

**SIGMA  
TAU  
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INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

# RECTANGLE

*Journal of Creative Writing*

**Volume 101**



**2026**

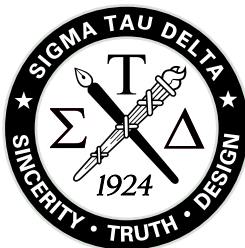


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**2025–2026 Writing Awards**  
***Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle***

*Eleanor B. North Poetry Award*  
“Pensando en los Rios” (“Thinking of Rivers”)  
by Joe Lozano of Texas State University

*E. Nelson James Poetry Award*  
“Know Me”  
by Marcus Tsai of The University of Texas at Dallas

*Herbert L. Hughes Short Story Award*  
“Daisies”  
by Abigail D’Antoni of University of North Georgia, Gainesville

*Elizabeth Holtze Best Personal or Informal Essay Award*  
“Divine Nature”  
by Ella Stott of Utah State University, Logan



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Veenstra

## CONTENT WARNING

Manuscripts in this publication may address difficult topics (such as death, assault, sexual content, and prejudice) that could cause duress for readers; to prevent unnecessary duress, we offer this warning and acknowledge the humanity of both our authors and our readers. We appreciate the writers' transparency in addressing sensitive topics.

The opinions presented in the published works of the *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* do not reflect the organization or membership but rather reflect the opinions, values, and perspectives of the individual authors.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

For this issue of the *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, I have asked the authors to record readings of their works so that you may enjoy a multi-modal presentation of the publications and so the authors may present how they intended their works to be read. Granted, you should enjoy the work and have some creative interpretation, but hearing the author read may give you some insight into meanings, emphases, and highlights. Readings (audio files) are linked in the Audio Links page following the Table of Contents for your enjoyment.

Thank you to all the authors, who provided their audio recordings for our readership to enjoy.

# *Creative Nonfiction*



# Faithful

Riley Brokesoulder

The music from my phone stops playing as I head further down the gravel road. There's nothing on either side of me except grass, breeze, and fence. I wonder what the fence is supposed to be keeping in. The left turn could be easy to miss if you aren't looking for it, if you don't even know that behind the trees six hundred animals are laid to rest. The sign indicating this place, Faithful Friends Pet Cemetery, is faded, and the wood is starting to chip. When I pull up, a man and a woman are waiting by a truck. It's almost as if they're expecting me. I hoped it's like any other cemetery—public. I ask if it is alright for me to walk around. They shift and relax with realization. Of course I can. They tell me there is a burial scheduled for today. I come to realize that they are expecting someone—just not me.

The caretaker's wife prompts me to join her on their golf cart. She takes me up and down the plaque-lined row of pets. The rows form a perfect rectangle—a clearing amongst unkempt grass. In some areas, greenery has completely regrown. In others, a slight mound of disturbed dirt remains untouched by time. She takes me to where her loved ones are buried. They're all together with a tiger lily blooming between them. The orange flowers hover over the graves like their own personal sun. I imagine the roots of the plant reaching into each of their shallow graves.



My fifteen-year-old cat is named Cupcake, though I'm sure you'll be hard pressed to find someone else who'll call her sweet. But when I was five, I looked at her and saw black fur that had turned brown in the light. She was chocolate with twinkling sprinkle eyes. If I had met her when I was a bit older, instead of as a little kid, I'm sure she would've shared her kisses then. I was all grabby hands and open arms, and she was just what I wanted to hold. My problem was that I never knew when to let go. The scratches never seemed to hurt me much, though; I would scoop her up again and again, and she would push me away. What bothered me most was how she was drawn to my dad, who had claimed her as his mortal enemy. He didn't even want a cat, but he loved me. Now when he calls,

she comes running. Envious, I joke that he ignores her and he's still her favorite. I know it's because he left her alone. Cupcake was never mean. Between scratches and hisses and bites, there was something she was trying to tell me: she wanted respect and boundaries to be set. She taught me to listen to her protests and notice cues.

We've both grown older and have more emotional control. She lets me hold her longer now because I know when it's time to let go.



The caretaker's wife asks me if there's anything I'd like to see. The introduction to her pets already answers a question I have. I want to know if families bury different pets together, like how my grandma and grandpa will share a headstone and how my great uncle's waits just in front of theirs. She shows me more relations—four friends in a line. The messages on the plaques are all signed from Mommy, Daddy, and the pet who preceded them. Would their owners be buried here if they could?

We drive past a hyphenated name and appreciate the coming together of a divorced couple to honor their lost pet. I think, in this gesture, they also commemorate a mutual love: a bond they shared over having loved the same being.

She turns me loose to walk around and take in the grounds. Two gazebos bookend the largest headstone that lives in the cemetery under the shade of a looming tree.

The front informs of how Theda L. Lockhart founded the cemetery in the memory of her cat Puko and wishes other "faithful friends" to rest in peace too. The last line on the back reads, "We shall meet in heaven again." Two figures stand next to the headstone, both with their hands folded in prayer.

I suppose even loving your pet is a religious experience: the feeling of unconditional love and the sense of comfort they provide. It might be the same for them. Your power is never a point of contention; they must have faith in the hands that feed them.

Many of the other plaques carry similar messages of reunion—desire so strong they create a permanent place to visit on earth in case the afterlife is not promised.



A bowl and water fountain are positioned like an altar. Crumbs of food and spilled water decorate the surrounding area like flowers. Here lies the place in my apartment dedicated to my cat. I can't keep him contained to one place though. He has his own pillow next to mine. His fur floats around the place, clinging to my red sheets, my black clothes, and the velvet green chair. I complain about the cat hair, the smell of his litter box, and every other pet mess. But I know I'd feel their absence.

When he's gone, I'll look at the bowl and think of how he crunched his food and let little bits hit the floor. I'll see a shadow move out of the corner of my eye and think I see him, like I already do. When I lie down to sleep, I'll feel how he's not next to me. I'll cherish the fur stuck to the sheets. I could bring him to the pet cemetery; his name will be carved into marble or some other kind of stone.

*Clark*, it'll read. People will wonder why I named him that, but I can't write that he'd already been given that name when I met him. Or how, when he picks the carpet, I tell him, "This is a rental," as if he knows what I mean. I can't tell them how he wakes me up early in the morning with a soft paw on my back and, if he catches my eyes open, he tries to keep me from falling back asleep. All my love won't fit on a headstone, but where else can I ensure forever, besides in my heart and in the ground?



Another car pulls up, and I feel that it's time for me to leave. I don't want them to have to be aware of anything except for the good-bye they're giving. I see them carry out their loved one in a blanket; they can almost pretend that their pet is sleeping. Except they're walking toward an open grave. The dirt piled on the sides almost looks like arms, welcoming them home. The caretaker is waiting to guide their pet down, like a sort of deliverance, as they cradle the resting animal with gentle arms. I can almost see them taking their pet home for the first time, holding them the same way. How peaceful it must be to be lowered down—like being put to bed—with familiar hands around you, not just the plush inside of a new casket. I pull away and try not to disturb this moment.

As their bowed heads fall out of view, I think of how the caretaker's wife told me they always pray as they lay them to rest. I can imagine

them calling out their pet's name one more time—one word they know their companion understands. I think of all the ways I say my pet's names: as a warning, a love letter, a lullaby. In their last moment, it'll become prayer.

# I Wrestle Like a Girl

Karoline Hartner

## Attack on “The School of the Boys”

I walked into Belmont Hill, an all-boys private school in Belmont, MA, known for its seasoned wrestling team and “men of good character,” and I felt my femininity dilute. Trailing behind my faulty but fierce team of ten wrestlers, we entered the nicest, most intimidating wrestling room I’d ever seen. We were invading *their* turf, and, by the looks of their padded blue walls, perfectly fit singlets, and their fat necks, we knew this would be a quick meet. Perhaps we were already losers when we pulled into the parking lot.

Upon reaching the threshold of their empire, I felt a sea of eyes drown my steps, and whispering voices whistle through my ears, strumming my brain along its path. The whispers robbed my mind of all self-worth before I even laced up my boots.

Like a needle in a haystack of men, I spotted my mom, Kathie, in the crowd. She stood smiling with her phone ready to record, giving me a nod of approval with a devious smile, as if she was motioning for me to *really* perform. Curious, I walked over to her and questioned her obvious gesture. She revealed that a father of the opposing team had asked her, “What weight is your son wrestling?” to which my mom replied, “My *daughter* is wrestling in the 106-weight category,” pointing toward me. He scoffed and asked her, “Why would you let your daughter wrestle in a boys league?” Speechless, she ignored his comment.

## Fueled by His Sexism, I Triumphed.

I beat my male opponent by pinning him on his back for three solid seconds. Is that so hard to believe? Why was it that when I stood up with my hair a rat’s nest, my knee pads resting on my ankles, and my uniform mangled that I was stared at with raised eyebrows, widened eyes, and scattered gasps from the crowd? Because a *female* just changed their entire perspective on a sport dominated by testosterone.

It amazes me how dismayed some men are when watching women succeed in something that is rooted so deep in history. Wrestling was

a form of discipline of the Pentathlon in the ancient Olympic Games. There are traces of wrestling back to the Roman times and ancient Egypt. Palaestra, daughter of Hermes, is considered the Greek Goddess of wrestling. Palaestra introduced wrestling to the people of Olympia as a sport and entertainment. She had short, boyish hair, eyes that could be seen as any gender, and breasts she didn't allow to be touched by anyone, even while wrestling. Palaestra didn't have any urge to bask in her femininity. She worked toward a rather boyish figure and shied away from anything that would possess feminine traits. Isn't it interesting that a sport proposed by a female was hijacked by men. At this point, it was 2019, and it was time for women to take the mat as permanent residents on wrestling teams and to channel our inner Palaestra.

### **Girls Just Want to Have Fun**

I started wrestling my freshman year of high school. With girls slowly joining wrestling teams, no one knew what to do with us. Often, all-boys schools wouldn't have female locker rooms, leaving us to strip down to a sports bra and spandex in a classroom or office or with the sweaty boys in their smelly, slimy locker room. Walking into their locker room was new for me, the same way it was new for them. The pounding of my heart could have knocked on the door. The classmates in my algebra class and those I rode the bus with to attend the meet were shedding their coats, sweatpants, and shirts in front of me as I sucked my eyes back into my skull. (I felt like Amanda Bynes in *She's The Man*.) The awkwardness filled locker rooms like heavy, thick smoke, blinding me from the powerful, confident mentality required to compete.

As I sat on the locker room bench, surrounded by shirtless men who reveled in their own milieu, I diminished into the delusion that I had no business being in a setting that was only socially acceptable for men. *Why go through this jungle of judgment?* This question wracked my brain until I realized that this wasn't just about me. It was about all the little girls watching who needed to see that they, too, can rebel against patriarchal gender norms and achieve greatness that wasn't designed for them to attain.

“NEXT!”

With my bare, wrinkled feet, I walked onto the scale, or more aptly a stage, surrounded by an audience of boys. My eyes transfixed on the rapidly changing numbers as I exhaled and squeezed every molecule out

of my lungs. I stood up tall, or as tall as 4'11" could be, wanting to hunch and succumb to the humiliation. I experienced the great pressure for wrestlers to keep under a specific weight every week or else they couldn't wrestle, and it was doubly worse with male opponents watching. Women are told that "they are more than the number on the scale," but in this case, was I?

Not making the weight of 106 or below could cost my team and myself a loss. If anyone missed weight, they won us a one-way ticket to Hell next practice.

With sweaty palms and pits, I prayed I didn't eat too much dry cereal, egg whites, and rice cakes over the last three days. The relief and satisfaction of making weight was a dangerous cycle I didn't see forming, but I continuously strove for it. My relationship with body image and food spiraled downward. Before I realized it's gravity, a tsunami of disordered eating and a horrible relationship with exercise drowned the positive mindset I once had. The lunchroom and kitchen had become a battleground as my stomach grumbled, and my sluggish body trembled for nutrients. Bathrooms were like underground bunkers—a safe house to purge foods my stomach fought to retain. Tears flooded my sunken eyes as I rid myself of any sustenance and dignity. Guilt from eating turned into guilt about who I was becoming. Sitting on a tile floor with no energy to pick myself up, I sat in shame with a horrible taste in my mouth.

A picture of me as a child smiling on the beach hung above the toilet. I stared at her, and my heart stung imagining her purging her dinner or watching me do it. I cringed at the thought of her being afraid to wear her cute floral, purple bikini because she had unrealistic, societal expectations infecting her mind. Never did I think I would be the girl who chewed her food to enjoy the taste but spit it into napkins or who used her own fingers to vomit. It would take years for this relationship to mend, and occasionally I wonder if it completely has.

With eyes scanning me like vultures staking out my carcass on the scale, each stare like a peck at my self-esteem, I shivered with eagerness to leave the locker room. Not once did I ever miss weight in the entirety of my wrestling career. Each meet, I'd weigh myself and fear that the scale would read over 106 pounds, though quite honestly, the only thing that could make me over was the weight of pressure I put on myself. But with each reading under 106, I floated off the scale like a feather. Then, I didn't realize my fortitude was shedding its feathers. I realize this now. I

shimmied off the scale and started suiting up. I laced up my adidas boots and donned my armor (headgear and kneepads).

Headgear is required, although it's not a helmet by any means. Two pads cover each ear to protect from injury and from "cauliflower ear." A hairnet required for women is looped through the headgear to mitigate any hair pulling.

I hated the hairnet. My hair is wavy, thick, and dense; covering it felt like masking the heart of my confidence. The one thing arguably "big" about my appearance is my hair. My voluminous waves bounced, and my golden streaks glistened, like a halo around my vitality and spirit . . . until I had to put on the hairnet, which dwindled my last remaining bits of faith. A few curls escaped from the bottom lip of the net. Stubborn, they swiveled out into the action, like buds of femininity blooming until my entire braid would dangle out, fighting The Man. My womanhood was manhandled with each yank of the headgear. If given the choice, my hair would have flowed free like a wild mustang's mane!

### **Me versus Them**

Jogging around the wrestling circle, I scouted out my opponent. I looked for the smallest boy: What was his style? Strong? Technical? Aggressive? Would he forfeit?

In wrestling, forfeiting means backing out of a match due to an injury, someone had "missed weight," or, in some cases, seeing a girl as your opponent. When forfeiting, the individual automatically loses, and their opponent automatically wins. Often, when opposing teams would see me or my fellow female teammates, they would forfeit their matches against us. I'm not sure whether this was fear of losing, fear of embarrassment, or fear of injuring us or their masculinity. What else would men rather avoid than to potentially lose to a woman?

Aside from a few forfeiting cowards, I faced a variety of opponents during my three wrestling seasons. I didn't know then, but these opponents would wrestle me into who I am today. Some would congratulate me afterward and genuinely compliment my strength and skill. One kid went out of his way to find me at tournaments and watch my matches. He supported me like one of his own teammates. There were opponents who couldn't be more excited to pin a girl and prove to her she shouldn't be there, almost laughing at how easy it was. Then there were those who were nervous and didn't want to hurt me

or didn't want to touch a girl that closely. Wrestling is a very personal sport. I did have an advantage over these types of opponents, but I found it enlightening that they didn't see wrestling me as a free chance to touch a boob (Yes, some would try to "cop a feel."), but rather as an inappropriate, awkward thing.

There are some incredible wrestlers out there that I was damn nervous to wrestle! The most intimidating thing about another wrestler isn't how they are built or how they are warming up but the look on their faces: that smug, emotionless, and hungry look made me feel like dead meat. I was seen as easy to them: an opponent that, in their minds, guaranteed a win. I felt damn tired of being seen as easy, in my school clothes and in a wrestling singlet. I would always be seen as prey, no matter how well I mirrored manliness.

I pondered if Palaestra dealt with that madness.

## **Me versus Me**

When I began wrestling, I had hardly any idea of the rules. That learning experience led to my face being smushed against the mat with someone using all his strength to keep me there. This was rock bottom in a wrestling match, but I was ignited by my own expectations. I didn't win to prove any men wrong; I won to prove myself right.

Regardless of who I was wrestling, my vigor was tested. As a petite, 4'11 woman who wore children's shoes, wrestling taught me how to be big. Mighty. Colossal. I learned to march onto the mat knowing I was going to win. It was tough gathering that confidence while wearing a uniform designed for men, headgear making me feel like my head was shaved, in front of an audience of primarily men who thought I was a team manager.

Circled by choirs of chaos and adrenaline levels so high they vibrated the gym, I'd sink deeper into the classic wrestling stance with a low staggered bend at the knee, hands in front, ready to pounce. Hearing the intensity in the voices of my family and friends fueled me to push as hard as I possibly could. Panting, my throat burned like I was inhaling cinnamon with each take down, sprawl, and scramble. I squeezed my muscles tightly together, my face wet with sweat, snot, and tears, holding the boy against the mat like I was fusing him into it. Exhaustion poured out of my body, but I felt the most accomplishment I had ever felt in my life when the referee held my limp arm high. Nothing feels better than

climbing out of rock bottom using your bare hands and strength to dig yourself out. One second, I was on my back fighting, and in the next, he was on his, pinned.

This was when I realized the biggest wrestling match I would ever have was with myself. It was so easy to just plop down and let someone pin me, but fighting to keep a single shoulder off the ground was like fighting to keep a single slice of faith in my brain with a muscular, strong man on top of me. You could see the demeanor in my wrestling change as matches ensued. I began defensive, scared, and timid, but with each shot, scramble, and move I became increasingly resilient, angrier, and hungrier. I believed that trend was my insecurity transforming into intensity and defiance; however, this cost me many losses by those who advanced on my own self-loathing before I shook it off. Regardless of the score, I marched out and tried, and that alone was a wrestling match.

Hearing the referee slap the mat and blow the whistle as I held someone in a pin felt like someone popped my heart and it exploded with confetti all throughout my body. To me, the whistle indicated that I could surmount any hardship I faced, and that rock bottoms are just ceilings to other opportunities.

Not all men are like the father who interrogated my mother, but I know there will always be similar men in my way throughout life. I was able to grow a thick skin as a buttress against sexism. The ref's smack on the mat was like a gavel in court. *Order in the court: females are wrestlers. Wrestlers are female. Wrestlers are wrestlers.*

## Beautiful All Along: The Make-Over, Girlhood, and Acceptable Defiance

Aisling Lake

Beast was disappeared, and she saw, at her feet, one of the loveliest princes that eye ever beheld; who returned her thanks for having put an end to the charm, under which he had so long resembled a Beast (De Villeneuve).



Anne Hathaway was nineteen when she starred in *The Princess Diaries*, and she was no less conventionally attractive in 2001 than she is now. “Not yet,” says the film in the first half. “First, she must be a beast.” Where her beastliness is meant to be observed, though, is less clear. Even before her stunning transformation, Anne Hathaway is still Anne Hathaway. Except her hair is poofy and full of curls, and her eyebrows are a centimeter or two thicker than usual, and glasses sit on the bridge of her nose. Her character, Mia, may be portrayed as a bit clumsy and awkward, but who isn’t in high school? Hardly anything beastly there (not unusually, at least; high schoolers can be very beastly). “But no,” says the film, “look at her hair. Look at how the straight-haired, bleach-blonde cheerleaders tease her for it. Look at her eyebrows. At her glasses. At her clumsiness. She is beastly.” And so, at the demand of her pearl-clutching grandmother, she must become straight-haired, thin-browed, cloaked in foundation and lip gloss; and, of course, she must wear contacts. Beast becomes Beauty.



“Beauty,” said this lady, “come and receive the reward of your judicious choice; you have preferred virtue before either wit or beauty, and deserve to find a person in whom all these qualifications are united” (De Villeneuve).



By the end of *The Princess Diaries*, Mia fights past her doubts and apprehensions and chooses to become the princess she was meant to be. She fights past the doubts and apprehensions of society, who assumes someone so clumsy and improper can never be royalty.

