shake it a few times in my hand. If my parents are listening as I expect them to, they will hear what they want to hear. They do not know that even the few flakes I dropped into my bowl will not even be eaten; they are just there to solidify the illusion. I clasp the milk jug in my hand until it gives the familiar pop that I desire, and then set it back down. I know my parents will not come out and bust me, because giving me my own space in the morning is their way of trying to rebuild trust between us. With my spoon, I loudly stir the few meager flakes around the side of my bowl. I look up at the clock on the wall in front of me and calculate the time in five minutes. This is how long I must sit here and fake conformity to my parent’s demands.

The pain is back again, and this time with an angry vengeance, but right now it is not what is worrying me. Right now, it is my brain that can hurt me the worst in these next five minutes. Tony the Tiger winks seductively at me from the box, his ecstatic eyes urging me to halt my cause and consume the flakes in front of me. "There would be no harm in just a few flakes," he grins. I count the flakes in front of me. There are seven of them total. Tony might be right. How much damage can seven little flakes do? They would probably disintegrate before they even reached my stomach. My face is just a foot away from the bowl and I am surprised by the potency of the bland cereal. It's just corn flakes, but my mouth is watering like it's a full course meal. Seven flakes. Seven. I want them all, but I could compromise. I could put four back in the box and reward myself with the other three. That *seems* like a fair deal. But three... could I really eat just three? Could I stop myself after three? Maybe two. Maybe I should just eat two. Three is too much, I'll get greedy. Two. I seal myself on the promise of two on the stipulation that I have time to eat them. I look up again at the clock, half hoping that my five minutes have not expired, half begging that they have.

Five minutes are up, and I am relieved. Fate has spoken. I shouldn't have eaten any number of them anyway. I have to keep up my resilience. I scoop the seven flakes back into the box without looking at them, and then put everything away. I glare angrily at Tony as I unceremoniously shove him into the cupboard. *You're fat, Tony, I think. I'm not going to be like you.*

The pure white of the walls creates such a glare that my eyes need a few seconds to refocus. It's a hospital all right, and I don't like it one bit. I didn't realize I was being taken here until my parents announced it in the car on what I thought was my ride to school this morning. While I don't like spending more time with them than is absolutely necessary, I was willing to take their verbal abuse in exchange for the comfort of a car ride over that of the school bus. I am angry at them for tricking me, but I am angrier at myself for giving in to the idea of comfort. I should have known it would lead nowhere pleasant.

Supposedly I'm here to talk about my *problem* with others who have the same problem, like some sort of AA group. Ironic that anorexia and alcoholics both start with an A. Technically then, this session might actually be considered an AA group. I sure hope not. All I can visualize are batteries, but I guess that's a better visualization than these cold walls.

Slowly, people file into the room with me, giving it a well needed and welcome splash of color. Most of the people are women, I note, between the ages of roughly 15 to 40. We are all shuffling about aimlessly, trying not to look at each other too long. I personally don't want to strike up a conversation with anyone. What would we talk about? More importantly, I don't want to get to know anyone. I want to hate this place as much as I hate my body, and I don't want a friendship to interfere with that plan. I am here for one reason. To prove that I am above all of this - that *I* am capable of taking care of my body the way *I* want to. Moreover, I want to prove to these nurses and psychologists that I am nothing like some of the pathetic sufferers here with the real *problem*. I am strong. I know what I am doing. *They* took it too far. They lost control. In a month or so I will finally look the way I want to, and I will start eating normally again. I will be the perfect median between fat and too skinny. The nurse here is fat, and the woman to my right is sickly thin. I look like neither of them, and this makes me happy.

As directed, we draw our chairs around a table in the middle of the room. We skip the introductions, and this too makes me happy. Instead, in an open format, we are urged to talk, vent, cry - whatever - about whatever we choose. By the looks of the people in the group, I doubt anyone will step forward. I won't, that's for sure. I stare at the ground and wonder if the menial task of counting to a thousand would be less painful than this discussion. I am about ready to tune out and start counting when a strong voice catches my attention. I am surprised that anyone would speak up, let alone the girl whose body the voice belongs to. She is a beautiful girl. In fact, she has the body I have been wishing I

could attain for years before I found I had the power to do something about it. She has a measured expression in her eyes as she pulls at the hospital wristband constricting her arm and says, “One word.”

There is a pause in the room and I’m confused. The girl beside her, who looks unfazed and completely bored out of her mind, raises her eyebrow. “Nurses,” she says.

“Hospitals,” a woman sighs from across the table.

“Family,” says a teenage girl.

“Men,” says a young adult.

“Women,” says the only man in the room with a smirk.

And so it goes. Single words fly across the room and I finally understand what is happening in this strange phenomena.

“Love.”

“Hate.”

“Crime.”

“Depression.”

“Adolescence.”

“Angst.”

“Models!” I blurt disruptively from my seat. There is an uncomfortable pause as all eyes in the room take me in; I am the newcomer here.

The beautiful blonde grasps her wristband tighter and lets out a small chuckle. “Magazine ads!” she barks at me, and winks in camaraderie, and the anxiety in my chest seems to lighten a little.

“Commercials!” someone counters.

“Expectations!” she launches back.

“Double-standards!” I yell.

She leans forward in her chair. “Fairy-tales,” she states seriously, and for some reason, I actually consider taking back my promise not to make friends.

“Parents,” I say, and the game continues.

The clank of a glass pulls me from my thoughts. Not surprisingly, I am unable to recall them; I am too tired for even short-term memory today.

“Juice, milk, or water?” The cafeteria lady scoops a cup of scrambled eggs onto my plate and my eyes are immediately drawn to her arms, which are enveloped by thick, drooping layers of fat.

“Water.” Water has no calories. Water doesn’t cause stretch marks and fat dimples and excess body weight that jiggles like the mass of eggs on my plate.

I am still staring.

The woman follows my line of vision and her eyes flash in anger. Tracing my navel to my neck, her eyes turn to pity as she discovers the dark bruise that has nestled into my collar. Last night, thrashing around on the thin board that passes as a bed here, I somehow managed to bump it. In the morning I awoke sporting this black souvenir. The nurses deem it an indicator of my body’s lack of vitality, but it’s a small pittance for the assurance that I will never have arms like those of the lady in front of me.

Ripping my eyes away, I turn and head in the direction of the condiment isle, where I can obtain an unobstructed view of potential seating options.

To the left are three tables within 10 feet of the nearest garbage can, which is, of course, being heavily monitored. In the back of the room is a potted plant with a wide, circular base that I might be able to slip my food into, but the nurses seem to have their eye on it as well. The right side of the room lacks any promise—it opens into the hallway that connects this room to the sleeping quarters, where anyone leaving or entering must get approval from the guards.

Decision made. I slap a small spoon of ketchup onto my eggs before heading toward the back of

the room, making a mental note of where my obstacles lie. Purposefully, I pass a young nurse whose eyes light up as she sees my plate—to her, the ketchup is proof that I will at least attempt to eat my meal today. I flash her an animated smile; she will soon be turning her attention elsewhere.

I am mentally congratulating myself when I come across my next obstacle: the gap between the plant and the table. From the front of the room it had looked like maybe a foot between the two—a very manageable distance. Up close, however, the actual distance is much larger: closer to five feet. The seats nearest to the plant are also taken. I am overcome by dread as I realize that the trashcans would have been an easier target. *Damn it, I think, you did it again. You screwed up. You couldn't even manage the simple task of choosing the right place to sit. Now you are going to have to eat your food. You even added ketchup! That's more calories. How are you going to get out of this now?*

I sit—three whole seats separating me from the end of the table and my goal—and glare at my food. *You are the problem*, I think, but I know it's not the truth. I am the problem. I caused this. I am the stupid, ugly screw-up who couldn't even choose the right place to sit. I deserve this. I deserve to be fat. I pick up my fork and lower it to my plate. Nausea overwhelms me, but I resign myself to my fate.

Suddenly, “Enjoying the fresh air?”

I pause, fork suspended inches from my lips.

“Enjoying the air?” The voice is strong, and familiar. Leaning toward me from across the table is the blonde from the discussion group, head tilted and smiling.

Taking note of the windowless walls surrounding us, I direct my attention back to the task at hand.

I am shocked when I feel a soft hand on mine, pushing my arm downward to rest on the table.

“You don't *have* to eat it, you know.” Two incomprehensible statements in a row. I don't have the energy for this. Or the time.

“You can buck the system for as long as you want. They won't force you to eat that. No doubt they'll make you feel real guilty about it, but it's up to you.”

I pause and really take her in for the first time. Up close, her eyes are a brilliant green, and her body is perfect. Her hair falls in waves over her shoulders, which are defined even through her thick sweater.

“Why are you here?” I am surprised by my own lack of reserve, but I keep my eyes steady; I truly want to know her answer.

“I'm enjoying the air.” Her grin grows wider and she chuckles. Eyes sparkling, she nods in the direction of the plant in the corner.

A genuine laugh bubbles from within as realization hits me. No windows. No open doors. One plant: the only source of “fresh air” in the entire facility.

Her eyes crinkle in victory.

“Rebecca,” she says, and extends her hand.

“Alison.” Formalities such as these tend to cause me anxiety. There are too many ways to continue the conversation, or end it, depending on the word choice. Further, what do people talk about in a mental ward?

Thankfully, she takes the pressure off of me by speaking first.

“I'm here because I want to get better,” she says, eyes open and honest.

“Better.” I test the word on my tongue. It sounds foreign and gritty. *Better*. Better than what? Better than perfection? Her eyes register the confusion on my face.

“It's a lot of work. *This*. It's hard. It takes so much effort and stress.” She shrugs her shoulders as if in amity, as if to say, “Well, you know.”

I wonder how long she's been here, and how long it took for the psychologists, nurses, meds, and lack of sleep to wear her down.

“But isn't it worth it?” I want her to say that it is. I *need* her to say that it is.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I really don’t know.”

It’s day five, and time has lapsed like water leaking from a splintered barrel. I’ve been pressured into eating two meals a day—the two being the ones we eat together in small groups, while being monitored. It supposedly strengthens our character and gives us incentive to eat. As the nutritionist says, “We are fighting *for* and *against* the same thing at the same time. Encouragement is key.” Maybe I do want the sickly twig beside me to get better, but *I* definitely don’t want any encouragement. I’m fine. I don’t need the help.

In a few hours I will be called to family therapy. If it were my call, I would skip it altogether. But it’s not, just like most things in here.

Yesterday, however, was actually...dare I say it? ...*fun*. Rebecca and I spent the majority of our free time exploring the hospital—or rather, *I* spent my free time exploring the hospital. *She* spent her free time following me around and laughing as I got lost and continually ran into doors, or even worse, patients.

I found out through conversation that Rebecca is the eldest of six siblings, all between the ages of 2 and 9. She, on the other hand, is nearly 17, though I would have assumed a few years older. Maybe it is because she has such a large family that she is able to handle herself so well. Even in the most awkward situations, she stands tall and speaks confidently. I admire her already, but I can’t help but wonder if we’d have even the slightest friendship outside of these walls. It’s a different world in here, even she admits it.

I’m currently staring at the huge door to the conference room, which has to weigh a ton. I imagine myself and the poor creatures on the other side, separated by three or four inches of thick wood. I wonder if I got closer and put my ear to it, if I could hear them crying. Family sessions always end in tears. Always. I’ve been forewarned.

“Alison?” John Roberts, my lovely psychologist, steps out from behind the huge door. Thin, young, red haired, and the gargantuan height of 4 foot 8 (I asked him), the man’s nearly breaking a sweat opening the door. I chuckle.

“Johnathon,” I say. “We meet again.”

“Yes, we sure do,” he says, extending his hand and flashing a grin.

“John, have we not progressed past formalities?” I take his hand and give it a playful swing.

“You know, Alison, you wouldn’t have had the energy for a joke a few days ago.” He gives me a purposeful nod.

My hand makes a loud slap as I pull it back into my side. He’s right, and it’s because I’ve been eating more. Too much, maybe? The mirrors here are tiny; I can’t get a good look at myself, but I know from my weigh-ins that I’m gaining weight. I should be paying more attention to those numbers. Did I even try to look at myself in the mirror this morning? Did I?

I can’t remember. I don’t think I did. I’m slipping up. *Get it together.*

“Energy is good, Alison.” John peers into me. I must be showing signs of worry. I pull my mouth into a straight line.

“Energy is good,” he repeats. “Going through life without energy to think, to run, to *smile*—that’s no way to live.”

Being fat is no way to live either.

Maybe I should refuse my meal tonight—Rebecca’s been doing well at it.

“Your parents are inside.”

I would trade any other psychotherapy for this. If there is one thing I actually like about this hospital—besides Rebecca and maybe John (the jury is still out on the matter)—it’s being away from them.

I breathe, pull myself taller, and set my jaw. I have to be strong. I will be strong. *I will not let them influence me.* There. Will. Be. No. Tears.

I walk in to grim, uncomfortable faces. Dad hates psychologists because of the divorce with my mom. Carol hates them because Dad hates them. They make quite a pair.

“Where shall we start?” John is way too chipper for this sort of affair.

Dad speaks first, rubbing his chin—his telltale sign for stress. “I just think this all needs to end soon. She’s getting behind with schoolwork.”

“Schoolwork.” *Really? That’s your biggest concern? Good to know.*

Johnathon mediates, “Well, this sort of thing does take time to come out of. It’s not an easy process. And the relapse rate is high, so it’s best to take as much time as needed.”

“Obviously, we want her to get better. We just don’t understand what is taking so long. Nothing seems to be working.”

Two minutes in and I’m already near rolling my eyes.

“You’re better than this, Alison. This isn’t you.” Carol this time; Dad would never say something so personal.

Oh, but it just might be.

“The thing with disorders of this nature is that there is no, one, single treatment that works for everyone. In fact, it’s usually a combination of treatments, and if you would ask a recovered patient what it was that helped them, they probably wouldn’t know themselves. It’s like a switch in their brains. It’s hard to tell what turned it on, and nearly impossible to tell what will turn it off. It just takes time and effort.”

“Well, is she trying?”

“Why don’t you tell them, Alison?”

Of course John would be the first person to directly address me. Not that I’m happy about it. I preferred when I wasn’t involved.

“Eating two meals a day.” *As of today. But I think I will be changing that.*

“Good.” Dad looks convinced, but he doesn’t sound it.

“That’s definitely progress.”

Carol nods.

“Well, do you have other expectations? Why don’t we talk about them?”

“Her attitude doesn’t seem to have changed.”

John addresses me again. “Alison, what do you think?”

“I think I’ll be fine.”

“Obviously, you are *not* fine—“ Dad this time.

“—That wasn’t the question.” Now Carol.

A double assault. My favorite.

I stare into space. “I’m fine.”

“You’re in a hospital, Alison!”

I keep staring.

“Look at us!”

No.

“Okay, let’s pause for a moment. Alison, the nurses have said that your health is improving. You have been eating better. However, from the nurse’s standpoint, you *do* still have some way to go. Do you disagree?”

Yes!

I don’t know.

Maybe?

I don’t know.

But I'm done talking.

I'm. Done. Talking.

"Alison!"

"Why are you doing this?"

Because...

Because...

Because sometimes, I just want to give up.

And that's it. That one thought. I can't believe it but tears are falling. I'm squinting and squirming, wishing them away but they fall despite my internal pleas not to.

Stop it!

Stop!

If you cry in here, with your parents and a psychologist, what will you do in the real world!

What will you do when there aren't meds and walls and nurses to protect you, huh?

Stop it!

*If you can't handle **this**, how can you expect to handle **yourself**!*

Stop it, Alison!

Stop. Crying!

"Don't cry." Dad is looking pained and even angry.

"Don't cry." I repeat him. My voice is stone cold. "Don't cry!? Do you think I want to cry? Do you think I enjoy this? Do you think I *enjoy* having you jump down my throat, every single day, telling me what I should or shouldn't be doing!—how I should or shouldn't behave? Well, I don't! I want to be left alone!"

"That didn't work out well for you for *this*, now did it?"

"Have you ever thought that *this* is because of that? Because it is the *one thing* I don't have to listen to you about! I can eat—or not eat—what I want!--"

"This is *not* our fault."

"No. It's mine. You are actually right about that. I started this because *I wanted to*! Because my weight—my life—is completely up to me. And you know what else? You hate that! You hate that this is one thing you cannot control. That's really why you're upset. You don't care about me—you care about what that means for *you*. Your life isn't perfect anymore! Your daughter doesn't fit neatly in your tight little box! And you know what? She's never going to!"

"We care. Don't you dare say we don't care!" A few tears are slipping out of Dad's eyes. He never cries.

"Sure you do—too much!"

"You both seem rather stressed. Let's take a moment to—"

"Fine then, we'll just leave you alone! Need to get to school? Nope, you can walk! How about someone to make dinner? You can do that yourself, can't you? How about pay the bills? Do the laundry? Keep you from starving yourself!"

"I'll starve if I want to!"

And I'll get better if I want to!

Carol and Dad are just staring at me. Dad's lips are pouted, as if he's ready to say something but can't. I've left them speechless, and I'm proud—at least I can have that victory.

"Excuse me for interrupting, but..."

You're not interrupting John, we're all burnt out.

"...The question seems to be this, Alison: do you *want* to get better? Put everything else aside. Do you want to beat this?"

Maybe, I want to say to him, but I opt for the silent treatment instead.

Maybe.

But sometimes, I just want to give up.

The doorknob rattles and I hear a whisper, “Alison?”

It’s late, nearly two o’clock. It’s been three hours since the nurses sent us to bed. I should be asleep by now, but the pains in my body have been keeping me awake. I didn’t eat today. Or yesterday. At all.

I swing open the door to Rebecca, face red and shining.

Pulling her into the room, I glance down the hall to make sure no one saw her, but getting found after-hours seems to be the least of her worries.

Rebecca is heaving, huge gasps racking her tiny body. I step in front of her, blocking her from continuing her pace around the room. I stare at her a moment, waiting for her eyes to come up to meet mine. However, her eyes stay perpetually trained at her feet.

I wait a few moments, standing there and letting the darkness of the room seep into us. “What’s wrong.” It’s not a question. It’s not a statement. I just let the words mean what they will and reach for her hand.

She shakes her head left to right, her mouth making an “o” to keep the tears from sliding into her mouth.

Palm in palm, we stand, until I realize her knees are shaking and set her on the bed. Wrapping my arms around her, the way I always like to be held, I pull her in.

From this vantage point, I can see what I never saw before. The sunken lines of her cheeks. The yellow bruises around her collar. The long, white hairs protruding from her body as a last-ditch effort to warm her because her body cannot. The hollow sound at the end of her sobs. The lack of energy in her eyes.

Come back, I want to say, and I know it’s odd but I can’t shake that feeling. As if she’s actually gone somewhere.

I pull her tighter, our ribs knocking together. Her bony elbow is stabbing my shoulder, but I don’t move because I don’t want her to know that she’s hurting me.

But, I do wonder if I’m hurting her. And for once, for this one, tiny moment, I actually wish I weighed *more*.

I loosen my grip slightly and we sit for hours this way, the two of us, clinging to each other and letting the night speak because we cannot.

“You ready?” John beams at me, eyes twinkling.

“That’s the question, isn’t it John?”

We’re staring at the huge scale, the one I’ve been getting weighed on each day for the past week and a half. I’ve never been more scared of what it has to say.

The platform makes a familiar clunk as I step onto it.

A big, bright zero appears on the screen.

And then, all sorts of numbers begin to flash. I can make out 70, 200, 90, 180, 100, 160, 110, and 150—the numbers are getting progressively closer together—getting closer and closer to the number that will decide my fate.

112, 142.

114, 130.

115, 128.

116, 126.

117, 123.

119, 122.

I can't look. God, I feel so queasy.

120, 121.

121.

121.

It's stopped.

121.

I weigh one hundred and twenty one pounds.

My breath is getting caught in my throat. I have that sickening feeling in my stomach, the guilty kind. One hundred and twenty one. It feels so high, so big. The thoughts are coming, the bad ones.

You are fa—

Stop.

You are laz—

Stop.

I am beautiful.

I am strong.

I am healthy.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking...it's time to go home?"

"It's not a question," Johnathon says, looking proud, "You are."

Rebecca and I are sitting in the waiting room. It's time to say goodbye.

"Alison..." Rebecca starts. I pull her into a hug.

"Be good," I say.

"I'll try."

"Well, at least you'll have ol' John to keep you company." We lean away from each other a moment to look at John. He's standing near the exit, talking to my parents. "I'm sure going to miss that tiny man."

"I'm going to miss *you*."

"Me too."

Suddenly, a familiar glint appears in Rebecca's eyes. "Enjoy the air out there, okay?" She pulls me close and plants a kiss on my cheek.

There's no doubt about it. I'm blushing. "I will."

The 'rents and Johnathan waltz over.

"You ready?" Johnathan asks.

"You know what, Johnny boy? I think I am."

"Good." Carol and Dad are bouncing nervously on their feet, but they are smiling.

I give Rebecca one last hug and grab my bag.

As we reach the exit, Dad looks me in the eyes. "We are so proud of you."

Carol is nodding and crying in agreement.

Me too, I think. "Thank you." I give them a genuine hug—the first one in a while.

A tall, round security guard holds open the door for us. He looks slightly annoyed with our love fest.

"She'll be back. They always come back."

My stomach hits the floor.

I look up at him, only to see my classmate staring back at me. The boy who looked at my gorgeous cousin, then at me, and said, "I guess looks don't run in the family."

I see my grandma, primping my hair and saying, "You could be pretty if you tried harder."

I see the guidance counselor, asking me what I want in a college, and all I can think is: *I don't even know what I want in myself.*

I see myself sitting in the back of each and every class, reading a book so that I can stay invisible.-

I see myself entering this hospital—my hell—my safe haven.

I take a deep breath.

“I will *not* be back.”

I walk past him, only to turn around to peer at Rebecca from the other side of protective glass.

Well, I think, someday I will. Someday, I'll be back for her.

Essays



“Pollinate Me” - Samantha Altman

“Signi5'9: Superman Goes Harder Than Bugs Bunny” Marquis Bey

Royce Da 5' 9", renowned hip-hop artist since the mid-90s, has troped, boasted, and used innuendo throughout his career as a wordsmith and lover of lyricism. His songs often reveal not only his ability to use words to conjure feelings, emotions, and creative images for listeners but also to, simply put, Signify. In *Go Hard Pt. 1*, Royce displays his craft of signification and utilizes historically, as well as academically, telling lines wrought with Henry Louis Gates' rendition of Signifyin'. The song epitomizes Signification and Signifyin' through indirection, metaphor, boasting, mocking, an implicit propensity to compete for discursive mastery over all other rappers and talk around a subject, as well as drawing on some historical urges for African American self-definition.

From the outset, Royce implies the oncoming Signification of his verse in saying “Bar exam 3 is like a mock a nigga, pop a nigga mockery.” The play on “Bar exam”—which is the title of the album on which the song is featured—on one hand is thought to be meant in the legal sense as the standardized test for practicing lawyers, but is also meant, to many hip hop fan, as a “bar”—a line break in hip-hop and rap—exam or test in lyrical skill. From the start, he and his album place a significant value on one's dexterity with language, expressing a need to quantify one's ability to use language, or “bars,” by way of an exam. His album in general, along with this verse, he says, is “like a mock a nigga, pop a nigga mockery,” implying that he will mock other rappers with his words, leaving them susceptible to embarrassment or “mockery.” Royce begins the song with a form of troping—he signifies first by setting up his verse as a “mode of configuration” then by clairvoyantly “trop[ing] a dope” with his album and song lyrics (Gates).

“Signifying is...to imply, goad, beg, *boast*, by indirect verbal or gestural means” (Gates 689; emphasis added). Boasting—talking with excessive pride and self-satisfaction about one's achievements, possessions, or abilities—has its origins perhaps as early as in the verses of skaldic poets circa the 9th century (Wolf 55). In relation to Signifyin', boasting characterized the trickster figure—he who possessed an adroitness in language, ever punning, talking with innuendo, and cajoling. In *Go Hard Pt. 1*, Royce boasts about himself, calling himself “The most interesting man in the world,” which both alludes to the actor in the Dos Equis campaign, and signifies upon the literal meaning of the line (that he, Royce, is the most interesting man in the world) and his propensity to drink alcohol, noted in the subsequent bar (“Sippin' root beer floats Saki mixed with Dos Equis”). He also claims that he is “Hooked up 'cause I'm ill as fuck like I.V.s.” To bolster one's reputation as a rapper and thus master of language, rappers often attempt to “one up” other artists or elevate their own statuses by making profound claims about their qualifications. It mimics the need to be a “big, bad motherfucka” as typified in the tale of the Signifyin' Monkey (Abrahams). By boasting about oneself while in conjunction diminishing the aptitude of one's opponent (“Fuckin' freak/...You're probably garbage”) rappers exemplify themselves and Signify by “making fun of a person or situation” (Gates 689).

Also a significant factor in African American male culture is one's sexual prowess and endowment, likely stemming from the racially motivated myths about Africans' larger-than-usual penis size. He uses this arcane myth and reappropriates it, using its purported truth value to his benefit in saying that “She like ‘get inside me,’ but that's a tight squeeze/Once I'm in her juice box, she gon' hit the high C's.” In this line, he at once Signifies upon the ancient African myth and intimates sexual innuendo, boasts about his incredible penile endowment, and plays on the double meaning of “juice box” and “High C's” in that juice box can be interpreted as a literal juice box which then parallels the “High C” (a common variety of fruit juice contained in a juice box), or the more vulgar definition of “box” as in a woman's vagina being penetrated by his earlier alluded to large penis, causing her to scream loudly, or hit the musical note of a high C.

To use words and phrases with double meanings, to Signify by saying “juice box” and “High C's,” lends itself to the ingenious inherent exclusivity of African American vernacular tradition. As Gates expressed about Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, “a vulgarized Western ‘translation’ of,” say, a word that originates in black vernacular tradition becomes appropriated or adopted to mean something that Westerners want it to mean. Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* plays on this fact, Signifying upon Western etymology and simultaneously feeding into the Western definition of mumbo jumbo as “gibberish” while defining the word for the esoteric black vernacular understanding, indirectly using Western practices against them, making them exclude themselves. Royce does the same: he uses the Western, or white, etymology of

an innocuous juice box and implements it into his lyrics to mean both the same thing as well as something different. With this, he “turns on repetition of formal structures, and their difference” (Gates 703); he presents the formal structure (juice box as a literal juice box) and, expecting the Westerners to interpret it as they have defined it, excludes them from *his* definition of the term.

He continues with his boasting and use of double meanings in the line “I’m a Slaughterhouse rock star/I pick up the biggest pig I can find and throw it at the windshield of a cop car.” His record label and rap group, Slaughterhouse, serves as a double dipping semantic tray, offering the literal interpretation of a swine from a “slaughterhouse” as well as the slang term of pig used when referencing policemen.

It is expected, even encouraged, that Westerners interpret the signifier’s tropes because that is the aim of the signifier: to trope and express things through indirect discourse. Indirection is, essentially, the name of the signifier’s game because she knows that

the correct semantic (referential interpretation) or signification of the utterance cannot be arrived at by a consideration of the dictionary meaning of the lexical terms involved in the syntactic rules for their combination alone. The apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance. The apparent meaning of the sentence signifies its actual meaning. (Gates 693)

This is why Royce can recite these lines in the face of a judgmental Western population and receive responses of indifference, positivity, or even cooperation with his overall plan of getting what he wants via indirection; he has achieved his purpose of rendering his voice and his meaning heard by letting a literal interpretation of his signified message prevail over his Western audience. It both gives voice to those practicing black vernacular tradition while keeping out those who may seek and have sought to silence it.

Signifyin’ is a “technique of *indirect* argument or persuasion;” its key aspect is “its *indirect* intent or metaphorical reference” (Gates 693; emphasis added). In *Go Hard Pt. 1*, the indirection, implication, and metaphors are almost ubiquitous. In the fourth bar, he begins with “stick my battery inside a little white bunny,” which makes use of both metaphors and indirection. As stated previously, the sexual innuendo persists in much of hip-hop, and here Royce implies that “sticking his battery into a little white bunny” means engaging in sexual intercourse with a white woman. Indirectly, he expresses his sexual prowess with white women—a direct blow to the white male community guised in the perceived Western definition of the words—by using the metaphors of “battery” and “white bunny” to Signify upon his penetration of a white woman.

Indeed, the most explicit form of indirection in hip-hop and seen heavily in Royce’s verse is the use of the anonymous, second person pronoun “you.” In bars 19-24, he recites

If *you*
 Ryhmin’ “packin’ a mac” with “back of the Acura”
 Perhaps *you* can’t match my spectacular vernacular
You still rhymin’ “bottles” with “models”
 “College” with “knowledge”
 Usin’ the word “swagger!”
You probably garbage
You thugs funny
 Comparin’ 5’ 9” to anybody
You comparin’ Superman to Bugs Bunny (emphasis added)

The repeated use of “you” clearly shows that he is addressing someone; however, using “you” allows him to indirectly say what he wishes without placing himself in the turmoil of “beef.” Moreover, those who understand this Signification can discern the “you” of this particular lyrical jab because of the specific references he makes. “If you rhymin’ packin’ a mac with back of the Acura /perhaps you can’t match my spectacular vernacular” is a subliminal shot at Saigon, another hip hop artist, who rapped over one of Royce Da 5’ 9”’s other instrumentals and rhymed the line “packing a mac” with “back of the Acura.” Royce indirectly bashes Saigon, expressing his dislike for Saigon’s rhyme, “making fun of” him “behind his back,” talking around the subject of his contempt for Saigon, and boasting that Saigon cannot “match [Royce’s] spectacular vernacular.” Royce uses

indirection to express his own ideas and feelings, epitomizing Signifyin' and being a vessel for its enactment.

It is also significant that the source of Royce's intolerance with the anonymous "you" is the use of rhymed words. For Royce, a rapper's use of the rhyme couplets "bottle" and "model," and "college" and "knowledge" are elementary and lack skill. Since rappers—tricksters—are touted to be masters of language, of "the literariness of literary language" (Gates 689), and as "divine linguists," to use a "weak line" is an embarrassment to the appellation of rapper. To be a rapper whose use of language is mediocre is akin to being a black belt who can't fight—it's paradoxical. Being a trickster and Signifyin' requires dexterity with language, so those who "suck" at it shame the name of Signifyin'. Since Signifyin' "refer[s] to a trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole...talk around a subject" and is predicated on a mastery of "technique...style, or the literariness of literary language," failing to meet these requirements devalues Signifyin's history of linguistic deftness (Gates 689).

The final line of the verse—"You thugs funny, comparin' 5' 9" to anybody/you comparin' Superman to Bugs Bunny"—not only boasts about Royce's abilities compared to other rappers, but also promotes him to a demigod-like level. His Signifyin' abilities and trickster capabilities are so skillful, so adept, that his comparison to anyone else is like comparing Superman—a godlike hero born with superhuman characteristics—to the cartoon character Bugs Bunny (who, interestingly enough, is also a trickster figure). Royce's craft and status as a trickster is both godlike because of his incredible prowess with language, yet still comparable to that of mere human rappers. Royce, then, is the Yoruba mythological figure Esu. One of Esu's legs was anchored in the realm of the gods and the other rested in the human world (Gates, 687). This implies that he had a place, characteristics, ties, familiarity with both worlds. It can be said that Royce also has a leg anchored in the gods' realm and one in the human world because he can traverse the two: he is a demigod-like Superman who has abilities far beyond those of mere humans, but he also exists in the human world, still being comparable to them. We must interpret, like the figure of Esu and as critics of comparative black vernacular and hip-hop, Royce Da 5' 9" as our metaphor for the act of interpretation itself because only through him and his unique, one-of-a-kind characterization (his unique belonging to the group Slaughterhouse, his unique pseudo-beef with Saigon, the unique name of his album, etc.) can we fully grasp the meaning of his mediations, his tricks, his rhymes.

Ending with the beginning of both *Go Hard* and Gates' essay, we see a clear foundation for the Signification that springs forth. The often overlooked insertion of "call me..." in the lines "Call me Enterpriser/Stick my battery inside a little white bunny, you can call me Energizer" may have historical implications regarding self-definition. Historically, blacks have been silenced and given names, thus given identities not of their own making. Perhaps the request to "call me" something is a reclaiming of the notion of self-definition; it may serve the purpose of putting the stamp of identity into the hands of blacks so they can define themselves, rather than *being* defined. Through his Signification, Royce defines himself, lyrically paints himself in a favorable image, attesting to the opening quote of Gates' essay: "Signification is the nigger's occupation" (Gates 685). Royce's occupation—quite literally—is to Signify, to trope, to make his living Signifyin' because it is perhaps the only way he can live.

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“Character Motivation and Fetishistic Commodities”

Danielle Cook

“The Gilded Six-Bits” by Zora Neale Hurston is one of many great short stories from the Harlem Renaissance. Some of the more common points of analysis of the piece include race, gender, and society. By performing an analytical reading of “The Gilded Six-Bits” using Slavoj Žižek’s theory of ideology one can gain a deeper understanding of the motivation of Missie May in her act of adultery. By analyzing her and other characters using a combination of psychoanalysis and theories of ideology one can be clear that at the root of her motivation was the ideological desire for a commodity fetish while being in a state of false consciousness.

Throughout Žižek’s essay “The Sublime Object of Ideology” he lays out his theories of ideology and how they manifest in society while motivating and altering their perceptions. Combining ideas from Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan he identifies three main concepts that must be understood, false consciousness, commodity fetishes, and reification. He defines false consciousness based off of the traditional Marxist definition as being one of two things: as the lack of perception of the real material conditions that are in existence or the nature of social relations in society due to the operations of society. He draws from Marx’s idea that every “ideological universal” in the world is false (Žižek 716). Žižek further adds to this theory by stressing that ideology is not just an illusory depiction of reality but rather it is the reality itself that is ideological. He argues that it is not just what is around society that is ideological, but rather the people in society are ideological themselves (Žižek 716). It is in this state of false consciousness that society is mystified by ideology. Žižek drew from both Freud and Marx in their analysis of commodity of dreams. In both theories the idea is to avoid fetishistic fascination of commodities. He, however, identifies the problem as being able to explain why work in a commodity assumed a value form (Žižek 712). According to Marx, a commodity fetish is simply when a commodity takes on a signifier for something that it is not. He asserts that when a commodity fetish is developed society becomes alienated from the operations behind the product. When that commodity becomes a “thing” itself it has gone through reification. Once a commodity has reached this stage the identity of the commodity no longer has anything to do with the reality of the commodity (Žižek 719). Žižek furthers this argument to add that one must not only look at what the ideological subject or individual *thinks* or *knows* but also what the individual is *doing*. He argues that a subject realizes on an everyday level the relations between people and things (commodity fetishism) but what they do not know is that their social activity is guided by these fetish illusions. He asserts that these concepts are not just a theory but a practice as well. The illusion is on the side of reality as well as knowledge (Žižek 720-21). Žižek also draws from Peter Sloterdijk and Marx to identify the two parts of ideology. The first part is what is called mystification, where the consumer is truly unaware of the ideological influences behind a commodity. The second is cynicism which is the idea that there are consumers that are aware of the ideological influences behind a commodity but choose to ignore it because there is nothing they can do about it (Žižek 718).

Missie May and Joe are in a state of false consciousness throughout the story because they are unable to see the real material conditions of existences that Slemmons lives in due to the operations in society. Joe is convinced that Slemmons is a wealthy man who has achieved great success in his life because of the way that Slemmons dresses, talks, and is shaped. What Joe does not realize is that all of these methods of defining Slemmons into the social class that he believes he belongs are methods that are given to him by Slemmons. Marx argued that those who own means of production are those who determine the dominant ideas that keep the dominant part in place. Slemmons was a business man in the town therefore he was one who the working class looked to for methods to critique such things. Slemmons is part of the super structure that produces ideology that holds together the base which helps society stay stagnant. Due to the ideologies and commonly held beliefs that Slemmons is distributing Joe

and Missie Mae are unable to see through his façade. The super structure that they are working within does not allow them to be able to see through his pretence at the beginning of the story.

In addition, there are many characteristics of Otis Slemmons that become commodity fetishes that undergoes reifications through Joe and Missie May's interpretation of such characteristics. The first of such characteristics is Slemmons's clothes. Joe tells Missie May, "Yea, he's up-to-date. He got the finest clothes Ah ever seen on a colored man's back" (Huston). Slemmons's clothes no longer are just articles of cloth that cover his body. Through Joe's interpretation they have become a status symbol. He has put his clothes through reification making them signify something more than what they simply are. They have now become a signifier for a wealthy person whose life is to be envied. Slemmons's figure is another such example. Joe states, "He jes' got a corperation. Dat make m' look lak a rich white man. All rich mens is got some belly on'em" (Hurstons). Joe has created a commodity fetish with Slemmons's figure by asserting that his large stomach is not just a sign that he has eaten more than he needed, but rather of his social and financial status. Joe has turned Slemmons's figure into something that is desired; even worthy of imitation and envy. Even Slemmons's words are turned into a commodity fetish by Joe and Missie May. The words are no longer simply random words or weird phrases that a man is using, instead they get turned into something that is indicative of a social or financial status and thus should be envied.

Similarly, there are also many rituals that become commodity fetishes that define Joe and Missie May's relationship throughout the story. One is the throwing of money on the wood floor every Saturday. The excitement that entrails is not at all about the actual monetary value of the pieces but rather it the game and the money pieces serve as a signifier for something much more meaningful in their relationship. When picking the coins off of the wood floor to set by her plate Missie May does not think about the work that went into Joe earning those coins. That is not to say that she is unaware of the severe manual labor of his work or the toll that it takes on his body, but in that moment during the little game she is not thinking of those things just as society can be aware of sweat shops in china that produces clothing but many do not think of such things while purchasing a sweater. During this game the coins are no longer about their monetary value. At the end of the story the coins signify the end of their marital troubles which is something completely different than what the coins actually are in reality. The coins no longer signify something that in reality they are.

The most important and significant of all of the commodity fetishes is that of the fixation on the gold pieces. Both Missie May and Joe are fascinated with Slemmons's gold pieces and mouth full of gold. Joe associates Slemmons's wealth with his gold pieces. His fetish is not based off of the monetary value of the gold piece but rather the status that it signifies. Joe says that he wishes he could be him so that he could have the gold piece not because of the money but because of what the gold piece signifies. Joe does not even seem to care about or question Slemmons's means of obtaining the money; he isn't thinking of that he is only thinking that he would like the money so that people would think of him the same way they think of Slemmons. Similarly Missie May also becomes fixated on this commodity fetish. The coin undergoes reification by Missie May because she starts to believe that by having sex with Slemmons in order to get the coin, her husband will become who he wants to be. She is not thinking of the monetary or realistic value of the coins, she is only thinking of what the coins signify to her and Joe. Although aware, she ignores the operations that must take place in order to get the coin. She is not focused on the idea that in order to quench her husband's desire to possess the coin she must break the sanctity of their marriage. Similarly, once the coin is within the possession of the couple they both know the operations behind how the coin was obtained yet they are both in a state of cynicism where each of them just ignores the operations. As the story continues the signifier of the coin changes. In the beginning it signified status instead of money to the Banks. After they have taken possession of the coin it acts as a signifier of their broken marriage. In the end Joe actually turns the coin into candy kisses which also act as a commodity fetish because it signifies their repaired marriage instead of just candy.

Each time the coin does not signify what it should in reality.

Žižek stated that there are two parts of ideology, mystification and cynicism. Hurston presents her reader with an example of both. At the beginning of the story Joe is in a state of mystification. He believes everything that Slemmons is saying and easily buys into the popular ideological concepts that define financial and social status without question. Missie May recognizes that her husband is being pulled into these ideological traps and tries to point them out. She tries to counter Joe's analysis of Slemmons by giving examples of very wealthy people such as Henry Ford and Rockefeller who both do not have a large stomach. She is also trying to tell Joe that his clothes are no better than Joe's are. She tries to show Joe how trapped in the ideological concepts he is by challenging his ideas but ultimately fails. In addition she ends up giving into these ideologies. Although she is still aware of the ideologies and operations behind gaining possession of the coin she still gives into them. Because of that she is part of the cynicism side of ideology. She understands that the operations behind the product but ignores them. After Joe catches Slemmons with Missie May he now realizes the operations that took place behind obtaining possession of the coin but like Missie May ignores them and thus aligns himself into the cynicism side of ideology with Missie May.

The main agent that propels character's actions in the story is commodity fetishism. Missie May was driven by her and Joe's commodity fetish of Slemmons's gold piece in which they had reified by associating the gold piece with Slemmons's appearance of high social and financial status. Both characters were products of the ideological state they were living in and although ultimately aware of the conditions behind such products were unable to escape them.

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“Dangerous Discourse Surrounding Victorian Prostitution” **Michaëlle Pancake**

During the Victorian period, the notion of separate spheres (which assigned women to the private, domesticated sphere and men to the public, industry driven sphere), set the foundational belief that women served as a moral compass to men, and had to be protected from being infiltrated by the dangers that a commercial world had to offer, such as prostitution. Considering that some women were paid low wages, lacked the same opportunities as men for employment, and did not have a husband to provide for them financially, prostitution became a way to earn a supplementary income; however, despite the actual reasons why women resorted to prostitution, the patriarchal Victorian society depicted them as lascivious, and feared they would have a contaminating effect on the masses by spreading venereal diseases. Thus, by initiating the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, this was a way for the surveillance and regulation of women's bodies to become rationalized by society for the sake of “public health.” Given the fact that statistical data regarding venereal disease was limited, medical studies published in periodicals offered the Victorians highly persuasive misinformation in order to represent the “reality” of prostitution. With the help of the media, prostitutes were able to have a voice that began to become acknowledged by society, creating a shift in the public perception of prostitutes from “the fallen woman” to a “common harlot.” Nevertheless, by analyzing the dominant discourse shaped by patriarchal figures of power that permeated throughout the media, the fear of contamination, anxiety regarding the existence of a new woman among society, and hysteria resulting from Jack the Ripper's murderous transgressions against prostitutes illustrates the dangers of discourse being articulated in the wrong way during the Victorian period.

While prostitution became rampant during the Victorian period, the rise of medicine contributed to the discourse that would be provided to the Victorian audience. William Acton, a notable venereologist at the time, produced a medical and sociological study *Prostitution in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*, which contributed to creating the support for the legislation of the first Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864. In his study, he discussed the ways in which venereal diseases, such as syphilis, were being distributed among the public due to prostitution. Thus, in order to decrease the rate of venereal diseases, he acknowledged that recognition of the phenomenon would be necessary when he expressed, “To ignore an ever-present evil appears a mistake as fatal as the attempt to repress it. I am, therefore, an advocate of recognition” (Qtd. in Claggett 22). Acton claimed that the origin of prostitution was embedded in women's essential nature, indicating that eliminating prostitution would be impossible. Therefore, since he felt that “All women were either corrupted or capable of being corrupted, they must be sequestered, regulated, or protected” for the sake of public health (Qtd. in Claggett 30). In order to prevent the recirculation of diseased women in society, he suggested that panoptic surveillance and regulation would be critical to limiting the national threat that prostitution posed on society. Thus, according to Shalyn Claggett, author of “Victorian Pros and Poetry: Science as Literature in William Acton's *Prostitution*,” when the British Parliament passed the first Contagious Diseases Act in 1864, it allowed “police officers in specified garrison towns to arrest suspected prostitutes, compel them to undergo gynecological examinations, and incarcerate those thought to be contagious in lock hospitals” (19). However, Acton's study offered the Victorians highly persuasive misinformation that relied heavily on figures of speech, rather than facts and statistical figures to represent the reality of prostitution. This sanctioned control and regulation of women's bodies enabled women to submit to the authority of medical men, illustrating how Acton's rhetorical power rendered a shared fear among society that was directly connected to patriarchal discourse. Through his rhetoric, this discourse served to reaffirm Victorian conventions regarding women by his expressions illustrating how women serve as a moral

compass to men, how the notion of separate spheres comes into play with the emphasis on protecting the private sphere, and how the fear of contamination led to a justification for delimiting women's liberty during the Victorian period. Due to Acton's study, the regulation of women's bodies through surveillance was a way for the patriarchal discourse to create a distortion among society, enabling prostitution to become normalized.

Building from this, the patriarchal discourse enabled the Victorian society to internalize social control that monitored society through the lens of prostitution. In his text *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault, a prominent French historian and philosopher associated with the Post-Structuralist movement, describes, "It is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated, and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (549). In other words, power arranges bodies in space; thus, the body becomes a symbol of power, enabling power to become more diffuse and more efficient. Power operates through a field of forces, or a web of power relations that respond to haphazard. Ideas are not just things in themselves; instead, judgments that get made by society are by power operating through local specificities, which illustrates how the legislation of the Contagious Diseases Acts was based on the assumption that regulation of prostitution was necessary due to it being inherent to Victorian society. Yet, Foucault is very clear in explaining that "power is exercised rather than possessed (550)," meaning power is not something that an individual possesses, it is the way of the world that is produced as a set of relations or conflicts inherent within society. The humanist impulse of making power more profuse and humane serves as a disciplinary power, which operates as a technology among society; hence, the regulation and surveillance of prostitutes served as a disciplinary power among Victorian society that was taken up through the discourse provided by medical authorities.

Taking this into consideration, panopticism is a disciplinary technology that enables visibility to operate as a form of power, which can be applied to the surveillance and regulation of prostitution that existed within the Victorian period. Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, which is an architectural figure that "arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately.... [It] induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 554). Foucault draws on this concept to express how visibility creates subjects that monitor themselves within society. This can be applied to the regulation and surveillance of women's bodies that emerged from the Contagious Diseases Acts during the Victorian period as a way for society to monitor itself. While the police served as the disciplinarian power, surveillance served as a way to normalize prostitution in the way that people began to internalize the social control that monitored society. The effect (field of forces) that allowed this discourse to occur was the relationship between prostitution, which served as "The Great Social Evil," and the spread of venereal diseases that threatened the prosperity of the nation. Foucault explains, "It is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge" (550). Considering that Acton's study did not accurately express the reality of prostitution in Victorian England (it did not provide exact statistical figures regarding venereal diseases), given his medical authority, the highly persuasive, patriarchal misinformation got taken up and dispersed throughout society. This illustrates the way discourse operates through the relationship between knowledge and power; while knowledge can be misconstrued with "truth," this indicates there is no certain meaning in society, and that meaning is always reliant upon discourse. While Foucault believes power is productive, it can easily be dangerous given the way that knowledge is taken up, and it proved to be during the Victorian period in relation to the discourse surrounding prostitution.

In terms of the medical examination that prostitutes were forced to undergo, like panopticism,

this operated as a technology of disciplinary power within the Victorian society. While the Victorians were repressed sexually, the rise of science and psychology led to discussing sexuality more openly. With the nineteenth century, sex began to be thought of as a form of identity rather than just sexual acts due to the addition of medicine, which influenced new forms of knowledge and subjectivity. The institutions of knowledge, especially hospitals during this time, sought to gather knowledge about a subject that would compare him/her to a norm. This is the way the medical examination worked with prostitution by “transforming the economy of visibility into the exercise of power” (Foucault 187). As Foucault describes:

In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification (187).

The examination, as a disciplinary power, operated with invisibility; however, it arranged objects (prostitutes) by placing them in a field of surveillance (always to be seen). It also introduced individuality into the field of documentation by providing a network of writing that engaged prostitutes in a whole mass of documents that captured and fixed them within a grid-work (Foucault 189). In this sense, prostitutes became information generating nodes that served as a case study. From the examination, the prostitute could be described, judged, measured, compared with others, then trained or corrected, classified, normalized, and excluded or detained in lock hospitals (Foucault 191). Thus, the examination served as a way that prostitutes could be objectified and monitored by society on account of the patriarchal discourse that insisted surveillance and regulation of women’s bodies was necessary for the sake of public health.

While Acton’s medical study, *Prostitution*, sought to render a discourse that got taken up among the Victorian society, journalism served as the perfect outlet for which this discourse could permeate among the masses. Given that Acton and the legislation of the Contagious Diseases Acts called for recognition of prostitution through surveillance and regulation, prominent Victorian newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Lancet*, served as the perfect tactic to provide a voice for the prostitute that could be viewed by everyone. In her article “The Prostitute’s Voice in the Public Eye: Police Tactics of Security and Discipline Within Victorian Journalism,” Greta Wendelin explains:

The task of viewing the population and guiding public discourse fell, in part, to the keen gaze of the journalist. Journalists, who constituted the very public eye of Victorian society, enacted the role of the police in generating a new rationality within the public. Their surveillance of the population via appropriation of the prostitute’s voice within the pages of popular journalism simultaneously generated an observation of prostitute as part of the social body and a disciplinary power by which to control the prostitute: common decency with respect to the public eye (56).

In 1850, the readership of *The Times* was “four times that of four other major London newspapers combined, and in 1855 circulation was estimated at 62,000 (Wendelin 56),” therefore, the rationality that was presented within provided a mentality that would guide the Victorians. Thus, in February of 1858, when a set of anonymous letters appeared in *The Times* written by “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate,” the public was able to get a glimpse of prostitution rendered through the voices of prostitutes themselves. While “One More Unfortunate” discussed sex in terms of “ruin and degradation,” “Another Unfortunate” discussed sex as a natural element of lower class life (Wendelin 61). While doubt ensued regarding whether these letters were actually written by prostitutes or by

editors of *The Times*, the fact remains that the letters depict how inextricable prostitution was as a part of Victorian society and how it needed to be better understood, illustrating how discourse operates through journalism.