It's an ending that is, in itself, beautiful: a defiance against social standards of beauty to declare value beyond superficial, arbitrary appearances. "We tricked you!" laughs the film. "It was always personality that truly mattered! How could you think otherwise?" But even so, there's no true defiance of traditional standards of beauty. Despite arriving at her coronation in an old hoodie, jeans, and soaking wet hair, Anne Hathaway retains her post-makeover beauty. Suddenly, she's back to looking like a princess, as if the rain hasn't washed a drop of product from her hair. "Oh, but she can't be beastly anymore, can she?" poses the film. "She is beauty now, inside and out!" To be beastly means the virtue of defiance against social standards has no reward (none except, perhaps, internal gratification. But this is a princess movie, so who cares about that?). Becoming beautiful is her reward for virtue, yet her only real virtue is acceptable defiance.



"Beauty, will you be my wife?" She was some time before she dared answer, for she was afraid of making him angry, if she refused. At last, however, she said trembling, "no Beast." Immediately the poor monster went to sigh, and hissed so frightfully, that the whole palace echoed. But Beauty soon recovered her fright, for Beast having said, in a mournful voice, "then farewell, Beauty . . ." (De Villeneuve).



When I first told my mother that I wished to explore the treacherous landscape of girlhood, she answered not with support, but with interrogation. "What do you hope to get out of this?" she asked, as if I was embarking on a doomed voyage to find a lost city. "What are your goals?" My mother was one of the last people I felt comfortable discussing the nitty gritty of my dysphoria with, but even when I gave answers to her questions, she seemed unable to fathom the concept of me as a woman. How I was born would forever define how she would

perceive me (which is honestly fair—she is my mother, after all). “Well, you won’t be like other girls,” she told me, like I didn’t know that already.

But I would be like some girls. Some girls have boxy hips and flat behinds. Some girls have bellies and stretch marks. Some girls have body hair. Some girls have broad jawlines and thick brows. Some girls dress like men or look enough like boys that they get called “sir” in line at the deli. “Then why be a girl at all,” my mother asked, “if you don’t want wide hips? Or large breasts? Or perfect skin, or thin brows, or full lips, or an hourglass figure?” Ironically, she herself fits none of these categories.



On the contrary, her two sisters did not know how to spend their time; they got up at ten, and did nothing but saunter about the whole day, lamenting the loss of their fine clothes and acquaintance. “Do but see our youngest sister,” said they, one to the other, “what a poor, stupid, mean-spirited creature she is, to be contented with such an unhappy dismal situation” (De Villeneuve).



My mother wasn’t always like this. My own girlhood seems to have changed her, and not for the better. She used to call me her darling light, her sweet boy, her everything. She used to tell me I was handsome, or that I was so tall, and that she liked my scruffy facial hair and wrinkled, oversized cargo shorts. “Those look so good on you!” she’d say, “What a handsome young man!” She used to shower me with compliments and praise and brag about how she knew me better than anyone else. For a time, she told the truth. Why is it so hard now for her to call me beautiful or even pretty? Do handsome and beautiful not translate to one another as I thought?

Instead of compliments, she tells me I’ll never have an hourglass figure. She binds me to boxy, sagging frames with her prophecies. She says I’ll never have rounded hips or a noticeable chest that I could feel proud to show off rather than afraid to see in the mirror. She reminds me every day of how skinny and straight she was as a girl and how my grandmother is so frail and bony. “It’s all genetics,” she says, “all the women in your family look like this. So will you.” To her, it’s in my genetics to

never be a beautiful woman. Why must she multiply me as a son but divide me as her daughter?



My mother, who would light up at the thought that my brothers were handsome, rankled at the idea that I might be nice-looking. The queen's envy of Snow White is deadly (Solnit 21).



Somehow, an underlined quote in a used book (like the one above) always seems to resonate more powerfully than if it were bare, freshly printed, and untouched by passion and connection. I always buy my books used if I can. Other than their affordability, they come with the added benefit of containing notes and annotations from former readers. Especially for textbooks and required readings, the notes are a godsend. Interpretations scribbled in the margins and underlined keywords, critical questions and close readings made by other students that once sat hunched over the same book with the tip of their pen between their teeth, hoping to find a revelation in the text.

I can't help but use the notes provided to inform my own readings and inspire my in-class discussions, even if I feel the slightest bit guilty for using the words of someone else as if they were my own. It feels like summoning the power and knowledge of ghosts from the past to deliver their wisdom and knowledge in your time of need. Like Harry using Snape's old notebook to excel in potion making. "Here, take this," say the ghosts, "have my words, have my thoughts, have my soul. Use them. The blue curtains are a metaphor for grief."

It's not often in life we get to be the ghost in the margins and see future readers take our notes as we write them. In fact, it's always been my dream to be the ghost in the margins. It's why I scribble and doodle in the blank space of even the dullest textbooks, just in case a future grad student needs a dash of whimsy during their research. Somewhat more often, though, do we get to relive our first encounter with a text through someone else encountering it for the first time. I don't blame my mother for savoring the ability to experience both at once.

I would be lying if I said her notes in the margins of girlhood weren't helpful—this is what a blending brush looks like; here's how you shop for

clothes; this is how you accentuate your curves—but her notes are cherry-picked. Watered down. Intolerant of nuance. They are filtered through layers of internalized oppression and silent envy. I can look feminine and pretty, but only as long as she is the unsurpassable gold standard, and only as long as I fit her outdated idea of femininity, and only as long as I demonstrate an acceptable degree of defiance. So, I pretend to study her notes. I put on my best thinking face, eyebrows furrowed and cheeks scrunched, so if she ever glances my way, she won't ever suspect that I've stashed my phone between the pages to read forum posts instead.



“Wear something cute” meant something very specific in Jennifer-speak. It meant I couldn't look like a total zero, but I couldn't upstage her either. I could expose my stomach, but never my cleavage. Tits were her trademark (*Jennifer's Body*).



Forums are, in a way, their own version of a used book, but condensed down to just the scribbles and notes. There's still something undeniably magical and pure about finding notes physically occupying empty space on a page; if you run your fingers across it, you can still feel the indents where pen met paper. But forums and threads and online discussion groups offer something far more social than ghosts in the margins can provide community. And in a community that must survive the fires of social oppression for as long as minutes are used to measure time, there's hardly anything more valuable than the sanctity of a used book and all the notes that come with it. “We know,” they say, “we understand. Here's how to find clothes that fit your body. Here's how to cover stubble with makeup. This is what girlhood is. This is what it means to be a woman (it means anything, and everything, and everything else in between).”



You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select, I don't know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance. . . . But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise, it's not lapis, it's actually cerulean. . . . However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs. And it's sort of

comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room (*The Devil Wears Prada*).



Much like textbooks, and diaries, girlhood is a transient thing. The first edition is always messy. Facts aren't always cross-referenced, sources aren't always backed up, and the handwriting is a shaky imitation of cursive. Then it gets its footing in the second edition. More sources, more citations, maybe it follows a more efficient style or adds a few doodles in the corners. Time passes and, eventually, enough new research comes out that a third edition is warranted. Then a fourth, and a fifth, maybe a sixth, and with each new edition, the cursive gets a little better, sources become more credible, and the subject matter gets a little more depth. Skirts turn to jeans, plushies turn to Stanley bottles, cherry-flavored lip gloss turns to foundation and concealer. Eyebrows are plucked, hair is straightened, glasses are nixed. Girlhood is made acceptable. Standardization becomes a virtue. In the end, the only version of girlhood I can get is one that's used.



"There," says Ken, taking off Barbie's glasses. "Now you're beautiful" (*Barbie*).

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# Sometimes We Ask for It

Allison Sadler

*[Content Warning: rape, child abuse, and  
general discussions of rape culture.]*

In a perfect world, the story of my first kiss goes something like this: an appropriately aged boy with freckles and bandaged knees kisses my cheek on the playground and then scampers off to a giggling pack of playmates by the swings. This is an acceptable story. A preferable story. This is a story you can tell your college roommate or joke about with your mother while looking at elementary-school yearbooks. But this is not a story I can tell casually. The story I can tell you begins with a much older man pulling me into his lap and running his hands under my shirt. With my parents conveniently absent and the sun streaking across my face, he leaned in to rip away the last vestige of my already squandered childhood—the first of many milestones he would steal from me. And you, in horror, would probably expect me to have been repulsed, confused, and scared. You probably would expect me to have told a trusted adult, like every “bad touch” presentation at school tells you to.

And you’d be wrong.

As a twenty-something adult, I still struggle to say the words aloud and admit to myself the truth of my first assault: I didn’t hate it. In fact, I was elated that someone would kiss me, touch me, treat me like an adult trapped in a ten-year-old’s body. What no one tells you about rape is that, in the absence of attention elsewhere, it can feel like care. It can feel like the love you have been denied all your life. And so began my first “relationship,” with a man twice my age, conveniently within my own home and under the noses of my ever-watchful parents. I knew him as my stepbrother but also as a kind of boyfriend (though he would never acknowledge this role, lest he confront the depravity of his abuse). For more than half a decade, we would pretend at the seriousness of an adult relationship—he, knowingly, and I, naively. This was the secret of how

he silenced me: not with threats or coercion, like *Law & Order* depicts, but with my own abiding affection for him.

Are you uncomfortable yet?

The first time I was called “jailbait” was in fifth grade, sitting across the table from my stepbrother at a Mexican restaurant in town. I was there for my birthday dinner, freshly ten years old and feeling like a real grown-up. Grown-ups go out to eat for their birthdays, I thought. They don’t have parties. Proud of my “adult” choice to forgo the *My Little Pony* decorations and confetti cake, I hardly noticed his glances at my body and suggestive comments.

“You’re turning out to be a real piece of jailbait. Man, if I were your age . . . .”

I didn’t know what the word meant, but the way he said it made me feel wanted, in a way no one had conveyed to me before. Sure, the boys at school sometimes teased me or blushed when I talked to them at recess, but that was nothing compared to this. The man who taught me how to play *Pokémon* and climb trees, who was so mature and cool and funny and interesting, found me desirable. And who wouldn’t want that? To be found pretty by someone you admired so much? Although I recognize now that I was being groomed, as a child, I could not conceive of a reason other than genuine affection as to why my beloved brother would look at me that way. So, I didn’t tell a “trusted adult” about his remarks and sideways glances. And I did not tell them when he stole my first kiss. And I did not tell them when he raped me, because I didn’t know it to be rape in the first place and because, even if I had, I would’ve defended him against the world. That’s the knife-twisting reality you refuse to accept about rape: sometimes, victims don’t even know they victims. Sometimes, we “ask for it.”

And I’ll tell you about everything we don’t ask for, too.

My stepfather once told me about his dream: to see his family united in the church again, all of us sitting side by side in the pews. And what do you say to that? How do you grapple with knowing, at the ripe

age of fifteen, that you have destroyed that dream and your family along with it? You spend hours ignoring your parents' phone calls to the jail, begging them to take down his pictures so you don't have to live with the reminder and the guilt. So it stung when they took to Facebook and the pulpit to share the gory details of my rape with anyone who would listen. It stung when they brought him up so casually in conversation, sharing details of his "new life" at dinner, as though he were on vacation and not rotting in a cell. And it brought down the entire hive on me when they wouldn't stop doing it—acting out this charade where, somehow, they can love me and him at the same time.

And it hurts that I can't bring myself to move on from it.

I am often asked about forgiveness, and it always bothers me—how everyone assumes I must be so faithful as to consider forgiveness at all. The truth is that my only prayer is vengeance. And the uglier truth is that anger leaps out of me like fire from beneath the coals, singeing everything close to it. Every therapy session I've ever attended has gone something like this: I say, out loud, what was done to me; I am asked (tenderly) how I feel about it; I say that, more than anything, I am angry. And what else am I told to do but forgive? I see the church's doctrine repackaged as therapy-speak and to everyone's tangible disappointment, I reject it. Again and again, I refuse to forgive, even though it's supposed to be something I do for myself. Even though it might bring me "peace." Therefore, I forgo the potential tearful reunions and reconciliations, burning the pews in my stepfather's church. I let that selfishness bury me and my family in the same hole.

And I'm not sorry.

People ask me about how I go on living knowing I am "broken," like I'm some kind of tacky porcelain angel found at a rundown thrift store. They approach me in Wal-Mart, online, at Thanksgiving dinner to see if I'm over it yet. To see if I've finally overcome my teenage melodrama over something that "happens to everyone." They're disappointed that I have tattoos and smoke cigarettes and drink dark liquor and say "raped" instead of "touched." It makes them uncomfortable to see the logical result of years of abuse: a girl—a woman—deprived of her sweetness

and polite sensibilities. Part of me delights in this. Destroying myself out of spite feels like a small rebellion against their expectations. And I can't help myself, so I keep picking up bad habits and putting myself in risky situations as though spitting in their faces will somehow heal my wounds.

I have never stopped asking for it.

I am not a survivor. I struggle to call myself a victim. And I don't pretend to be an activist for anti-rape causes. You can say that's selfish—to deprive worthy causes of whatever contributions I could make to them—and maybe it is. But I have to wonder if it is not more selfish to ask me to let childhood rape define the whole of my work, life, and identity. Is it not enough to continue surviving the only way I know how? The truth that no one tells you about rape is how loathsome it becomes to justify your existence afterwards. You become damaged goods in the eyes of even the closest friends and family, and every action you do (or don't) take is somehow related to your violation. Your life is seen as an irretrievable tragedy, and from then on, you have only two paths forward: championing “healing” and “forgiveness,” or enduring silence. It is never enough to live. But I choose to do just that, to exist as a perpetual bad example of “survivors.” I smoke, I drink, I fuck, and I do so without bending my head in shame or pretending as though I have overcome some great devastation. I disappoint my parents and live just as happily as you or anyone else—and that's why I will never be the perfect victim.

# Divine Nature

Ella Stott

**M**y mom told me a story once. At eight years old, before I could get baptized into the Mormon religion, I had to meet with the bishop and explain why I deserved it, why I believed it and nothing else so fully and irrevocably. I was shaking on the car ride over, convinced he wouldn't believe the things I had to say.

"You know what May said during her interview?" my mom asked, soothing me with little shushes as tears threatened to stain my cheeks dirty.

"What?" I whimpered, trying to picture my older sister talking to the bishop. She didn't say a lot. Especially not to people other than me.

"The bishop asked why she wanted to get baptized, and she said she didn't know."

My shaking immediately stopped, replaced with a paralyzing shock. "She did?"

She laughed. "Yep. She said she didn't know, and she got to be baptized anyway. You'll be fine."

She couldn't have known this made everything so much worse.

Yes, God would forgive May. May didn't know any better, but I did. And God knew it. I would have to make my answer doubly good. It would have to count for the both of us. God had let May sneak by with that answer, but he wouldn't let me. It was different for me.

I'd already told God I would save all of us after missed family prayer and scripture study, after kids from other families knew all of the answers during primary that my parents hadn't taught me. It wasn't their fault they weren't strong believers. But I was one, so if we wanted to actually be together for eternity, I was our gateway.

So I went into my interview, delivering poetry on why I believed so strongly in God's power that I would devote my life to the religion. The bishop's handshake of approval gave me my only chance to remove my sins.



The day came quickly—an evening in June.

“Congratulations” was the word I heard most that day. “Congrats,” like I was winning an award. Or “I’m proud of you,” like they wouldn’t have been if I’d chosen not to get baptized. The words were unsettling, even if I agreed with the sentiment. I decided not to think too hard about what they would be saying if things were different.

The program started off with a couple of words and music numbers. Then I had to change into my baptism outfit, a pure white jumpsuit, while my dad changed in a neighboring room. We walked down the hall together, decorated in pictures of hope and colors of peace until we arrived at the baptismal font.

Everyone was waiting for us there, the little kids in the front so they could see what it would look like if they made that decision later in life. It seemed like everyone was holding their breath in anticipation, so I looked away.

“I’m getting nervous,” I whispered to my dad before he led us into the water. “What if I do it wrong or forget to plug my nose or something?”

He placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “There’s no way to do it wrong, I promise. We practiced it. You know what you’re doing, and it’ll be fine.”

I nodded, trying to regulate my breathing as I followed him into the font. We positioned our hands just like we practiced, with him holding up his right hand so he could say the holy prayer.

*Amen*, and we nodded to each other, and I plugged my nose with my free hand. He dunked me in the water.

People said the world stilled under that water. That they heard a whisper from God. That they felt nothing but love.

I just felt like I had been dunked in water.

When I came up, immense relief coursed through me despite my damaged expectations. That part was over, my sins were washed away so I was technically perfect, and I could spend the rest of my life doing good to get my family to heaven. I relaxed in my dad’s arms.

Until I heard one of my grandpa’s voices. They were both witnesses, cast to ensure it went perfectly. “I think her foot came out of the water.”

The relief was washed away like my sins hadn’t been.

My other grandpa agreed. “I saw it come out too.”

I looked at my dad in panic, hoping it was a joke, even though I knew it wasn't. I had lifted my foot up with the motion of being dunked underwater.

"I . . . I didn't do it right," I whispered to my dad, my voice cracking. Fear formed a burning dew as a glaze across my eyes.

I could see him searching for the right thing to say. "We can do it again," he assured me. "This happens to lots of people."

"No, it doesn't," I said, trying to keep my voice quiet so no one in the room would be able to sense my distress. "I did it wrong."

"No, you didn't. We can just do it again."

He forced our hands into the right position and said the prayer quicker this time. I looked around the room again, and the faces were different. Shocked. Scared. Not as proud as they had been before.

I was supposed to be perfect now. The one moment everyone was perfect, right after their baptism, was never going to be true for me. I'd messed it up. Not just for me but for my entire family. The water burned like a flame around my waist.

The prayer was done. My dad nodded at me. I kept my feet firmly planted on the ground.

The world didn't still. I didn't hear a whisper that I was doing the right thing, God didn't let me know he loved me. I was just in water. Imperfect.

I came up, ready to hear I needed to do it again and again and again, but my grandpas nodded, and my dad led me out of the font, and I felt numb because I was never going to get a redo of being baptized for the first time.

My tears were streaming now, and I couldn't control them.

My dad tried to comfort me, and my mom did too when she came to help me change into my new dress. My baptism dress. Traditionally, it was supposed to be white, but my mom had convinced me it was okay to get a dress with the ends dipped in pink. Why had I caved? Just because I liked how that dress looked more than any of the white dresses we'd looked at?

The dress made me cry more.

And then the power went out.

My mom kept comforting me, wiping tears off my cheek, as my distress turned into a panic attack. She guided me through changing in the dark, and I eventually calmed down to the point where I could go

back to the main room to proceed with the confirmation of the Holy Ghost.

My mom led me through the hauntingly sanitized hallway, and I did my best not to look at the many images of Jesus on the walls. I just wanted to go home.

I woke up the next morning pledging to be perfect that day.

I did that every morning.

And every night I would cry because I hadn't lived up to the promise.



Eight years later, my dad told me a story.

My mom was pregnant with me, and May was two years old.

He read something online that had piqued his interest—Joseph Smith history. CES Letter. The truth.

Outside sources were sources of the devil, he recalled. He read it anyway.

Hours later, he stumbled into their bedroom. He told my mom he had something to talk about.

She had to clarify: *Any of it, you don't believe any of it?*

He didn't.

She threw up.

Throughout her pregnancy, people told her they wouldn't judge her if she left him. She even heard this from his parents. But she was in love. Painfully, so painfully in love.

I was born to parents divided on religion.

But my dad was in love. Irreversibly, so necessarily in love.

He went to church every Sunday, Boy Scouts every Tuesday, Girls Camps. He gave blessings with power he didn't believe he carried but snuck drinks of coffee when no one was looking.

My dad told me this story when I was driving. I had just told him I wasn't sure I believed in God. He sprung it on me; he hadn't believed for sixteen years.

It hurt that he lied, but it couldn't hurt too much. Because what would hurt more would be baptizing your three kids and giving them up to a religion you couldn't get yourself to rationalize.

The car I was driving was white. We were going to go through a car wash, but I was crying, so we went home instead.