Even Acton acknowledged that eliminating prostitution would be impossible, and the names of the anonymous prostitutes depicted within the newspaper suggest that they are just one of many others. Despite the fact that “One More Unfortunate” fit the description of the fallen woman stereotype that was prevalent in Victorian society, “Another Unfortunate” represents herself as a common harlot that has been produced by an industrious society when she states, “If I am a hideous cancer in society, are not the causes of the diseases to be sought in the rottenness of the carcass? Cancers cannot exist outside a body, but grow out of it; if prostitution is a cancer, it can only be assumed that it was fostered by the larger social body” (Wendelin 62). Foucault discusses confession as “A tactic wherein the subject speaks of themselves and an authoritative confessor renders the confession useful, either in absolution, judgment, or prescription of penance (Qtd. in Wendelin 58),” thus, the confessions given by the two prostitutes are not intended to repress sexuality, but rather to encourage a normalization of sexuality. While there is no denying the fact that prostitution was ubiquitous during the Victorian period, there were no actual figures, only estimations, regarding the pervasion of prostitution. In his novel, *The Dark Angel*, Fraser Harrison explains, “*The Lancet*, a publication not known for judicious restraint, declared in 1857 that “one in every house in every sixty in London was a brothel, and one female in every sixteen a whore, ratios which give totals of 6,000 brothels and 80,000 prostitutes” (217). By *The Lancet* including figures as profound as these in their publications, it is doubtless that the Victorians believed this. Therefore, by surveilling these prostitutes, the newspapers were attempting to do away with the “fallen woman” stereotype in order to supplant it with the “common whore” mentality, considering that prostitution was occurring consistently within their industrious society. Nonetheless, while eradicating prostitution as “the Great Social Evil,” prostitutes were still being controlled, regulated, and objectified among society illustrating the ways in which discourse was also being shaped by journalism.

Considering the Victorians believed that women were to be domesticated, confined to the private sphere, and serve as a moral compass to husbands, the normalization of prostitution conveyed through journalism produced anxieties among the Victorians. Despite the fact that the principal cause of prostitution was poverty, most of the Victorians still contributed prostitution to “the Great Social Evil” that they feared would contaminate the rest of society. However, to the many prostitutes, prostitution served as a supplementary income made available by the industrious society. According to E. M. Sigsworth and T. J. Wyke in “A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease,” they explain, “The low wages were themselves the reflection of the lack of opportunity for female employment which sharpened the competitive forces while depressing rates of pay. Low earnings, even when employed, it was argued, presented a compelling temptation to supplement income with the receipts from prostitution” (81). While the Contagious Diseases Acts sought to regulate and control prostitution through surveillance and examinations, once these acts were repealed in 1885, prostitutes had more freedom, but were still kept under surveillance by philanthropists and the medical profession (Liggins 39). In her article “Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880’s and 1890’s,” Emma Liggins states, “A variety of discourses constructed the prostitute either as an innocent victim of male lust or as a ‘demon’ and ‘contagion of evil’ Feminist accounts often revealed an uneasiness about working-class female sexuality and lack of faith in the reclamation of fallen women, literary accounts exposed the fears and fantasies surrounding the sexually experienced woman, particularly in the New Woman’s reaction to her ‘fallen sister’” (39-40). Thus, this created a dichotomy between working-class women and female sexuality, which exemplifies the discourse that the prostitute was framed within, while also illustrating how the Victorians sought to create categories.

When the figure of the New Woman entered into Victorian literature in the 1880’s, it was publicized by journalism and taken up by the masses. The characteristics of this New Woman included:

being sexually aggressive, valuing independence/self-fulfillment rather than sacrifice, believing in legal and sexual equality, expressing an openness with sexuality, tending to remain single, being educated and reading a great deal, and preferring to wear clothing that appeared more masculine than traditional feminine dress. In many ways, the prostitute mirrored the figure of the New Woman, and this produced a level of anxiety among the Victorians. Like journalism, novels also provided a way to explore the experience of prostitutes in greater detail. For example, Emma Liggins describes, “Philanthropists sought to stereotype prostitutes as a homogenous group, though the novel is to demonstrate that individual women have different stories to tell...” (44). In this sense, the novel, like the newspapers, sought to normalize prostitution by illustrating the ways in which females were sexually active. However, because this “normalization” retracts the original role of the woman, this produced varying discourses that permeated throughout the Victorian society leading to anxiety among the masses.

The most prevalent form of anxiety that ensued among the Victorians in regards to prostitution was Jack the Ripper’s murderous acts against prostitutes that occurred in the autumn of 1888. While the media sought to contextualize these murders, hysteria resulted widely from the scandal, making women, in every respect, fear for their lives. In her novel *The City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, Judith Walkowitz describes:

Between 31 August and 9 November 1888, five brutal murders of prostitutes took place, all but one within an “evil quarter of a mile” of Whitechapel, East London (the exception occurring just within the boundary of the City of London). The murdered victims were Polly Nicholls, 31 August; Annie Chapman, 8 September; Catherine Eddowes and Elizabeth Stride (the “double-event”), 30 September; Mary Jane Kelly, 9 November. The murders were performed at night, four in the open, with great daring and speed. All five took place in a densely populated area where local residents kept close watch on each other’s movements. Still, there were no witnesses to the crimes; the police could uncover no clues or “rational” motives for the murders (192-3).

For Ripper, Whitechapel seemed the perfect place to execute these murders given the fact that it was impoverished, overcrowded, and a region full of illicit sex and crime. To put it into perspective, the area was so dangerous that “[Annie Chapman] cried out ‘Murder, Police’ five times, but the neighbors, familiar with such night sounds, chose to ignore them” (Harrison 225). On the West End of London, “It was instead, to a house that a client was generally taken by his prostitute, and here he would hire a room and occupy it for as long as he thought it was worth his while.... (Harrison 220),” however, in the East End, poor prostitutes did not have this option. Often prostitutes brought their customers into dark corners just to avoid having to pay for a room. On most of these dark street corners (Buck’s Row, Hanbury Street, Berner Street, and Dorset Street) was where Jack the Ripper’s victims were found by people going to and from work (Walkowitz 194). The mystery of the murders publicized within the media enabled the Victorian imagination to run wild. Considering that the murders were deemed sexual, “press commentary invoked the figure of the Gothic sex beast, a “man monster” motivated by “bloodthirsty lust” who “goes back and forth stealthily and takes his victims when and where he already pleases.... There was talk of black magic and vampires” (Walkowitz 197). Given the fact that the Ripper’s victims were all disemboweled, many contributed Jack the Ripper as being a knowledgeable medical man who had experience with female bodies; his murders seemed to evoke the regulation and disposition towards prostitutes throughout the nineteenth century (Walkowitz 198). Ripper’s murderous acts executed on prostitutes renders a narrative about the dangers of sexuality and power, while also illustrating the ways in which discourse can prove to be dangerous when taken up in the wrong way.

Considering that the Ripper case was never solved, it offered no closure to the acts of sexual transgressions executed on prostitutes. It also encouraged imitators to carry out his work, continuing the

menace on women. Despite these horrible sexual crimes, some of the letters that were published within *The Times* on account of the murders focused more on the “corrupted” lives of the victims instead of the pathology of the murderer. For example, one letter exclaimed, “The Whitechapel horrors will not be in vain if at last the public conscience awakes to consider the life which these horrors reveal. The murders, it may almost be said, were bound to come” (Walkowitz 205). This exposes a social commentary of sexual antagonism that was “aided and abetted by sensational newspaper coverage that blamed ‘women of evil life’ for bringing the murders on themselves (Walkowitz 218),” demonstrating the ways in which patriarchal discourse reinforced predispositions regarding prostitution.

Overall, with the Ripper murders in the Victorian period, the ends of multiple women’s lives were overlooked due to their “immoral” profession. Why did it not occur to the Victorians that women were not the only ones engaging in sexual intercourse? Men were at fault just as much as prostitutes. However, because prostitutes challenged the original role of women, this New Woman type of attitude produced an anxiety among the masses that threatened the prosperity of the nation. Although many prostitutes resorted to prostitution as a means to provide a supplementary income, the distortion was created among the masses illustrating the ways in which prostitution would be dangerous to the public. While there is no denying that venereal diseases were being transmitted during the Victorian period, limited statistical figures were provided to the public, and yet, the rhetorical power of patriarchal authority, such as William Acton, enabled men to have a sense of entitlement over women through the regulation and control of prostitution. As Walkowitz indicates, it was “only the strict libertarians...that came forward to defend prostitutes as human beings, with personal rights and liberties” (224). Despite this, the dominant discourse that was portrayed to the masses through the media was shaped by patriarchal figures of power that reinforced prejudices regarding prostitution, illustrating the dangers of discourse being articulated in the wrong way.

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“Flightless Bird: A Study of Edna in Chapin's *The Awakening*”
Kristen Roedel

Kate Chopin dared to challenge the social norms of the late nineteenth century with her proto-Feminist novel, *The Awakening*. Edna Pontellier struggles to balance motherhood and independence, wifely duty and naïve romance, and despondency and euphoria. In fact, she is caught between the extremes: The life of the “mother-woman” (9) and that of the single artist. Unlike most other women, who believe they are content with the lives society delegated to them, Edna Pontellier awakens to the fact that her own life is unfulfilling. She strives to prevail over societal conventions, which she had tried to meet her entire life. Like Madame Lebrun’s birds, Edna finds herself encaged, under Mr. Pontellier’s discretion, and ensnared in her role as a mother; these conditions irk her to the core. Mrs. Pontellier discovers that her quest to redefine herself as ‘Edna’ is not easily conquerable, given her preexisting conditions: wifely duty and the “slavery” (108) of motherhood. Despite her efforts to achieve independence and freedom, Edna crashes to a halt when she flies too far out into the abyss of denial and irresponsibility. Mrs. Pontellier finds that the weight of her two children would forever drag her back down to earth and out of her denial of such biological ties. The devastating realization that she could never fully free herself from motherhood leads to the most drastic measure: Suicide.

Edna Pontellier does not emerge in the novel as an individual; rather, she is defined by her husband, their two children, and the Pontellier estate. Mrs. Pontellier is treated as one of Mr. Pontellier’s belongings, and he looks “at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (4). She is kept, just as Madame Lebrun keeps her birds confined to their cages. Although they are subject to their owners’ control, the birds “[have] the right to make all the noise they [wish]” (3), and they are sure to do so. Neither the birds nor Mrs. Pontellier is free to leave the roles to which society chains them. Mrs. Pontellier lives her life as mundanely as the birds do: She sits back and observes from the cage of her soul, of her mind, and, ultimately, from the cages of marriage and motherhood. Unlike Mrs. Pontellier and the birds, “Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting” his surroundings (3) because there is nothing stopping him from doing so. As the parrot squawks “*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!*” (3), Leonce flees from the source of his discontentment. He thinks nothing of it, for he, as a man, has always had the prerogative to do so; however, Mrs. Pontellier never had, and still does not have such a right.

Coincidentally, the parrot was begging him to “Go away! Go away! For God’s sake!” This is all that the parrot and Mrs. Pontellier can do, for they can only control their immediate surroundings. Edna ‘squawks’ through her actions, attitude, and behavior toward Mr. Pontellier, her children, and society as a whole. On the other hand, the uncomplaining mockingbird remains in its cage, letting the parrot do all the jabbering; she tries to copy her peers and stay under the radar, not wanting to draw much attention to herself. As a shadow of the life Mrs. Pontellier once lived, the mockingbird does not agitate Mr. Pontellier. It is her drive to seek grander things for herself that confounds and irritates Mr. Pontellier. Even though Mrs. Pontellier has not realized she can “quit” her roles as wife and mother, Mr. Pontellier’s gradual retreat from dominion throughout the novel begins to reveal the possibility of a life other than the one she lives.

After Mr. Pontellier comes home from a long night out and criticizes Mrs. Pontellier’s mothering habits, she seeks reprieve. She sits out on the porch to escape the claustrophobia of the cottage and her family. As she sobs, she hears the dismal “hooting of an old owl in the top of a winter-oak” (7). The bird seems to sympathize with her, for all birds know what it is like to be encaged. The owl’s somber cries reflect Edna’s current state of mind. This is Edna’s plea for solitude and for everyone to “Go away! For God’s sake!” Albeit she does not know the source of her sorrow just yet, she wishes to be left alone so she can be left to meditate in peace. Like the parrot who only speaks without comprehension of what he

says, Mrs. Pontellier senses her discontentment and seeks the space to discover its source. It is in the dead of night, out on the porch, that Edna realizes that she needs some space to achieve serenity.

Prior to this night, Mrs. Pontellier explores her discontentment and uncertainty when speaking to Madame Ratignolle on the beach. As opposed to her preferred disposition of quietude and inward contemplation, she speaks her mind for the first time: She is “intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddle[s] her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom” (19). Although unsure of what her feelings will amount to, Mrs. Pontellier is liberated by her own voice. Because she is used to submitting to her husband’s authority and is not expected to have her own opinions, she never found much of a reason to voice her feelings; however, now that she has gotten a taste of freedom of expression, she will not stop here. While she speaks somewhat modestly to her good friend, Mrs. Pontellier grows emboldened and becomes assertive when speaking to her husband. As opposed to Madame Ratignolle’s understanding, caring, and open mindset, Mr. Pontellier is far less prepared to hear his wife’s thoughts.

Mr. Pontellier demands that his wife come inside for bed; however, she feels rather content in the hammock. Accustomed to the silence of the obedient mockingbird, Mr. Pontellier is startled when Edna begins to talk back, as the parrot does. Mr. Pontellier makes a fuss, forbidding his wife “to stay out there all night;” she “must come in the house instantly” (31). No longer wanting to stand such treatment, Mrs. Pontellier declares: “I mean to stay out here. I don’t wish to go in, and I don’t intend to” (31). Furthermore, if her husband “speak[s] to [her] like that again; [she] shall not answer [him]” (31). In this very instant, Edna emerges as her own person. She makes it known that she will not be bossed around like a possession or a child. Just as speaking her mind to Madame Ratignolle was invigorating, the very action of talking back to her husband is empowering. Likewise, just as Leonce feels free to come and go as he pleases, Edna spends an entire day at Grand Terre with Robert and does not return until after dark, neglecting her responsibilities as mother and wife. “The old owl no longer hooted” (31) after Edna speaks up for herself and the repression of her soul is temporarily put to rest. Leonce eventually backs off, succumbing to her wishes; however, the more room he gives her, the more pleasure Edna takes in her newfound freedom, and the more she seeks her independence. Although Edna starts her journey with abandoning minor expectations, like Tuesday reception days, it soon escalates toward more obvious attempts at avoiding her motherly and wifely duties.

While there are some “men who [have] set their wives free” (102), as an owner sets a bird free from her cage, not many women are as bold as Edna. Leonce does not exactly encourage her flight from the nest, but he does not exactly stop her, either. Startled by Edna’s assertiveness, and wanting to act in his her own best interest, Leonce approaches Dr. Mandelet for advice. Society maintains that Leonce tighten the hold on his wife’s leash, while Dr. Mandelet advises him otherwise. This explains for Leonce’s compliance with Edna’s desire to move out. Striving to maintain his financial reputation, he even goes so far as to make announce in the daily papers the mansion’s renovations, which he implements solely to cover for his wife’s rash actions, providing an excuse for the shack Edna chooses to inhabit. Even though Leonce accommodated to his wife’s wishes, as per the doctor’s suggestion, there is nothing he detests more than a squawking bird, as suggested by his reminiscence of “[shooting] the gosbec” (67) for sport in his childhood. Edna’s erratic behavior causes a great hassle for Leonce. Edna continues her pursuit of liberty, without much concern for her husband, children, or their reputations. Nothing ranks higher in importance than her own contentment.

One of Edna’s biggest steps toward sovereignty is her decision to move into the “pigeon house” (81), which the editor notes as a term referring to a house for brilliantly colored, “domesticated” birds, which is usually kept for “show or sport” (81). As opposed to the mansion, which “never seemed like [hers] . . . like home” (76), Edna’s smaller house has the “intimate character of a home” (89). Despite the fact that it is smaller, Edna does not feel trapped within it. Edna does not move just for show, either. Instead, her new home is an assertion of her free will. Although the place is notably less grand, and Edna

feels as though she has “descended in the social scale,” Edna is content with the “corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual” (89). As she once said to Madame Ratignolle, “[she] would give up the unessential” (46), which she does with her move into this more modest home. Despite Edna’s change of surroundings, she is still a “domesticated” (81) woman. Edna thought it would be easy to forget about her husband, children, and responsibilities while they were staying in Iberville; however, Madame Ratignolle asks Edna “where on earth was she going to put Mr. Pontellier in that little house, and the boys?” (91). This dilemma is not something Edna considered, for she has no intentions of resuming her former life. Just the thought of considering what Madame Ratignolle posits threatens to shatter the daydream in which Edna has grown accustomed to living. Choosing to disregard the practical question, she perpetuates her reverie of independence in the pigeon house. Despite what Edna chooses to believe, no matter what she does, she will never cease to be “domesticated.” Since Edna has inhabited the cage of marriage and motherhood too long, she would find difficulty in escaping successfully.

Since Edna’s battle against society to redefine herself is not easy, Mademoiselle Reisz asserts that “the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (79). She genuinely roots for Edna to rise above the standards of tradition, for “it is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (79). Although Edna does not believe she is embarking on any “extraordinary flights” (79), she defies societal expectations in seeking to abandon her husband and children, which is plausibly the most radical thing a woman in her time could do. Despite the fact that Edna makes significant strides toward the life of the single artist, she remains Mrs. Pontellier in name, and Raoul and Etienne’s mother by blood. Madame Ratignolle’s entreaty to “remember the children” (104) after a poignant childbirth startles Edna; it forces her to realize that she cannot evade her children as easily as she could elude Leonce. The very detail that she overlooks is the one that prevents her from succeeding; she is struck by the fact that she will always be a mother, no matter what she does or where she goes. Madame Ratignolle’s plea “had driven into her soul like a death wound” (106). The thought of eternal motherhood is too great for Edna to handle. She is no longer “a dupe to illusions” (105), for she acknowledges her inability to dodge the roles to which society chains her. The world will never allow her to fully forget or leave her children.

As “antagonists who had overcome her” and “overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (108), Edna’s children drag her back into the imprisonment of motherhood. As she “remember[s] the children” (104), she drops from the clouds of oblivion, and the gravity of reality crushes her wings, her courage, and determination, which prevents her from conquering such daunting and unrealistic hopes of achieving absolute independence from Leonce, the boys, and societal expectations. She is the “bird with a broken wing [who] was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (108); Edna is no longer strong enough to “soar above . . . tradition and prejudice” (79). The men in her life would come and go (108), but her biological tie to her children is constant, unlike a marriage, relationship, or friendship. Unable to “give [herself]” (46) to her children, Edna devises the only permanent way she can fathom that would allow her to flee from all of her cages: Suicide.

Like the encaged birds, Edna was once restricted to the unenlightened and reserved life of a “mother-woman” (9). Although she kills herself in her search for serenity and contentment, Edna takes comfort in the fact that she became cognizant of the life outside of the one she unhappily led. Because the world made women feel that if they were not a wife or a mother, they were not only unfulfilled, but a waste of space, Edna relished in the realization that she had options, which turned out to be unattainable. She was enthralled with the notion that a woman could find fulfillment outside of the home and without the boundaries society set for her. Edna laments for Madame Ratignolle because she does not know that she could live a different life that could be equally, if not more, fulfilling than the one she leads, just as the owl sympathized with Edna on the night of her first awakening. Even though Edna is inhibited from achieving sovereignty, she is free in the sense that she escaped the narrow mindset of the late nineteenth

century. Albeit Edna's series of awakenings culminate in her death, her esoteric knowledge is what emancipates her soul from eternal dissatisfaction.

No matter how far a woman progressed as an individual in that particular society, she would inevitably end up wounded and destined for failure, much like the last bird Edna sees on the beach before her suicide. This is a clear statement about the late nineteenth century's society; as a woman, there always were consequences for trying to be an individual. Even though Mademoiselle Reisz does not fall victim to despair, she is socially outcast and not very well-regarded among the people; she leads the life she wants, but it is a lonely one. Because these conditions were not enticing, women found no good reason to seek outside of societal traditions and norms. Even today Edna's actions, especially those concerning the abandonment of her children, are taboo. If Edna were to divorce her husband or have an affair today, it would be forgivable, but she would be equally chided as she was back then for abandoning her children. However, Edna's dilemma was confined to the late nineteenth century, as was her fate. It is likely that if she had not married so quickly, she would not have taken her own life. As tragic as her fate is, at least Edna Pontellier did not submit to what a man believed was right for her. She may have been a flightless bird, but she was certainly not a "dupe" (105).

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“Quoth the Poe, Nevermore: A Study of Edgar Allan Poe’s Influence on *A Series of Unfortunate Events*”

Emily Rogers

Regardless of one’s education or exposure to eminent literature, it is obvious that with each genre of writing a specific author usually comes to mind. One of the most evident connotations readers have developed is that of horror stories and Edgar Allan Poe. Despite the fact that Poe’s masterpieces are 200 years old, contemporary authors still draw inspiration from his many works. Adolescent author Daniel Handler, more commonly known as “Lemony Snicket,” uses fictional elements, such as plot and setting; writing techniques, such as a foreshowing introduction; and literary devices, such as symbolism, irony, and literary allusions, in a manner similar to or referring to Poe, introducing young readers to crucial literature fundamentals at an early age.

Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1809. Although his success was sporadic throughout his writing career, Poe repeatedly struggled to obtain and maintain love of any kind. After a traumatizing and melodramatic childhood, being abandoned several times by father figures and watching his mother die at a young age, it is no mystery where Poe gets his dark motivation (Norton 629-32).

Handler, otherwise known as “Lemony Snicket,” is the author of popular adolescent book series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In 1999, book one of thirteen, *The Bad Beginning*, was released. It becomes immediately obvious that Snicket’s narration was inspired by Poe’s famous sinister voice. Upon reading the brief book synopsis on the back of any *A Series of Unfortunate Events* book, a murky tone is produced, and the reader is bluntly set up for a “horror” story: “Dear Reader, I’m sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant” (Snicket, *Bad Beginning*). The concept of a dark tale beginning to transpire is reiterated within the first few lines of every book as well. The omniscient narrator of the entire *A Series of Unfortunate Events* book series, warns the reader, “If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle” (Snicket, *Bad Beginning* 1). Snicket uses this effective introductory tactic because, “readers are given the impression that their storyteller could not be more straight with them,” (Butt 281). Every book throughout the series includes these “disclaimers.”

Any well versed reader can conclude that Snicket’s blunt devastation is borrowed from Poe’s pieces. Both authors directly establish the fact that, for lack of a better phrase, *what you are reading is a horror story*. This technique produces a brief metafictional moment, and tests the reader on his commitment to the fiction being comprehended. The speaker in Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” immediately informs his readers, “The ‘Red Death’ had long devastated the country” (Johnson 55). He then continues to explain, “No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous” (Johnson 55). This instantaneous “spoiler alert” is used in many of Poe’s other works. The speaker of “The Fall of the House of Usher” begins his tale by establishing an eerie setting, where nothing other than a horror story could take place: “During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback... and at length found myself... within the view of the melancholy House of Usher,” (Johnson 64).

The similarities between Poe and Snicket go beyond distressing introductions to their works. Both writers demonstrate the effectiveness of setting and plot in a horror story. The storyline of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* revolves around the three Baudelaire children, Violet, Klaus and Sunny. Within the first few pages of the series’ starting point, the reader is informed that a mysterious fire has destroyed the Baudelaire home and tragically killed both parents; the children are orphaned. The Baudelaires, having no immediate relatives to serve as a guardian, are placed in the care of Count Olaf; a distant Uncle whom the children doubt is a relative of theirs at all. After being abused and mistreated by Olaf, the siblings manage to escape. However, Olaf spends the remainder of the book series haunting every

fresh start the children are granted with by each new guardian. Olaf continually tracks down the children, murders their guardians, and attempts to kidnap the orphans in hope to somehow inherit the generous family fortune.

It is no secret that murder, death, and tragedy are all dominant themes in the works of Poe and in Snicket's series. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," is, as the title announces, about murder. "The Masque of the Red Death," centers on the fear and mystery of demise. "Ligeia," is a horrific tragedy told by a speaker who has lost the woman he loves, only to be haunted by her throughout the piece, both figuratively and literally. Snicket's works, similar to Poe's, also center around tragedy, or, as the series' title declares, "unfortunate events."