# *Fiction*

## The Motley Girl

Austin W. Dabney

Granite Junior High School was constructed in 1901. Its two floors were connected by a single stairwell, and the classrooms had six windows each with cotton curtains picked precisely for those rooms. The letters that spelled *Junior High School* were carved into the rocks that flanked the front double doors, but they didn't need the name of the town on the building, because both it and its people were made of the same stone. Half a century later, dances were held there as well as talent shows. Soft girls with barrettes in their hair and without a run in their hose jumped and tripped over and on, again and again, gladly, the same pair of ropes since the Second World War. Kickball was played by the boys who'd skinned their knees raw and said they were fine when they weren't, who lost baby teeth falling from the jungle gym and secretly liked the slingshot crack of a crabapple at his back—because it was at the foregone mercy of a friend he'd later remember as more of a brother. Pat, Jo, G, and Cam—names easier said for short but later able to be shouted across the bar. They'd all toast to the memories of those days: first kisses 'round the corner, field trips for Christmas caroling, hot lunches with chocolate milk, and the chance to play the triangle with the high-school marching band.

In 1967, when the Rue girl showed up for her first day of seventh grade, Mrs. Goode had to tell Principal Dean that he couldn't just pretend *Brown v. Board* never happened. Rue's mother Eudora remembered what it was like to stand in the spotlight without trying, not without them saying she stole it if she shone, having to let them think she was not one of their own. So, Eudora schooled Rue at home until she wasn't allowed to anymore. When that morning came, Eudora wanted to make sure she dressed Rue herself for her first day away from home. Every night for a week leading up to it, she tailored one of her old skirts to Rue's size. She made Rue tuck into it a cap-sleeved, baby blue blouse and buttoned it up to her throat. Because she could only hem the waist so far inwards, Eudora sewed in some belt loops to keep the skirt secure. She allowed Rue to choose which belt she wanted to wear, and Rue chose a thin black one with a bronze buckle. Eudora slowly removed the nightcap from her daughter's head and guided her hair, straightened to string,

from the nape of her neck down past the blades of her shoulders. She took a few steps backward and stood erect next to the standing mirror, and saw, in Rue, a vision of the perfect daughter.

“Look at you, Lil’ Miss,” Eudora said, “lookin’ like your Mama. Now go on and get your new shoes. They’re still in the box. You’ll see ‘em sittin’ on the steps.” Eudora left the room to finish her own getting ready. “We need to have been gone from here,” she hollered from across the hall. “Your father promised he’d walk with us.”

Rue rushed her way downstairs in a thrill. Wondering what pair of shoes were waiting for her in the box on the bottom step, she sat down next to it and took off its lid. With embarrassed awe, she thought, *These? These?* She looked over her shoulder at the top of the stairs and saw a shadow on the wall of her mother, bent forward, clipping on earrings. As she stitched the skirt a week prior, when Eudora said, “And I’m gonna get you a new pair of good school shoes, too,” Rue made the mistake of thinking that it would be a pair of shoes she would have wanted. It tormented Rue then at the bottom of the steps—her foolishness, as she slid into a pair of too-big lady loafers she would be expected to grow into over the next two years.

“You ready?” Eudora asked. Next thing Rue knew, she was gazing at a morning’s civil twilight. Their front door was a weathered shade of red Rue’s father used to call crimson. But there was no sight of him now. Eudora locked the door and tried to distract her daughter’s thoughts, which she could sense were wandering away from the day ahead and swaying toward her father’s absence.

“Don’t seem like crimson to me,” Eudora said. “More of a cardinal, don’t you think?” Rue shrugged her shoulders. She could feel the artifice in her mother’s voice, how the very inquiry was dumber than they both were. All Rue could think about then was whether or not her dad would actually show up. The other kids might not say anything if both of her parents made a show of unity and if the students saw the colors that explained her complexion. It would set a precedent and give her a license to say, *I’m gonna tell my dad* and have it mean something. But more than that, secretly, Rue wanted her dad to recognize her as she was then and there: another inch taller in ugly shoes, dressed in her mother’s drag, and the first colored girl to attend Granite Junior High School.

“Let’s give him another minute,” Eudora said. “I’ll go check the back door. Maybe he’s there.” As her mother vanished from sight, Rue finally thought to breathe.

Instead of giving her father sixty precious seconds, Rue decided to take them for herself. She passed the time by looking for every color. Outside that crimson door, beyond the silhouette of trees, was orange. The clouds above it were slow-roasted by the sun into a warped, cottony yellow. Deep into the stratosphere, a crescent moon waned blue. Goosebumps climbed Rue’s gingerbread legs as dewdrops glistened the green in the grass. Rue spotted every color except her favorite one—purple—so she squinted her eyes and looked harder. The periwinkle of a neighbor’s forget-me-nots didn’t count, and neither did the mahogany of her shoes; of no use to her then were the pinks of the tulips her mother planted along the driveway. It occurred to her then that what she needed wasn’t coming. Refusing to let the minute finish without having found it, Rue decided she must become the purple she longed for, must be her own favorite color.

“Well,” Eudora said with a sigh as she circled back to the front porch, “you know how he is.” Rue knew she should have known.

“I almost forgot,” Eudora said. “I got something else for you. One last thing before we leave.” Eudora knelt at her daughter’s feet and tapped the tip of Rue’s right shoe. From her breast pocket, Eudora pulled out a penny and stuck it face-up into the slit atop the tongue of Rue’s loafer.

“Penny loafers,” Eudora said, “all the style in my day.” And as she fastened the other penny into Rue’s other shoe: “But ain’t they timeless?” Eudora held Rue’s hands and looked up into Rue’s eyes.

“We like Lincoln,” Eudora said. “You know why?”

“Cause he freed the slaves.”

“We were never slaves, Rue,” Eudora said, “just enslaved. You’re not wrong, though.” She pulled a stray strand of straightened hair off Rue’s shoulder. “They just don’t tell our story the right way.” It wasn’t until then that Rue forgave her mother for the hot comb and for the shoes because she saw two small amethysts dangling from her earlobes. What it meant, what it took, to feel purple inside—it made sense now.

“I know you’re scared, baby,” Eudora said. “But now you got my lucky pennies.”

“In my lucky penny loafers,” Rue chimed with a smirk.

“There she is,” Eudora said, making Rue smile with teeth, tugging her hands with pride. “There’s my girl.” They both walked taller toward Rue’s first day of seventh grade, each holding the other’s hand the whole way there.

Drop-off was easy. But for the performance of parent pick-up, Eudora was sure to be there by three o’clock sharp. She stood on the school’s periphery but not outside its perimeter. She could see the mothers gathering with other mothers close to the front doors. They had kept conversations about whatever came to mind while they waited for their babies. And it wasn’t because Eudora was an eavesdropper but from how loudly they spoke aloud that she got a sound of their lives. She could hear them when they talked about last weekend’s regatta, about the runt boy who won the race and about rooting for the underdog, and about how they couldn’t believe that a gallon of gas cost as much as a pack of cigarettes: “32-cents with tax!” Eudora knew better than to believe they all seemed the same, but she thought they sure as hell sounded it.

By half-past three, Rue still hadn’t come out of the school, and Eudora was the only mom left in the lot. When the last of the women had collected their young, it seemed to Eudora that any one of those children could have belonged to, and be claimed by, another mother. Bethany or Tiffany or Timothy or some other one-two-three, one-two-three. But not Rue—hair pressed and all dressed to the nines as Eudora’s way to protect her curly-headed baby from their gaze of the world. Having bid each other ‘til tomorrow, the other mothers avoided Eudora by walking past her on the other side of the lot. She could hear their children ask them, even at a distance, *Is that her mom?* Eudora sensed that something had gone wrong, but then Rue emerged intact.

“Rue, baby!” she hollered and waved. Rue came toward her but wouldn’t look her in the eye. And when she tried to ask Rue what was wrong, she didn’t say a word. It wasn’t until they were out of sight of the school, when Eudora asked her, “You learn something new today?” that Rue stopped in her tracks. She held her face in her hands and released what she withheld.

Eudora knelt at her penny loafers and said, “Tell your mama what happened.”

That morning, Rue and her classmates were reciting the Pledge of Allegiance when the principal arrived outside their door, joining the

chorus in a baritone “of liberty and justice for all.” As the children slid back into the seats at their desks, he walked into the room.

“I won’t be long,” he said. “I just want to formally welcome you to Granite Junior High School. And to remind you all that we are here for one purpose: to prepare you for high school. I advise that you mind Mrs. Goode and mind one another, despite how motley things may seem.”

Mrs. Goode thanked him, and he walked out. Then she saw an innocent hand, held lazily in the air.

“Yes, dear?” she called.

“What does ‘motley’ mean?”

Had the student not asked the question, she would have carried on pretending she knew what that word meant. But they all looked at Mrs. Goode with eyes that were just as curious as their hearts were hooded. They all wondered: what does that word mean? Mrs. Goode said she wasn’t sure, so she pulled from underneath her desk a large volume of the English language dictionary, and, with impressive speed, found the word’s entry.

“Motley: noun. The particolored costume of a jester or harlequin.” She looked up from the dictionary to see a sea of confused faces unsatisfied with that answer, so she kept reading.

“Nonsense. Foolery.” Then, with a tone of, *Ah, here it is*, Mrs. Goode said: “Adjective. Checkered. Diversified in color. Mixed.”

## Mississippi, 1883

K. E. Dahl

The man left Texas the day his mama died, cold and withered among the hand-stitched blankets of a servant's pallet. He heard people say over and over again that the dead looked peaceful, or as if they were merely asleep, and he was now qualified to call all that just talk. Just talk. No. Mama looked anguished, with brows furrowed and hands still clenched around the corners of that damned blanket that he folded up to her chin; she was still looking at him, mouth gabbing and flapping to tell him something, anything. If only her throat could form the words. She died just like that: mouth and eyes open, tongue lolling, spittle collecting at her lips even as he wiped it away with her ragged handkerchief. After a crawling eternity of keeping his ear to her mouth and waiting for the choking words to escape along with the gurgling of her bloody saliva, she died so suddenly that he hadn't realized she was gone until he stopped hearing those noises, until he tucked a hand under the sheets and felt the unnatural stillness of her concave chest—the very same chest that nurtured him to life. He manually shut her eyes and closed her jaw so he didn't have to look at it, gaping like the mouth of a cave, and so he had the peace of mind that she might be comfortable. If there was a God and a heaven and an eternal soul, his own would be damned for leaving her to lay on that pallet, undignified and barely human, as she had died. He cleaned her up, tucked her in, and kissed her cheek, and then he left the room how he had entered. The nurse—who wasn't a nurse but a house servant who had been sequestered to the sickroom when no funds could be appropriated for a proper doctor—did not seem startled when he told her Mama was dead. She merely nodded, touched his arm, and said, "Lo siento. Fue una mujer bien." (I'm sorry. She was a good woman.)

The man made no effort to contradict the nurse; what his mother had or had not been was no longer important. Instead, he took his hat from where he had hung it on the doorknob and sat it back on his head.

"Gracias," he said simply, and that was all there was to say. The nurse replied that she and those who had once worked alongside his mother would take care of the funeral. Today, they would send a letter into town to organize a time for the pastor to speak some words at the burial, and she would speak to Renaldo about a coffin. She said it would

be a simple ceremony, but that was more than what most people got. He thanked her again and left.

If folks on the ranch were surprised to see the man go, they did not say so. They only watched with tired, purple and red, dun-rimmed eyes, like callus-handed phantoms. It was only Angel—good old Angel Muñoz—all five-and-a-half feet of overgrown ranch boy that still couldn't speak a word of Spanish, who finally stood, flicking one end of his hand-rolled cigarette into the mud as he did so, to face the man.

The man stopped and fiddled with the loose tail of his belt from where the loop had snapped.

“What are you doin', Cowboy?”

“Going.”

Angel nodded and waited for him to add something more. When he didn't, Angel said, “Alright, I'll play. Going where?”

“What's it matter to you?”

“You know what. No need to get secretive.”

He didn't reply, only knocked his hat a little further onto his head and looked toward the horizon, squinting as dust stung his eyes. “Wind's pickin' up. Cattle are wanderin', if I had to guess. You'll probably want to wrangle 'em soon, 'fore it gets too dark out here.”

“Sure thing, Cowboy. We'll start as soon as you get back.”

He met Angel's eyes and saw both a probing question and a characteristic hint of amusement that bordered on challenging. They'd grown up together, he and Angel. Two riotous teenagers eager to get feet into stirrups and money into pockets sure had a lot of growing to do—he more than Angel, he reckoned. Hell, he still had growing to do; even at a middlingly ancient-feeling age, he figured that knowing he was only half-grown made him more grown than many other men he had met. It was only because he considered Angel to be more of a brother than the one related to him by blood that he said more.

“You'd better not wait. Could be a while.”

“As long as it's before dark, we'll wait,” Angel said, and that challenging glint was back, daring him until he found himself frowning.

“Fine. I'll be back before supper.”

“What would you say if I told you I don't believe you?”

“You callin' me a liar now?”

“We both know you've been a liar since you first could hold a rope in two hands. Ain't no use in gettin' offended by facts.”

"I'm goin' now. I'll see you."

Angel smiled a bit ruefully. "Aw, Cowboy, look at you getting' all sweet on me."

He didn't dignify that with a response as he turned toward the stable.

Angel called out, "You ain't getting' one of them horses, are you?"

He didn't reply and, even as Angel shouted curses after him, his friend did not follow. The last thing he heard Angel say was asking for another smoke from his lazy-eyed friends still seated behind him.

The barn door creaked as the man stepped inside; hay smell and dust kicked up by his boots filled the air. Mama was allergic to hay; the slightest whiff of it was enough to cause a violent coughing fit, as if she were dying. His throat itched as he breathed, either with the hay or the thought of Mama; he couldn't tell.

He passed by a skittish mare who, already tossing her head, whinnied and stomped at him with energetic fury. She'd bitten a cowhand and kicked him in the chest just the other day—so badly that the boy was laid up in the house with a nurse on one side and his brother on the other, praying. It was only Angel's begging and bargaining that kept that mare there; otherwise, she would've been God knows where, but it certainly wouldn't be here. Further down were two big chestnut bays, the best mounts on the ranch: quick-footed and powerful and, better than that yet, reliable. Both were bought in Mexico and, contrary to what the Americans on the ranch believed, they seemed to understand English just as well as if they had been born and bred in Texas. Those beautiful Mexican bays were the envy of nearly every hand—nearly.

He passed on. She was in the corner stall at the far end of the barn, where he'd left her. Mama's mare nickered as he approached and shoved her nose against the bars of her stall door. He smiled and touched her soft, white-patched forehead with his hand. She wasn't built much for riding; she wasn't lean and toned like the bays, and she wasn't energetic and fiery like the ill-tempered mare. He couldn't recall the last time she'd been fitted for a riding saddle, let alone actually held the weight of a human on her back.

Slowly, he unbolted the door and clicked the bridle around her splotched face, speaking to her as he did so. She barely moved, only blinked at him slowly and staggered him with her trusted glance. He was always surprised how devoted an animal could become to man, for her

pliability in his hand and her unmoving form that could allow him to do whatever he wished with her.

"I don't know how you trust me so easily, Tad," he told her, patting her neck. Then, he led the blonde paint out of the stall and dropped the reins by the tack closet where his dusty, sun-stained gear hung on the wall. When he came back, hands full, Tadpole hadn't moved even an inch from the spot where he'd left her. He smiled. He fitted the saddle onto her back, cinched and secured, before he led her out of the barn by the reins, despite thinking she would follow him without being led.

Angel was still standing by when he and the horse came out into the sun, but he had a new cigarette glowing in his right hand and he had a far more confused look on his face. "Whose saddle is that?"

"Mine."

"No, the hell it ain't."

"Well, it's mine now."

"And what are you gonna do with it?"

"That seems a right stupid question, don't you think?"

"You ain't gonna ride her, are you?"

"Maybe I will."

"Listen, Cowboy. I know you, and you ain't gonna ride that horse there."

"Don't go tellin' me what to do. If I mean to ride her, I'll ride her."

Angel looked him in the eye again and balked a little. "You ain't lyin'?"

"No."

"Well, shit, Cowboy," Angel said. "You're still full of surprises, old man."

"I ain't aimin' to surprise anybody. It's my business, and she's my horse," he replied and then tugged the reins even closer to himself. Mama was dead; Tadpole was his. No one would argue otherwise, even if the will had been burned years ago. He absentmindedly touched the horse between her dark eyes and then reached for the dusty, insignificant, and grim bags he had lined against the doorway.

He didn't say anything when Angel appeared next to him to take some of the bags and secure them to Tadpole's saddle—a hand never offered, never voiced, yet there all the same. Together, they hooked on his bedroll, pack of provisions, coffee pot, extra pair of wool trousers, and Sunday church shirt. Then, together in a silk handkerchief he'd tied

shut, he added his folded hunting knife, his rosary, and his tiny leather pouch of loose coins that constituted his savings. Lastly, he added his near-empty tin of tobacco, which he hadn't smoked in over three weeks for fear of finally running out. When Tadpole tossed her head, he thought she looked like a wagon pony without the wagon for how heavy her saddle seemed. Yet, it was all his worldly possessions—every last penny of his livelihood put into three measly bags and a handkerchief—and then it seemed barely anything at all.

The man sighed, resting his hands on his hips. *Wyoming*, he thought, then said.

"Wyoming?" Angel repeated, squinting at him from the corner of his vision. "That's where you're headed?"

He hummed, almost surprised at himself, and saw Angel shake his head. "What the hell's in Wyoming?"

"My damned brother. Or, he *was*, last I heard." It had been a few years since anyone passed through with any sort of news, but word of mouth and the like were about as reliable as he could expect when letters and short messages passed along through traveling cowboys who owed him a favor went unanswered.

"I didn't know you had a brother."

"You never asked. I never told."

"Shit, I guess I didn't. Don't tell me you've got a sister, too."

He hummed again and looked outward toward where the sun was going down, an orange egg yolk hanging above the horizon, warm on his face like the fumes of a burning stove. Soon, the yolk would split and run down the edges of the pan, coloring the sky with broad strokes of golden drips and bloody streaks.

Angel cleared his throat after a beat and looked around. "How'd he get up there? In Wyoming, I mean."

"Cattle drive."

"From Texas?"

"Well, the cattle were from Texas and North Mexico," the man said. "You probably remember him. Name's Clarke. Never stuck around here for long, maybe only a few weeks after he turned nineteen. Said there weren't nothin' left for him here after his Pa got all shot up on the border and Mama got all screechy and mean at him. Fucker."

Eyebrows rose high on Angel's face. Clarke never stuck out in a crowd—skinny with knobby knees permanently scraped—and he never

looked for trouble. The man could tell Angel remembered the kid: his shifty eyes and fawn-like, stumbling gait, his wrinkled clothes and stuttering words, all the warning signs.

“Nineteen—so you must’ve been . . . .”

“Roundin’ five years before thirty.”

“And you both were brothers?”

The man just shrugged, and for a minute they were silent, looking at the West. The sun reflected the copper in Angel’s eyes, appearing like an orange-eyed housecat: analyzing, thinking, stewing. The man, seeing that casually contemplative expression and copper eye, realized he hadn’t spoken so much and so truthfully in years. The lies seemed both horribly attractive—crooked shade and cool liquor down a parched, cracked, burning, choking throat—and terribly sickening. Somewhere, he heard himself muttering in a low voice: *It’s true as the thousand dollars in my pocket*. Angel would ruffle his hair and hook an arm around his shoulder, but he was stopped for a thickness in his mouth, like cotton or venom, or the lye soap Mama used to put there to keep him honest. He swallowed the bitter taste of her ghost, her fingers against his cheek, her hot breath scalding his face in rebuke.

“Someone’s gotta tell him about Mama.”

“It doesn’t gotta be you.”

The man smiled briefly. Angel—always the idealist.

He said, “No. But it’s gonna be. I’m goin’.”

“You sure about this, Cowboy? And I mean *really* sure? Wyoming’s far and you know it.”

“If I said no, would you believe me?”

“Can’t say I would.”

“Then, no.”

“Well,” Angel said, stomping his cigarette in the mud once again, even though it was only halfway burnt, “I suppose that settles it, don’t it?”

“I suppose, unless you got a lot more you wanna say to me?”

Angel shrugged one shoulder up against his cheek. “Nah,” he said, turning toward Tadpole. “You take care of her, alright?” he continued earnest, honest, just himself. “She’s a beautiful horse, and she ain’t gonna let you go.”

The man couldn’t quite read the expression on his friend’s face, but he could read the words just fine. Just fine, just like hearing prayer, or

prophecy, or paradox—or any of them mixed together with the lingering regret of his leave-taking. They didn't speak any longer, even as the cowboy clicked his tongue and beckoned the horse with a tug on her reins to let the air of the ranch settle behind their northbound feet in the dust.

## Daisies

Abigail Grace D'Antoni

I knew Lori was going to die a week before she started to slow down. The way she nuzzled into the limp body of her stillborn calf told me everything I needed to know. If I had another newborn I could have given to her, I would've. But she gave birth out of season. And she was old.

And she lived a good life.

I talked for a long time with Millie that night, and I could see that her heart was hurting with mine. She hadn't known Lori as long as I had. Since Lori had come from my father's farm to help us start our herd, I'd known her all her life. Millie knew her through me, though. Through the gentle way I kept her and through the way I would pick daisies from the field, would give some to Millie, and would keep some to stick into Lori's soft fur. When Millie and I sat at the kitchen table and talked, I could see that her heart hurt because when she looked at me, I could swear it was those big cow eyes gazing into mine. I told her that I thought it would be time soon, but I didn't tell her that I knew the exact day. She listened, and she knew anyway.

After Millie and I took away her baby, William helped me give Lori her first bath in years. Will, my sweet boy, picked daisies with me to lay on her baby's grave, and he helped me weave the rest into her fur. He was going to be a good caretaker when he grew up; he was young, but he already knew how gently to braid Millie's tail tuft. I remembered when he was a baby and how, when I introduced them, Lori had nudged her big wet nose into his face. He had laughed and reached with his small, grabbing hands to tug at her before I pulled them apart. My heart was so full.

Lori kept up with the herd for a week but, like I said, she started to slow down after that. She lost her energy and became listless, if a cow could do that. I think she could. She stopped eating ten days after she gave birth to that calf. The other cows and bulls knew that something was wrong at the same time I did; animals usually do. Her other children seemed to understand what was happening, and they often trailed behind the rest of the herd to keep an eye on her. They didn't seem sad though. I think they just wanted to make sure she had some peace, and she knew she was loved.

When the day came, I laid in bed longer than usual, knowing that she, too, was laying in her corner of the field. Not gone yet but going. I got up, got dressed, and pulled the comforter off our bed. Millie watched as I carried it to the barn, and when I came back inside for coffee, she already had a cup waiting for me. She kissed me swiftly. “Do you want to take the spare blankets, too?”

A knot formed in my throat for a moment before I sucked down some coffee to clear it, and I nodded with my face turned slightly away from her gaze. She was doing the same thing Lori’s children did: keeping a distance but giving me peace.

Once I lugged the extra blankets to the barn, I swept off the hay and debris from the dirt floor and dumped and refilled the water troughs. I even tidied the hayloft after lunch. After the barn was as pristine as my father would’ve liked, I took a break to pack my pipe on the porch. I could hear Millie going over mathematics with William in the kitchen. He was a smart kid, and Millie and I both knew it, but fractions could be a killer.

I blew tobacco smoke in thick clouds, the summer sun making them hang heavy in the air. Looking through the haze, I could just make out Lori, a lonely brown smudge against the green fields. I knew it was time.



Getting her into the barn was harder than I had anticipated. She was exhausted, and halfway through tugging her lead to pull her down the hill, I considered just bringing a blanket out to the grass and laying with her where we stood. But she made it eventually. She knew that I needed her to. I brushed her down one last time in the setting sun before I brought her into the barn, her tail swishing away the occasional fly. I knew she was a smart cow because she went straight over to the bed of soft comforters and blankets and settled down in my makeshift nest. I pulled her lead loose, slipped it off her head, and hung it on a hook by the big barn doors. When I did, I noticed a small pile of daisies had been dropped outside. Millie or Will, or both, must have waited for just the right moment before leaving this precious, fragile offering.

I settled in next to Lori, shucking my overalls in favor of more comfortable canvas pants, and wrapped myself in a blanket. She huffed at me, lifting her head to stretch, and nudged it into my lap. We’d spent countless days just like this when she was a calf; it warmed my heart to

know she remembered. Her head was heavy, the weight of her grounding me. I leaned over her, wrapping one arm around the back of her ear and the other under her snout, and I hugged her to me. She huffed again, lowing softly. I held her for a moment, pressing my nose to her temple and inhaling deeply, and then I let her go. Her ear twitched when I pulled my hand away.

I picked up the bundle of daisies from the floor next to me and spent the next hour or so meticulously brushing my fingers through her long, soft fur that never shed right in the summer, threading the flower stems behind her ears and into her strong shoulders. I tried, but I couldn't keep our eyes from meeting. Those big, beautiful eyes. She looked at me like she knew every part of me. Like she would forever, long after her heart stopped. Her tail would swish every once in a while, swatting away a bug or an itch, and she would close her eyes as her breath grew more labored.

I kept two daisies. One, I tucked behind my own ear, and the other, I folded into my overalls.



I woke up to the sun, like normal. Lori's head was still heavy in my lap, and my back ached from sleeping bent over her with an arm splayed over her side. Her side, which no longer rose and fell. Sunlight filtered through the slats in the barn wall, and the way the white flowers stood out on her soft fur was angelic. I had cried, and my tears hardly wet her thick coat, but this morning I did not. I kissed her cold nose, and I left her bundled in the barn to trade a daisy for a cup of coffee.

## Glass Made to Shatter

Raquel Elliott

Vylah could tell her triple bag request for her Malibu and pineapple juice annoyed the cashier. “You must be new here,” she said. “I’m in here every other day.” Vylah gestured and stuck out her hand, suggesting a shake, with a crooked smile. The cashier glared at her for a second too long. With no return, she swiftly put her hand down.

“\$19.43.” The cashier narrowed his eyes, then asked, “Every other day, huh?” His deep blue eyes unnerved her.

Vylah realized how her introduction could have suggested a daily desire for coconut rum and handed him her debit card. “Um, maybe every week, I guess. Better to get liquor here than the grocery store.” With every second it took for the receipt to print, she thought of three different ways of killing herself; she was in mid-daydream of slamming her head in the nearly half-broken glass door of the store when he ripped the receipt off the machine.

“Maybe you should try Bruno’s Corner on Elm Street next week.” He cleared his throat. “I hear they run better sales there than here,” he added almost apologetically. “And yes, I am new here.”

Vylah thanked him for the suggestion and headed for the breaking door.



The bathmat was still damp from yesterday’s shower. Vylah squished her feet from left to right, allowing blush-pink microfiber clusters to enter between her toes. Undressed and soaked, she tilted her head back, just far enough for the water to drip into the tub. She began combing her honey blonde hair with the same wide-toothed comb that her mom used back in Vy’s teenage days. She flipped her wrist at the end of every stroke, sending a whip of water to the wall.

She had three Malibu pineapples within her forty-five-minute shower. One more than last night. Vylah walked seductively on her toes toward her single ceramic sink and looked into the shattered mirror above; she noticed her ashy brown eyes in four different shards of broken

glass. Giggling and burping as she reached for her phone, she was pleased to see that Carter messaged her back during her shower.

*Showering without me, Vy?*

Giddy-like, Vylah positioned her hips and snapped a picture of herself in the mirror. She stared at the photo, tracing her waist with her fingernail. Carter had Vylah in some sort of trance—one that she couldn't understand but didn't really care to. Vylah poured herself another mixed drink, still staring at the beads of water that sat so neatly upon her body.

She gulped the drink down within seconds and hit "Send."



"Bruno's Corner not work out for ya?"

Vylah looked up at the man and noticed the same Atlantic-like eyes from last week. She hated blue eyes and always had, with only one exception. Her friend Amelia had the softest blue eyes—like the color of a midday summer sky. Amelia's grace and forgiving nature made Vylah feel safe in their friendship. She decided to not only look past the color of her eyes but to indulge in them.

"You gonna ask me out or let me scan your items, miss?" the cashier said, shaking Vylah out of her daydream.

"Fuck, uh, sorry." She started sweating. "Something new today."

"Vodka cran, basic move for a not-so-basic girl."

Vylah wrenched her eyebrows, half in question and half in defense. She decided to hold her tongue while the cashier started to scan her items. She took the moment of silence to study his appearance because she figured this wouldn't be the last time she saw him. He had curly, bleach-blond hair but a dark complexion, almost olive-like. He looked about her age—mid-twenties. Vylah couldn't help but notice how exotic looking he was for a Michigan resident. "\$16.32 today," he said, once again pulling her out of her daydream.

Vylah giggled. "You look like a Florida man." He looked down, clearly hiding his reddening cheeks. Vylah noticed how pointed his canines were.

"Family is from the Florida Keys, but, uh, I grew up in southern Alabama."

Vylah lost herself in a relieving comfort. She looked around, noticing that no one else was in the store, and decided to invite him in.

“My name is Vylah,” she began to word vomit, “born and raised in Michigan, borderline alcoholic, and a very stagnant writer.” She stretched her hand out for a shake like she did during their first encounter. The cashier smiled and accepted her hand in greeting. His hands were soft, like velvet. Vylah debated asking what exfoliant he must use, but she had already put herself out there enough.

“I’m Beau, and, uh it’s nice to meet you, Vylah,” he kindly said, glancing at her face to see her response.

Vylah grabbed her bag, noticing that Beau had triple bagged her liquor and juice. She avoided his blue eyes when she nodded goodbye and she made her way out. *Beau*, she thought, *what a Southern name. What is he doing here?*

Vylah thought about Beau while the maintenance man changed out her mirror in the bathroom. She couldn’t stop wondering how someone could move so far north from a tropical area. Truthfully, she had always wanted to live somewhere south but knew she couldn’t handle the heat. Plus, her writing stemmed from her experiences of living in a brisk cold area. Vylah was a relatively confident person though. Her thoughts strayed from Beau and she began to think about how she would style her pale skin in a tropical setting. She figured vibrant colors would draw the most attention away from her washed-out tones, something about which she had always felt insecure.



“Alright, Miss Farley. The mirror is up, and I’d imagine this time, it’ll be charged to your resident portal.”

Vylah always appreciated the maintenance man’s patience over the three years that she had lived there. This was her third mirror change after all. You’d think she could have remembered his name by now. The maintenance man studied her intently for a moment and then asked how she broke the mirror.

Vylah paused. “You see the liquor around, dude. I don’t know. I’m just a bit . . . clumsy, if you will,” she responded nervously.

He pursed his lips. “It’s not my place to really say, Miss Farley, but you should consider a new story for whenever Jennifer asks you what happened,” he responded sternly. Jennifer was her landlord—a straightforward kind of woman. Vylah was not necessarily scared of her,

but the thought of Jennifer asking what happened with the mirror made her arm hairs prickle.

“Alright, noted. Thanks again.”

He made his way to the door, grabbed the knob, and halfway turned his head. “We’ve all seen that guy you bring in here, Vylah. Really reconsider, okay?”

He didn’t give her time to respond, and Vylah could only stare in shock. How bizarre, coming from the maintenance man whose name she had never been able to remember.



Carter came over unannounced later that evening, but Vylah didn’t mind. She’d put him to good use by helping her with an email to Jennifer about the mirror. Vylah wouldn’t tell the truth, even if she wanted to. Then again, she never really knew what she wanted when it came to Carter.

He snorted. “Dude, just say you threw your brush at the mirror in a bitch-fit of rage.”

“Dude, stop calling me ‘Dude,’” Vylah retaliated, “and ‘bitch-fit?’ You call other bitches in front of my face while drunk and expect me to keep taking it?”

“Bitch-fit.”

“*You* are the bitch, Carter.”

He started to laugh, which made Vylah reluctantly smile. She started typing, her first response being that she brought freshly cleaned towels into the bathroom, slipped on a dropped washcloth, and accidentally bashed her elbow into the mirror. She had a scar on her right elbow from a bicycle fall when she was thirteen. At least there was some sort of coverage.

Vylah and Carter went through a twenty-four pack of Bud Light within two hours. Another pack down that she had paid for. “I’m sick of staring at this e-,” she paused to burp, “email.”

“Send it out, Vy. There’s something else I’d rather be doing right now.” Carter began to rub her thigh. Though allowing it, Vylah held in a scoff for his antics. He started toward her knee. Something about tingling a sensitive area before slowly tracing his grimy hands toward the buttons on her jean shorts.

“You disgust me sometimes, but a quick fuck and Frankie’s pizza sound sexy, don’t ya think?” She began drawing her lips to his. “Be even sexier if you fucking paid too.”

Carter pulled his hand from Vylah’s pants, infuriating her. After how much money she had spent on him and after all the hours she had catered toward his job issues, she felt that she could say anything she wanted to him. Any comment, critical or kind, was fair game. Carter had a head of stone, though, never taking a slight critique very well. Anything that either of them did at this point called for an argument.

“I’m fucking out of here, Vy. You really know how to turn a man off.”

Vylah scoffed. “You’re off to your calls then, buddy?”

“What’s it to you anymore?” Carter asked and then slammed the door behind him.

“Nothing that I could understand,” Vylah buttoned up her jean shorts.



Vylah woke up the next two mornings with pounding headaches. Hungover. The empty beer cans scattered throughout the room were getting unbearable to look at. When Carter was last over, she bought a case of beer from Bruno’s Corner. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, it was because she didn’t want to run into Beau while she had Carter with her.

She grabbed one of those cheap, cherry-scented trash bags and began to grab the cans, starting in the living room. She wondered what Beau would think of Carter. He was no prize, being that he was so pale and sickly looking. Carter had one of those frat boy appearances: tall, skinny, shaggy, ash-brown hair and an ego so high that you could fall to your death. Vylah realized that Beau wasn’t far from the frat boy look either, but there were several categories. She unfortunately just fell for the least popular ones of those categories.

Vylah couldn’t resist her temptations any longer. She dropped the trash bag in the bathroom and made for her bedroom. She hadn’t washed her hair since the night Carter made his grand exit. She sprayed in dry shampoo, too antsy to wait any longer. It was headed toward late spring in Michigan, so Vylah chose a loose cardigan over a sheer, white tank top. She chose black platform flip flops that flattered her painted

white toes. Perhaps she was trying too hard for a beach-styled vibe, not that she knew what it entirely consisted of.

She scooted the trash bag toward the wall in her bathroom and checked her appearance in the new mirror. After an application of coral lip gloss, she grabbed her keys and left for the liquor store. To see Beau.



Vylah crashed through the almost-broken door, tripping over her own feet. While on her hands and knees, she saw a pair of white tennis shoes rushing over to her.

“Careful miss! You drunk already?”

*Beau.* Vylah smiled in triumph at the familiar voice and reached out her hand to be helped up. She patted off her stomach and wasted no time.

“I’m here for Malibu and pineapple.” She cleared her throat softly. “And one night of your time.”

“Woah there, cowgirl! Are you asking me out?”

“Yeah, I am.”

Beau smiled, flashing his pointed white canines. He took it upon himself to grab her items, as she always seemed to be the only customer. He hadn’t accepted or denied her, but she let him continue the quest. He didn’t scan the items but triple bagged them, much to her pleasure. Carter never bought her anything, not even candy from a gas station.

“It’s been dead, so I suppose I could close early?”

Vylah shook her head. “No, stay until closed. Then 894 West Meier Avenue, Apartment 3,” she continued. “Bring the alcohol and I’ll see you later!”

She rushed out of the door before he could even open his mouth to respond.



Vylah reverse ransacked her entire apartment within the three hours that she had before Beau closed the liquor store. She showered, shaved every inch of her body, and put on her favorite pink sweater set. She wanted to get back at Carter the best way she knew how. She wanted someone to know her the way Carter couldn’t, and she wanted to know everything about the Florida Keys.

When her doorbell rang, she squealed and ran to the door.

“Hi, miss. I brought your Malibu pineapples,” Beau said, as he welcomed himself in.

Beau poured them drinks and they began to chat about their lives, their hobbies, and their careers. She was flattered that a guy just wanted to sit and converse with her. It was almost too good to be true.

Moments passed and Vylah’s head began to spin. She told Beau that she needed to use the bathroom but fell right back down.

“I’m sorry, um, I feel so dizzy,” she slurred out.

“Not much of a heavy weight as I thought,” Beau purred.

Vylah began to laugh, which settled down to giggles. She started to have double vision. Beau’s hands slid up her crewneck.

“What’s going on? Beau, this—Malibu . . . .”

“Let me introduce myself again.” Beau yanked off her top. “It’s Dan.”

“Dah . . . Dan?”

“Dan Fredrick.”

Vylah’s drooping eyes shot to his growing brown roots, then back to his eyes. Contacts. Deep, ocean blue contacts. Florida’s most wanted. Dan Fredrick. The crazed man who killed his girlfriend, his mother, and his two infant sisters. The whole country had heard about him.

“Oh . . . ,” Vylah’s voice drifted off.

Dan wrapped his hands around Vylah’s neck and began to mercilessly curl his fingers tightly.

In that moment, Vylah thought of her parents, of who would find her, and all of the unfinished stories on her laptop. To Dan’s surprise, Vylah began to smile.

With her life being ripped from her, she also thought of how Carter would explain the once-shattered mirror. And for the first and last time, Vylah thought about her future.

## Snowed In

Huici Gunawan

It was unrelenting. It captured every inch of the land in an unshakeable grasp. Every roof, every road, every speck of existing nature—their once varying colors and surfaces now blanketed by pure white. And even after succeeding in its initial claim—it only continued, and continued, and continued—until everything was completely overcome and buried, their original states long erased, now forced to accommodate to its ever-increasing mass.

“Unbelievable,” his mother said, looking out the window. Her right hand laid across her chest, gripping her heart as if it was on the verge of falling out.

Beside her, William let out a disgruntled sigh.

“Do I really have to do it now? I mean look at it. What’s the point of trying to clear it if it’s just going to come back,” he said.

She looked at him, a stern yet soft expression on her face.

“See, if you don’t do it now, it’s going to get heavier, which will only make the shoveling harder. I don’t want you to . . . .”

“Hurt myself. Yes, I know.”

Her hands reached forward and adjusted his collar, though it truly didn’t need any further adjustment. She continued with a smile, “The quicker you get it done the quicker you can come back inside.”

For a few more seconds than he would’ve liked, she stared at him, gently gripping the sides of his arms. Her brows knitted together as a sorrowful expression took over her face. He hated it. He hated it, he hated it, he hated it. Instead of returning the smile, he kept his expression blank. It looked like she wanted to say something else but the words never quite left her mouth.

Instead, she said, “Well, let me stop holding you up.”

He approached the door, which required much more effort to open than he had expected. After a few shoves with his poor shoulder, it finally swung open. It truly was snow like never before, at least not in the short fifteen years William had lived. He stood at the doorstep and looked up at the grey sky in utter disbelief. The blizzard was lasting much longer than usual. Despite the many layers he had on, he swore he could already feel the cold penetrating through.

William rubbed his eyes when a white blob flew into his view, bringing his head down to avoid any more coming in similar contact. He continued to watch the bleak scene in front of him, his gaze catching certain snowflakes and their slow and frivolous descent to the ground.

It was quiet, besides for the whistling, harsh wind and light crunching of fresh snow beneath his boots. It would've remained a peaceful sight had it not been for the fact he would now have to enter it.

Shoveling snow wasn't his favorite chore. As treacherous as the snowstorms were, he most enjoyed them at their peaks, as it would leave them stuck indoors. It meant apt time to read, warm meals, and best of all, proper time with his family. The best memories would be made in their sequestration. Their house was very small and shabby, its walls thin and therefore not able to resist the severely cold temperatures. This would then cause them to crowd around the fireplace. The conversations they had around here were like no other. Endless laughter and joy would fill their household, drowning out their chattering teeth. One of his favorite parts was when his mother would tell stories about his father and the total fool he was.

He had died when William was far too young to have remembered. He often found himself thinking about his father, wishing that he could step into his mother's mind and see just a glimpse of the person he was—what he looked like, what his boisterous personality was like first-hand, what he thought of him, or how their relationship might have been. It would never eat at him for too long, because he would then remember he at least had his father's supposed clone, as his mother ceaselessly claimed, William's older brother, Robert.