Snicket's use of setting also mimics that of Poe. The majority of Snicket's book titles of the series introduce a dreadful setting. *The Miserable Mill*, *The Vile Village*, *The Hostile Hospital*, and *The Grim Grotto*, are only a few examples of the disquieting titles Snicket uses. Each title included within *A Series of Unfortunate Events* uses alliteration, and the inclusion of negative connotation to alert the reader that, again, *what you are reading is a horror story*. Poe does this as well. Not only do several of Poe's stories immediately identify the text's genre, but the description of setting within each story also conveys that gothic and dark feel. It isn't only titles that incorporate the daunting feel in both authors' works; the descriptive language within the piece reiterates the setting Poe and Snicket intend.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the speaker declares that "with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom" pervaded his spirit (Johnson 64). The speaker then describes the melancholy details of the house, including features such as "bleak walls," "vacant eye-like windows," and "a few white trunks of decaying trees." Shortly after, it is established that the house of Usher is a "mansion of gloom," (Johnson 65).

Snicket uses imagery to convey his forlorn settings as well. When describing the house of Count Olaf, the series villain and Baudelaire's first guardian, the narrator illustrates a house that portrays a mood similar to the one portrayed by the house of Usher: "The bricks were stained with soot and grime. There were only two small windows, which were closed with the shades drawn even though it was a nice day. Rising above the windows was a tall and dirty tower that tilted slightly to the left. The front door needed to be repainted, and carved in the middle of it was an image of an eye. The entire building sagged to the side like a crooked tooth" (Snicket, *Bad Beginning* 20-1).

Among countless other traits, Poe is notorious for the use of symbolism. The prince's palace in "The Masque of the Red Death" includes seven rooms, all themed in color: the first room prevailed blue, the second, purple, the third, green, followed by orange, white and violet. The seventh room however, "was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries... But in this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet- a deep blood color," (Johnson 57). The color black, when used in literature, frequently symbolizes death, as does the color red. Therefore, it is no shock to the readers when Prince Prospero is murdered in the seventh room, surrounded by the colors that foretell his fate. In addition to the colors serving as symbols, the fact that there are seven rooms specifically referred to could quite possibly represent the seven deadly sins. Although the examples of symbolism throughout Poe's works are innumerable, some obvious symbols examined are eyes in "The Tell-Tale Heart," a black cat in "The Black Cat," an ebony clock in "The Masque of the Red Death," a doomed bedroom chamber in "Ligeia," and countless others.

Like the readers of Poe, Snicket's audience could easily identify limitless symbols throughout the series. An obvious one, referenced in every book, and also undoubtedly inspired by Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," is that of an eye: "Count Olaf had an image of an eye tattooed on his ankle, matching the eye on his front door. They wondered how many other eyes were in Count Olaf's house, and where, for the rest of their lives, they would always feel as though Count Olaf were watching them even when he wasn't nearby," (Snicket 25). Snicket also uses the number of books in his series as a symbol; thirteen books, thirteen being a commonly known "unlucky" or "unfortunate" number.

However, Snicket also uses symbols that prove to be more complex. Violet's character, the eldest Baudelaire orphan, symbolizes the shred of hope to which the siblings cling. The color violet symbolizes hope and purpose: purpose to protect siblings from kidnappings, murders, and unfortunate events in general. The color violet is believed to "help rebalance one's life," "remove obstacles," and "energize from depression," all of which, Violet Baudelaire, as the eldest child, must attempt to perform throughout the series in order to protect her remaining family members (Gems). Snicket incorporates a less obvious symbol in the fifth book of the series, *The Austere Academy*. The motto of Prufrock Preparatory School, the Baudilaire's temporary residence, is "Memento Mori." Klaus explains the translation to his siblings: "'If I'm not mistaken,' said Klaus, who was rarely mistaken, 'Memento Mori' means 'Remember you will die,'" (Snicket, *Austere Academy* 13).

Although it is obvious that Poe was not the only author to incorporate death, dark themes, foreshadowing titles, creepy settings, and symbolism into his works, Snicket's recognition of Poe cannot be denied when examining the naming of his characters. In several of Poe's works, he ironically names characters in a way that contrasts with their fate. For example, in "Masque of the Red Death," the protagonist, Prince Prospero, does not prosper or thrive, but instead throws a tantrum in regards to a mysterious party guest, and dies. Poe uses ironic naming in "The Cask of Amontillado," as well. Fortunato, the enemy of the speaker, has a name that translates to "fortunate" "blessed" or "happy" in Italian. However, Fortunato's fate proves to be anything but fortunate, seeing as he is led into a crypt, trapped behind a wall, and left to die.

Snicket also utilizes irony in naming his characters. Sunny, the youngest of the Baudelaire orphans, has a name that conveys happiness and cheerfulness. Ironically, Sunny finds herself not amongst cheer, but rather disaster, and in the midst of a series of unfortunate events, as the series title foreshadows. The name of the second Baudelaire orphan, Klaus, is short for the German name Nikolaos (*Behind the Name*). Nikolaos, which translates to "victory of the people," obviously contradicts the destiny of any of the Baudelaire children. Considering the fact that the only Baudelaire triumph the reader knows is that the children continually escape from the deranged relative trying to destroy them, it is safe to say that none of the children proves victorious.

In addition to creating ironic identities for the Baudelaire children, Violet, symbolizing the little hope the children have, and the the names "Sunny" and "Klaus" representing the opposite of their definition, Snicket alludes to many historical and literary characters and events throughout his series. Lisa Maxwell Arter and Alleen Pace Nilsen, co-authors of "Using Lemony Snicket to Bring Smiles to Your Vocabulary Lessons," suggest that Snicket's most frequent allusion is to Edgar Allan Poe (Arter 237).

Snicket introduces his readers to his use of literary allusions when a character named Edgar Poe appears. Mr. Edgar Poe is the character that delivers the news of their parents' death to the Baudelaire children, in an incredibly blunt way, similar to how Edgar Allan Poe hooks his readers: "'Your parents,' Mr. Poe said, 'have perished in a terrible, terrible fire'" (Snicket, *Bad Beginning* 8). In addition to a character named after the great American writer, Snicket alludes to several other details pertaining to the life and works of Poe. Arter and Nilsen continue to suggest that, "Truly knowledgeable adults are probably amused that the children's last name is Baudelaire, evoking Charles Baudelaire, the poet who translated Poe's work into French," (Arter 237). However, Snicket's implications of Poe don't cease there. "*The Vile Village* is centered, both literary and figuratively around the great Nevermore Tree, home to a 'murder of crows,'" (Arter 237). When stumbling across this reference, readers can hardly keep from being reminded of Poe's renowned line "quoth the raven, nevermore," (Arter 237). In addition, when Count Olaf appears in *The Vile Village*, he has adopted the persona of Detective Dupin, a character created by none other than Edgar Allan Poe, appearing for the first time in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," (Arter 237). Although this contemporary adolescent author makes intriguing references to T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Lewis Carroll, Dante Alighieri, Robert Frost, and many other adult authors

throughout the entire series, Poe was the writer Snicket idolizes most and who serves as his greatest inspiration.

Although some may argue that authors such as Poe and Lemony Snicket are too mature for our youth, it must be recognized that the fictional elements, writing styles, and literary devices used by these authors are fundamental to understanding literature. Snicket encourages his young readers to become passionate about the Baudelaire adventures. He provides them with a lesser version of horror that will perhaps develop into a well-deserved love for Poe's works. Snicket effectively introduces concepts such as plot, setting, symbolism, foreshadowing, irony and literary allusions throughout *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, preparing young readers to admire the timeless works of heroic authors, and appreciate the roots of extraordinary literature.

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“Politics of Quintessential Fantasy: Alliances and Domestic Government in *The Lord of the Rings*”
Tessa Yang

Introduction

A political analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* requires a challenging feat of balance. On the one hand, the novel arguably takes the form of a war narrative, and war is a political act; an examination of the politics of Middle-earth is therefore both natural and justified. On the other, one runs the risk of relegating *The Lord of the Rings* to mere political parable, compromising the integrity of the work and blatantly ignoring the repeated claims of Tolkien himself that the novel contains no allegorical significance. Critics have demonstrated varying degrees of success in managing this challenge. In his “The Politics of Fantasy: *The Hobbit* and Fascism,” Peter Firchow acknowledges Tolkien’s denial of allegory even as he points out numerous instances where protagonists in *The Hobbit* demonstrate markedly Fascist characteristics. Others have more gracefully navigated the murky turf of allegory vs. applicability; David Waito and Joseph Brogan examine the Shire through the lens of Plato’s *Republic*, emphasizing the presence of a universal—rather than particular or contemporary—political teaching. *The Lord of the Rings* has even emerged as a promising pedagogical tool. Here, unfortunately, the temptation is to sacrifice the complexity of Tolkien’s work by consigning various characters to mere theories of international relations.

What many of these approaches have in common is a tendency toward oversimplification and, overwhelmingly, a preference for lifting characters right out of Middle-earth and depositing them in our modern political context. A missing factor in much of this scholarship is the function of politics *within* Tolkien’s work. The hobbits’ journey affords many opportunities to study the political landscape of Middle-earth, both at the international level, through a complex network of alliances, and at the domestic, through the socio-political makeup of the Shire. These political overtones become especially significant when we consider their placement in a work that has been said to dwell in the bullseye of the fantasy fuzzy set (Attebery 14). Tolkien was not the first modern fantasy writer, but his “imaginative scope” and the “immense popularity that resulted” set him apart, upholding *The Lord of the Rings* as the quintessential fantasy (14). The novel’s complex political landscape reaffirms that status, both enriching Tolkien’s secondary reality and dramatizing our sense of wonder at the story’s close.

Secondary Reality and the Alliances of Middle-earth

Critics have not always viewed a coherent secondary world as a necessary ingredient in an effective fantasy. In a survey of the history of fantasy criticism, Greg Bechtel describes how critics in the “Todorovian” school emphasize the development of the *deconstructive* fantasy. Rather than creating a wholly developed second universe, the author should maintain a constant state of uncertainty, as “fantasy exists only so long as the narrative remains ambiguous as to the ‘true’ explanation of the portrayed events” (Bechtel 143). Bechtel has described this kind of fantasy as fixated on portraying the real as unreal. The “Tolkienian” critics have challenged this deconstructive emphasis, with their namesake leading the charge: “It is at any rate essential to a genuine fairy-story...that it should be presented as true... Since the fairy-story deals with marvels, it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion” (“On Fairy-Stories” 42). This, then, is the *reconstructive* fantasy, intent on portraying the unreal in as realistic a manner as possible by maintaining the coherence of a fully developed secondary reality.

The international relations of Middle-earth are crucial in shaping this secondary reality, first and foremost by contributing a sense of spatial and temporal depth. According to Tolkien, “to survey the depths of space and time” is one of our primordial human desires, which good fairy-stories can help

satisfy (“On Fairy-Stories” 41). Admittedly, Tolkien does not delve into much detail regarding the history of the Rohan-Gondor alliance within *The Lord of the Rings*, but there does follow in the appendices a history of the House of Eorl and its relation to Gondor. Tolkien invites an exploration of this material through textual references to the “old alliance,” which impart a realistic sense of historical depth, of time stretching backward beyond the present moment. The errand-riders of Gondor have a similar effect. Grounded though they are in the particulars of the War of the Ring, the Red Arrow they bear echoes back to an earlier time, alerting the Rohirrim to Gondor’s contemporary need by linking it with an emergency out of the past. In fact, as one learns in Appendix A, Gondor’s desperation and the ensuing Battle of the Pelennor Fields has a close historical parallel in the Battle of the Field of Celebrant. There, too, “all hope was lost when, unlooked for, the Riders came out of the North and broke upon the rear of the enemy” (*The Lord of the Rings* 1039).

In the same fashion, the Rohan-Gondor alliance frequently manifests itself in allusions to geographic layout. The beacons provide perhaps the most compelling visual representation of an alliance operating through space; the flames go “speeding west” across the heights, amplifying our sense of the great distance separating the allies (731). Indeed, much of the tension in the start of Book V stems from an acknowledgment of this distance. “It is a long road,” Théoden reminds Hirgon. “Man and beast must reach the end with strength to fight” (782). Many behind the gates of Minas Tirith very much doubt the Rohirrim’s likelihood of reaching that end. Within a few pages, we move from the uncertain statement of Prince Imrahil—“The Rohirrim may come, and they may not” (*The Lord of the Rings* 798)—to the grim declaration of Ingbold—“The Rohirrim cannot come” (803)—even as Rohan rides to Minas Tirith with all the strength and speed it can muster. The old alliance thus instigates a powerful dramatic irony as it struggles to maintain itself across space.

In addition to extending the parameters of the secondary world, the Rohan-Gondor alliance complicates our understanding of it. In his book review, “The Politics of Middle-earth,” Malcolm Joel Barnett has argued that complexity is precisely where *The Lord of the Rings* is lacking. Politics are oversimplified; a beloved leader has only to emit the cry for action to incite a universally enthusiastic response, resulting in a novel that advocates “the search for a false security in a static polity” (Barnett 387). Within the ranks of the Rohirrim, there certainly appears very little hesitation to follow Théoden into battle (though given the gravity of the situation and the strong probability of death, “universal enthusiasm” may be an overstatement). Judy Ann Ford, observing this idealized warrior culture and other aspects of the Rohirrim, has described the rescue of Gondor as a reimagined history of the Roman Empire. The Riders’ nick-of-time arrival “is a constructed memory of Rome saved by the Germanic peoples from a final collapse” (Ford 58). The Rohan-Gondor alliance is thus a myth, a dream, the way things *should* have been, a perfect political union formally consecrated in the marriage of Faramir and Éowyn.

Yet if the alliance appears to stand out as the simple archetypal exemplar, it simultaneously epitomizes the dangerous tendency of nationalism to give way to imperialism. The means by which Gondor and Rohan established themselves were neither admirable nor romanticized; both hunted the Dunlendings from their new lands, earning the reputation of murderers and usurpers. It is no wonder that Saruman was able to capitalize on the Dunlendings’ hatred of the “straw-headed” warriors: The Rohirrim themselves had set the stage several centuries before. The Drúedain provide a second example against which to read the supposed infallible purity of the Rohan-Gondor partnership. After promising to lead the Rohirrim through little-known paths into Gondor, effectively ensuring their timely arrival at Minas Tirith, Ghân-buri-Ghân entreats the men of Rohan to “leave Wild Men alone in the woods” and “not hunt them like beasts any more” (*The Lord of the Rings* 815). Thus does the history of the old alliance blur our understanding of victim and oppressor, as the men of Rohan—and of Gondor, though they may not know it—come to rely on the people of Ghân-buri-Ghân.

A second powerful alliance in *The Lord of the Rings* is the relationship between Legolas and

Gimli. At first glance, such a relationship between individuals may seem too restricted to qualify as a political association. However, Gimli and Legolas hold the unique position throughout the novel as the often sole representatives of their races. For example, in “The Ring Goes South,” Elrond decrees that the Nine Walkers shall represent all the Free Peoples of the World. ““Legolas shall be for the Elves; and Gimli son of Glóin for the Dwarves”” (268). Even as they are individual characters imbued with their own personalities, Legolas and Gimli act as envoys for their people. This is a burden and a privilege they appear to readily accept. At Isengard, Gandalf at first suggests that he, Aragorn, Théoden, and Éomer proceed toward the tower to speak to Saruman. ““Nay!’ said Gimli. ‘Legolas and I wish for a close view. We alone here represent our kindreds. We also will come behind’” (563).

Consequently, their relationship generalizes quite easily into an indicator of more large-scale relations between their races, providing a vantage point from which to study time and space much like the Rohan-Gondor alliance. The burden of history is especially important to understanding the initially hostile interactions of Gimli and Legolas. The schism between elves and dwarves extends all the way back to the days of their creation. Elves, the Children of Ilúvatar, born beneath the stars, seem naturally counterpointed to dwarves, the secret creations of Aulë, born beneath the earth. Later relations only exacerbate this inborn tension. In particular, the conflict over the Nauglamír and subsequent slaying of Thingol sets a precedent for elf-dwarf relations for ages to come: ““And there befell a thing most grievous among the sorrowful deeds of the Elder Days. For there was battle in the Thousand Caves, and many Elves and Dwarves were slain; and it has not been forgotten”” (*The Silmarillion* 234). Although later ages saw some cooperation between elves and dwarves—the trade centered in Khazad-dûm, for example—old tensions remain powerful when Legolas and Gimli first encounter one another at the Council of Elrond, leading Gandalf to wisely remind both parties that ““if all the grievances... between Elves and Dwarves are to be brought up here, we may as well abandon this Council”” (*The Lord of the Rings* 248). The developing Gimli-Legolas alliance encourages us to consider the details of these old tensions, increasing the historical depth of Middle-earth.

At the same time, the alliance between Gimli and Legolas provides a means of exploring the geographic scope of Tolkien’s secondary reality. Their friendship has the unique property of circulating around their (usually contrasting) opinions of a physical space. Gimli’s enchantment with the caves at Helm’s Deep, for instance, is juxtaposed with Legolas’s appreciation for Fangorn Forest, which Gimli dubs, ““the most perilous wood in Middle-earth”” (534). Nevertheless, he resolves to return to Fangorn in exchange for Legolas visiting the caves. There is consequently an indication that as Gimli and Legolas reconcile their differences, so will the intrinsically opposed spaces of Middle-earth: cave and forest, stone and tree. A similar incident emerges in Minas Tirith. As Gimli imagines restoring the streets to their glory, Legolas comments on the lack of gardens and green space (854). Once more they vow to return, but in this case, they broaden their aspirations to include *all of their kindred*. ““When Aragorn comes into his own, I shall offer him the service of the stonewrights of the mountain,”” proclaims Gimli. Responding in nearly identical syntax, Legolas declares, ““If Aragorn comes into his own, the people of the Wood shall bring him birds that sing and trees that do not die”” (*The Lord of the Rings* 854). From delegates of their people, they have transformed into marshals, the instigators of physical action with the potential to effect consequences for the international relations of Middle-earth.

Yet ultimately it is among the antagonists that we find our most complex and fractured political relationship, perhaps not unsurprisingly. Tolkien has long tended to portray his villains as the bickering type, going back as far as *The Hobbit* with the crass and contentious trolls who argue so long they forget to seek shelter at sunrise. The division between Isengard and Mordor, however, transcends comic squabbles: Sauron and Saruman are both political masterminds launching a calculated political game. Perhaps due to his nature as a more abstract being, remarkably little has been said on the political mindset of Sauron; his attempt at total dominion, however, advanced through bribery, espionage, coercion, and military might, is both an evil act and a politically complex one. Critics readily assent to

Saruman's political savvy. Tom Shippey observes that the wizard "talks exactly like too many politicians. It is impossible to work out exactly what he means because of the abstract nature of his speech" (Shippey 75). Barnett supports this claim, but with an additional note of admiration for Saruman, "the embodiment of the political animal" and the most politically diverse character in the *Lord of the Rings* (Barnett 386). Saruman also relies on espionage and coercion to achieve his ends, freely using the palantir to plot his usurpation of Sauron.

In this sense, the political association between the lords of Isengard and Mordor does not constitute an alliance, or at least not a successful one; Saruman and Sauron harmoniously coexist only as long as their objectives happen to align. As Saruman explains to Gandalf at Orthanc, the ultimate goal would be usurpation: "As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it" (*The Lord of the Rings* 253). Nevertheless, the relationship between Sauron and Saruman enhances the secondary reality of Middle-earth in much the same way as the more successful alliances. Spatially, the shadow of Sauron pushes consistently from the East, threatening to engulf Gondor, while the white hand of Saruman stretches out from Isengard over the plains of Rohan, demonstrating a calculating intent to sever the Rohan-Gondor alliance. Thus we understand the threat as generating from more than one location. Evil does not have a single face in *The Lord of the Rings*, and its physical dispersal is one means of helping readers perceive this.

More significant is the way in which Saruman's treachery, once revealed, sends out shockwaves backward through time. Much like the Gimli-Legolas alliance, the revelation of the connection between Isengard and Mordor invites a critical reexamination of past events. One must now contemplate how far back Saruman's treachery extends, for as Elrond acknowledges, he was deep in the counsels of the Wise (258). It is in fact apparent that Saruman has long been the object of limited suspicion; the mysterious "Thorongil," whom readers identify as the young Aragorn, "often warned Ecthelion not to put trust in Saruman...but to welcome rather Gandalf the Grey" (1031). With the advantage of retrospect, hints like this one become all the more devastating, reading as warnings unheeded. Finally, even after the breaking of the wizard's staff and the dissolution of ties between Isengard and Mordor, the legacy of that relationship persists into the future in the most heinous way of all: by invading the Shire. It is as if Frodo has destroyed the Ring only to return home and find a shadow of Sauron preserved, dwelling in his own Bag End in the form of a greatly weakened but still dangerous Saruman.

Wonder and the Politics of the Shire

As with Middle-earth's international relations, the Shire is more complicated than it first appears. Initially, we seem to have entered a peaceful agrarian utopia unpolluted by outside affairs—a "rich and kindly" land, a district "of well-ordered business" (*The Lord of the Rings* 5). Beneath its fertile hills, however, the Shire is a hotbed of socio-political tension. Of particular concern is the extent to which prejudice, both of outsiders and "queer" neighbors like Bilbo, governs the hobbits' day-to-day activities. These kinds of social deficits have led critics to conclude that the Shire is far from utopian. David M. Waito, for example, notes how the Shire lacks adequate Guardians to preserve it from negative exterior and interior forces, leading him to conclude that, "the Shire is an unhealthy community from the outset of Book One" (Waito 155) Brogan, also building off ideas from Plato's *Republic*, draws parallels between the Shire and Athens as unjust cities. In particular, both suffer from the clash between the state on one hand and poetry / philosophy on the other, stymying intellectual and moral growth (Brogan 39).

Crucially, the hobbits appear unaware of their homeland's shortcomings. The Shire remains throughout most of the novel a source of nostalgia and hope, and understandably so: the further the hobbits travel, the greater need they have to anchor themselves to the familiar. The Shire's natural beauty and well-tilled land becomes especially significant when compared to the sights that await Frodo and Sam as they journey toward Mount Doom. When the hobbits left their homeland, "the trees were laden with apples, honey was dripping in the combs, and the corn was tall and full" (*The Lord of the*

Rings 66). In converse, the environment they face in Mordor is one of utter filth and decay: “Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the land about” (617). One can hardly blame Sam for feeling physically sick.

The Shire certainly never decays to the level of Mordor, but it *has* drastically changed by the time the hobbits return. Gates close off main roads and smoke darkens the sky. “Sharkey” directs teams of ruffians from his headquarters at Bag End, which has been gutted almost beyond recognition. Here, one may rightfully question whether we are drifting into the realm of the Todorovian fantasists with their emphasis on estrangement—the rendering of familiar objects “disconcerting, alien, or incomprehensible” (Bechtel 153). After all, this is exactly what seems to happen when the hobbits return to the Shire: the Mirror of Galadriel foresaw truly, and the familiar has indeed become distressing and strange. Tolkien, however, did not favor permanent estrangement in his own writing, focusing instead of fantasy’s ability to *restore* or *recover* one’s original perception of an object, to create a sense of wonder. Fantastic elements—the unfamiliar or strange—can therefore serve to freshen our perspectives, which may have grown stale out of boredom or loss of faith (Attebery 16). As Tolkien puts it, “We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves. This recovery fairy-story helps us to make” (“On Fairy-Stories” 77).

Nowhere is this process of recovery clearer than in the two “versions” of the Shire. The familiar environment may have become unfamiliar, but only insofar as to help us regain our vision of it. The political problems so many critics have observed in fact crystallize with the emergence of Sharkey and his gang; these antagonists frequently embody that which has long lain dormant in the Shire. Pimple’s rapid rise to power, for instance, is due in part to his ability to exploit the Shire’s natural weaknesses, especially its intolerance for difference (Waito 165). The term “uppish” takes the place of the word “queer”: both serve to discourage what is perceived as overly bold behavior that threatens the status quo. Long before the ruffians arrive, the hobbits of the Shire are therefore predisposed to conform, making them vulnerable to forces of institutionalization and oppression.

It takes the return of Frodo, Merry, Pippin, and Sam to save the Shire from its own internal decay. They are able to do so precisely because of their foray into the perilous realm of Faerie. Orcs and Uruk-hai, wizards and palantírs, Nazgûl and Eagles—these fantastic elements help the hobbits recover their perception of their homeland, just as “in order to recover our sense of something like a tree, it is only necessary to envision a dragon curled around its trunk” (Attebery 16). Though stopping short of applying Tolkien’s ideas on fantasy, several critics have commented on the way in which the hobbits’ quest prepares them for the Scouring. As Waito describes, “Frodo and his companions cannot themselves perceive the Shire’s call for leadership until their own adventures teach them the necessity of tolerance, pity, and leadership in a community” (166). Jane Chance supports this idea of the moral-political education, particularly Frodo’s, which she traces through his growing awareness of tricky language. The Ring provides the greatest challenge to his civic growth. Shadow “is linked to the inarticulate and dark,” that which cannot be expressed in language (Chance 48). By the time Frodo returns to the Shire, he has gained enough experience to confront the master of tricky political rhetoric: Saruman. The wizard himself acknowledges Frodo’s development when he says, “‘You have grown, Halfling. Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel’” (*The Lord of the Rings* 996).