Once the snow had melted an appropriate amount, it would be him and his brother's duty to begin cleaning it up. His much smaller and much scrawnier body would tire very quickly, but his brother would tell him to keep going, that it would save them trouble in the long run. And so, William did, but he was not happy about it, not in the slightest. Over the years, the initially torturous and tedious task soon became a bonding activity between the two, so much so that they would enthusiastically look forward to it.

"It still looks pretty heavy out there, but if you two insist, I suppose I can't stop you," their mother conceded, her hands on her hips. "Just be careful. I don't want either of you . . ."

"To hurt ourselves. Don't worry, we won't," Robert responded.

“Promise,” William added.

They stepped outside, the cold breeze hitting their bright, determined faces. It was an annual competition now, seeing who could shovel the most amount of snow in their designated area the fastest. William would always manage to lose, no matter how many times he practiced, or futile tactics he tried to play. In his defense, Robert was a few years older, and therefore had more experience. There was unfortunately nothing he could do to change that.

“I’ll give you a head start this time.”

“No. I don’t need it.”

“You sure? Quite enjoy scooping cow manure, huh?”

“It’s going to be you this time, Robert. I’m going to make sure of that.”

“Hm, fairly confident this year? Well, I expect to see fair sportsmanship. If I see your shovel anywhere near . . . .”

“Look over there!” William darted his finger to the left.

“That’s not going to work on me.”

“Okay, but this will.” William shoved him into the snow and then bolted, an evil smile plastered on his face.

“Hey!” Robert yelled as he stood back up, dusting the snow off his pants. “You may have got me there, but I’m still going to win!”

And he did.

That was last winter. No—two winters ago. *Has it really been that long?*

The last time he saw his brother, summer was just beginning. A light breeze brushed through the air as the sun cascaded on the boarding platform. Endless chatter surrounded William and his family as they made their way through the sea of people who were embracing their fathers and sons. He could still see the cool expression on his brother’s face; feel the rough fabric on the back of his uniform as they hugged; hear the promise that he’d be back by winter, in time for their competition, ready to beat him once again; tell him that this was his duty, that he wasn’t going to get hurt, that he would come back just the way he left. William and his mother quietly stood together as they watched the train gradually get further away, until it was impossible to distinguish Robert among the many waving hands.

“He’ll be fine, just fine,” his mother murmured. “There’s no need to worry, William.”

*He'll be fine.*

*There's no need to worry.*

He was fine. He was safe. He had played cards so much that he was practically a master at it now. The food was disgusting. He missed mother's cooking. How is Mother by the way?

Reading brought him much solace. There was a raid at their camp. It was brutal. Many casualties, multiple of which were his friends. He's not sure how he got so lucky. Attacks were increasing by the day. He was tired. He was scared. He missed us dearly. Rations were scarce. He wasn't sure what was to come, when he'd be able to write again. He loved us. He loved us. He would see us soon as he could, he promised.

William gripped the shovel tightly with both of his hands and pierced the blade into the snow. Pressing his weight onto the handle, he scooped up as much as he could handle and then swung it off to the side. He did it again, and again, digging deeper each time. When he could finally see the familiar dirt pathway begin to show itself, he moved onto another area. A large white pile quickly started to form off to the side. His back was aching, his hands and feet practically numb. Snot leaked out of his nose incessantly; at first, he wiped it away with his sleeve, but it was hindering his progress, so he started to sniffle instead. His heart pounded from all the exertion. Tired, he paused, basking in the work he had completed in such a short amount of time. He imagined that if Robert had seen it, he would've been thoroughly impressed.

He tilted his face up again, welcoming the snow to fall on his face. The moon beamed against the darkening backdrop, lighting a plethora of white dots, some shining more than others. The snowflakes quickly melted into drops as they landed on his rosy cheeks. He closed his eyes and wondered what would happen if he just stood there and let the snow smother him, consume him whole, until he was stuck in place, until his body lost all its warmth. Robert was currently experiencing this. His lifeless form was somewhere out there, not a semblance of him left intact, alone, with nothing to protect him from this merciless weather.

He heard the front door creak and saw his mother's head peeking out.

"William! Dinner's ready!"

He went back into the house, the smell of his mother's signature chicken soup instantly filling his nose. He took off all his outerwear and approached the dining table, taking a seat.

"I added extra potatoes, just how you like it," she chirped, taking her seat across from him.

He brought a spoonful of the warm broth to his mouth. It was delicious.

"It wasn't too hard, right?"

"No."

"Good."

The sound of metal clanking against their dishes filled the silence. The kerosene lamp in the middle of the table flickered.

"Looks like the storm's going to go through the night. Get ready to shovel again tomorrow."

William nodded and looked back down, continuing to eat his soup. His mother watched him for the rest of their meal, hoping that he would look back up, but he never did.

After he was done, he said a brisk goodnight to his mother and went to his room. Closing the door behind him, he stared at the bed in the corner. They had shared a room together. Robert's bed was slightly bigger than his and it always annoyed him. He told him before he left that it better stay exactly how he left it, and if it didn't, he would be back to strangle him.

And William stood by that because who would want to be strangled? The bed was untouched. An impression from the last time he had laid in it was still there, and the once rich navy blue bed sheet was now muted by dust. He continued to stay there frozen in place. In time. He found himself in this position more times than he would've liked to admit.

The wood floors creaked as he made his way to his desk. Sitting down, his eyes fell to the letter sitting on the right side. It was the last letter that Robert had sent him. Its edges were crumpled. He had read it so many times at this point that he could recite it. But no matter how many times he recited the letter, he never got sick of it. He needed to, he needed to hear his brother's voice, or he would forget it.

He turned his head toward the paned window above his bed, watching the blizzard's persistence. The wind was howling even louder. He was sick of it all. He wanted it to stop.

He wanted it to be gone.

He wanted to see the grass again.

# The House I Lived In

Fiona Haborak

Displaced, destabilized, and older now, I figure home to be a trap meant to lure you in, lulled into a false sense of warm security, only to snap when you least expect it.

I keep going back to the house I lived in—the house I moved into at eleven and moved out at twenty. I return to that house by sleeping in a bed once my mother's (always hers, then mine, then ours, and then hers again in a bizarre karmic cycle; there, I lay on the floor on a rug never washed and a stained comforter that I never complained about.

I keep going back to this house (not my house) and patching wounds—but not mine, never mine, always hers, all theirs. I venture back to remember that cage of a room, sharing the bed, where she lay at my feet or vice versa, and years before that, to the couch where she slept and the floor where I joined her for summertime sleepovers.

I keep going back to feeling (being) stuck there, hungry to escape, yearning for a life I never dreamed of, never deserved. I swallow the stale air, flavored with fecal matter and mold, paired with the smell of rotting wood and peeling paint strips. If I breathe deeper, I also swallow the alchemical fusion of ethanol, rubbing alcohol, something fruity and rancid.

Sometimes, I'm trapped in the middle of the creaking staircase with its dusty, soiled amber rug and a wooden plank missing above: either hacked away, burned, or tossed into the marsh masquerading as the backyard.

*(Am I wrong to think that these walls have veins?  
I want to tear them open.)*

I can't fault my mother for hiding with me and beside me, trying to ignore the angry spirit that haunted a space that was not ours, never ours.

Now I'm back to the memory of that dilapidated house: only half in size, both literally and metaphorically. Back to feeling stuck in a room I couldn't leave. This time, my chess problems manifest at the house, afflicted by being stuck at a desk, unable to leave a single room.

Back to the kitchen table where I was mocked, belittled, ignored, and silenced.

Back to the haunted house that plagues me.

So, I'm a child again, wanting my mother—wanting something that I can never have, deprived of a comfort I only knew to be a vacant, fleeting ghost.

So, I'm hiding in bed amongst a sea of synthetic animals, reaching out for something soft, tender, and warm to drown out the stomping feet, slamming doors, and incoherent shouting. I pretend to be asleep, sleepwalking into the present, but it's not my mother I want. I ache to make my grief palatable, to fashion it into something stable, something that glistens brightly and screams success.

Instead, I find myself trapped in the cycle of caretaking, thrust into the centrifuge where caring is a synonym for taking.

I still go back to this house in memories, in dreams, yet never in any fleeting visits.

And I want to burn it down, watch the house become soot, ash, the skeleton it was once erected as, and shape it not into a house, but something else.

Something for me.

# Mr. Mangel on the Seventh Floor

C. J. Jones

Last week, a man named Kurt Mangel was fired from his position of adjunct professor of English literature at Dansbury Community College. His firing was somehow completely unrelated to the mountain of complaints about him that the dean had received in the span of the mere six months Mr. Mangel had been on faculty payroll. This is the story behind the incident, which is completely fabricated. This is called a lie.



Micheal Lyman had lived on this planet for thirty-four years and had spent approximately five of those working night shifts as a janitor for Dansbury Community College. On his first night on the job, he'd been assigned to clean out Sullivan Hall: the biggest and ugliest office building on campus where most of the school's faculty were crammed into offices. No one told him to keep doing it, but no one ever told him to stop either. After hearing extremely detailed tales about what his fellow janitors on dorm duty had to clean up, Micheal found that picking up after professors didn't offer him much about which to complain, so he never said anything to his superiors. He just kept cleaning, and soon enough he settled into a comfortable routine.



Kurt Mangel had lived on this planet for thirty-one years and had spent approximately half of one of those years working as an adjunct professor of English literature for Dansbury Community College. He was not particularly thrilled to be teaching at a community college, but after graduating from his doctoral program, he quickly discovered that, without substantial publications or research, obtaining a tenured position at a real institution, as he described it, would be nigh impossible. So, he'd been forced to play the field until he could finish his first manuscript, which he knew was so groundbreakingly genius that whichever publication house was lucky enough to get ahold of it first would make him their poster boy.

For now, he was not a legendary figure in American literature. He was only the new guy at Dansbury Community College, leaving him to teach the crowded ENG 101 lectures that let out at 4:45 p.m. (referred to as “paying your dues” by English professors in the Dansbury faculty lounge), which required him to hold his office hours at a ghastly 5:00 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Unsurprisingly, it was rare that anyone—students or faculty—ever visited him in his office.

Last Thursday, at 4:57 p.m., Mr. Mangel reached his office, Room 0727 of Sullivan Hall, and gave himself a moment to stop coughing and catch his breath. His office was on the seventh floor of the complex, and the elevators were currently on their third week of being out of service. He had lodged several complaints with the campus repair team, but he had quickly discovered that the opinions of the faculty who were unimportant enough to be on the seventh floor of Sullivan Hall were not well-regarded by anyone who had the power to change anything.

When he'd recovered from his concrete hike, he maneuvered through the towers of books sprawled across his office floor (his requests for actual bookshelves having been similarly ignored), flicked the humidifier in the corner on, and flung a massive binder of student papers onto his old desk. This was the only time in the day he had to work on grading, and because he didn't have anyone to go back to at home, he usually ended up locking himself in his office until midnight. His therapist had advised against this sort of prolonged isolation, but, as with most professionals in his life, Mr. Mangel tended to pick and choose what advice of the therapist was legitimate and which was, as he referred to it, “hokey-pokey.”

Kurt Mangel's trembling left hand now glided across Savannah Mason's midterm paper, leaving shaky splotches of ink in its wake. He paid close attention to the marks he left on his students' work, as he liked to think that literary scholars a century from now would peer at the serial-killer-scrrawl feedback he left on half-baked essays about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and nod with knowing approval at his thoughtful insights. This fantasy was a real possibility in his mind because a late-night internet search had revealed to him that an archive of David Foster Wallace's papers, including syllabi and graded student work, was stored in The University of Texas Library. This archive, of course, gave him the rather arrogant impression that there would one day be a Kurt Mangel collection in some university's library (there

would not) or that there could ever be works of his that were even close to significant enough to populate such a collection. He thought of his style of grading as attentive and engaging. Students reportedly thought of it as tight-assed.



Last Thursday, at 5:05 p.m., Micheal Lyman was sitting on an old sofa in one of the many faculty lounges of Sullivan Hall, recovering from the effort of dragging a shopping cart's worth of cleaning supplies up seven flights of stairs. He huffed and puffed loudly. Dr. Lucy H. Reynolds, Chair of Dansbury's History Department, walked inside to use the coffee machine and flashed him a pitiful smile. "Hey, Mike! How ya doin'?"

"I'm doin' all right, Dr. Reynolds. Thanks for asking. Just takin' a breather after the marathon I did to get up here. How 'bout yourself, Sugar?"

"Can't complain, I reckon, other than this killer headache I've got. Sorry that I'm sticking around a bit late tonight. I know you've gotta clean my office and everything. I don't wanna be in your way. I've just got so much to grade tonight," she said, gesturing toward the machine gurgling out a brown stream of coffee into a cracked mug. "That's what this is for."

"No worries 'bout that, Lucy. It wouldn't be the first time someone stayed a bit too late around here, now would it?"

"You're bad, Mike," she chuckled as she shook her head. She knew he was talking about Mr. Mangel. The entire seventh floor had been a bit on edge since he'd taken up residence in 0727. Michael heard the complaints and the rumors every time he changed the trash bags in the faculty lounge. He had complaints of his own about the man, but he didn't find it professional to badmouth someone to a colleague of theirs.

"Have a good night, now," Lucy called out to him as she left the lounge, steaming mug in hand.

Micheal smiled before he craned his head up long enough to notice the massive blotch of dark-lime mold that had formed a watery ring in the center of the lounge ceiling. He swore under his breath. He had diligently worked to rid the seventh floor of the epidemic of mold that it had endured after last summer. It had been a wet and humid season, with more rainstorms per month than the county had ever seen. The ensuing water damage didn't mix well with the seventh floor's already

stuffy climate. He sighed as he reached for his bottle of Instant Mold Remover™ for the third time this week.



At 7:39 p.m. last Thursday, as Kurt Mangel finished tracing the massive red D+ at the top of Naveah Branscomb's midterm paper, he suddenly felt the warm presence of someone else in his office.

"Now, Professor, that seems a bit harsh, doesn't it?" asked Mary Mahosa, Mr. Mangel's teaching assistant. "Naveah's a real hard worker. You just gotta give her the right incentive."

"Mary!" Mr. Mangel exclaimed. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"With how many papers we have to go through, I'm always here. You gave me the keys, y' know." Mary said as she stretched her legs out on the couch across from Mr. Mangel's desk. She flipped a dial on the controls to the humidifier in the corner to amp it up a level.

"I guess I was so wrapped up in grading that I didn't even see you come in," he muttered. "Can I get you anything?"

"Water would be nice. I'm parched."

"Right. There's a cooler in the lounge. I'll be right back."

On his way out, he noticed Mary's dress, a long piece of fuzzy fabric tinted such a dark shade of green that it was almost black. Something about her outfit seemed to make him feel light-headed.



Last Thursday, at 7:42 p.m., Micheal Lyman dragged his cleaning cart out of the men's bathroom on the now nearly deserted floor and yanked his gloves off with a sigh. An unidentified individual had left such a mess for him to clean up today that he planned on giving dagger eyes to any male professor he came across the next day, just to cover all his bases.

The lights on the floor had dimmed now, and he didn't notice Kurt Mangel scurrying out of the faculty lounge with two plastic cups in hand until he bumped into him, sending the tepid water flying from the cups onto the cold white floor.

"Ah, Mr. Mangel, I'm so sorry!" Michael exclaimed. "It's so dark in here, I didn't even see you. I'll clean that up for you, don't even

worry about it!" He squatted down to the floor and grabbed a towel from his waist.

Mr. Mangel smiled at him. "No worries, Mike. It's my fault for being in such a rush, eh? And remember what we talked about. You can call me Kurt, y' know."

"Say, I see you've got two cups here. You got a guest in your office, or are you just extra-thirsty tonight?"

Mr. Mangel's face scrunched suspiciously. "Oh, uhm, just my TA. We're going over papers together."

"Ah. I didn't know you got a TA, Kurt. Bet that makes everything way easier, huh," Micheal said as he finished wiping up the spill.

"Yeah. She's . . . new." Kurt Mangel appeared in no mood for small talk now. "Well, I've got to get back to the grindstone. See you around, Mike," he said as he quickly walked back into the faculty room, reappeared with full cups, and hurried down the dark hallway.

As he watched the professor hobble away, Micheal began to try and recall if he had ever seen a professor and a TA in an office together so late at night with the door closed. He hadn't. He'd heard a lot of stories about things like this, but he'd never wanted to believe it could happen at good old Dansbury. The thing with those stories, though, is that they never ended well. Especially for the TAs. He gripped the ring of custodial keys in his pocket a bit tighter and began to slowly approach room 0727 of Sullivan Hall.

From outside the office, Micheal heard a muffled conversation through the door, in which he could make out the rumbling of Kurt Mangel's voice. He listened for a while, waiting to hear another voice chime in. He waited for what felt like hours. It sounded like a rather one-sided conversation, but perhaps the TA had been on the receiving end of a lengthy lecture.

Eventually, he heard this:

"Anyways, Mary, I got that water you asked for."

Micheal listened for a "Thank you" in response. There was nothing. But Kurt replied to the silence with a "You're very welcome" anyways. Then: "Here, I'll help you drink it."

That was the final straw, Micheal thought as he rummaged through his custodian's keyring for key #0727. He jammed it into the lock, kicked open the door, and pointed his lopsided set of keys at Kurt Mangel in the most threatening manner he could manage. "Don't you lay a finger on

that girl, Kurt!” he cried before the reality of what Kurt was truly doing set in.

Kurt Mangel, who was pouring the contents of his plastic cups onto a ravenous patch of mold on the wall, gave Micheal Lyman a shell-shocked look. “Mike, I think you may be confused,” he said, pointing to the black pattern of gunk next to his humidifier. “This is Mary. She’s my TA. She was helping me grade papers. I had to help her drink some water. She was thirsty.”



Last Thursday, at 8:15 p.m., custodian Micheal Lyman, age thirty-four, performed a citizen’s arrest on former adjunct English professor Kurt Mangel, age thirty-one, in Sullivan Hall on the campus of Dansbury Community College. When campus security arrived, they discovered an entire colony of mold in Kurt Mangel’s office that had managed to spread to the rest of the seventh floor through unknown means.

The next morning, Kurt Mangel’s office was empty. Every other office on the seventh floor was empty too. The entire floor had to be fumigated.

## The Sloth

Thiri Lin Bo

For as long as I can remember, I've lived with a ticking time bomb in the next room.



Dad was a heavy drinker. I don't think I've ever seen him not drunk or hungover. He would come home in the late hours of the night, violent and smelling of alcohol. The next morning, grouchy and hungover, he would see the scattered and broken furniture and our bruised, bandaged limbs, and ask, "What happened?" but he wouldn't believe my sister when once, she meekly replied that *he* was the culprit. He wouldn't believe my sister, who had never once lied to anyone, who was so brilliant and admirable and hardworking, who was his first daughter—by the way once-loved. He threw his bowl of cereal at her head for daring to accuse him. I've lost count of how many times I've had to clean milk and cereal from the floor with the same dirty rag, clenched in the same trembling hands.

From that day, the answer to his question would always be silence. We would avoid his deranged, narrowed gaze. We kept our eyes down and our chests still, only daring to breathe once he stumbled away, grumbling about "clumsy, useless bitches." But one day, instead of asking my mom or my sister, he turned his beady gaze to me, the youngest girl in the family. I think that was the only time he had ever really looked at me properly. I met his gaze as steadily as I could, though I faintly felt my hands shaking, hidden under the table. I saw his mouth move, asking the same question as always. But frankly, I didn't hear him. I was transfixed by the weight of my father's gaze. Not the man who parked haphazardly in the driveway of our crumbling house, having driven home completely drunk. Not the man who would cuss loudly as he crashed through the doors at one in the morning, cursing the locked doors and coffee table for being in his way.

My father was hungover yet conscious and aware. He sat in front of me during breakfast and asked me a question. He suddenly seemed to shift into focus, when usually he was a blurry figure covered in a drunken, raging fog—far away and yet too close.