Most significant for the plot is the way in which the intellectual experience of recovery galvanizes the hobbits into action. Frodo, Merry, Pippin, and Sam become marshals to their people, not unlike the way Gimli and Legolas prompt the movements of their own kindred through individual leadership. Waito has analyzed how Tolkien’s varying applications of the word “up”—more than twenty-five different forms in “The Scouring of the Shire”—“alerts readers to the point that ‘standing up’ against the ruffians, rallying ‘up in fire,’ and being ‘uppish’ are exactly what the Shire needs” (Waito 165-166). Importantly, after dispelling the ruffians, the hobbits are able to recover their appreciation for

the Shire even as they make significant changes to its political structure. Brogan describes the new and improved Shire as one where martial valor and political leadership take their place as honored virtues. Likewise, the tension between state and poetry / philosophy relaxes; Frodo, Merry, Pippin, and Sam's intellectual projects are mirrored in a general appreciation for scholarly pursuits—previously only undertaken by the “queer” (Brogan 40).

Of course, Tolkien did not intend the process of recovery to remain trapped within the pages of a given text. It is meant to apply to readers as much as, if not more than, fictional characters, to preserve them from monotony and stagnation. There is room for debate as to what, exactly, “The Scouring of the Shire” helps us recover. Most critics are silent on the issue, though in some cases, one may extrapolate their conclusions. Brogan, for example, with his emphasis on *The Lord of the Rings* as a careful retelling of *The Republic*, seems to suggest that the restructuring of the Shire helps us recover our sense of ancient political virtues that may have grown muddled in our contemporary era. On the other hand, a critic such as Barnett, perceiving the novel to be a glib oversimplification of politics, would likely argue that readers recover nothing at all. One must return to the real authority on the issue. For Tolkien, the “recovered” or newly appreciated object does not have to be complex: “It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine” (“On Fairy-Stories” 78). The political injustices of the Shire and their ultimate resolution may therefore be most significant in restoring our sense of wonder for the simple things: Home and hearth and honey dripping in the combs become more valuable when one is forced, as Attebery would say, to contemplate the dragon lurking among them.

Conclusion

Middle-earth's political landscape is no flatter or less complex than its physical one. As mountain ranges cut jaggedly across the countryside, as rivers rage and ancient forests sometimes pick themselves up and move to a new location, so are politics a colorful, textured, and constantly shifting element in *The Lord of the Rings*. The alliances between Rohan and Gondor, Gimli and Legolas, and Isengard and Mordor demonstrate a realistic tension between cooperation and defection, often complicated by the burden of history. These far-reaching international relations further provide a means of plumbing the depths of Tolkien's secondary reality. Domestic politics, too, reveal the complicated clash between state and individual in a way that restores our vision of home.

An analysis such as this one exposes the way in which the fantastic mode remains compatible with the mimetic, each shedding light on the other. Politics has proven an especially apt topic on which to conduct this sort of study, but there is ample room to take this approach much further. Poetry and history, race relations, the natural environment—how do these topics function *within* the fantasy world itself? Asking this question is instrumental in helping us move away from reductive claims of allegory and in a direction that respects *The Lord of the Rings* for the expansive, fully developed fantasy that it is.

1. Tolkien has broadly disclaimed allegory in the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*: “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence” (xv). Later, in a 1956 letter to reviewer Michael Straight: “[*The Lord of the Rings*] was written to amuse (in the highest sense): to be readable. There is no ‘allegory,’ moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all” (Letters 232). In a more humorous but equally as enlightening phrase, Tolkien writes, “To ask if the Orcs ‘are’ Communists is to me as sensible as asking if the Communists are Orcs” (Letters 262).

2. This confused stance reaches its height when Firchow states that to call the hobbits Fascists “is both ungenerous and exaggerated. Exaggerated, yes, but not farfetched...” (29).

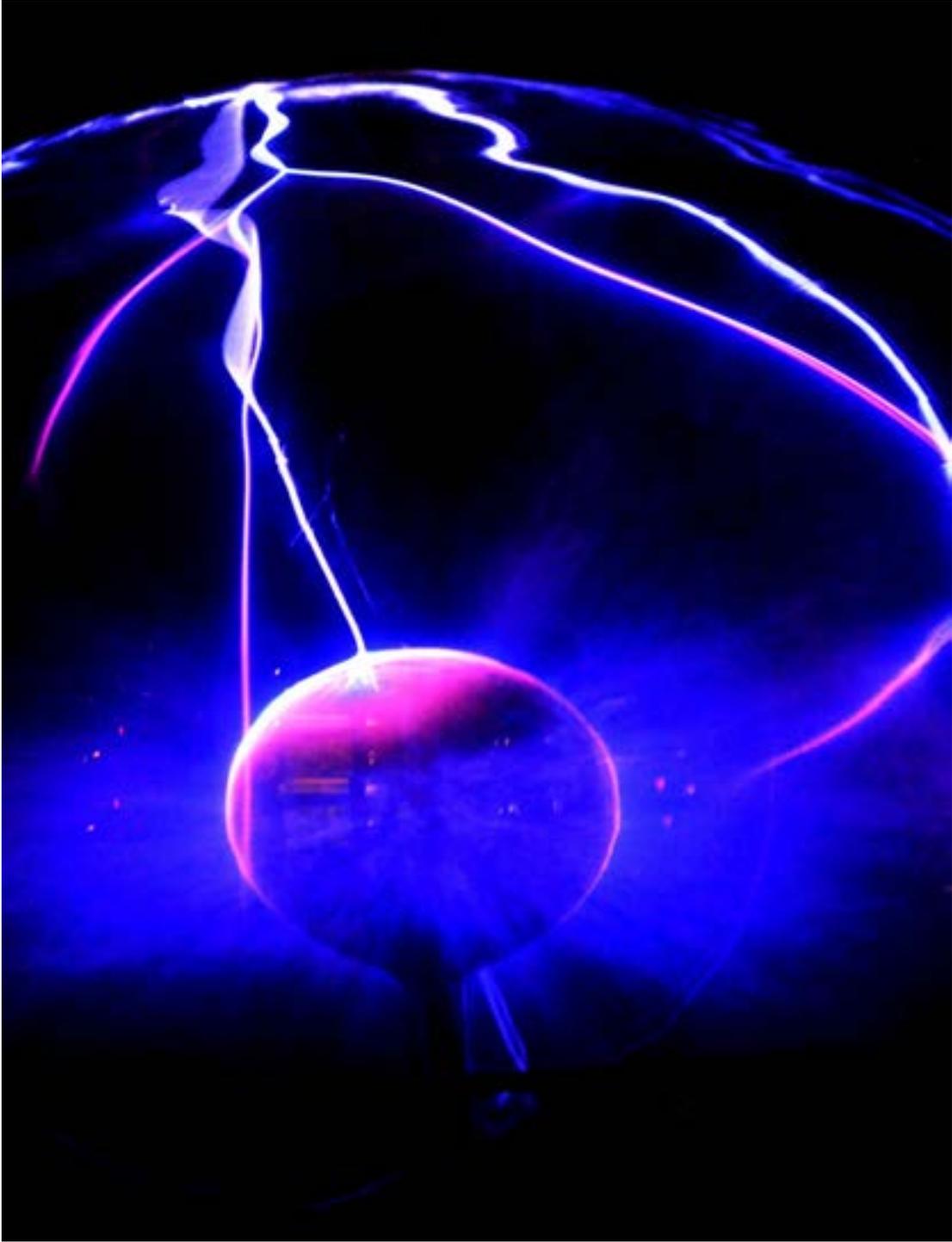
3. Indeed, Brogan makes a compelling argument for the legitimacy of a political analysis of *The Lord of the Rings*: “Tolkien's adamant rejection of any allegorical or topical meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* does not preclude any political interpretation at the level of transhistorical principles of political life, but only an interpretation bounded by the particularity of the historical moment” (11). Thus one may fairly draw a conclusion about universal truths, which myth is in fact well-suited to impart.

4. See Ruane and James, “The International Relations of Middle-earth.”

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Fiction



“Untitled” - Zachary Kronisch

“Seeing Double”
Julia Cuddahy

“What’s that smell?” Hal asked as his daughter went to check on the oven.

“It’s my lasagna,” Willow called from the kitchen. “It’s just about ready.”

The timer went off. Hal ran to Willow, navigating his way around exploding car parts and falling cement. In the distance, the Adila Khatun mosque crumbled; a car bomb had destroyed everything but its foundation. Willow stood close enough to touch the blasted vehicle, unscathed as ash flew around her. She tried to open the door but it stuck, falling completely forward seconds later. Smoke billowed into her face, but she merely waved her hands around, flicking the fumes in every direction. The flames persisted under the exposed rack, scorching the skin of the passenger beyond recognition. Hal attempted to pull her away, but Willow resisted, fighting to lift the remains out. He grabbed her arm and dragged her across the smoking room.

“Let him go,” Hal muttered, looking towards the front door. “There’s no time. We can’t save everyone.”

“What are you talking about?” Willow exclaimed. “Who’s everyone? Who are you saving?”

Hal released her. Willow staggered back and lost control of the baking dish. It flew out of her hands, and glass shattered on the floor. Meat lay in clumps while tomato sauce dripped down the cabinets. Shards cracked under Hal’s hiking boots as he stepped over them to turn off the oven and close the door. A beeping noise echoed incessantly in the background. Hal pulled the broom out from behind the fridge and jammed it into the smoke detector. He opened the window above the sink just as his wife, Emily, walked in and hung up her jacket in the front closet.

“What the hell happened in here?” Emily said. She nearly tripped on Tyler’s unused bicycle and Willow’s stuffed backpack as she advanced towards the kitchen. Emily stopped abruptly. She examined the stains dotting Willow’s body and glanced at Hal who stood inspecting the soggy lasagna noodles scattered across the floor.

“Ask the psycho,” Willow retorted.

“Don’t talk to me that way,” Hal commanded. “You nearly burned the house down!”

“Everything was going fine until Dad ran in here and made me drop the lasagna. I mean, sure the oven was smoking, but—”

“Willow, you could have started a grease fire,” Emily said.

“If you don’t like me cooking then I don’t know why you make me do it. Dad doesn’t do anything. He should cook.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Emily agreed. “I’ve been relying on you too much to pick up the slack around here.”

“Yeah, that’s why I failed my driver’s test today,” Willow said, scowling.

“You failed your driver’s test?” Emily asked. “We spent days practicing. I even took off from work to show you how to drive on a highway!”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Willow said. “I messed up.”

“How come I didn’t even know you were taking it today?” Hal asked.

“I tried to tell you during dinner last night,” Willow muttered, “but you weren’t paying attention.”

“Why exactly did you fail?” Hal asked. Another shard crunched beneath his foot.

“I hit the curb.”

“I knew it,” Emily exclaimed. “We must have reviewed parallel parking a thousand times. She’s hopeless, Hal.”

Hal removed a cup from the cabinet and poured himself some water. “I know it’s difficult to remember things under pressure, but you have to do it, Willow. Sometimes you don’t get a second

chance.”

“Like you would know,” Willow muttered.

“What was that?” Hal said, raising his voice.

“Look at the mess you made,” Willow complained, “You just ruined dinner. You ruin everything.”

“Willow,” Emily said sternly. “Apologize to your father at once.”

Tyler walked in from his bedroom. “What happened?”

Hal took a gulp as his son coughed.

“I don’t know, dear,” Emily said in a soothing voice. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Why don’t you go upstairs and play a video game.”

“I just finished one.”

“Go play another.”

“When are we eating?”

“Never,” Willow said bitterly.

“Willow, you are overreacting,” Emily said. She picked up the broom and began sweeping pieces of glass into a pile in the center of the room. “Calm down and help me clean.”

“Why doesn’t Dad clean? He’s the one who made the mess in the first place.”

“Do what I tell you!” Emily yelled.

“No!” Willow stormed off.

“No dinner for you tonight!” Emily shouted down the hall. “Hal, help me clean.” Emily found a dustpan and bent down to scoop up the glass. Hal removed a paper towel from the rack and dampened it. He started wiping sauce off the cabinets.

“Hal, you need to teach her how to drive,” Emily said. “Obviously I can’t. Nothing I say gets through to her.”

Hal pushed the tomato-stained ricotta around the counter. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” Emily demanded. “You have been home for four months without a job. You have nowhere to be tomorrow. I know that ever since Iraq you have been jumpy, but both of you are being ridiculous.”

“Fine,” Hal said. “I will show Willow what to do, but she is better off not driving. Cars are dangerous.”

“She can’t avoid cars forever,” Emily said. “We live in a suburb. Just going to the grocery store requires a car.”

“We can start tomorrow,” Hal said, throwing the sullied towel into the trash.

The next day Hal banged his fists on Willow’s door shouting for her to wake up. It was just after eight a.m. on Saturday morning. Hal had already finished his coffee and read the newspaper. Willow grunted, but Hal did not hear footsteps. He pounded on the door again.

“Coming!” Willow yelled, throwing herself onto the floor with a loud thump. She opened the door, pulling a sweatshirt over her head. “What?”

“We’re going for a drive,” Hal said. “Get dressed.”

“It’s Saturday. I sleep in on Saturdays. What time is it anyway?”

“It’s eight o’clock. I wanted to start at six o’clock but your mother said I needed to hold off until at least eight. I will give you ten minutes to get ready.”

“Are you kidding me? I just woke up! I have to take a shower and put my makeup on.”

“Why? Who are you trying to impress?”

Willow glared at him. “At least let me put some jeans on.” Willow closed the door. A few minutes later she reappeared in the same hoodie, jeans and a pair of flip-flops.

“Ready?” Hal asked.

“Yes.” Willow sighed.

Hal handed Willow a granola bar and a water bottle.

“What’s this?”

“Breakfast.”

“I don’t eat breakfast.”

“What do you mean you don’t eat breakfast? Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

“I’m never hungry in the mornings. Besides, I don’t have time anyway.”

“You have time to put on makeup but not eat breakfast?” Hal asked, exasperated.

Willow stared at him. “Can we just get this over with please?”

“Fine.”

Willow threw the food on her bed. They walked downstairs together and out the door. Hal unlocked his Honda Accord and sat in the driver’s seat.

“I thought I was driving,” Willow said.

“You will be directing me today,” Hal commanded. “I won’t do anything until you tell me to.”

Willow took her place in the passenger’s seat. “Put the car in reverse?” she asked hesitantly.

“No,” Hal said, sighing.

“Well first you have to start the engine. I thought that was obvious. Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Willow, I’m doing this for your benefit. We can go back inside right now and you can fail the driver’s test again.”

Willow directed her gaze towards the house.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” Hal demanded. “Part of your problem is you are not concentrating when Mom teaches you.”

Hal’s arm shook violently as he slid the key into the ignition. He closed his eyes to block out the mosque.

“Don’t close your eyes,” Willow said.

Hal flinched. “Good,” he said and put the car in reverse. “I was just testing you.”

“Why did you flinch?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hal retorted.

“You just did,” Willow said exasperatedly. “Whatever, I’m tired of arguing with you. Back the car up, slowly, and look both ways. Turn the wheel slightly and straighten the car. Accelerate to forty miles-per-hour. Where do you want to go?”

“I need to pick up something at the pharmacy,” Hal said.

“Why? You’re not sick, are you? You have been acting weird lately.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“What’s wrong? Dad, are you sick? You can tell me.”

“No, honey, really, it’s fine. There’s no need for you to worry.”

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“I need to pick up something for Mrs. Grey across the street. Calm down.”

Willow sat back in her chair. “Oh. Turn left.”

Hal drove past the familiar, yellow house with the chained dog who barked incessantly. He continued on down by the forest and approached the Al Hariri Primary School in the Kasra district of Baghdad. Willow instructed him to turn right on Al Maghrib Street, and make another left past the motorcyclists and occasional gunmen. Hal rode past the Adila Khatun Mosque and ignored the expanding airbags. The steering wheel kept inching closer, but Willow never noticed. She relaxed as shards of glass flew into her face and disappeared.

“We’re here,” Willow said. She got out of the car and started walking towards the pharmacy.

Hal loosened his grip on the steering wheel and cracked his knuckles. “It’s not real,” he mumbled.

Hal caught up to Willow and followed her through the automatic doors. He took deep breaths as

they walked to the back and waited by the counter. Willow disappeared down the holiday aisle but stopped when the pharmacist greeted her father loudly.

“Hal, how are you?” Mark said. “You’re a little early this week.”

“Yeah, I’m giving my daughter a driving lesson.”

“Oh, I remember those days.” Mark laughed. “Glad they’re over.”

Hal laughed. “I will be too, if that day ever comes. Say, how’s your family doing? Did your wife impress her interviewer?”

“Actually, she did,” Mark said, smiling, “We’ll be moving next month. I’m glad you brought that up. I wanted to discuss your prescription. Since I won’t be available that week—”

Willow came out of her hiding place. “I thought you said that prescription was for Mrs. Grey? Why are you lying?”

Mark handed him a paper bag labeled Hal Sternbrook. “We can discuss the details later.”

“Thanks, Mark,” Hal said.

When they made it to the center of the store, Willow snatched the bag.

“Zoloft?” Willow asked. “Dad, why are you on antidepressants? This stuff made my friend suicidal.”

“Give that back, Willow.”

“I know Iraq must have been difficult, but you’re home now. Shouldn’t life be easier?”

“Willow, can we please not discuss this right now?”

“We never discuss anything,” Willow shouted. “Why don’t you tell me? I’m your daughter!”

“You’re too young to understand.”

“How am I supposed to understand when you won’t tell me what’s going on?”

They walked out of the store. “Get in the car,” Hal said sternly.

Willow braced herself. “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me the truth.”

“Get in now or else I’m leaving you here.”

“I’ll walk home. It’s only a mile or so. I like walking.”

“Get in.” Hal gritted his teeth and gripped the car door. Willow backed down and sat in the passenger’s seat. Hal swerved the car out of its parking space, nearly hitting another car that was driving through the lot. He turned the car sharply onto the main road and sped up, accelerating to nearly sixty on a forty mile-per-hour road. When he reached their street, he did not slow down to accommodate for the twenty-five mile-per-hour speed limit change. The car ran over the grass as Hal veered into the driveway, almost forgetting to break.

“What was that?” Willow asked. “A lesson on how not to drive?”

“Go inside,” Hal ordered.

Willow walked towards the house and left the front door open. Hal slammed the car door shut and proceeded inside.

“Is everything alright?” Emily asked. Hal and Willow scowled. “Did you get into an accident?”

“No,” Hal yelled. “Why does everyone keep questioning me? Everything’s fine! I have it under control!”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Willow muttered.

“Go to your room,” Hal shouted.

“I’m not five years old.”

“I said go to your room.”

Willow stomped upstairs.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” Emily asked.

“Willow can’t mind her own damn business,” Hal said.

“What did she do?”

“She kept asking me about my medication. She even ripped it out of my hands in the middle of

the store to read the label.”

“You have been getting worse lately,” Emily said. “Maybe it’s time you start seeing a counselor.”

“I’m fine, honey,” Hal argued. “Really. I have everything under control. I think I just need a nap. I’m exhausted.”

“Okay,” Emily said. “We can talk about therapy later.”

Hal only made it halfway up the stairs before he recognized the sounds of gunshots. He wiped sweat off his brow and remembered to relax his clenched jaw. The noise grew louder. Hal stopped at the foot of the stairs and peered into his son’s bedroom.

Tyler lay sprawled across the bed with a controller in his hand. A soldier in full body armor raised his rifle towards a creature with two heads and tentacles. Tyler pushed on the buttons repeatedly, until blood and guts covered the screen.

“Take that,” Tyler yelled.

Hal marched into Tyler’s room. “What is this crap?”

“I’m playing a video game.”

“Does Mom know?”

“What’s the big deal?”

“You’re killing someone!”

“It’s just an alien.”

“I didn’t raise you to be a murderer. Turn it off.”

“Listen to Dad,” Willow said. She had snuck into Tyler’s room so quietly no one noticed.

“But I’m almost at the next level.” Tyler redirected his attention back to the flashing screen.

“You’re making Dad have flashbacks.” Willow snatched the controller out of Tyler’s hand. Tyler jumped up and pulled on the wire. Willow stood her ground.

“Enough,” Hal shouted. He unplugged the television. “No more games tonight.”

Willow let go of the controller and Tyler fell back on the bed.

The next morning, the family went to church. After the service, Hal pulled Willow aside as the family filed out with the crowds, leading her to the prayer room. A sculpture of Jesus hung on a wooden cross above the shelves of extinguished candles. One had sunken so low only an inch of wax remained. Below it, the kneeler’s cushion was permanently indented.

“Willow, I just wanted to thank you for what you did yesterday.”

“No problem.”

“The flashbacks have been getting worse.” He shuddered. “The medicine can only do so much. Your mother and I decided that I should go to a therapist. I wanted you to know that I was just trying to protect you.”

“I know, Dad, but I can take it.”

“I don’t want you to have to deal with this, but I can see now that hiding my problem is only making life harder for you.”

“What happened?”

Hal took a deep breath. “One day I went to pick up my friend from evening prayers. A car bomb detonated in front of the mosque right as I arrived. I tried to save him, but it was too late.”

“Dad, that’s not your fault,” Willow said, hugging him.

Hal hugged her back. “Thank you.” He let go and lifted a box of matches perched next to the flickering red glass. “I want to light a candle for him. Would you do the honors?”

Willow picked up a match and lit it. The flames flickered, nearly going out as she brought it to the exposed thread. They grew stronger as she held the match close, fusing into a single, white flame. Willow pulled the match back and blew it out. They both knelt down and prayed silently, bowing their heads.

"Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah," Hal whispered, finishing the Islamic prayer.

**“At Any Moment”
Chelsea Lockwood**

“So when this giant meteorite, nine miles long, three miles wide, when it struck the Yucatan peninsula sixty-five million years ago, two-thirds of all life on Earth died—the plants, the animals, all life. The Gulf literally *boils* for several hours, everything in North America is vaporized like that.”

Professor Laylin claps sharply, waking up the guy sitting across from me. He blinks a few times, realizes he isn’t in bed, crosses his arms and again loses the fight to stay awake. Most students in the class are only partly paying attention, dozing on and off between occasionally scratching tired notes on evolutionary theory. We are surrounded by the castes of skulls and bones locked inside glass cabinets against every wall, empty sockets and fragments of bone rendered in plastic. \$200 for a plastic head, and there are dozens of them.

“Earth is *literally* knocked off its orbit and for twenty-to-thirty years a dust cloud encircles the Earth, blocking out the sun, a perpetual twilight. So, what happens to the rest of life? Within thirty years all the dinosaurs are extinct. *Thirty years*. Dinosaurs were so well adapted to their environment—hot, muggy climate, thickly forested land—that when this environment changed so drastically, they just could not adapt fast enough in the other direction. Thirty years, folks, that’s the end of the most successful evolutionary order up to that point. And then, almost overnight, a new animal becomes dominant: the mammal. We saw synapsids living side-by-side with dinos, half-reptile, half-mammal hybrids. We can see in the fossil record a shift away from these reptile characteristics to more mammalian, arboreal features like grasping hands and live birth. These give way to Order Plesiadapiformes, then to Primates—to us.”

Dr. Laylin pauses in his lecture, clicking over to a new slide. The photo of the squirrel-looking rodent that is my ancestor goes black and is replaced with a photo of a skull that looks human except for the fangs, the long face, the tiny cranium. A girl in the back, Kelsey, raises her hand defiantly, looking like she is holding her breath with the apprehension of what she has to say, like a little girl about to tattle on a playmate for pulling her hair—intent on the justness of the accusation on her lips.

“So, you’re saying we came from reptiles?”

“You could trace our lineage back to the Plesiadapiformes, which developed from reptiles, yes.”

“I’m sorry, but how can we really know that, you know? How can they know that?” She is giving Dr. Laylin a look of condolence, presumably for his stupidity.

“As we have seen over the last few weeks, it’s clear in the fossil record.”

“What if they aren’t real.”

“They...?”

“The fossils. What if they aren’t real, I mean... What about God?”

I think she can’t be serious.

“God?”

Laylin can’t believe she is serious either.

“What if God is trying to test our faith? So, you know, he puts the fossils here to make us question our faith, to make us think about what we think we came from. Adam and Eve? Don’t you think Adam and Eve had anything to do with all of us? What about the Bible? I believe we have to consider that.”

Dr. Laylin’s lips are pressed tight together, a look of minor panic on his face. Like he left the house and forgot to turn the oven off, like there is an twenty-one percent chance his whole house might burn down. He reverts back to the Galileo apology, about theories. Scientists are allowed to talk about theories, if they have evidence.

“I am not challenging any religious beliefs here, that’s not what I’m doing here, just giving you guys the theories. Now, we are moving on to the adaptations of the mammals after the meteorite. So 65

million years ago...”

Kelsey is triumphant in her disruption. I wonder why she feels more comfortable coming from the incest of Adam’s and Eve’s babies than evolving from a reptile. I wonder if she will be disappointed, in the end, or if the pearly gates will open soundlessly on polished golden hinges to welcome her to pinkish clouds and eternity.