I looked at his hands—thin, wiry, and reddened from the countless nights of punching and beating. They were veiny and worn down from a lifetime of manual labor. On his right fist, I could see a faintly healed scar from punching through drywall or a minor workplace accident. My gaze floated upward. His eyes were bloodshot and perpetually sharpened from long-extended times of glaring. His entire frame could be described as thin and wiry, I realized, except for his beer belly, the trophy of a life spent drowning in drink. How could someone be stick-thin and round-bellied at the same time?

“Hello? Are you even listening to me?”

I saw the familiar sparks of anger in Dad’s eyes. His hand clasped around the rim of his bowl, ready to either crush it or throw it at me or both. My mom and sister had frozen, finally raising their nervous eyes. They were tense, but ready. My mom would throw herself at Dad and hold him back, and my sister would grab my arm and drag me out of the house, as far as she could from his wrath. This time was far from the first time.

My mom and sister have always protected me. Loved me. Provided for me. They even secretly saved money so I could go to college—away from Dad and away from them.

I was sick of it.

“ . . . A sloth,” I said.

“Hah?”

Dad’s grip on his bowl loosened. He was looking at me with intrigue now. The same intrigue a snake might show a rat. My mom and sister were too nervous to be confused.

“A sloth broke the flower vase last night.”

“A sloth, huh?”

He started laughing. Loudly, boldly, shaking the walls of our house with his joy and causing Mom and Sis to flinch. I didn’t know he could laugh.

“How’d ya know I like sloths, huh?”

Two weeks later, Dad passed away in a drunk driving accident.



I didn’t think it would ever happen. But I was also surprised it took this long. Mom broke down sobbing when she heard, leaning on my sister for support. For the first time, I saw their shoulders drop. Muscles

that had been tensed for years finally relaxed. That night, the three of us sat huddled on the sofa watching cheesy romcoms with pizza, popcorn, and soda. Dad always hated romcoms, so he would've been really angry . . . if he were alive.

We didn't hold a funeral; we didn't have much cash to spare. Dad was cremated, his ashes given to us in a small urn. The three of us stood in the parking lot, staring down at the little white jar. I was the one holding it because my mom and sister couldn't. They asked me to scatter his ashes around the nearby lake, a popular local fishing spot. Apparently he used to like fishing. Apparently he used to be patient. He had wanted a son, and his patience wore thin after our mom had two daughters and a miscarried son. I gained awareness of the world too late to know Dad before he became the drunken, violent thing with stick-thin limbs and a round midsection. Mom and my sister knew him before the ugly descent, and they struggled between mourning the man's passing and cheering the monster's demise.

They watched from the house with shiny eyes as I carried the urn off to the nearby lake. They made me promise to scatter his ashes all around and then gently drop the emptied urn into the water. I agreed and made my way to the park, where I tossed the entire urn into the first trash can I saw.

We knew Dad's death represented freedom and the start of a much-needed time of peace. We were exhausted and ready for quiet, peaceful nights. But of course, peace continued to elude us.

After I returned from dumping Dad's ashes, the three of us huddled on the couch once again to watch cheesy movies. The wind was particularly strong that night, so it took a while for us to register the low moans coming from our backyard—a sound similar but separate from the howl of the wind. Mom tensed up, got off the couch, paused the movie, grabbed the sharpest knife in the kitchen, and carefully crept to the back door. She tiptoed across the room to peek through the glass panes. Almost immediately, she flinched back and grew pale.

"What's wrong?"

I tried to sneak a look at the mysterious thing that was now softly tapping at our back door. My Mom grabbed my sister and me by our wrists and hurriedly dragged us to her bedroom. We huddled together on her bed that night. Mom refused to answer any questions about what she saw. She told us to go to sleep, but how could we when we could clearly

feel her terror in how tightly she hugged us? So, the three of us lay there, holding each other—three pairs of wide, frightened eyes staring into the dark like a cowardly Cerberus, dreading the weak moaning thing that was begging to be let in with soft and gentle taps.



The next morning, the three of us headed to the backyard together. In the grass, we found a clear trail of brownish blood and flattened grass, as if something had slowly dragged itself to our back door. The bottom of the white door was dirtied with half-dried red stains. There were some small, red ovals, fingerprint shaped yet with no fingerprint pattern, as well as long, red lines dragging down to the bottom of the door, as if the Thing touched our back door with ten fingers and then let those fingers slowly slide downward, almost pawing like a dog. Whatever it was, it seemed too weak to leave even the lightest scratches in the wood. We spent the morning scrubbing and hosing the dried trails away. It took a while, but we removed the stains. Unfortunately, the soil also turned muddy from the amount of water we used to wash off the Thing's trail. My sister laughed as I waddled past, grumbling about muddied socks and shoes, but I could tell she was forcing her laughter.

The worst part about the Thing was that it seemed to appear at random during the night, disrupting our sleep with its weak taps and raspy breaths. It followed no pattern or logic. In the day we all tried to move on, immersing ourselves in work or school. At night, we huddled together in the same room, fearfully listening to the sound of tapping and pawing. We flinched at every thump or creak, though Sis and I had no idea what the Thing looked like, other than knowing it was bleeding a lot. Sis wasn't interested in finding out what that Thing was either, but I wanted to know. Mom forbade me at first, but eventually I managed to get her to give in. She stood beside me, tightly holding my hand, as I tiptoed to peer down at the Thing that was currently slowly tapping at our door. It had been a quiet night. I could hear its dry skin creaking as the Thing tapped ten spindly fingers on our door, the same way old wooden floorboards might. It looked like tree roots, if they were the color of skin and had blood dripping from their ends. The Thing was laid flat on the ground, a figure diminutive and tormented. Tree root hands extended with fingers brushing and tapping on our door, as if trying to paint it red. I stared down at the strange humanoid in a transfixed state.

It almost looked like it was begging to be let in, pleading for mercy and shelter from the cold night. Then, it slowly turned its head up to look at me while opening its mouth. I heard its skin creak again like a pair of leather boots protesting being worn as it slowly unhinged its jaws, exactly. I think I saw a pool of blood in there.

If it spoke to me, I didn't hear what it said. Mom was already dragging me away, stumbling in her panicked rush, while Sis scrambled to drag a chair over to place under the doorknob just in case the Thing somehow managed to open the door. I let Mom drag me away. My mind was buzzing and whirring, trying to process the unholy sight of the Thing that had, at this point, spent months keeping us up at night and busy in the morning trying to erase every sign of its presence. It had lightless, beady eyes that also happened to gleam in the pale moonlight like pools of blood. Funny coincidence. I swear I could make out the reflection of my face in those hollowed orbs if I were allowed to stare a little longer. I'm reminded of the times I spent staring into Dad's eyes, gazing at the girl who was reflected there in the black of his bloodshot eyes.



I had a dream that I was standing in our backyard at nighttime, inhaling the still air, feeling the cold soil and grass beneath my feet. I heard the earth in front of me creaking; It had slowly split open. The hair on my arms stood on end, partly from the cold. After the creaking of the earth came the creaking of the skin, a sound I recognized immediately. I drifted toward the crack in the earth and peered down. I was surprised to see a jagged tunnel down into the dark depths of the earth, almost like a mini chasm. There, way down in the darkness, slowly climbing its way up by digging root-like fingers into the soil, was a sloth with human skin and eyes like pools of blood. I was paralyzed, watching it creep up agonizingly slow. I was close enough to hear the sound of joints cracking. It took all of my willpower to take a single step back from the hellhole. Really, I stood there, watching the sloth-like thing climb out of the depths of hell, and ruining the perfect green lawn that we worked so hard to maintain. It slowly crawled toward my home; I stood there and let it all happen.

Again and again, countless nights in a row. Watching the sloth Thing slowly crawl toward my home (which, for some reason, always had all its doors and windows open in my dreams), I stood there and let

it all happen. Really, it sucks that I had to spend my mornings cleaning up its mess, my days pretending it didn't exist, and now my nights dreaming of myself being powerless to stop it. It was terrible.



This was about two months ago. Things have gotten better now, I suppose. Mom and Sis don't fake their smiles as often. I've managed to attain a scholarship from the nearby local college, so I'll be moving out in a few months. I still dream of that sloth-thing crawling toward my house, but I've learned to move in my dreams now—enough to raise my foot over the cracked earth and give that sloth-like Thing's ugly and bloody face a good kick to send it right back down to hell, where it should stay but for now still stubbornly tries to claw its way up and back into my life. It's nice that a single kick sends it all the way back down. It sucks that it keeps ruining the soil by breaking through every damn night. One morning I woke up with red lines clawed into my calves. It took me three days to limp over to the laundromat to get my bed sheets and blanket cleaned.

One day I hope to have a flower garden in my backyard.

# What it Means to Be Chinese

Carmen Lok

“No bend here. Straight. Arm straight.”

My hand trembles under Popo’s intense scrutiny. The lower slash of the Mandarin character now looks more like a squiggly worm.

Popo clicks her tongue and shakes her head with her usual air of disappointment.

“I can’t do it,” I say. “It’s so hard to write with this brush.” Chinese calligraphy requires a touch of control that I simply don’t have.

“That why must practice. Keep doing.”

I groan softly. “Why do I need to learn this again? You do it so well, so we don’t need two of us writing this every year.”

“You are lady now, later wife. Wife must write on red paper and stick on house for good luck.” Popo dips the brush gently into the inkwell and picks up just enough ink for a perfectly lush stroke.

“Well, why can’t you write them for me?” Her characters sit beautifully on the paper, basking in their own perfection. “Yours looks much nicer anyway.”

“I no live forever. Who write after I die?”

I bite my tongue. I will simply forego the red papers when I no longer have an old Chinese woman forcing me to do it every year. If I really needed good luck, I will do one of those zodiac readings or something.

“Must learn be good wife. So many thing you don’t know. Who marry you?” She tuts.

“What if I don’t wanna get married?” I mutter under my breath.

Popo’s head snaps up, her eyes boring holes in mine. “What you mean no marry? Become like Auntie Lily?” Her face sours at the mention of her estranged daughter.

“She seems to be happy, though.”

“No,” My grandma scoffs. “She is shame for family. How can lady no stay home, no take care house, no marry? No, no. Cannot.”

I put out the small hopeful fire in my heart. I stay in my role. I keep my silence.

We inhale Chinese tradition and exhale obedience in this family.



I wring my hands together behind my back to hide the trembling. The admission letter I haphazardly stuffed in my back pocket feels like the weight of the world nestled comfortably in its little denim hole. My grandma is sitting on the porch for her daily neighborhood watch, the last few breezes of spring exposing the bald spot on her head. I notice the greying near the roots of her hair as I walk up to join her. As if feeling my momentary gaze, she instinctively combs her hands through her thinning hair.

“I tell your mother to fix hair. One week but no do,” she complains.

I pull the red plastic chair back and situate it at just the right distance. Not too far and not too close. “I’ll buy your hair dye tomorrow.”

“Better than your mother.” She gives a resounding *humph*.

A tinge of relief comforts me in the curried favor I very much needed. We sit in silence like we usually do, except that this silence is anything but normal. I have handpicked the words, carefully strung them into perfect sentences, and lined them up like kindergarteners on a field trip. The only thing I should have done is practice. Now, the sentences, tripped over and jumbled, form a useless lump in my throat.

“America,” is the only word I manage to blurt out.

“美国? Why?”

Fighting the Chinese instinct pulsing through my body, I resist the urge to retreat. All the times I skirted around the conversation have boiled down to this moment. Concentrating on the feeling of my feet grounded in the tiled floor, I confess, “I’m going to study in America.”

My grandma stares at me for a long silence, her blemished cheeks taut and set. Her chest rises and falls as she pauses for a moment.

“No.”

I hesitate, stricken. “What do you mean—No?”

“No, cannot go. You are lady.”

I take a deep breath to steady myself. “Po, nobody follows those old traditions anymore. Things have changed.”

“No! Chinese tradition is for Chinese. We Chinese must follow. No simply do or say. You are Chinese lady, cannot go out.”

“So, I can’t pursue my own things just because I’m a Chinese woman? Doesn’t that sound crazy to you?”

“No.”

We glare at each other fiercely, both unwilling to back down.

I pull on my hair in frustration. How are we having this conversation in our modern day? How far have we come as women just to be tied down for tradition's sake? "I wasn't asking for your permission."

"Mei Ling." My grandma's voice drops to a low, threatening tone, one that demands submission and respect. The hairs on my body stand on end.

"Popo, this is my life, my dream. I've worked so hard for this. I'm not gonna let some Chinese tradition stop me from living it."

A thick silence blankets the room.

"Then you cannot be Chinese lady."

The words knock the breath out of my lungs like I've been pushed off a five-story building and landed on my back. I pause for a moment but not long enough to process the words already coming out of my mouth. "I guess I won't be Chinese then."



The wheels of my suitcases scuff the walls as I lug them sideways down the stairs. I cringe at the jarring black streaks I leave behind and inconspicuously reach down to try to wipe them off with my sleeve.

"Sorry, Mom." I sheepishly point at her vandalized wall.

She pats my head. "It's okay. We should leave soon, so . . . ." Her eyes trail to the living room where my grandma is.

I let out a deep breath.

"Your dad and I will wait in the car." She squeezes my hand in assurance.

"Okay." With each step I take toward the living room, echoes of my grandma's words reverberate in my mind.

*We Chinese must follow. No simply do or say.*

The floorboards creak under my feet, accompanying my increasingly heavy breaths.

*You cannot be Chinese woman.*

I stop at the doorway, holding onto its frame for support. My grandma stares stoically at the television. The music from her Chinese soap opera spills out of the speakers, shamelessly occupying the room as it does every afternoon.

"Po."

She doesn't look at me. The wall between us is as insurmountable as the first day it was erected.

“Po, I’m leaving for the airport now.”

Her attention stays fixed on the screen. She doesn’t even spare me an acknowledging glance.

“Popo, please.” My voice breaks. “I’m leaving.”

Her face, as unyielding as stone, betrays no emotions or thoughts. I open my mouth to speak, but not a sound comes. My heart plunges into the deafening silence, smothered in anger, hurt, and pride. When I move to leave, I drag its shattered pieces behind me.



I squeeze the small towel over the bucket. Water splashes onto the surface, like droplets onto puddles. Voices echo around the usually quiet home. Relatives from every corner of the earth have gathered in anticipation. I am one of them.

My grandma coughs weakly. I pat the warm towel over her forehead and neck. “Mom says that Uncle Choi will arrive this evening.” I didn’t even know my grandma had a fourth son.

A sorrowful smile finds its way onto her chapped lips. “好.”

Her hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, and ghostly complexion overshadow her contentment. Tradition is the only reason strangers gather in my home—to pay their respects to a person whom they haven’t seen in years. Tradition is the reason I haven’t talked to my grandma in months, but it has brought me home to care for her in her last days.

How damn ironic.

The clock sounds at the arrival of the next hour.

Time for dinner. I get up to start blending her food when a grunt, barely above a whisper, holds me still. Popo’s eyes meet mine for the first time since that day on the porch.

“Mei Ling,” she rasps, an unfamiliar tenderness in her voice.

“Does something hurt?” My eyes roam her body for signs of distress under her thick padded blankets. “Do you need more medicine?”

Pain grips her face as she swallows hard, tiny beads of sweat forming along her receding hairline. She barely shakes her head.

“You don’t need to talk.”

Her lips quiver as she struggles to speak. “Put red paper for New Year good luck.”

My mouth falls open slightly. Her hand, not much heavier than a feather, moves to rest on mine. Silence sits in the room with us, filling

the space of unspoken words, explanations, and apologies. I lay my hand gently on top of hers, my vision quickly blurring.

“I’m sorry too, Po.”



I stuff the last of my clothes into the drawers and force them along their rusted rails to shut. The wind blows fiercely, rattling the old windows of the dormitory. I sigh at the realization of braving this weather tomorrow. Getting caught in this blizzard would be unlucky.

Unlucky.

My head perks up along with my spirit. Returning to my half-emptied suitcase on the floor, I throw clothes out and around until I find it. Gently, I lift the paper by its corners. Wobbling on the shaky desk chair and biting on a roll of tape, I carefully fasten the four corners of the red paper to my wall. The imperfections of each character stand out like sore thumbs, further accentuated by the natural light. Still, I straighten each wrinkle out and make sure it is hung in perfect symmetry above my desk before giving thanks for the year’s good luck.

## In the Lap of the Gods

M. K. Rees

I wanted to grow up to be just like my Mama—until I heard the preacher’s wife call her a trailer-park-trash Jezebel. On Easter Sunday, I slipped out of the sanctuary during the prayer to hide in the afternoon shade of tall grass near the chapel. A few minutes later, Edith’s mom and Mrs. Hamilton came out to the side of the church and leaned against the white-washed wall.

“I can’t bear that heat anymore,” Mrs. Hamilton said. “I’m sweating through my stockings.”

“Sweating like a whore in church,” Edith’s mom added with a laugh.

“Well then, Tiffany must be soaked in that skin-tight, hot-pink number,” said Mrs. Hamilton, shaking her head. “Suzanne told me the Millers divorced because that woman can’t keep her legs closed. They have children, for goodness’ sake. What will they do without a father?”

I leaned forward. That was my mama they were talking about.

“Just because she don’t have a husband doesn’t mean she can take someone else’s,” Mrs. Hamilton said. “She is nothing but trailer-park trash.”

I was cleaning up Sunday lunch when I remembered what Mrs. Hamilton had said. I wondered why she felt a father was so important for the Miller’s kids but not for me. I should have been mad, but I realized it was a truth as much as it was a lie. Mr. Miller picked Mama up sometimes. I had seen him. But we didn’t live in a trailer; we were just poor. I knew ‘cause I was the one paying the bills from Mama’s checking account; remembering to do that kind of thing just wasn’t her style. She was only seventeen when she had me, and we figured out life together.

The sun shifted toward the west, casting long shadows, and my mama sat at her dressing table while I lay at the edge of the bed.

“What was my daddy like?” I asked, pulling at the loose strings on the flannel blanket. Mama turned toward me.

“Why’d you ask that all of a sudden?”

“I dunno,” I said. “Just curious, is all. You never talk about him.”

“He was smart,” she said, returning to the mirror. “Smarter than me. That’s why he left this town, and I didn’t.” She glued on her fake lashes

and blinked several times. “It don’t matter, Lilith. He don’t matter. He’s nobody.”

She kissed me on the head. I knew that was the end of that conversation. She wouldn’t say no more.

“Be in bed by nine, ok? I work late tonight.”

I scrunched my face up and stuck out my tongue as she walked out, knowing Mr. Miller was the late shift, and his kids were home with their mama while I was left alone, the daughter of a Jezebel and a nobody. I decided then and there that I would never be like her. Somehow, I’d find a way out of this town.

I knew better than to snoop, but I had to see if traces of my father were still left in the house. It seemed like my mama had removed him completely until I found an old paperback about mythology with his name written inside. The corners were bent at odd angles; the white cover yellowed with age. The image of a sword protruding from a naked man holding a head full of snakes both repulsed and attracted me. As I flipped the pages, the sharp scribbles of my father’s handwriting extended along the edges. The pages held ancient stories as distant and altered from my own; they felt magical, and my favorite was about the winged stallion Pegasus, born from the blood of Medusa.

I couldn’t wait to tell my best friend Diana. I walked six streets over, opened the screen door, and threw myself on the couch beside her.

“You have got to read this book.”

“You know I hate reading,” she said.

“But Diana, you don’t understand . . . .”

Her mother peeked out from the kitchen. “Why don’t you girls go outside before dinner.” It wasn’t a question. We jumped on the trampoline, Diana and me, existing at the blurred edges of childhood until Adam and Jessie, some neighborhood boys, came by. The sun was fading from the sky, and we sat outside on the patio, listening to the cicadas.

The boys looked different today, though Diana hadn’t noticed. Adam and I slipped away toward the fireflies in the darkness at the edge of the yard. We fell into the bushes, and he kissed me. The cold, wet slug of his tongue tasted like Dr. Pepper as it slid into my mouth. It was not at all how I had imagined my first kiss. Then, Diana’s mom called us in to eat.

“Take this,” he said, as he pressed his class ring into my hand. “You’re my girlfriend now.”

I slipped it on my finger, liking its weight on my hand. When I fell asleep that night, I didn’t feel quite so alone.

A few days later, Adam stood on my porch, but I knew better than to let him in. “Let’s go lay on a blanket in the yard,” I suggested. “We can look at the stars.”

“Do you know any constellations?” he asked.

“No,” I admitted. “But that one over there looks like a big square with legs.”

He pressed his body on top of mine, making my mouth feel like an invaded snail shell.

“I guess I better head home,” he said not long after. “My mom wants you to come to dinner . . . .”

“Adam, I can’t,” I replied, letting his letter jacket slip from my shoulders. His eyes widened.

“Lilith, keep it, please.”

But I shook my head no, decidedly aware that he was not the type of man they write myths about—not the “hero” who would take me away.

I told Diana all of this the next day as we walked to our secret spot. Behind her yard, the rigid steel train tracks stretched for miles, separating us from somewhere and nowhere at the same time. As we crossed them, I wondered which side of the track was good or bad and how I would know if I lived on the wrong one, particularly when the far side was a lightly wooded field. We followed a well-worn path in the meadow to a copse, where we sat in the shade, surrounded by the rustling of dried grass. We stopped short on seeing a man lying in the dappled sunlight of our thicket. His arms were askew, and the pale skin of his face sagged into the dirt beneath the trees. We stared at the unmoving body for a moment before quickly retreating.

We moved through the field at a faster pace, returning to the safety of her parents. I stood at the edge of the shadows, between the softness of grass and the hardness of stone: a river of tracks before me. A squad car came, and two men in dark suits with badges gripped their sides as they marched toward our hidden sanctuary, so violently invaded by death. We watched until three figures appeared on the horizon: two

tall, steady soldiers and another loosely rolling between them. As they passed by, one of the cops stopped to speak to Diane's father.

"He wasn't dead. Just drunk, Mr. Hunter, but it's probably best if your girls don't go out there anymore. It could have been worse."

The man's sour stench drifted toward me. It reminded me of the frogs we dissected in science class—slippery and wet with formaldehyde. I stayed with Diana that night, lying on a pallet beside her bed. Her breath fell in even intervals, but I couldn't sleep. The image of the body haunted my thoughts.

There was scratching at the window, and I huddled under the blanket, wishing I had gone home. I heard a voice speak in the darkness.

"Hey," it said. My breath came in quick and shallow at the threshold of a scream.

"Diana, unlock the door."

I moved on trembling toes toward the window where I saw, not the pallid figure I expected but Diana's older brother Andrew Paul. Nobody called him that except his grandma.

"Go unlock the door," he whispered again, and I submitted.

He set down a bag of burgers in the kitchen and offered me one. We leaned against the counter next to one another, and I told him about the man we found. He stepped toward me in a move that felt rather sudden, picking up my chin and leaning down slowly, just like in the movies. His mouth tasted like the frog man, and his tongue danced like a polliwog with mine. When he pulled me into his bed, he called me jailbait as our hands traced over the warmth of each other's bodies. His fingers slipped in and out in rhythm with his tongue. The door stayed open, and when the sun cast crimson light through the blinds, I was back in Diana's room.

Mr. Hunter made pancakes, and we sat at the table, pretending we couldn't hear her mom yelling.

"AP, if you don't straighten up . . ."

A door slammed, and his heavy footsteps echoed down the hall as AP passed me without a glance.

Later, Diana called and told me he had moved out. I felt guilty for betraying her, so I kept my secret. The next day, I told her I was too busy to hang out and I sat on the porch swing, reading my father's book instead.

Jessica, a girl from my high school, lived next door. I heard her car roll over the gravel.

“Hey, freshman,” she called. “Do you want to smoke a bowl with me?” I hesitated for only a moment. Her stepfather sat on the couch in just a T-shirt and underwear.

“Put on some pants,” she said with a shout as we walked by. Sorry, she mouthed at me. Her room smelled of incense and patchouli, and a mandala hung over the blinds. Just inside the door, she flipped a latch over and pulled a padlock off her keychain.

“Privacy,” she said.

“Won’t he care?”

“Richard? Nah, he don’t care about anything.”

I walked home an hour later. The sunlight scathed my eyes until I found solace in the darkness of my room. I dreamed about my father standing with his back to me on a beach, but no matter how hard I screamed, he couldn’t hear me over the waves.

The next day, Jess invited me to hang out again. Her car lurched to a stop in the parking lot of a seedy motel.

She looked at me seriously. “Hey, I told them you were eighteen. Okay?”

I nodded.

Inside the room, I sat with a man with a scorpion tattoo on his bicep and split a joint. I tried to act interested as he spoke, but I could see Jessica writhing with her pants down on the bed below a mustached man whose name I couldn’t remember. We left soon after.

In the car, she looked at me and smiled. “I want to get a tattoo.”

I laughed because it was absurd, and I was high, but I knew she was serious.

When we got to the tattoo shop, a bald man named Dave showed us magazines full of samples. He seemed much nicer than the mustached chicken man. Jessica picked a tribal butterfly, and I watched the needles pushing ink into her skin.

“This is what I want,” I said, pointing to a dragon eating its tail. Dave unzipped my pants as I lay on the table, shimmying them down and then sliding his fingers into my underwear as he tucked in a shop towel.

“To protect the fabric from ink,” he said with a wink.

“What’s that?” Jessica said, jabbing her cigarette at the plastic wrap sticking out of my underwear.

“An ouroboros,” I said, looking down. “It’s from mythology.”

"All right then." She nodded, taking a long drag and blowing a smoke ring into my face. Afterward, we drove to the motel near the airport. Jessica was friends with the bartender. I nursed my Miller Lite, watching the locals come in. They ate chicken wings and burgers, wiping their greasy fingers on the bottoms of their shirts. Jessica walked away, leaving me alone at the corner of the bar. I tilted my head back against the wall and closed my eyes, feeling the booze mixed with weed.

"Hiya, this seat taken?" My eyes jolted open.

"Uh, no," I stammered. A man not much older than me stood next to the bar stool, smiling. His dimples gave him a childlike innocence.

"I'm Jasper," he said with his hand out.

"Lilith," I replied.

Jasper told me he was a pilot, and I said I was a waitress.

"I can take you to Tahiti," Jasper promised. "We'll drink out of coconuts on the beach." When he went to the bathroom, I closed my eyes and felt the warm, gritty sand on my back.

"Dead on the beach," Jessica said. "That man won't take you nowhere except his room. And even if he does, he won't bring you back. What are you gonna do then?"

But I couldn't hear her.

"Bad idea," she mouthed to me.

"Just go, I'll be fine," I said, shooing her away.

"Your mama will kill me if I leave you here."

"My mama won't even notice I'm gone, and we both know that's the truth."

The next morning, I saw his crisp white shirt hanging next to his navy-blue hat, and I just knew Jasper was special. That man was going places. And he did: I never saw him again.



A month later, I lay on the cold tile in my bathroom with the water running. I lay there unmoving as the water crept up the walls—holding me down, slowly suffocating me under the weight of it all. There was a piece of Jasper still lingering.

I couldn't keep it.

There was no right choice.

There was nothing that ended without regret.

My mother yelled and screamed, “I’m too young to be a grandma, Lilith! How could you do this to me?”

I looked up at her with a blank stare, and I wanted to say, “I’ve finally done it. I’ve turned out just like you.” But instead, I said nothing. I couldn’t wait for a hero; I had to rescue myself.

Months passed quickly and days slowly, right up until they cut it out of me, cut right through my ouroboros, breaking that dragon in two—leaving it forever broken.

Before they took him away, I whispered, “Your daddy had wings, and so will you, my Pegasus. One day, you’ll fly right out of here.”

I expect he will hate me or think I didn’t love him ‘cause I’m a nobody, and my story’s not worth telling. But one day, it might be.

## Conchas and Café

Vanessa Reyes

Walking down the cobblestone streets, I remember the stories my mother told me while I was growing up. Stories about catching butterflies at dawn, picking hibiscus flowers by the water, and dancing at discos to John and Olivia. Although this trip is the closest I have been to those stories, it only serves to show me that the world of her stories is long gone. The exterior could fool anyone with the red-tiled rooftops and faded signage, but looking closely, I see Doritos being sold on the streets alongside the gazpacho and paleta vendors. Old men are trying to use their smartphones and tourists are taking selfies at every corner; they were only stories after all.

The scent of pan dulce wafts through the air pulling me into the panadería with orejas, moños, novias, and several other breads I can't quite name, all lining the walls. Customers pile their trays high with their favorite rolls to dip into their evening café, not wasting a second to think about what to grab next or it will be on their neighbor's tray first. Before I realize it, my nose is at the counter and I'm drooling at the fresh tray of conchas that the baker is pulling from the oven. Steam rises off the piping hot sugar topping, promising the softest, fluffiest, and crumbliest bread I have ever tasted. Promising to crumble in my hands after the first bite.

Clutching the wad of pesos that my aunt generously entrusted to me, I follow the steadily moving line. A small bead of sweat trickles down my neck, and my heart beats faster with every satisfied customer exiting the line, bringing me closer to the counter. I review what I need to say to order four conchas.

Cuatro conchas, por favor.

Cuatro conchas, por favor.

Such a simple phrase—something even a child can say with ease—leaves me weak in the knees. The cash register becomes a spotlight and every ring signals me closer to my upcoming monologue.

Cuatro conchas por favor.

One for me, one para tía, uno para tío, and one for my cousin Little Stevie. Grabbing any other bread from the available trays would spare

me the humiliation of stuttering through my amateur Spanish, but that would be admitting to a defeat before getting the chance to fight.

Cuatro conchas por favor.

At the counter, an old woman stands with long locks of thick gray hair pulled back tightly and wearing a beautifully embroidered blue dress underneath an apron that is stained with dough and strawberry jam. She is yelling commands to the kitchen, while she waits for a gringa to make up her mind. I try to find a sign from her to say, “It is safe to mess up”—a remnant of my aunt or mother or the grandmother I never met, but there is no sign.

“Four conchas, p-p-p-please.” I look down at the counter, unable to face the old woman’s judgmental gaze on my cherry-red face and teary eyes filled with shame and embarrassment.

With a heavy heart and conchas in hand, I return to my grandmother’s home where my aunt and uncle are waiting for me. We have been packing up Abuela Josephina’s belongings ever since I arrived. My aunt and uncle hope to take advantage of the growing tourist population but need help cleaning the house out, since my cousin Little Stevie only sits in the corner playing his games. The first to notice my return is Tía Angelica as she shuffles by the door in a somber dress with her hair tufted so high it could touch the low ceiling with another brush or two.

“¡Gracias, Josephina, para los conchas! Thank you!” She reaches for a big hug as if I had been gone for much longer than the few minutes.

My uncle, Tío Jorge, looks over from the reclining sofa chair. Sitting in his nice shirt and tie, he looks like he has been waiting for ages for my aunt to finish getting dressed. He must have noticed that Tía used Abuela’s name or he would not have exhausted his energy to say, “Necesitas a soltar tu lengua.”

As encouraging as his words are, I could not forget the pain and embarrassment of buying the conchas; I cannot not do as he suggests and “loosen my tongue” enough to respond in Spanish.

“Aunty, it’s Joey,” I shyly speak up.

“Si, Si, Joey! Primero vamos a ir a iglesia para la vigilia.”<sup>1</sup>

I smile and nod pleasantly as my aunt continues to deliver detailed plans for the evening. She pauses for a moment, noticing my disconnection from the conversation, and aggressively gestures for my cousin to abandon his game and join the conversation.

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<sup>1</sup>First, we are going to go to church for the vigil.

After a long sigh, he begins to translate without looking up from his Gameboy. “You took too long and now we need to go to Abuela’s vigil, so you better be done cleaning by the time we get back.” Tía looks back at me for a sign that I understood her message, unaware of the crude spin her son put on her words. While she runs off to adjust her earrings, Little Stevie continues to talk to me, with his eyes still glued to his game. “How come you don’t have to go?”

I can answer his question in several ways, from the simple and sweet “I have nothing to wear” to the more honest “I haven’t stepped into a church in years.” Anything will do, besides the truth; I do not want to be surrounded by people crying for a woman I never had the chance to know. The thought itself is enough for me to choke up.

“Aww, are you going to miss me?” I teasingly reach for Little Stevie’s cheek as if he is a child again.

“Ew! No! Who would ever miss you?!” He swats me away, still not letting go of his game.

“Brat!” I respond, pretending as if his retort did not wound me as much as it did.

“Fea,” realizing his mistake too late, Tía drags him out the door by his ear as she begins to scold him.

“¡Joey es muy bonita! Pretty like her grandmother,” Tía says in her barely recognizable English, loudly enough so I can hear her.

Tío rises from the armchair and starts to close the door behind them but stops to leave one last piece of warning: “Don’t go out by yourself. We’ll be back soon.”

The sound of the door shutting behind them echoes throughout the empty house until only the hum of the outdated air conditioner remains. I stare back at the closed door, with its chipped brown paint and worn knob, waiting for it to turn and reveal the people who have left me behind. If I had known about the unbearable weight their departure would leave with me, then I might have gone to the vigil with them . . . or maybe I wouldn’t have come here at all.

As the sting of loneliness and floating dust are beginning to cause my eyes to water, I hear muffled cries coming from the backyard. The golden sunset is rapidly fading into dusk, and it’s no time for me to wander out on my own. Careful not to catch anyone’s attention, I peek through the delicate lace curtains and into the yard.

It's the only place that remains just as my mother described it: slightly overgrown grass mixed with native wildflowers swaying in the evening breeze lines the concrete walls, stopping just before a small trickle of water generously referred to as a stream. Covering the entire yard under its parasol-like branches, the avocado tree continues to bear fruit that accompanied the meals my grandmother cooked and that will soon feed curious tourists. In the tree's shade is a throbbing silhouette, convulsing with each growing cry: a sobbing woman, hunched over and trying to hide her sadness underneath a black prayer veil.

I never met my grandmother. If she suffered like this woman is suffering now, then I will never know. It is a pain that is far too late to remedy. I could not be there for my grandmother, but I am here for this poor, lonely woman. Despite my uncle's warnings, I unlock the back door and make my way to the crying woman.

Nighttime rapidly approaches with every step I take, but it only makes my mission to save this woman even more prudent. I bend down so she can hear me in between her sobs and I notice that no distinguishing features exist under the veil, as if I am staring at the memory of an old photograph. My heart begins racing, but I refuse to let it silence me again.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Is something wrong?" I ask in a comforting tone.

Her sobs escalate into wails. The wailing woman begins to inch toward the stream still hunched over like the Viejito Dancers, who openly mock the elderly for a few pesos and laughs. From underneath her endless layers of fabric, a small hand thrusts out, emitting a slightly rotten smell and wrapping itself around my wrist. I'm caught in her trap, and she has no intention of letting me go.

As she pulls me in, I feel the water from the stream creeping in through the bottom of my shoes, slowly climbing up the fibers of my socks. In the dark, it is now difficult for me to see how the landscape has shifted, but only a few steps in and the water is already up to my shoulders. The once dainty stream has swollen into a mighty river.

"Ay, mi hija." She continues to wail with no sign of releasing me from her grip. She's already submerged well beneath the water and attempting to drag me along with her. The shadow of her veil floats beneath the water. If I pull back any harder, then she may pull my arm down without me.

“Please, let me go!” I cry.

Uncle’s few words ring in my head, clearing away the fog of panic clouding my judgment. “Necesitas a soltar tu lengua.”

I can feel a fire growing in my belly, and my nerves turn to steel. Yanking back with all my might, I shout at the water: “¡Suélteme!”

The water splashes, and I can pull back, but I can still feel her grip refusing to let go.

“¡No soy tu hija! I’m Josephina’s granddaughter!” I shout with more force this time, sending her screeching back into the water and giving me a chance to pull myself free from her trap.

“Joey!” I hear Tío Jorge and Little Stevie shouting as they run over to me.

The suddenly raging river has calmed back down into a stream still enough for the fireflies to take a sip. Tío Jorge pulls me up to my feet.

“Hey! What happened to you?” Little Stevie begins his interrogation, ignoring how he himself is disheveled with his collar slightly burned from whatever hijinks he was up to at the vigil.

“¡Cállate!” Tío Jorge whacks his son on the side of his head.

Tío doesn’t ask me any questions, accepting my soaked clothes as enough evidence of what occurred, just as I will accept his silence. Little Stevie holds my hand trying to hide his sniffles as they guide me back in Abuela Josephina’s old house. Tía wraps me in a warm fluffy towel, and we all sit down between the half-packed cardboard boxes to enjoy conchas and café.

## The Curtain

Emily Rutland

“*H*e’s starin’ at that curtain again; I just know it,” Ms. Beth muttered, squintin’ at that man with his tender-brown tweed suit and tar-like loafers crackin’ along the edges in the odd criss-crossin’ patterns of dry riverbeds. His grease-stricken hair was always combed back like porcupine quills hidden beneath peppered blades—ready to stick ‘ya if you came too close—though he’d never give ya any acknowledgement. He kinda reminded her of Aunt Sally’s basset hound: extra skin and gush stretchin’ against the cold floor, completely still, but them eyes still wide and knowin’—watchin’. Why Louis hadn’t kicked that man out already, Ms. Beth didn’t know. Bad for business, she said. Any man who stared at the draperies for that long with such intensity must be very odd.

Shakin’ her head, Ms. Beth adjusted her wide-brimmed hat: a great white blob with lengths of striped ribbon chokin’ the base. Ms. Beth had just finished up her Bible study that mornin’, singin’ the Lord’s song while prayin’ for Mrs. O’Donald’s soul in a hushed voice with Mrs. Thims and Mrs. Leabs along the wooden pews. Pastor Michael repeated the same message he spoke four weeks prior. She knew, for she wrote it down five times before. She wished he tried preachin’ a different sermon occasionally or somethin’ that spoke to her a little more. Oh, but she knew her place; she didn’t want to cause any problems now. She cringed to even think about that sort of idea. No, she’d rather observe all the comin’ and goin’. Like how she’d seen Mrs. O’Donald without her weddin’ band, walkin’ the children to school the other day, or how the cross above Pastor Michael seemed to be hangin’ a little bit lower each passin’ Sunday. It might fall on ‘im during one of the sermons if someone don’t warn ‘im, but Ms. Beth would leave that up to someone more inclined.

Ah, but Ms. Beth was in need of a break. She needed her afternoon tea at the best place for observin’ all kinds of matters: sweet Louis Baker’s Teahouse. The only one of its kind in town. Ms. Beth walked along the gravel path, reachin’ those sun-bleached steps.

What a precious young boy Louis Baker was, making all kinds of brews. Ms. Beth had to admit, though, that Louis had some strange company comin’ around as of late, askin’ for a lick of the devil’s water.

Of course, he'd always turn 'em away. Smart boy. She didn't know why they came to him for such a dirty deed, although she had to admit she'd seen some odd characters sneaking on back once Louis closed up shop. Anywho, it didn't help Louis' reputation with this strange man, sittin' himself nice and easy on the front porch.

Ms. Beth didn't dare look his way when she approached the front door. She really didn't know why this man had started comin' to the teahouse every Sunday afternoon. It'd just happened one day, kinda like when that Mississippi breeze digs its fingers beneath your clothes one fall mornin' then slappin' you with a wet, sogged hand the next.

Finally steppin' through the door, Ms. Beth went to the front desk, where Louis was leaned up against the wall in his long black apron and striped button shirt. A silk red tie burned along his scrawny, pale neck as the sun tried to catch hold of his golden cufflinks, twitchin' along his wrists. He was starin' at himself in the mirror. A lingerin' gaze remained on his upper lip as a few stray hairs sprung up nervously. Ms. Beth wouldn't be surprised if Louis kept a tally of how many new freckles he got each week. Louis looked up, and a crooked grin full of crooked teeth sprung loose.

"Well, hello there, Ms. Beth. Wantin' the usual, I presume?" Louis replied, cockin' his head to the side.

"Why, of course, Louis, that'd be just perfect!" Lookin' back to the man on the patio, she whispered. "Now, Louis, I see that strange man is back again."

Louis turned his head. He'd just started brewin' her tea.