A week later I am stretched across my bed, having a panic attack. I know a meteorite is going to crash through the white plaster ceiling and crush me through my mattress, through the carpet, into the apartment below. Or maybe I will vaporize. No, definitely crushed, pulverized, meat against a tenderizer. I can feel it hurtling down, breathless and falling, falling through white stars, acrobating through space, rushing through wispy clouds, through an unresisting sky—through heaven—a throttling spec of rejected dust in the universe aimed with offhand disinterest at my stomach, crushing me into a flat plane of compacted bone and pinched skin, like road kill. Blank, white, smooth ceiling stares back, sheltering me from the elements, unable to actually protect me, a blindfold over the eyes of someone facing a firing squad.

Exhilarating. That’s what this is. I want to feel that crushing, that embrace of burning rock traveling through my body at twenty miles per second. Hyperventilating breaths almost burst my lungs.

I pop two Klonopin, buzz into indifference, sleep.

Home for the holidays.

“Don’t say that,” Joe says.

We are at the Corner, sitting at the bar sipping dollar-a-draft Miller High Life. Amy, the bartender, is expertly ignoring the eyes of the men encircling her as she pours three beers with one practiced hand. It’s cramped tonight, everyone crowding in as close as they can to each other, all of us sweating. The heat is broken, they can’t turn it off, so all the windows are open to get the December air in. All the bodies between us and the windows block any cold respite from dry heat. The beer is cold at least.

The bar is mostly men, farmers or people who grew up near farms, plaid shirts, Wrangler jeans, and scuffed up steel-toed boots. A man across the bar makes eye contact with me, smiles to reveal a missing tooth. He seems nice enough so I smile back, remembering not to look over again. Kate came with us tonight. She is further down the bar, leaning on the sweaty shoulder of a guy in a black cowboy hat.

“Don’t say what?” I ask, turning back to Joe.

“Happy Holidays. It offends me.”

I scoff. “Happy Holidays offends you?”

“Absolutely. This is a Christian country. Forty-four presidents have been sworn in on the Bible, take out a dollar bill—what does it say? In God We Trust. Yes, sir. Happy Holidays is nothing but bullshit political correctness. At least eighty percent of this country celebrates Christmas, and that’s probably a low-ball figure. All these stores with Happy Holidays signs, fuck yer Happy Holidays! I say Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night. Cheers!”

Joe raises his glass and toasts the man next to him, who doesn’t know what he is toasting. He turns back to me, beer foam in his beard.

“You sound paranoid. Not everything is some liberal, secular conspiracy, ya know.”

He grins. “Coming from a secular, liberal conspirator.”

I roll my eyes and finish my beer. The man across the bar catches my eye again when I forget not to look over there. He nods this time, grinning, and I pretend not to see. On TV there is a news story about a star exploding 8,000 years ago that some ancient Chinese astronomer documented in his journal. Apparently NASA found the star and it turns out the explosion was about 8,000 years away from us. At this very moment heat waves could be rushing towards our universe to vaporize everything

in radiating ripples of sizzling obliteration. From where I sit sweating at the bar, I can believe it. They move on to a human interest piece about a nine year old white girl that lost 86 pounds in a year.

“Hey, did you hear about Ricky Valencia?” Joe asks.

“About him fucking Alayna?”

“What? No—the fuck? No, about him getting arrested.”

“What’d he do?” I ask. Kate is clinking shot glasses with the black-cowboy hat.

“Bath salts.”

“...Bath salts?”

“Yeah, it’s this drug, makes people real aggressive and shit. That’s what that guy was on in Florida when they found him eating the face off that homeless dude.”

“I thought it was zombies,” I say, only half joking.

“Nope, bath salts. Not the kind from a store or anything, that’s just what they’re called. It’s like crack kind of, just makes people crazy.”

“So what happened?”

“He couldn’t handle that shit, went nuts. He cut one of his fingers off and went to the Police. Hand delivered his drugged up ass right to the cops, minus one finger. My brother was on duty that night, said the kid was talking crazy bullshit about a conspiracy for his girlfriend to take all his money.”

I smirk. “He sounds as paranoid as you.”

“Ha-ha, you’re funny.”

“So they arrested him?” I ask, pushing my empty glass to the edge of the bar. Amy is at the end of the bar, changing the channel on the TV to the Eagles game. The men there cheer in response.

“Go Birds!” Joe raises his drink in camaraderie. “Well, yeah. He walked into the fucking police station high as shit with the bath salts in his pocket. He’s locked up in White Hall now, but after the trial it will probably be Salem.”

“Shit.”

Richie Beuler, looking more boxy and angular than he did in high school, throws a hand on Joe’s shoulder.

“Long time since I seen ya, man. Happy Holidays, buddy.”

Joe smiles. “Now, see, I have a problem with Happy Holidays...”

We leave the bar after last call and Joe is designated drunk driver. He can’t get the key into the Jeep door to unlock the car, drops his keys twice. Kate sags against the front door.

“Shot-gun,” she sings, giggling.

“If Joe can unlock the car,” I tease.

He slurs back, “You can walk.”

It’s too cloudy to see any stars tonight, too foggy even to see down the street. Everything is opaque with a wet, cold mist almost as oppressive as the heat of the bar. I think it must be a bad idea to get into the Jeep with Joe. But then again, at any moment a meteorite could crash out of the sky and crush me to death, or a wave of heat from a dead star could scorch me to ash.

We make it home alright.

I throw-up in the church bathroom during the call to worship, the first hymn, collection, and opening prayer. A woman in pearls and pastels washing her hands at the sink gives me a concerned look.

“Are you sick, sweetie?”

“Just hung over.”

When I get back to the pew my little sister, Leigh, gives me a pious, thirteen year old look of disapproval. I wink at her and she turns away from me in minor disgust.

The pastor’s voice booms through the speakers lining the walls.

“And a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all.”

I can't focus on the words coming from the pulpit. They sound threatening, like they are demanding a reaction from me. Everything else about the church is designed towards surrender: warm, bright bulbs in the overhead lights add to the soft glow of candles, everyone calm, everything wooden and natural, silent except for the confident voice of Pastor Dan. Painted glass windows of Biblical scenes line the side walls of the building: Mary, the whore or the mother I can't tell, standing in front of an orange sun, arms open to receive us; Jesus nailed to the cross; three men with beards crouching in awe at the feet of an angel; Jesus reading to a group of children. The choir sitting behind the pastor smile perfect sheep smiles. Leave your soul with us, they say, we'll take care of it.

I can feel the tightness in my chest, the tingling in my jaw, my throat. When my ears start to ring, I go out to the parking lot. Sky is still invisible behind an atmosphere of clouds walled against each other in a seamless gray. Misty puffs of breath fog the air in front of my mouth as the hyperventilating begins. The Klonopin is on my shelf at home, I am alone this time. Moving helps. It makes me a harder target.

I'm getting out of the shower when I hear my little sister screaming.

I don't get dressed, almost forget my towel, run out the front door and into the freezing January evening. There is a fading light coming in through the trees around our house, making the snow falling look hard and crystallized. On the street, rolling around in the light dusting of snow, is a man in a ripped brown sweatshirt with tangled, unwashed grey-brown hair that goes down past his shoulders. A brown wool cap almost covers his eyes, making his brow look thick and primal, and a wiry beard covers the bottom half of his face. He is holding his stomach and wailing, rocking his body back and forth creating a snow angel of agonized movement. Leigh is fumbling up the steps.

“I think he's hurt,” she says, snot and fearful tears shiny on her face.

The man wails. “It hurts, it hurts. Stones in my stomach, to sink. SINK!”

“Go inside.”

My neighbor is coming now, hunched in her red housecoat and shuffling in slippers through the snow. She stands at the edge of her yard and shouts to me.

“You're gonna catch cold if you stand out here wet like that in just a towel.”

“I was in the shower.”

“What's a'matter with him?”

I don't know so I ask. “Are you alright?”

He screeches inhumanly and tosses his head back hard onto the concrete. I think he might bludgeon himself to death on the road, if a car doesn't hit him first.

“The scales, all over the scales. I've got gills, man, GILLS! THEY'RE CUTTING ME!”

“I think he's gone nuts,” my neighbor says, disgusted.

I think I might agree. When my neighbor doesn't make a move to get help, I go inside and get the phone, throwing on a sweatshirt and a pair of shorts laying on the floor before going back out. He has moved now, further into the center of the road, still screaming.

“9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

“IT HURTS, IT HURTS!!!”

I try to keep my voice calm, even, as if this kind of thing is typical. “There is a man screaming in the middle of the road in front of my house.”

“Where do you live, ma'am?”

“125 Sanford. I think he might be on drugs.”

“The gills, the gills...” the man is whispering now, a hysteria rising in his tone.

“Why do you think he is on drugs?”

“He thinks he has gills. And scales.”

“We have officers on the way. Are you in any immediate danger?”

“No. I think he’s hurt.”

“Is he showing signs of injury?”

He is just crying now, rolling back and forth in a ball, mumbling things about scales and gills and rocks in his stomach.

“He was screaming about how much he hurts.”

So it’s snowing and I’m soaking wet standing on the side of the road with bare feet and this drugged up guy—part missing link, part Jesus—is screaming on the ground about how there are scales all over his body, that he is becoming a fish, and I think, fuck, maybe there is God. Stranger things have happened, like meteorites and stars exploding and people who are offended by Happy Holidays.

“Bombs Expanding”
Chelsea Lockwood

In 1964, my dad is born at Salem Hospital in South Jersey and my grandmother refuses to name the father on the birth certificate. Decades later, dying of slowly expanding dementia, she will tell me the name of this man that is my grandfather. She will mistake me for her sister and insist I take care of her son, “Maryanne, help Gary.”

In Vietnam, bombs are dropping and a soldier says around a broken cigarette, “What a dumb cooze.”

It’s 1986 and there are a group of guys sitting at a table on the mess deck of the USS Vincennes, floating serenely in the dark emptiness of the Persian Gulf off the coast of Iran. The air conditioner in the room isn’t working and the maintenance guys are cursing every tool they have as if it will motivate the metal to perform magic on the impassive machinery. Everyone in the room is sweating and it smells like salty skin, pickled onions on a sizzling surface. Walking through the boys side of the gym to the girls side, I would always smell this pungent funk of diving for balls, of screaming until red-faced, of exploding male exertion. It is an oppressive smell, but in the ship this is the only place to go. If this were a bar, or a cramped living room in a suburb, or a casino, there would be a smoky haze in the air. But this is war.

Five guys—tight skin, subdued muscles under sweat-damp t-shirts—sit in a circle playing Texas Hold ‘Em, talking girls and bombs.

“Nah, man. This chick, I’m tellin’ ya this chick was *fiiiine*. Tits like mangos, man.”

One laughs. “Mangos?”

“You know, perfect size, round and perky, mm. Anything bigger than a handful’s a waste of space.”

Another guy shuffles the deck. “Hear about that bullshit over the Dezhul bombing? Just got a letter a week back from my Dad, said the news was covering it like all these kids are dead and shit, like we’re the bad guys.”

“Bullshit, man.” Everyone agrees.

“Hey, anyone get the new Hustler?”

In Bab al-Azizia, American bombs are falling on other young men.

In Galveston, Texas, my dad is driving his truck into the Gulf of Mexico.

I’ve heard the story many times, so I can remember the scene even though I was only a long-off half-thought in my moms mind. My parents are the kind of young and beautiful I have only seen in pictures: thinner, firmer, and rampantly responsive to life. They fold up the lawn chairs hardly passing as furniture in the living room and toss them into the back of his brown 1980 Datsun pickup to go bajaing on the beach, a cooler of Budd bouncing between them. It’s a hot day, arid, windy, and the sand that isn’t weighed down by dirty Gulf coast water drifts like haphazard missiles into the air, targeting vulnerable eyes unshielded by sunglasses.

They meet up with friends, friends I know from Christmas cards and Facebook albums or from trips to Texas when I was little. They are so domestic now, but I imagine them thin and tan and swaggering with youth—and alcohol. Beer is sipped, weed is smoked, and bets are made. My dad cannot resist bets. He once drunkenly bet God would not strike him down in the middle of Hurricane Ernesto as we sat in a broken hot tub off the coast of North Carolina, shouting towards a furious sky “God doesn’t have *the balls* to strike me down!”

There are dunes on the beach, and the tires of my dad’s truck treads up and over shifting layers of

sand in an aimless expedition to unconsciously justify the energy of his youth. One dune is bigger than the others in its series, peeking just a little higher, standing out as a tempting target to prove macho abandon.

“Gary,” says Bill, a faceless friend who died in a drunk driving accident before Facebook and Christmas cards, “I bet you don’t have the balls to do that one.”

His disembodied finger points to the dune that has grown to massive size in my mind, but probably wasn’t much. The truck door slams, sand flies off the tires as it roars up the hill, a nervousness clenches my mom’s stomach as a precursor to the debilitating anxiety that will command her hands to twist open prescription bottles of Xanax. The truck is triumphantly airborne for the smallest of time before slamming back down, sliding on locked tires until finally skidding front-first into the salty, oily, brown water of the Gulf that sprays away from the hood in a foamy burst.

Laughter ensues, some nervous, some genuine.

Later, the girl that is now my mom says, “You should really wash the truck.”

The boy who is now my dad replies, “Nah, I’ll get it tomorrow, babe.”

They lay down together, go to sleep on their twin mattress on the floor, forget about the oxidizing properties of salt on metal. The truck rusts in expanding explosions of red-brown corrosion, stretching from the bottom up, paint chips and metal disappearing as it silently consumes. They spend the next few months sharing a two gear bike that years later will be stolen out of our shed by boys with nothing better to do.

It is 1991 and Operation Desert Storm is sweeping over another country built on sand. Paul—the soldier who will become my dad’s co-worker—is trying to stay cool, reclining with his feet up on the dash of a convoy Jeep, hat brim low over eyes squinted against dusty debris swirling like propelled targets. Fuzzy, named for his spanning layer of thick back hair, is sitting in the back whistling a riff of a Bruce Springsteen song; Tim is behind the Jeep, peeing into sand, a slow-moving surge of waste sliding over the dry ground down a ditch.

“God, it’s fucking hot,” Tim says.

Paul snorts. “It’s always fucking hot. That’s why they call it a desert.”

“But at night it’s fucking cold.”

“Want Fuzzy to keep ya warm at night?”

Fuzzy shoots Paul a conspiratorial grin, “*Hold me!*”

“Fuck off. *You* can come shake my dick for me.”

Paul smiles, “Not a chance, I’m an engaged man now.”

A few miles down the road, they are arguing about who would be the better lay: Michelle Pfeiffer or Demi Moore. A truck coming the opposite way swerves to avoid hitting a dirt-clad goat idling in the street. The heavy metal support beams the truck is carrying in its cargo break through the wooden sides of the truck bed and fall into the back of the Jeep, bombarding Fuzzy’s head with traumatic blows. He collides into a coma and dies fifty-three hours later, his death reported as “accident, not in combat”; no medals are sent to his mother in Delaware. The minute he dies, Paul and Tim are watching bombs detonate over towns in the distance, flashing light expanding in an exuberant burst into the dark sky, stretching violently outward before rubber-band-snapping back into darkness.

“But really,” Paul says over the bombs, “who swerves for a fucking goat?”

In New Jersey, my mom is dropping other bombs.

“I think I’m pregnant.”

This is met with silence (but not the stricken kind; it’s the adrenalized “don’t want to jinx it by hoping, can’t stop smiling, watching a little kid—my kid, our kid—try to eat spaghetti will be hilarious” kind of silence), and then methodic action: driving the new-used Honda to the Happy Harry’s (before it was bought by Walgreens), buying the pregnancy test (\$12.99 for the two pack), peeing on a stick, and

the excruciating two minute wait before the pink plus sign explodes silently on the screen, permanently positive. My mom cries, happy but twenty-three.

“I can’t believe I’m going to be a dad.”

It is 1998 and the US bombs the Al-Shifa (Arabic for “healing”) pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. The Clinton administration will claim it as retaliation; the Sudanese government will give us a bill for tens of thousands of lives.

In South Jersey, my dad and his coworkers at Ganes Chemicals (before it was bought by the Swiss company, Siegfried; Ganes is American for “rich family”) are in the lunch room, waiting for the plant supervisor to give them the tired night-shift version of the cheery, day-shift briefing on a chemical new to the plant.

“Alprostadiol,” the shift supervisor says monotonously to a half-listening room of men in navy-blue jump suits and scuffed work boots, “is a fast acting, protein based chemical used in drugs to treat erectile dysfunction. We are in a contract with Edex, which makes the injectable form.”

Some of them smirk at each other, trying to transmit unsaid jokes with their eyes.

“The SOPs for this drug will be handed out by your building supervisors when we begin production next week. Side effects of this drug can include...”

On the walk back to Dryer Building #3, my dad and his ex-solider-now-chemical-operator friend Paul listen as Joe Guinto mutedly explodes about the gutlessness of the men in the generations that followed his.

“Your generation don’t get it. Our friends died in a jungle, face down in mud, god damn Vietnam-mese comin’ outta the trees like fog. And what did they get? No respect. You had the easy war, one year, in and out like that.”

Paul is thinking about Fuzzy and the strange bruise patterns that burst in purple and blue like violent flowers across his bald head. He thought again, “A fucking goat.”

“Ah,” my dad says, “I can’t say anything against someone that sacrifices like that, life or not, that’s a lot to ask of, you know, not everyone is built for that and, well, maybe there was just more shit to do when we got out in the world.”

“I was ready to go,” Joe continues, scratching his salt-and-pepper moustache with two round, grubby fingers. “Told me I couldn’t, told me my heart wasn’t strong enough, had an irregular rhythm. I’m ready and my damn fuckin’ heart can’t handle it. Some of the skinny bastards they sent over there—they were just a catcher’s glove for shrapnel.”

Paul can’t stop thinking about it, “I mean really, who swerves into a car to miss a fuckin’ dirty goat?”

“Damn heart, couldn’t handle the bombs,” Joe says. “Would have loved to feel that boom in my chest, every time a bomb went off in one of those damn jungles.”

It is 2013 and we are dropping bombs on ugly linoleum.

White and light brown boxes, checkered squares in a dotted, fading pattern across the top of the counters in the kitchen. My mom hates that linoleum, with a piece chipped from the corner exposing the ugly, unstained wood underneath. That corner had been loose from the counter for years and my mom would always tell us, “Don’t play with it, you’re gonna make it worse.” It finally cracked off completely on New Years 2012 at 1:07 AM, when my Dad used it as a deterrent from bursting a fist uncontrollably towards the face of my friend, John. They argued about George Clooney; they argued because alcohol is an accelerator in the explosion, gasoline on an inferno, napalm in a Vietnamese jungle. Dad had lunged at John over the counter, chipping off the piece of linoleum in his uninhibited rage, with Randy Wysoki in the background saying, “You’re gonna come into a *man’s* house and treat a *man* that way?” For a while we used wood glue to stick the piece back on, but my mom gave up after

Sandra Welton crinkled her little nose at the sight of it (even though, “*She* has been halfway through an addition on her house for *five years*”).

It is three o’clock in the morning and I am staring at this missing piece of linoleum as my dad goes off about Bill Clinton and bombs and men playing cards in a Middle Eastern desert. My mom is passed out on the couch and he is yelling like she can’t hear us—and maybe she can’t. He is yelling about “the absolute fucking ball-lessness” of the Democrats.

“Bill Clinton never would have let that shit happen. He would have—he did!—stand up and say ‘I’m the damn President of the god damned United States and you’re gonna have to go through me to do *that* bullshit.’ Obama doesn’t have *the balls!* to say that to those Tea Party fucks.”

I sip my beer and listen.

“Ya know, we weren’t in the financial shitter when Clinton was in office, we weren’t dropping bombs all over the place when Clinton was around. And they impeached him. And for what? A *fucking blowjob?* It’s *insane.*”

“He dropped bombs,” I say, quieter than him.

“Well, yeah, they all drop bombs,” he says and sips his beer.

The music playing mutedly from the speaker on the counter fills in the silence, Elvis Presley implanting his sound into our minds, stretching towards us over years of death: *And his hunger burns.* I think about music as a packaged, three-minute thirty-second arrangement of explosions. The food from the party hours before is sitting between us; congealed cheese dip, the crumbs of broken chips, and grotesque, half-eaten, cold buffalo wings sticking out of red hot sauce with a clotted film forming on the surface. The debris of beer cans and lipstick smudged wine glasses clutters the stove top. Our kitchen looks more like a filthy frat house, a binge drinking war zone, than a place where well-adjusted adults raise well-adjusted girls. I think about cleaning it up, but remain reclined in my chair, not wanting to interrupt this stretching silence undercut by Elvis’ low narration: *Do we simply turn our heads and look the other way?*

“War is weird,” my dad says in the middle of the silence. And I know he is thinking that he could have dropped some of those bombs and that he didn’t, and I know he is wondering what is worse: that he could have, or that he didn’t. I cannot look away from this moment, but I cannot understand it either, not fully. The best I can do is sit, listen to music about young men dying of poverty and bravado in a ghetto, and try to understand.

I can’t tell if it’s because I’m drunk, but I realize in that moment silence is a series of very long explosions that are stretched out across spaces that cannot be filled with sound. So we sit in our silence, with all our little bombs expanding between us and into the alcohol tinted air of the humiliated kitchen. There are real bombs exploding, too. There are boys sitting in the desert right now, the desert or places like it; they are carrying bombs, and they will always be there, we are told. In that shifting landscape, they are as essential and numerous as the sand displaced by wind, covering over the layers of the others they are indistinguishable from. This sand is carried back—back from deserts, back from construction zones in a ghetto at 3 AM, back from Texas beaches bordering the Gulf of Mexico—back from some boy’s past, carried into some man’s future along with noiseless bombs that will detonate randomly throughout their lives, creating silent distances between them and everyone else.

Somewhere in a desert, a father is exploding and a daughter is trying to understand.

“Skinless”
Lindsey Quakenbush

Elliot wished, years after, that she had looked. She wished she turned around and watched from start to finish, no matter how frightening, and articulated the confusion later, the distress, the fear tightening inside her chest. Her mother would have known what to do. She would have sat beside her in the damp rot of the ground and taught her names of the pinecones littering the forest floor. Yet Elliot never moved from that tree. She stared up at the sky through the bristled canopy of pine needles overhead, listening to the rumble of her father’s voice overlap with the tearing, the slicing, the quartering, the crunch and pop of sockets sucking around bone.

When the stag first went down, her father held out the hunting knife and asked if she wanted to help field dress the carcass. She took it from him, giddy at first, excited at the prospect of the new experience, intrigued by the idea of dismemberment.

“Remove the skin on the legs,” her father said, pointing. “Start at the back, and work your way forward.” A pair of wide, dark sunglasses shielded his eyes, and a blaze orange cap shaded the rest of his face. His white grin came out startling and bright in comparison, framed by pinkish lips drying and peeling in the sharp air. He was laced toe to neck in green-brown camouflage.

Elliot pierced the skin where he indicated, at the soft junction at the top of the back leg, where the inside of the inner thigh met the groin. Cutting was tough work for her small hands, her short arms, as she sliced up from the inner thigh, to the very top of the cloven hooves. There she carved a circle around the foot, like a tiny pinkish anklet. No blood yet. The fur released thick, musky odors and small particles that floated in the air around her and made her sneeze. The short fibers ran smooth beneath her gloves, latex blue.

Her father showed her what to do next. He peeled back a corner of flesh from the crooked, T-shaped incision she made around the hoof, and began to cut away from the muscle beneath. The hide curled back from the leg as he repeated the process, all the way down the limb, peeling back the skin as far as it could go and skinning it further by making long, quick slices between the hide and the fat beneath. A few spirals of steam rolled off from the exposed flesh in lazy moist curls. When he reached the base of the leg, her father handed her the knife, flashing another grin.

“Your turn.”

She skinned the other side of the limb, one careful cut at a time. Still no blood, only the rosy and purple tones of raw flesh glimpsed through opalescent sheets of cream-yellow cartilage and fat, laced together with veins like little spiders. When she reached the bottom she stood back and surveyed her work. The stag’s leg looked like a tall, open book with pink pages, parted down the middle, two pale covers flapping at the sides.

Her father stepped behind the leg, holding the topmost corners of the pale hide in his bare fists, smiling.

“Now’s the fun part,” he said. “Now we pull.”

He wrenched his arms down, taking the skin with it. It tore away clean as a pant leg, parting with a wet, sucking rasp. The leg beneath the hide was white and fibrous. He stripped the skin to the knee, and as he worked the appendage rose straight into the air, slender and pale, bobbing like an aimless compass needle, pointing towards the sky.

In later years she reflected on the memory and decided it was comparable to watching porn for the first time, or learning about sex. Staring at the naked flesh of the stag’s exposed shank, Elliot felt like a voyeur and a thief. A slow, bitter shame rose inside of her, a horror and a terror.

She turned to her father.

“I’m done.”

She handed the knife to him, still bloodless, clean and bright. She sat at the base of a tree with

her back turned, with the trunk between her and her father. She listened to him cut through the stomach wall, the slosh of intestines and blood; the muffled rip as he pulled the anus out from the inside; the dull click and pluck of the knife as he cut through the esophagus, releasing the creature's organs onto the forest floor; the wooden crack of joints as he dismantled the body one segment at a time, and bound the meat in cloth to deter the flies, and hung the pieces to cool.

All the while he spoke to her, tried to ease her discomfort, coax her back into the open.

"First time I skinned an animal," he said, "I vomited all over. Your grandpa was so mad. He smacked me upside the head!" A pause. "Not in a bad way, I mean. Just, pawing." He laughed. It was a muffled sound, with a slight echo. She imagined him immersed in the red cavern of the stag's empty body, reduced to a pair of legs emerging from a pale gray belly, split from end to end like a gaping mouth. The vision was funny. She started giggling, and then stopped herself.

She tilted her head up until she felt the tree bark grate against the back of her scalp and tried to discern spruce from redwood in the tangle of branches above. Behind her, on the other side of the tree, her father grunted and groaned over the prickle of nylon against wood—hefting the meat into the air, she knew, hand over hand. The branches above made patterns like veins and the fat of the deer was lukewarm and slippery on her gloves. After removing the gloves she wanted to wipe her hands, but was afraid. She was afraid it would stain her clothes.

* * *

He kept the cabin for the rest of his life, in the hopes of one day returning. Most of her young life she begged him to move, find someplace where the roads were level and even and it took ten minutes to drive to the grocery store instead of an hour, and she could ride the bus for two dollars and fifty cents to meet her friends at the mall. He held fast to the mountainside for twenty more years after she moved out. He hunted until his knees could no longer carry him over the roots and tumbled earth. He split cords of wood for the stove and repaired the roof and shoveled snow from the twelve-foot driveway until his shoulders became too stiff to wield an axe or hold a hammer steady. Old age forced him away, urged him nearer to civilization.

When a move became necessary he called to let her know.

"The doctor went nuts at me." There was a rush and a crackle in her ear as he snorted onto the phone receiver. "I trip once, and they think I'm going to die when I hit the ground. I'm no glass figurine. It's not like I threw myself off a cliff, or anything."

"Glad you're okay, dad." She was at her apartment, boiling potatoes for dinner.

"Yeah I got a new place now, down in Louisville." More crackling static as he exhaled onto the receiver. "All moved in. Good view, clear shot all the way to Longs Peak." He chuckled. The potatoes rolled in the pot on the stove in her kitchen. Even over vast distance between them, his resentment was palpable. As was his loneliness and his yearning.

"I'll check on the old place," she said. She never did.

* * *

The cabin was dark, old, and sodden when she pulled up to it at the end of the driveway, the windows so full of dirt she couldn't see in or out. The roof let everything in—wind, sun. Water. Every room was soaked with the previous night's rain. Inside the dust matted into a thin pulpy sheen along the walls, jumbled with the papery forms of dry leaves and grass, brittle pine needles. She looked in every room and touched nothing, careful where she stepped. Little seemed changed from when she left for college ten years ago. Through the decay she could see the familiar features of her childhood home, each piece of furniture deliberately placed, the same marks left in the ceiling, the same dings in the walls and scratches in the wallpaper.

The other guests at the funeral reception went to his new home, the quiet, one-story brick of a building with one bathroom, one kitchen, no television, and two bedrooms—one, meant for Elliot, that was never used. Yet she knew her father's home remained in the cabin. His essence, his words, his

scent and texture—all of him existed there, in the moaning wood planks and the doors too big for the doorjambs and the dangerous warped floorboards.

Only the kitchen remained clean. She perused the drawers and cupboards, coaxing them open with the very tips of her fingers to peer inside each for a single, brief moment. Her father had stacked the dishes in the cabinets according to size and color, folded the towels into squares and left them by the kitchen sink. Beneath her feet, the floor tiles gleamed white through the brackish rainwater pooling in the corners of the room.

She found her mother's picture hanging on the inside of one of the cabinet doors, warped and faded. When left open, it faced the doorway to the living room, where her father's chair stood on thick, creaking legs, swollen and darkened from the downpour. She examined her mother's image, twisted and bent behind the glass frosted over with grime. She was a slender woman with a broad jaw. Her hair was pulled back into a tight braid, tugging the skin at the edges of her face. She showed none of her teeth as she smiled to the camera. A thick, hairy arm draped across her shoulders, gleaming with sweat, reaching into the image from beyond the frame. It ended in a large hand clasped around a can of soda; a gold band glinted from the ring finger on the hand.

Elliot remembered that trip, that long, silent night. She lay awake between her parents in the sleeping bag as they slept, listening to their breath fall in and out of sync, staring through the mesh ceiling at the stars above. Her father and mother each slept with one hand resting on her belly, and she felt pinned on the ground, like a butterfly beneath a pane of glass. The salt in the air had made her dry and thirsty and the wind blew in sporadic gusts. Every few minutes she looked between her parents and wondered why they slept so far apart.

She closed the cabinet door, leaving it ajar as she moved out into the living room, sending slow, wide ripples across the buckled floors with each step. A couch was pushed to the wall, adjacent to the kitchen doorway. It crouched low to the floor, bloated and heavy with rain. Seeing it made her feel heavy and choked, and she turned her head away, to the windows stippled in mud.

* * *

She remembered a woman's strong, slender hands easing her upright in bed, cupping her underside and carrying her to the front of the cabin, where they lowered her onto the couch. In the complete darkness before sunrise, her mother stroked her hair and spoke to her, her voice wide and low against her young ears. Her mother parted the strands and wove a long, elegant braid down the middle of her back. She told her a story she didn't understand until later in life.

"His name was Drew," her mother began. "But your real daddy lives here. I wanted you to know." He lived in the city and studied leaves and bugs. He knew her mother when she started seeing her dad. After her father proposed, they slept together.

"I was scared," her mother said. The note in her voice frightened Elliot. She sat extra still on the couch cushions, as her mother tugged and tucked away her hair. "But you galvanized me. Standing at the end of that aisle, knowing I was pregnant—I felt so sure I knew what I wanted."

When she ran out of hair to fondle, her mother wrapped a hair band around it and smoothed it down over her back. She leaned in and pressed her lips to the back of Elliot's small head.

"I did it all for you, Ellie," she whispered into her little ear. "I couldn't let you live with him."

Her mother sent her to bed after that and tried to leave, but her father must have known. He must have waited.

When the rumbling started, Elliot crept out of her room and watched from the darkened hallway. Her parents were nothing more than shapes, impressions in the blue haze of pre-dawn light. The rumbling came from her father. He spoke in a growl as her mother stood like a stone pillar before him, unflinching. Then their voices softened, receded, until she couldn't hear them at all. They bowed their heads together, as though in prayer, looking at something her father held in his hands—a box, thick and heavy, which clunked woodenly as he pressed it into his wife's arms. She pushed it away. It hit the

floor with a bang and its contents slid out from the open lid into the thin light from the window. A small cascade of knives rattled over the floorboards; knives for carving, hunting, cutting, decoration. Every last one, gifted from her father to her mother throughout their years of marriage. The blades glinted like tiny fish under water.

Her mother stepped through the front door and let it fall shut behind her. Her father still stood at the window at the front of the house when she returned, hours later, dressed for school.

She kept the braid in her hair for weeks, as long as she could, until the hair band was so matted and snarled that her father had to cut it off. He used her mother's Swiss army knife and threw the severed ends into the wood fire stove. She watched her own hair flash and curl, twitching spider-like in the inferno, right before he closed the door of the stove. He used the same knife to slice apples into wedges that she could suck and chew at lunchtime, and again at night to stab empty soda cans and fling them into the blue recycling bin.

A sharpened blade became his only tool. Blunted edges became bottle openers, pointed tips tightened small screws. One day, he took his daughter hunting. He never touched the knives again.

* * *

Elliot examined every room of her father's cabin before exploring the hallway, sloshing through water and mud as the floor moaned beneath her weight. She lingered outside his bedroom for a long time before stepping inside. The bed sheets heaped against the footboard in a pile of grey and white. The mattress sank in towards the center as though pulled into a giant, gasping mouth. Mold black as charcoal clung to the corners of the box spring, filling the room with the scent of salt and rot. The dresser stood crooked, at an angle with the wall, with the drawers pulled out and laid across the floor, filled with water that rippled with each step she took.

The memory of her father's voice bellowed in her mind, his explosive, thunderous laughter. She remembered watching him shamble through the halls of his house like a bear, chasing her as she giggled and screamed. His shadow always appeared before him, huge, hulking, and she used to scramble under the bed in his room to hide. She would curl up with her hands over her mouth and nose as he lumbered through the door, stooped, arms bent and thick as saplings, his nostrils flared wide above his thick, wiry beard.

"I smell a little girl," he would say. "I'm a hungry mountain monster, and I'm going to eat her up!"

After her mother left, a quiet fear used to grip her as she watched him move about the room, the sense that he was a stranger, a foreigner in her life. He didn't seem real. She hid until he started walking normally, calling her by her name, apologizing. Often she scrambled out and apologized, too, although neither of them seemed to know what for.

Elliot surveyed her father's room from where she stood, never moving, turning on the spot. A black shoebox rested on the floor beside the bed, dripping at the corners. She recognized the magenta lettering, the smooth-edged logo. She bought a pair of red stilettos in that box. Her father threw them out. A waste of good money, he said.

She stepped towards the box and peeled back the sodden lid. Mounded against the inside wall were a handful of old knives. Not kitchen knives, but utility knives, and pocketknives, and folding knives, and spring-assisted blades.

She left the house with the slippery mass of cardboard and metal tucked beneath her arm, trailing yellow water all the way to her car. She lumped her jacket on the passenger seat and set the box on top to catch the flow before pulling out. She left the rest of the cabin to rot.

She kept knives in a small display case her boyfriend made for her using a boxed do-it-yourself kit for beginners with pre-cut pieces and glue. He put a mirror on the back wall, and glass shelves inside, and glass windows in the hinged doors. The glass rattled and shook each time she opened the doors, every tremble of movement made it chatter.

Some nights she crept from her room—just like she was six again—and opened the case. She lined the knives up in a row on her coffee table by size, unsheathed them one by one. She held them. Touched them. Tried to remember where she had seen them last, made up stories about where they came from, adventures her parents never had. Beneath her touch each knife became an extension of their hands, forever reaching into her existence—each blade a mirror through which two strangers could watch their daughter move.

“The Black Feather”**Alanna Robertson**

I came over a rise on the hill on a summer’s day, and there it was. It spiraled down, the wind shifting it so that it tilted from left to right and back again as it slowly fell to earth. I watched the sunlight try to glint off of the vanes, but it was absorbed into the coal-black depths. I wanted to touch it, to reach out and caress the silkiness I knew would cover it from quill to rachis, but I hesitated. I felt that if I touched it I would be disturbing something primal, something that would turn feral and maul me at its first chance.

As I reached the final peak of the hill I paused to watch the feather continue its corkscrew descent to the dead ground. No birds had flown overhead, nor was there a caw to be heard, yet the feather was there, reasonless, emotionless, unthinking. A sudden gust of wind, carrying the smell of ripe carrion on it, wafted into my face as it dragged the feather with it. I watched in astonishment as it gently alighted on my shoulder, its presence sending a wave of shock through me as I took on its burden.

It lounged there awhile peacefully, almost as if it could actually gain warmth from basking in the feeble noonday sun. My feet crunched on the brown, dead grass as I shifted my considerable weight to my other foot. The dying sun spilled red upon the field, its weak rays straining to provide its usual warm embrace to the world. The feather shifted on my shoulder, as if in anticipation of an event I knew nothing of. It sent a tingle up my spine, causing my pupils to dilate abnormally as a bitter taste coated my tongue.

I looked around dazedly; the sun had died into grey, leaving me alone but for the feather on this barren, God-forsaken hill as my voice ripped its way out of my throat. A wind blew, this time from behind me, and carried the feather up off of my shoulder like an unanswered prayer. It began spiraling back up the way it came, invisible hands grabbing it and violently shoving it upwards as I felt something crawl up my back, its frosty grip snaking over my shoulders and down into my rapidly-freezing heart. It couldn’t enter somewhere already frozen, so it trailed up over my chest and neck and settled in my eyes.

The droplets of icy water froze on my face as they trickled down my cheeks, all warmth gone from my world the moment the sun had died. I thought my life had stopped along with it, but no...it was still there, merely changed beyond recognition. The light that had once filled my eyes was gone, a pitch-black settling over the world and covering me in a storm of feathers. They caressed me, growing on me until I had become a crow, my flesh beginning to stink of carrion as it melted off of me in globs. I tried to scream, but the water on my face had frozen my mouth shut as I struggled to breathe. I wasn’t me any longer.

“Nothing Serious”
Shanna Salvador

There were several things Xandra wanted to get done today, and as she sipped her jasmine green tea and looked out of the bay window in the living room, she thought about them. She could touch up her résumé, clean her room, search for apartments so she could *finally* move out of her parents’ house, or even make herself a Caesar wrap for lunch. The most tempting thing, however, was to continue to sit here and do absolutely nothing on this lazy Sunday afternoon. Yup. That last one was the best idea of all.

Whatever she would have decided on doing would be left undone anyway, because as she swirled her spoon into the teacup she heard the quick double vibration of a text message arriving on her cell phone. Katya, the Angora cat, jumped with a start at this sudden disruption of her nap. The queen glared at the cell phone, was tempted to touch it, but dared not deign herself to do so. Instead she haughtily sauntered away toward the kitchen, where such disturbances would not disturb her.

“Why are you such a bitch, Katya?” Xandra said teasingly, reaching out for her phone. The cat paused for a moment upon hearing her name, but then continued to walk away.

The text message was from Jay, her fuck buddy for the past month. ‘Plans today?’ it said.

Xandra typed back, ‘Not a one.’ The teacup becoming far less interesting now, she set it aside on the windowsill, and waited for Jay to respond. She began to play with the third hoop earring of six that punctuated her left ear. The phone vibrated again.

‘Wanna chill?’

Chill. It was their euphemism for sex – as it was certainly the euphemism for plenty of other 18-25s. It was the not-really polite way of asking, without actually having to say so, while making it clear to the other person that that’s all it was going to be: sex.

A lady might have declined such an invitation, but do those even exist anymore? Certainly Xandra wasn’t one of them. Ladies never seem to have any fun, what with their standards and manners and uptight hair-dos too proud to spill down to the shoulders. And for all intents and purposes Jay was a good enough guy besides. No, they had never formally dictated the parameters of their so-called relationship, but he seemed to understand this was what it was, and it wasn’t what it wasn’t. He was polite as far as casual lovers go, letting her leave with dignity the next morning, even offering to drive her back home if they had gone to his place for the night. He certainly didn’t attempt anything intense like hand-holding. Or asking her out for coffee.

It wasn’t that Xandra was turned off by relationships completely; at the moment she just wanted to take a break from them – any prior attempt at anything serious had ended with amusing failure. If she wanted to tell a story or two that guaranteed a laugh, she could talk about Rob, the clown who should’ve worked at the circus because he juggled Xandra and some other girls like three unknowing bowling pins. Or she could talk about Jordan, the boy who was far more interesting drunk and painfully boring anyway else. And there were plenty of other Toms, Dicks, and Harrys (or that hairy dick named Tom who was a night in Burbank that should remain a suppressed memory) that could be included in that list too. She definitely needed a break from all the nonsense that came with dating. She didn’t need a man anyway; boys were silly; there were plenty of other fish in the sea, and blah, blah, blah etc.

What she won’t say, though, was that choosing these boys was her intention all along. It was the pattern in which Xandra functioned. It wouldn’t make sense for her to want a serious relationship, because she took nothing else in her life seriously. While old enough to be a college senior, she only had the credits of a second-semester sophomore because it was easier to mess around than to show up for a class she didn’t even like anyway. And while her dad constantly fought with her about how she needed to get her shit together in school or bother to get a fucking job so she could move out of his goddamn house already, she always threw it in his face that *he was the exact same way when he was her age!* He was just allowed to get away with it because it was the fucking Seventies and everyone was fucking

around and fucking each other to the twang of acoustic guitars that tangled with their long goddamn hippie hair. That's how he had met mom, remember? And there mom would be in the kitchen, sighing and rubbing her temples because she didn't need this headache after a sixteen-hour shift at the hospital. No one ever got mad at *Alex* because at least *Alex* was up in San Fran being a good fucking undergrad and the overall blessed angel child. He may have been doing exactly what Xandra was doing down here – cross-fading quality kush with piss-poor alcohol – but the only difference was he was doing it in a dorm room at SF State and Xandra was usually at some rando house party in Silver Lake. And it was that little difference that made him the good twin, and *apparently*, her the evil one.

So she was like, fuck it! She was young. She could afford to get lost until maturity yanked her down. She wasn't worried. Well, she was worried a little bit, but it pissed her off to not know where to begin to get her act right. Like her dad, she was stubborn, so if he wanted her to pull herself together, all the more reason not to do it.

Xandra just wanted to have fun and a body of convenience to match – and conveniently his name was Jay. He had taken some miscellaneous GenEd class with her at PCC, and that was the icebreaker he had used when he asked for her number at Zeppelin – the hookah bar on Washington. So after a little hookah, a little hook-up, there it was hook, line, and sinker: she reeled herself a decent enough catch to toy with at her fancy. Truthfully she didn't know much about him, mostly just his apartment in the dark and the backseat of his car, but she had no desire to learn much else. Nor did he. And if there was ever a time to enjoy the completely selfish realm of random stranger fucking, this was the age to do it and do it often.

What confused Xandra at the moment, though, was that Jay was asking to hang out on a Sunday. Fridays, sure; Saturdays, most definitely; Thursdays, it happens; but on a Sunday? That was off. It didn't mean she didn't feel like hanging out – nothing makes a Sunday lazier than casual sex. With the house empty, she could have him come straight over and stay awhile, but there was always the risk of her family coming home early from church. She seriously needed to fucking move out.

Because she didn't need to take too much care in getting herself ready – as Jay was not the guy to get ready for – she figured she could get to his apartment in Downtown within the next twenty minutes. She told him so in her next text. 'Oh,' said his response, almost instantly after she pressed send, 'I was thinking of picking you up.'

'Really? Why?'

'I mean, I'm in the neighborhood...'

Who *really* says that? This wasn't dropping by for a quick spot of tea, borrowing a cup of sugar, and catching up on the latest gossip from the rotary club.

'Oh, well, that's cool I guess.'

'I can be there in ten minutes.'

'Aight.'

'Kk.'

Xandra caught a whiff of conventionality in this exchange – like he was picking her up for a date – and she wasn't particularly fond of it. Katya had come back from the kitchen in time to see the funny look on her servant's face, and she tilted her head up at Xandra. "Fuck if I know," she said to the cat. Then again, this could all be coincidental. Pasadena wasn't really out of his way, and obviously if he was coming around in the next ten minutes he was expecting her to look like shit. She could attempt to get her pretty on, but she wasn't making any promises.

Unconsciously, though, she did try a little for Jay. When she went upstairs to her room she shimmied on a purple maxi dress and combed her hair. She had had it in a bun all morning so the normally straight texture was tricked into acting wavy, and she preserved the curls by working in some mousse. Her hair was a bright brown, like hot chocolate mixed with cinnamon, and lucky for her it was behaving. She went to the bathroom to quickly brush her teeth and then check her face for any remnants

of toothpaste or eye crud she had failed to rub away. She slathered some BB cream over her face as a quick and easy makeup substitute, and upon deciding she was halfway decent she made sure the six piercings on each of her ears had an earring, and that she had rings on all of her fingers.

The reason why she wore so many accessories was out of habit now, but when she was younger it was a way of shielding herself. She used to be shy, and having rings to play with on her fingers was an effective way to hold off small talk with other people. Stick her in a room with dozens of people now and no one would ever know she was a wallflower at some point; she was quite successfully the funky girl that wore a lot of accessories and fluttered like any capable social butterfly.

She was practically ready with three minutes to spare. With the extra time she thought she had, she was going to put on a little mascara, but a knock on the door decided that no, she wouldn't have time for that. "Come on in," she called downstairs.

She heard the door open and then shut promptly afterward. "Where are you, Zany?"

God, that nickname. He never called her anything else and she hated him for it, but it grew on her just like he did, and now she didn't mind. No one else was allowed to use the name though.

"I'm upstairs, let me just get my shoes and I'll be ready. There's water or whatever in the fridge – beer too if you want."

"I'm fine, thanks."

Xandra's outfit would be complete if she could find her other shoe (they were the comfiest black wedges on the planet, and if she was the athletic type, she would even consider going for a jog in them – of course, providing she found the complete pair).

"You ok up there?"

"Yeah, I just can't find my other shoe."

"Well you wanna come down here and say hi to me first?"

She came down the stairs, holding the lonely wedge. Jay was sitting right where she had been at the bay window, and the cat had joined him, resting on his lap. He was absent-mindedly petting her while he checked his phone. When he looked up and saw Xandra he put the phone back in his pocket. "I think it likes me."

She rolled her eyes at Katya, and stroked her behind the ear. "At least somebody does," she said with a wink. Jay raised his brow and studied Xandra momentarily.

When she first met him, he was just another standard L.A. hipster. She rolled her eyes because of it, even scoffing, "Let me guess, you work at Urban Outfitters?" thinking that he was some pretentious prick that claimed to know bands before everyone else did, or that he wore glasses with non-prescription lenses for the look of it. Neither turned out to be true. He didn't just buy a vintage-looking record player to play his newly bought re-issued Beatles record – he found a broken 1958 RCA Victor at a garage sale and fixed it up himself so he could play his old jazz records, and he was actually nearsighted and wore his glasses when he was too lazy to put on his contacts. Despite discovering these pleasant surprises, she chose to cling to the idea he was just another hipster, and therefore just another silly boy like the other ones.

Putting Katya down, he stood up to kiss Xandra, possessively latching onto her lips while remaining meltingly sweet. How he could be so rough – yet so affectionate – she didn't know, but she liked thinking about it in the moment. And that made the moment last longer. Everything her body did committed her to savoring the kiss, so her hand lost grip of the shoe she was holding.

When it fell to the ground the two abruptly stopped. Bending to pick it up, Jay shook his head. "This is the shoe you can't find the pair to?"

"Mmhm."

"It's in my car, Zany."

"Why would one of my shoes be in your car?"

"So you don't remember then?"

“Obviously not.”

“It was like a while ago, like last week – you were *so* drunk. I was dropping you off here, remember?”

She shrugged.

“You started to take off your clothes?”

“Umm... no, I so did not.”

“Umm... yeah, you so did.”

“God, what did I do? Or try to do?”

“Well we didn’t actually do anything – I dropped you off, and was handing you the shoe when you said, ‘Keep it, I don’t need it!’”

“I choose not to believe I was that stupid, Jay.”

“Either way, Zany, your shoe’s in my car,” he grinned. And that smile of his was like a smirk that curved to the side, as if he had just gotten away with taking cookies out of the jar and was pretty damn proud of it – and after a round of holy shit that was amazing sex, that’s the smile a girl definitely wanted to see on a boy’s face.

She wanted to slap it off of him right now, though. But instead she leaned her head on his chest, frowning at herself. In a surprising move of tenderness he kissed her forehead. “Well if it makes you feel any better, I thought it was cute.”

Against her will, Xandra blushed, and feeling the color rush to her cheeks she stiffened. “We should get out of here before someone comes home.”

They left in Jay’s jalopy of a ’76 Charger; and it was pretty beat-up indeed, having been his crazy uncle Mike’s first before he gave it to Jay. He had since dented the car with his own adventures, and the leather on the backseat had scratches on it. The scratches were fairly new, having been etched by Xandra herself and when scrutinized closely, a few flecks of the teal nail polish she had been wearing were still in the cracks. She had apologized for the scratches, but secretly she was proud they were there.

“Here you go, Cinderella,” he said when he reached under his seat and revealed the sole mate to the black wedge she loved so much.

“Ah – thanks! So are we heading straight to your place?”

“Cuttin’ right to the chase, huh?”

“Not like we ever do anything else.”

He started the car, but hesitated a little when he grabbed the steering wheel. “Right, right,” and then he pulled away from the curb, and left it at that. He grabbed the aviators that were on the visor, and put them on to disguise whatever look was on his face. The hesitance didn’t go unnoticed, but she said nothing of it.

She began to constantly change the radio stations while they drove, mostly because she couldn’t think of anything to talk about. They never talked much outside the realm of “I want to bone you,” and even if those were the words she was aching to say, it was strange to say such things on a sober Sunday afternoon. She settled on leaving the radio on KROQ as he merged onto the freeway. “*California is burning like a cigarette, let me burn with you,*” the speakers ached, and the song bled into the air as Xandra attempted conversation.

“What’re you doing in South Pas anyway?”

“Just hanging out. I like the boba at Tea Spots.”

“On Colorado?”

He nodded. “I should’ve gotten you something, sorry.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t need to.”

“If you want I could find a Starbucks.”

“I’m good.”

“It won’t be a big deal. There’s pretty much one every –”

“Jay,” she interrupted, “it’s totally cool.” There was a puzzled look on her face as she looked out the window – this was odd, him being so sweet. She couldn’t quite decide if she liked it.

“Gimme a cigarette?” he asked quickly. “It’s in my pocket.”

Xandra liked this game. She stuck her hand in the pocket of his dusty gray corduroys and “searched for his pack of cigarettes” – but when he felt the exact location of her naughty hand he jerked a little and swerved the car slightly to the left before putting it back in place. “Whoa, shit! In my shirt, Zany! The cigarettes’re in my shirt!”

“Oh!”

She noticed the obvious slender rectangle of a cigarette case in his denim shirt pocket. She took a cigarette out of it and stuck it in his mouth. “Sorry.”

The cigarette flopped up and down while he spoke. “I think I have a lighter in the glove box.” She lit his cigarette and then put the lighter back, and then proceeded to play with the silver spoon ring on her thumb. She twisted it over and over again – just like she used to when she was younger – feeling a little silly for attempting to cop-a-feel.

But it really wasn’t her fault for being a little frisky. Normally such advances were welcome! She couldn’t count how many times she had been questionable at a stoplight or forced Jay to pullover to the shoulder of a freeway or to the curb of a street because she was feeling naughty. If anything, he was being the weird one here. Why was everything so different today with him? Didn’t he want her to touch her? The confidence she had was crumbling slowly into self-doubt, and the feeling wasn’t welcome.

“You ok, Zany?” he said, casting a brief sideways glance.

“Me?”

“Yeah, what’s up? ...I don’t think you should feel embarrassed for–”

“What? No, no, whatever – it’s cool.”

“I mean I just honestly needed a cigarette...”

“Jay, oh my god, it’s totally fine!”

“You’re acting kinda funny about it.”

“Wait – you think I’m the one acting weird?”

When she heard the words leave her mouth and reach her ears, she then realized she hadn’t said a thing earlier about how she thought he was acting strange. And he caught it too.

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“Ok, I believe you,” he said, in a sing-songy tone that meant he didn’t believe her. In silence he took a few conscientious puffs of the cigarette. They were about two stoplights away from his building when he rolled up his shirt sleeves. Underneath the tattoos she saw a hint of tension on his arms and his knuckles were a little pale from clenching the steering wheel, even though he looked as cool as ever. The aviators didn’t help her figure out his expression; they just made him look like a Ray Ban ad.

She never paused to really look closely at his tattoos before; in fact she had dismissed them as another part of his hipster costume. But now, she actually thought of them as having a personal meaning to Jay, so she began to study them. His left arm’s tattoos were all in color, the ink collage comprising of peacock feathers on his upper arm that peeked-out from underneath the part of his shirt that he had rolled up, as well as an angel’s wing at the bend of his arm, and a devil’s horn that curled around the wing and ended on his wrist – miscellaneous filigree filled the in-between spaces, as well as other tattoos she couldn’t quite see from where she sat. The arm closer to her, his right arm, was entirely in grayscale. Mostly the designs were abstracted tribal ones, and by tribal that meant a mixed variety of Eastern and Western themes that somehow merged together. The tribal designs were inked around a single quote, and she tried to read it aloud.

“For the... For the act of...”

Jay looked at his arm briefly, recognizing she was reading it. His eyes went back on the road, and

he recited the complete quote to her after he put his cigarette between his fingers: "For the act of love is a confession. One lies about the body but the body does not lie about itself; it cannot lie about the force which drives it."

The next thing she would have done was ask him where he had taken the quote from, but she didn't want to know. She liked to think that the quote belonged solely to Jay, and she wanted it to exist in her mind as just that. "Oh, wow... That's actually beautiful."

Nonchalantly, he played it off as if he chose it as an afterthought. "I thought so, yeah." A pause to flick the cigarette ash out the window and then, "We'll be at my place soon."

When they parked in front of his apartment building and they got out of the car, he slid his arm around her waist. His grip was firm, and through her dress she could feel each one of his fingertips. He smashed the cigarette butt into the outdoor ashtray and popped a mint in his mouth.

"Fuck, I've really missed you," he said in her ear as he pushed the elevator's up button. With his sunglasses now resting on his head, she could feel his covetous eyes all over her. He began to greedily kiss her cheek, her neck, her shoulder.

"There he is," she laughed. When the elevator doors opened he picked her up and pressed her against the wall. Intentionally, he didn't push the sixth floor button to his floor.

"What? Did I go somewhere?" he breathed haphazardly as he pressed against her in a steady, rhythmic grind. See? There was nothing to worry about! This was like the last time and the time before. He was needy and she was greedy, and everything was just fine.

She wrapped her legs around him and began to unfasten the buttons on his shirt. "Never mind, it's nothing." His hand hiked up her dress higher and higher, and her shoulder strap started to slip down. They petted heavily, but before anything entirely scandalous happened there was a ding indicating someone was about to step inside the elevator. "Oh, shit!" Xandra giggled, and they tried their best to put themselves together. Jay moved Xandra in front of him and rested his chin on her shoulder, his arms enveloping her. They both began to laugh uncontrollably and as the elevator door opened she said, "Settle down, soldier."

"Tell him that," he mumbled, pressing himself against her.

"Behave!" She pressed the number six button since the nonsense had to temporarily halt.

A girl, no older than sixteen, had walked into the elevator, and pressed the number seven. She was dressed in vintage clothing, as if she stepped right off the *Pleasantville* set. She clasped her hands behind her back, and there was a glint of a promise ring on her finger. Xandra instinctually rolled her eyes, but there was a part of her that thought it was sweet. Maybe she shouldn't hate on this girl too much. She was just a teenager. She was allowed to be romantic.

In the corner of her eye she caught Jay looking at the ring too.

Generic elevator jazz hummed until the sixth floor dinged, and when the doors divided they both spilled out and turned the corner and down the hall to Jay's room. She pinched his ass as he fumbled to find the key to his apartment door.

"You need to calm down, Zany," he said with that poisonous grin.

Oh, but she couldn't! Licking her lips, she felt the anticipation rising in her. His anticipation was already full-grown and she was dying to unbutton his pants and get her hands on it! Neither of them had noticed Jay's sleeping roommate on the living room couch in front of the television; they b-lined to Jay's bedroom and tumbled inside. He tossed his sunglasses to the floor and hastily took off his shirt, kissing Xandra all the while as she slid the zipper of his pants down. The rest of his clothes came off down to the boxer-briefs, and she raised her arms up so he could peel her dress away. When she would have dropped her arms, he instead grabbed her hands and he intertwined their fingers together as he lowered her onto the mattress. It was the first time they ever held hands.

Something in her face must have expressed this shock, and he saw it clearly. "What is it?" he asked.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Is everything ok, Xandra? I thought I did something wrong.”

And there it was.

In the few milliseconds she had before he expected her to respond, she found herself having to process a lot of information: Sunday, picking her up, acting weird, holding her hands, calling her Xandra. For the first time. Wasn't all of that wrong?

Yet somehow, what should have been overwhelming and too much to handle was actually turning into something wonderful – if something was turning into anything at all. It could honestly be nothing, and everything else that had happened earlier could be dismissed. Sunday was just another day. He picked her up because he was in the neighborhood. No one was acting weird. They were just chilling.

So whatever, right? Nothing could be something, something could be nothing. She didn't know, she couldn't know, so why try to know now? Right now she just wanted Jay, whatever the hell that even meant. So she kissed him.

“Everything's fine, Jay.”

“You sure?”

“Mmhm.”

The last things she needed to remove were her black wedges. She kicked them off and they dropped to the floor, near the maxi dress and by her suspicions, next to the corduroy pants and beside his mystery, then the aviators, then the denim t-shirt – alongside the other discarded thoughts and things that didn't matter in this moment.

“The Endless Stretch of Road”**Tessa Yang**

Ed is shaving over the sink when he first sees it glistening inside the drain. He doesn't know what *it* is, exactly, but it catches the light in a pleasing way and doesn't seem to belong in a dirty motel any more than he does. He leans forward, shaving cream still lathered on one side of his face. The screen is missing and he can see into the pipe, six inches or so down, where the trap has collected hair and fuzz and bubbles and—*there*, a thing shining so appealingly in the flickering glow of the strip light over the sink.

His fingers are too fat to extend more than a couple of inches down. “Hey you! Girl!”

He sees her thin shape moving through the plastic shower curtain and then her head protrudes, water dripping from her beaklike nose.

“Get out here, girl,” he says. He can't remember her name. “I need your skinny little fingers.”

She takes her sweet time. Ed paces back and forth across the sweating tile. He has never liked waiting for anyone. Twice he's driven off and left their keyboardist flirting with pretty girls at gas stations. He grabs a towel from the small pile folded on the shelf, mops the shaving cream off the unshaven side of his face. Finally the water shuts off and she steps from the tub, wrapping the towel tightly around her hard, boyish body. She told him she was nineteen. Her pale hair swings in wet ringlets as she lowers her head, tucking the end of the towel beneath one arm.

“Come here,” he says. “Look down there. D'you see it?”

“All the hair and spit?”

“Not that! *There!* Something shining.”

“Yeah, maybe,” she says doubtfully.

“So what're you waiting for?”

She gazes up at him with a look of superiority he can barely stand. They were all the same, small-town sluts who screamed your name and clung to you backstage and crooned about your sexy voice and then, soon as daylight came, looked at you like some muck on the bottom of their shoes. It hadn't always been this way. Ed's been with the band long enough to remember a time when the groupies really *did* go crazy, though he can't recall at what point things started to change.

The girl reaches carefully into the drain. Ed can hear the faint scraping of her fingers.

“Don't you drop it,” he whispers, his hands balled tightly into fists. “Don't you fucking drop it.”

She bites her lower lip, concentrating. Then she withdraws her hand, greasy and flecked with gray filth, and between two fingers she holds a silver ring.

Pale daylight creeps through the single bare window in the bedroom. Ed sits on the end of the unmade bed and shines the ring on his shirt to remove the final bits of drain scum. It gleams in the light—a double band of silver with a fat diamond perched on top. Ed realizes he's been waiting for it. Some signal to reset him on his feet and send him running far away from stuffy bars and hot lights and all the things he used to think meant freedom.

The girl dresses in the leather tank top and ripped jeans from last night. The clothes sag on her skinny frame. When she perches on the bed next to him, he can see the dark smears of poorly removed makeup under her eyes.

“That's an engagement ring, I reckon,” she says. “An expensive one. Wonder what kind of lady would've left it behind?”

Ed can't remember his mother's ring. He does not think his father gave her one. He turns the ring over in his fingers, feeling a sense of hope that he hasn't known since he ran out on his parents over a decade ago. The other guys will sleep late, working off their hangovers, and want to leave by two or three at the latest. He glances at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It's half past eleven.

“Bet she was pretty,” says the girl sullenly. “Bet the man who gave it to her told her so every

day.”

He rises and starts sifting through his bag for a fresh shirt. “You got a pawn shop in this town?”

She doesn’t answer. She sits on the edge of the bed, sucking on a strand of pale hair, her eyes on the highway outside.

“*Hey!*” he shouts, and she jumps. “I asked if you got a pawn shop round here.”

“Dun street,” she says.

It takes him a while to find the right place. All roads look the same in dumpy towns like this one, and all dumpy towns look the same. *Assbag, Arkansas* their bassist called it when they pulled up outside the bar. The bassist is the newest member, a shaggy-haired farm kid from Oklahoma. They’re all kids, the drummer and the keyboardist and the lead guitarist, and if they used to respect him for his experience, they think he’s a joke now, outdated. What does Ed care? Why should it bother him if the drummer’s started driving the van, or if the pimple-faced guitarist has taken over planning gigs?

He sure misses the days when they first formed up, he and Lonnie and the other original members. He’d left his parents’ house that summer with the feeling that he was about to take flight. The van, dented and reddened with rust even then, ate up the vast stretches of open road between hazy cornfields, tearing along at a hundred miles an hour in a way that made Ed feel swift and clever and uncatchable. Something had caught them anyway. The army got Doug, and rehab snatched Cooper, and marriage, of all things, had stolen Lonnie. Maybe Ed should’ve left then, made a clean break. But there had been nowhere to go, really, and so he had stayed and lingered until he was like an old man among children.

He tells himself he’s ready for a change. All he needs is cash, a good-sized wad of it to get him on his way. He fingers the ring in his pocket as he comes upon Dun Street, not far from the bar where they played last night. The pawn shop is a lopsided building with a fluorescent sign in the window—BUY SELL PAWN—that does not light. A bell jingles faintly as he enters. The air smells lemony and clean. The pawnbroker slumps over the counter, half-asleep, but straightens up at the sound of the bell.

Ed nods a greeting. He walks slowly about the cluttered room, peering at racks of oiled guns, shelves of pocket watches, cases of collectible toy trains stalled on their dusty tracks. The pawnbroker watches with an expectant expression. He looks harmless enough, wiry and middle-aged with a circlet of red hair running around his bald crown, but Ed knows the sly workings of business. His father had owned a garage, and used to brag how he could wring an unsuspecting customer of all his savings for a routine repair. Wherever Ed ends up, he knows it will be better than a lifetime in that garage.

He moves toward the counter, beneath which, in a locked glass box, sits the jewelry. They’re trinkets compared to Ed’s ring. He touches it in his pocket for good luck.

“I’m looking to sell. You do that here?”

“Sure thing. Buy, sell, pawn. So long as you got something I like.”

“It’s my grandmother’s ring. We been coming on hard times lately. Wife’s pressuring me to get cash quick.”

“Women,” says the pawnbroker, shaking his head. “Ain’t happy till they’ve drained us dry. Take my old lady: run up to Little Rock for the week to see her sister. Leaves me with the kid and everything.” Ed notices, for the first time, the red-haired boy squatting in the doorway to the back room, prodding along a toy car. “Like I don’t got enough to do,” grumbles the pawnbroker. “I’m a working man. I can’t be looking after a boy all day... Well, let’s see her, then.”

The pawnbroker takes the ring, holding it first at arm’s length, then bringing it toward his close-set blue eyes. He stoops a moment to fetch a tool from beneath the counter, a cylindrical magnifier. He places one end to his eye and continues to stare.

Ed waits in silence broken only by the boy’s whispered *vroooms* as he pushes the car in circles across the floor. He’d been thinking a thousand. The number winds higher and higher the longer the

silence lasts. Two grand? *Three?* He begins to imagine what he could do with five thousand dollars: an airplane carrying him high above the flat brown patchwork of Arkansas. That had been the plan all along—escape—ever since he'd left his parents that summer, only he'd never made it farther than Alabama.

The pawnbroker removes the magnifier from his eye.

“Well,” he says, “it’s a good one. Damn near good enough to have me fooled.” He tosses the ring back onto the countertop. “Don’t tell your grandma it’s worthless. I don’t want no old lady’s heart attack hanging over my head.”

“Worthless,” repeats Ed.

The pawnbroker shrugs. “Maybe not totally worthless. I reckon the band’s solid. I’ll take it for eighty. But that jewel there—see how you can look right down into the bottom? Can’t do that with a real diamond. I’d call this glass. You want a second opinion, talk to a jeweler. Nearest one’s in White Hall. But I’m telling you, you won’t hear anything different.”

He stoops to return the magnifier to its place, whistling. Ed’s father used to whistle, too, shrilly and tunelessly through his teeth. Ed stands staring at the ring, discarded on the countertop between them like some toy out of a gumball machine. Then he grabs the pawnbroker, who comes sliding halfway over the counter like a sack.

“You think it’s funny, ripping people off? You get a real kick out of it, I bet,” Ed says. “You go home each night telling your old lady about the latest sucker. You tell your son you’ll make a fine businessman out of him someday.”

The pawnbroker sputters unintelligibly. The little boy has paused in his play, his head cocked as he stares up at his father hanging strangely like a puppet.

“I’m not another stupid hick,” snarls Ed. “I’m not falling for it. I know what I got here, what it means.” He can hear the blood singing through his veins, booming like drums at his temples. The boy has started to cry. His father is turning a mealy white color.

“Please,” he says.

Ed throws him back over the counter where he crashes into a shelf of antique clocks that ring and clang down onto his head, then snatches up the ring and leaves the shop with the sound still echoing in his ears. He takes the streets at a run and reaches the motel ten minutes later, red-faced and sweating. The sight of the girl on the end of the bed startles and enrages him. He might’ve thought she hadn’t moved at all, except that she’s reapplied her makeup. It makes her look older, but not much.

The room is stifling. He goes straight to the window, throwing his weight against it again and again. It does not open. Panting, he turns to find the girl watching him warily.

“How do I get to White Hall?” he asks.

She tells him there is a bus. He grabs the phone and dials the operator and gets the number for the county transport office. He can catch the next bus to White Hall at 7:35 PM.

“What’d Theo have to say?” she asks as he hangs up.

“Who?”

“The pawnbroker. That’s his name.”

“Oh. Well—he reckons it’ll go for about two grand, but I’m taking her to a jeweler just to be sure.”

He begins to pack, tossing clothes haphazardly into a battered brown suitcase. He wonders if the guys are up yet, if they’re even now chowing down on bacon sandwiches in a diner with greasy seats, if they notice his absence. He does not want to look at the girl, but every time he straightens up, there she is, sucking on a strand of hair, staring out the window at the sunny motel parking lot and the highway traffic.

“Listen,” he says. “Maybe it’s about time you took off.”

“To where?” she asks.

“To your house. Your family. Wherever the hell you want. You’ve got a family, don’t you?”

She eases back onto the bed, as if posing for a painting. “Might be someday I’ll have a ring like that for myself,” she says dreamily. “Might be there’s some richy-rich boy just waiting for me right around the corner. We get ‘em around here every once in a while, you know. They come to play football.”

He laughs. He can’t help it. The thought of her clinging to some high school quarterback as a hope of salvation. The dreamy look fades from her eyes. Her face hardens into that cold superior expression again.

“Maybe I will go,” she says.

“I wish you would,” he says.

She rises and straightens her leather tank top. At the door she pauses. “Jewelers are nice places, you know. Up-scale folk. Might want to think about that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks.

Her eyes travel down his body, pausing at his half-shaven face, again at the wrinkled T-shirt stretched tightly over his stomach, and finally at the stained socks peeking out of his worn discount Nikes. She slams the door behind her.

He stands shirtless before the bathroom mirror, scowling at his reflection. Sure, he’s lost some muscle over the years, and his face isn’t as chiseled as it was a while back. But he’s got all his hair, doesn’t he? Thick chestnut-brown stuff not yet peppered with gray. He’s got all his teeth. A woman once told him that was all it took to make a nice-looking man: good hair and a mouthful of teeth.

But it wouldn’t hurt to make a nice impression. Ed knows that appearances matter in business transactions. Every once in a while, his father used to get a wealthier client, a businessman in a suit and tie who broke down on the way to a conference. That suit and tie made a difference; his father never messed with the customers who looked like they might be smarter than him.

The woman at the motel desk recommends a place called Leroy’s. It’s the only men’s clothing store in town. Ed buys a pressed white shirt and khakis and a pair of shiny brown shoes, peeling apart the bills and passing them grudgingly over the counter.

He goes to the Exxon across the street to buy a comb, but finds himself changing in the gas station bathroom. The new clothes still smell like cardboard and feel fresh and cool against his skin. He’s never had a crisp new outfit before. As a kid he’d worn the hand-me-downs of older cousins, and once he’d left home he took pride in his grubbiness, the rips and stains seeming like a tribute to his wanderings.

Now he can’t bring himself to change out of the Leroy’s clothes. He piles the old T-shirt, sneakers, and jeans into the empty shopping bag, then wanders around town searching for a spot to grab lunch. Somehow the usual fast food joints won’t do. He walks a long time before he finds a glass-fronted sandwich shop with clean counters.

When he gets back to the motel, he sees the van hanging open in the parking lot. The guys load instruments and amps into the back, or stand smoking in the shadow of the rusted vacancy sign.

“Where you been, Pops?” asks the drummer. He’s a scrawny kid with huge horsey teeth he likes to flash during his solos, which seem to grow longer with every show. “We saw your sweet little girl storming off a while back. Don’t you know how to keep your girls happy?” He laughs, and the others with him. He says it’s time to take off.

“I got business to tend to,” says Ed. “We’ll leave tomorrow. Day after tomorrow at the latest.”

“What about Mississippi?” asks the bassist.

“Fuck Mississippi. We weren’t hardly gonna play there anyway. Just warm the crowd for some local trash. We’ll leave day after tomorrow.”

They flex their biceps and shift their jaws from side to side, looking at one another out of the corners of their eyes. A car speeds by on the highway, its windows dazzling in the sunlight. A cop car

goes tearing like hell after it.

“Listen, Pops,” says the lead guitarist as the shriek of the siren fades. “We been talking.” And he explains in his low drawl about the way music is moving forward, about how you have to move forward with it, about how you have to run looking for opportunity instead of expecting it to fall into your lap. “Georgie’s gettin’ real good at all the songs now,” he says, nodding to the bassist. “He can write ‘em, too. You’d know, if you ever tried to listen.”

“What’re you saying?” Ed asks. He feels strangely calm in his fresh clothes with the ring in his pocket, as if he’s made of some new material not even the sun can touch.

“I’m saying...” The lead guitarist glances at the other guys, who nod grimly, their jaws clenched tight. He drops his cigarette and stubs it out on the concrete. “I’m saying we’re going to Mississippi.”

Ed checks out of the motel at quarter to seven. He does not look at the empty space in the parking lot where the van should be, but somehow he can almost feel it, like a missing tooth. The guys will be on I-40 by now, following the endless stretch of road east and north into Tennessee, then south toward Mississippi. *Fuck ‘em*, Ed thinks. He never liked those guys anyway. Not a single one had half the talent of Lonnie or Doug.

He has time before the bus to White Hall arrives, but there’s nowhere else to go, really, so he walks to the bus stop at the corner of Dun Street. He can see the windows glowing in the apartment above the pawn shop. Already he recalls his treatment of the pawnbroker with a certain distance, as if those actions belonged to a shameful kid brother.

The glass panels of the bus shelter are cloudy, showing only the indistinct outlines of people on the sidewalk outside. Ed sits on a bench, fiddling with the ring in his pocket as the sun sinks steadily in front of him. He tries to think about the jeweler, but his thoughts keep turning to those wheels churning up dust on I-40. Why the hell did he let those kids take his van? It was his, after all. He’d stolen it from his father’s garage all those summers ago, and since then it had carried him everywhere he needed.

The shapes on the sidewalk move suddenly, and then three men in baseball caps enter the shelter and seat themselves on the other bench. Ed tries to feel reassured by their presence. They must be waiting for the same bus. Still he wishes he had a watch, that he could be sure...How much time has passed? A good half hour, he would bet, since leaving the motel.

For the first time, he wonders what he will do if the bus never comes. He squeezes the ring until it bites into his palm.

It’s nearly dark now. The last rays of sunlight glint feebly on the fogged glass. Ed rises and sticks his head out of the shelter. The road is empty. The night air smells of exhaust fumes and fried food. He turns back to ask one of the men if they know about any delay, when something sails toward him and collides with his face and he sees the white flash of pain before he feels it. He finds himself on his knees.

“This the one, Theo?”

Beneath the rim of the baseball cap pulled low, the pawnbroker’s face shows shallow cuts and fresh bruises. “This is him. Wasn’t sure till he stood. Looks different all cleaned up.” He nudges Ed with his toe. “You scared my kid, you know that? He cried when you left. He thinks you’re coming back to get us. I tell him: don’t you worry, Teddy—that’s his name, named after his old man and all. Don’t you worry, I said. He won’t be bothering us again.”

The bus never comes, or if it does, Ed misses it. He lurches from one dark shop front to another, staggering toward the source of light and laughter and music in the next street. His tongue touches on loose teeth. He lost his suitcase some time ago, but he feels the ring in his pocket as a small, irritating irregularity, like a pebble in the bottom of his shoe.

He recognizes the lighted place as soon as he rounds the corner: the bar where they played last

night. There's a new band now. An electric guitar wails through the night. Ed makes it almost all the way across the road before he falls. Headlights strike him. Honking. He forces himself to roll onto his back and into the gutter as the car skids past, still honking.

"Look at the old bum! Nearly got himself killed!" A kid stands smoking on the sidewalk. "Shelia, c'mere. Look at the old drunk."

Ed rolls onto his front, his white shirt spotted with mud. Pain sears through him and he can go no further. He can only crane his head upward as she steps outside the bar, wearing a fluorescent orange T-shirt that fits her slightly better than the leather tank top. He wonders if she might recognize him through his filth, and take him into the light and clean off the grime to reveal something worth saving.