"Aw, yeah, I knew he'd come. Ordered somethin' brisk, but it's fine, Ms. Beth, really—"

"But, Louis, you know what they've been sayin' about you . . ."

"Now, Ms. Beth, I know you mean well, but I'd prefer not to discuss my other customers," Louis firmly explained. However, that crooked smile curled right back on his lips like nothin' had been said on the matter.

"How about this?" he continued. "You go sit in your usual spot and I'll bring your drink over, on the house."

Ms. Beth tried to say something, but Louis put a freckled hand on her arm as the reflection of the cufflinks made her eyes squint.

"Don't you be worryin' about that man, Ms. Beth. He don't hurt anyone, I promise you."

Lettin' out a sigh, Ms. Beth smiled and thanked Louis. Such a nice young man, but that strange man outside—she couldn't get him out of her head. It didn't help much that he was opposite the window she sat beside; plus, his curtain had to be right over her shoulder as well, brushin' against her from time to time. Oh, she just couldn't stand that look he gave that curtain, and the way those hands seemed to twist and curl over nothin' sometimes. Was he plannin' on stranglin' the thing? Wringin' it out of the rest of its color? Or was he just wonderin' when the next opportune moment would be to steal it away? Ms. Beth would prefer not to find out.

Louis had told her once that it may be better for her to switch seats. But, excuse her French, this was *her* darn spot.

Ms. Beth placed her white purse on the rosewood table, smoothin' her pale dress along her knees as she folded each hand over the other, nice and proper-like. Not like the man outside. Glancin' his way, discreetly of course, she viewed the man stretchin' his long limbs out, head lazin' to one side as one foot lay on the opposite chair, openin' his yellow stained shirt to any passerby who dare to look.

That same outfit again. Did he even wash? Ms. Beth crinkled her nose.

She always tried to avoid those eyes of his—steamin' bloodshot coffee cups. Never movin' or shiftin' from that curtain. Maybe she needed to finally tell Officer Petey about the man. But, oh, Louis would be so mad at her; she couldn't destroy his trust—being his best customer an' all.

Ms. Beth turned her head to find Louis with her favorite porcelain cup and a crustless sandwich in his hand. He knew her so well!

Placin' them down, Ms. Beth thanked Louis again and decided to take a bite of her sandwich. Mid-bite, she couldn't help but think about that curtain. It wasn't anything special really, just a transparent white thing with orange-red spots. It didn't really match the rest of the tearoom; sage green would have been a better choice. Louis should hire her to redecorate. Maybe he'd get more customers than her and that crazed lunatic now starin' at her.

Ms. Beth dropped her sandwich.

And siveled her head to the man. He was still starin' at that blemished curtain with a half-lidded gaze, mouth agape where you could

see the black scarrin' of chewing tobacco against his gums. He didn't acknowledge her in the slightest. Just kept those eyes forward.

Ms. Beth shook her head and grabbed the napkin next to her. It must'a been a trick of the light. Maybe she needed a nap once she arrived at Chardonnay Lane. As Ms. Beth finished dabbin' her lips, she felt that same sensation crawlin' along her skin. She didn't quite know how to describe it, but it made her tense up and her body got cold. She didn't dare look up, grabbin' her porcelain cup instead.

She swirled the dark liquid, starin' at her reflection as it trembled a little, when she noticed the inklin' of a round shape. Two round shapes in fact. Until those two circles were a pair of eyes starin' directly at her. She dropped the cup, lettin' it shatter on the floor. The tea splattered on her dress, but she ignored it. She had to. *How'd he get in?* she thought, pushing the chair back and clutchin' her purse, only to find no one behind her. Only the curtain with orange-red spots.

Ms. Beth looked directly at the man outside. He was in the same position he was in before. No reaction. No movement. He was like a dead man; fisheyes attached to that distasteful speckled curtain.

Turnin' her attention away from the strange man and his obsession, Ms. Beth noticed the mess she made of her dress and hurried to the lady's room before the liquid stained, leavin' her purse on the table. But as she hurried along, her thoughts kept twirlin' in wide rings about that sensation and intense stare. What was goin' on with her? Was she really that tired? Or was she jus' plain mad? No, no, she wasn't like them crazy folk in Rose's Asylum. But those eyes had gotten to her. But whose eyes were they? They couldn't belong to that crazed fool along the porch or Louis, or maybe . . .

She closed the door behind her and quickly turned on the tap. Splashin' her face a little, she grabbed the cloth off the wall and started scrubbin' the stain. It wasn't comin' off too easy, but Ms. Beth had had her fair share of stains before. With each scrub, she felt a chill run down her back. She didn't dare look. She didn't wanna. She only focused on scrubbin'; there was no way anyone could've followed her in the lady's room. But again, that feelin' was stretchin' itself along her skin. She kept her mind on that firm, swishin' cloth. "Just get rid of the stain and go home," she told herself. "Keep it goin'." However, when Ms. Beth decided to look down, she found the area she was scrubbin' was like that odd colorin' of the curtain outside, a bright

orange and red, and it kept on spreadin' even without her scrubbin', soon reachin' the bodice of her dress.

Ms. Beth let out a scream and fell into the corner of the room, coverin' her eyes. *What is happen'n?* she thought, *I've never seen anything like it.* She heard footsteps runnin' toward the door and a voice rang through: "Ms. Beth, are you okay in there? Did somethin' happen?"

Ms. Beth took a few deep breaths, keepin' her eyes away from the growin' stain. Holdin' both of her hands tight, she called back, "I'm alright, Louis. Just saw a bug is all." She gulped. "I'll be out in just a second." This seemed to satisfy Louis, for she heard him walkin' away not sayin' another word. She lifted herself off the floor, and, as she steadied herself, she still refused to look at the stain and only kept her eyes on her shakin' hands. Maybe if she acted like it wasn't there, no one would notice. That's the ticket: Louis had already paid for her meal, so she'd grab her purse off the table and go on home, actin' like nothin' had happened. Then, she would think about the stain—away from observin' eyes.

Finally, Ms. Beth opened the door with a quiet creak of the knob. She stepped out, closin' the door behind her, and looked directly toward Louis. Thankfully, he was pay'n her no mind, again scrutinizin' himself in the mirror. Ms. Beth breathed a little sigh and identified her purse on the table. Walking toward it, she noticed the remnants of the porcelain cup were gone, and her half-eaten sandwich lay waitin' on the table, along with a new pair of eyes starin' directly at her.

Ms. Beth jumped. The chair fell behind her, straight into the white curtain. That man on the porch was starin' straight at her, directly into her eyes. Cold black eyes seemed to bite her soul in two. She didn't understand. "Stop it!" she yelled at the man, but he didn't seem to listen. He lifted himself up menacingly from his seat. The corner of his lip, liftin' a little higher into some kind of malformed smirk. "Don't you come any closer!" But she knew he was headin' to the door. What was he goin' to do with those eyes of his? Ms. Beth felt the wisp of flat hands brushin' themselves on her shoulder. "Get away from me!" She yelled even louder, takin' in big gulps of air. That red and orange were all over her. She wouldn't let him touch her, with those eyes on her. Always on her.

They were on her constantly—each Sunday afternoon, watchin' and watchin' and watchin'.

He was comin' through the door now. Where had Louis gone? Ms. Beth turned and saw Louis's face smooshed hard against the mirror. It was like he was gonna fall through hazel eyes first. The man was inside, clickin' the door shut with those twistin' fingertips. He dissected her with those wonderin' eyes, findin' each red and orange swirl about her dress. What was behind those eyes? He was comin' closer, and those eyes were only getting bigger and bigger. What could he do with them? They were blank. No sheen. No life.

All she could see were them eyes, until they finally swallowed her whole.

## The Dress-Eater

Derek Whorley

County Commissioner Aaron Mason stopped for a moment and admired the grand display of coquette dresses. Just in time for the coming spring, the dresses emerged from deep storage and replaced the thick gowns and muffs of winter with frills and pastel fabrics, dotted with tiny flowers, with the softest lace he'd ever seen. He already knew the feeling of the skirt, the thin folds sliding together between his heavy fingers. As he looked, he became more enchanted in the tailorship of a particularly soft-looking dress. It looked thin, yet durable. It was a pale lilac, trimmed with white lace. The torso was ribbed slightly, giving it a certain texture that made the pearly buttons stand out. He often stopped at this store in particular; the front window always displayed such high-quality stuff—nothing like the cheap rags he'd see online. A flash of his arm fat bulging against the shoulder straps robbed the moment of all enjoyment. A glimpse of himself in the window twisted the knife. The hard-lined visage of Commissioner Mason followed alongside him on the window-pane as he went inside the store.

He kept it in his trunk, knowing he would not be able to get to it until late into the night. He pulled into the garage, beside his wife's cherry red Nissan minivan. Honestly, he liked the minivan more than his black Lincoln; he was the one that suggested Tammy pick it out, and he managed to get a good deal on it. It was bought after Mason had been elected County Commissioner, a title which had a surprising amount of pull. The Lincoln he had always had, passed down from his father, Marcus Mason, a governor. After Mr. Mason's retirement, he gave it to Aaron and replaced it with a hulking Jeep. Mr. Mason had called his son over once just to see it fresh from the dealership. The LED headlights cut through the daylight somehow, and Mr. Mason had never gotten used to the back-up camera. At first, Aaron worried about his father; he could easily cause some crash and make both of them look bad, but he let it go, assuring himself that whatever happened would be fine.

He smelled food and sought out Tammy, finding her exactly where he thought she'd be. By the scent, she was cutting onions. He waited until she finished chopping to say anything. When he did, she swiveled around, eyes wide, then took a deep breath seeing that it was only him.

He knew he'd scare her again with how softly he walked. Even when he tried to make a little commotion, she still jumped a bit.

"Hi, honey," she said, returning to her cheery demeanor. "How was it?"

Aaron walked over and held her, hands gliding over her hips and her stomach. "It looks like the next bill will go through at this next meeting."

"Which one again?"

"Put simply, it'll outlaw sexual-reassignment surgery." His hands drifted to her thighs, soft but brimming with real muscle beneath delicate skin. He'd kill for her legs.

"That's wonderful," she said. "Maybe then they can get the help they need instead of—cutting themselves up." She waved the kitchen knife for emphasis.

"Yes," he said, not really paying attention to her response. He kissed her neck and her cheek and her lips and gave her a pat on the ass. "I'll be in my office; I want to go over a couple things."

"Okay, love. Dinner will probably be done a little after Will gets home."

"Perfect, perfect," he said, mostly to himself, as he went upstairs. His office was next to William's room, down the hall from his own. He shut his door and went to lock it but decided to leave it. No one ever barged in on him. He did not turn on the light, only sat and opened his laptop. Immediately, he went for the browser but hesitated at the keyboard. He started to type the name of a high-end fashion store but held the backspace key until it disappeared. After he closed the laptop, he retrieved a bottle of brown liquor and poured himself a glass. He drained it in one go, feeling the sting go down—like tiny holes opening and then closing on the inner track of his esophagus. He went to open the laptop once more, then left it, letting his hands fold into his lap. When the hiss of bus brakes cut through the silence, the time that passed in silence seemed nonexistent for a moment. Glancing out the window, Mason saw a shadow moving toward the house. It was only a matter of time until he'll be called to dinner.

Mason never really liked family mealtimes. He treasured his solitary lunches at his office or the occasional quick bite he'd catch either on the way to or from work. Restaurant dinners were much more comfortable. He believed it must be the neutral atmosphere: he knew more about

what to do and how to act. Dinner at home was orderly enough; Tammy ensured that. She was a total neat freak to the point that Mason found it irritating. Not one thing was to be out of place; it looked like a doll house to him. But he could never bring himself to speak on it; he felt he had no real reason to complain. It was clean. He never had to do so little before living with her for nearly two decades now. If not for the occasional dinners he cooked, he would feel completely infantile.

He was lucky; tonight was spaghetti. She made it especially well—at least to Mason. The noodles were overcooked, which made them incredibly soft and sort of mushy. There wasn't much to the sauce—only a few simple vegetables and wine really elevated the store-bought jar of sauce. A lot of other meals were blandished; he saw her put spices in her cooking, but then he didn't know where they went. He could not complain much either: the meals were healthy and tasted fine.

The real problem was the social time that family dinner demanded. He could not stand the silence but was reluctant to really engage. He thought it'd be a bad look for a public figure to have such silent dinners. Tammy was a local socialite, at least virtually. If she was unhappy, it might come up in her conversations; word might get around that the County Commissioner had an unhappy family. Mason was most concerned with his son, William. He could see in his eyes a weak backbone—a wet-blanket. William spent most of his time in his room doing God knows what. Mason did not think of William's business as long as he did well in school and found a good career. When he struggled with conversation topics, he was often grateful that William was there; it was more than natural for a father to ask about his son's social/school life, despite William's reluctance to share. Mason knew this trait came from him. Whenever he thought about Will's distance, he clenched his jaw for a moment.

Tonight, he started off simply. "How was your day, Will? Anything interesting happen at school?"

William shrugged and said, "Someone got beat up today."

"Oh, Lord," Tammy said. "Who was it?"

Another shrug. "They got him in the bathroom. I only heard about it. Sounded pretty bad."

"That's just awful. What is wrong with your generation?"

Another shrug. “I have no clue. They’re crazy.” His voice was continually flat and monotone. He had nothing more to say about the matter.

“Why would they do something like that?” Mason asked, his eye intent on the great forkful of pasta he was spinning.

“I don’t know. I only heard about it. I think I was on the other side of the school when it actually happened.”

“As long as you didn’t get caught up in it,” Tammy said. “A smart boy like you doesn’t need to be mixed up in things like that—bathroom fights!” She huffed slightly.

“And your grades are still good?”

“Of course. Chemistry’s been a little hard, but I’m doing good.”

“Then that’s all that matters,” Mason said.

Tammy always talked to Mason when he shaved at night. He shaved twice a day; in the mornings, she’d either still be asleep or in the shower talking to him like she was now. He often woke up in the small hours of the day, when it was still dark or when the sun was just lighting up the horizon. He felt it important to do so, even if he was tired. Like shaving. He hated to have any hair on his face.

Tonight, she was talking about what happened at William’s school. “Unbelievable,” she said.

“What is?”

“On Facebook—that boy that was beat up was one of those transvestites.”

“I thought it was transgender.”

“Same thing. It looks like he had gone into the girls’ room, then was beaten in the men’s. His mom’s making a big fuss about it online. Had to go to a hospital, check for a concussion.”

“Awful,” he muttered, concentrating on the area where the corner of his jaw met his neck, checking for hair.

“I guess now he’ll know where he doesn’t belong.”

Mason wiped his face after scanning it for any stray hairs. When he came out of the bathroom, that was when he chose to say, “Oh—I almost forgot. I have some things to look over. I’ll be in my office for a bit, okay, Love?” He kissed her lips, then her forehead. “Don’t wait up for me. Get your rest.”

Tammy was obviously displeased but allowed it. “Okay, Honey, but don’t be too long.”

"I won't." Another peck and he left, tying up his robe as he went.

He opened his office for a moment, then closed the door again. Mason figured it was an unnecessary precaution by this point. He didn't think Tammy suspected anything; she probably didn't care at all once he left the room. And William . . .

A sound was coming from his son's room. Steady, but trembling. Mason stood there, entranced by the attempt to decipher it and holding his breath in turns. William was weeping gently, the vibrations bouncing off the corners of where his bed met the wall. Mason did not turn his head to the shaking, only listening a few more moments until his hand unclasped the door. He hadn't realized his fist was so tight. Immediately, Mason suspected it had to do with that fight William had mentioned. At least there would be no chance of William knowing where he was headed.

Down the steps, through the kitchen, and into the garage in darkness, until the sterile white lights came on. His eyes adjusted from white, letting all the colors again disperse and take their place again in only a second. Reality snapped into place.

He opened the trunk of his car with the key. Satisfyingly quiet. He felt so good getting away with this again. He could feel the anticipation swimming around in his gut. The dress came alive once more as it slid out of its plastic cloak. Ironed, dry-cleaned, and scented lavender. The little family at the only cleaners around had always thought he was buying for his wife or the teenage daughter he said he had.

If they only knew, he thought.

He held the fabric close to his nose, smelling the subtle freshness of it before burying himself in its softness. He could feel the fine threads gliding across his face as he rubbed against it like a cat. He pulled the dress up and felt a button pass over his lips. He got his teeth around it and tugged. It came off with a whispering snap, and he held it in his mouth, feeling the delicate melamine button move around his tongue, until he swallowed it like a pill.

# *Poetry*



# Neither Nor

Nikita D'Monte

*This poem follows the journey of someone who identifies as  
two or more races, fitting in neither one nor the other and  
remains a stranger to both her cultural identities*

Distinct Different Divergent

Separate Stoic Strange

She stood looking in—hoping, praying, wishing . . .

Wishing . . . wishing . . . she could be like them, with them, be them!

Be part of a larger group

Accepted

Approved

Adored

Love Longing Belonging

She was young—too young to realize that she was an abomination to them

Neither them nor the other

Unaccepted Unloved Undeserving

By one or the other or both

Bipedal

Opposable Thumbs

Human

Acceptance Assimilation Adherence

She tried it all

She became them, one drowning in a crowd of many

Linguistically, culturally, religiously

She was them and they her

She accepted them but they dismissed her—

All of her

Her heart broke into a million parts, and none of those parts were  
accepted either.

Neither  
her assimilation nor her difference  
Neither  
her culture nor her religion  
Neither  
her willingness nor her refusal  
Neither  
the culture within which she was born, nor the one her ancestors adorned  
Neither nor . . . .  
No one wanted her, not even a little, not even all.

Standing on the fringes,  
Forever looking in,  
She vanquished community for the preservation of self  
Resolute, stoic, strong  
Neither standing out nor fitting in  
Stepping out from the shadows of her mind  
Where once sorrow fell!

# Bittersweet Goodbyes: The Tale of an Immigrant

Nikita D'Monte

I never fit into the body in which I was born  
I never fit into the family—the black sheep  
I never fit into the country—where I stayed two decades and four more  
years

I never fit into the stereotype  
The role that I was supposed to play  
The obedient daughter,  
The loving older sister,  
The meek and mild woman,  
The one who behaved decently, kept her hair long,  
Kept her body covered and conversation soft and short.

I thought I belonged to a different world,  
A different body (a man perhaps)  
A different era—  
A different time zone.

Stay inside the house.  
STUDY.  
Learn to cook, clean, tidy up  
Learn to blush at compliments  
Do not raise your voice  
Do not talk to boys

DO NOT . . .  
look for attention  
talk too loudly  
seek out love  
touch yourself

DO NOT . . .

show your bra straps  
your belly button  
your shoulder  
your collarbone  
your legs  
your arms  
your face

HIDE YOURSELF . . .

your feelings!

DO NOT . . .

admire yourself  
crave sex  
straighten your hair  
put make up on  
smile for strangers

Follow these rules and you will be one of ours!

I ran with all my might,  
Leaving behind the skin I had shed—  
the only remnant of a life past lived.  
I ran as soon, as fast, as far as I could  
I ran to a world that promised better  
A world that promised me “you *WILL* be one of our own”

Disillusioned by this fake promise  
I started my life anew  
Left maa, paa, and bubba behind  
(*Hoping to bring them into the light someday*)  
Alone to brave a new world.  
Make sure when they come to me  
A better life, a better world they would see  
Left my own  
To become one of theirs

But I remain the outsider still

I LEARNED

their language,  
 their culture  
 their accent  
 their mannerism

emulated all they did

Miles away from the comfort of home  
 educating myself  
 living paycheck to paycheck  
 never giving up on their promise to make me one of their own  
 Yet here I am  
 the subaltern, the other, the nobody  
 Forevermore!

I do not *NEED* to hide myself here,  
 Not in the way I did back home  
 But now I *WANT* to hide myself  
 So, my cultural and racial identity is never known  
 I change the way I say my name

I CHANGE

my accent  
 my clothes  
 my pop culture references  
 even my jokes

I change my use of words  
 Drive on the left instead of the right side of the road  
 my clothes . . .  
 my hair . . .

I lie to myself and to others,  
 "I can do whatever I want here, and no one will care"  
 But the fact is, they care (they're just not aware)

If I am to be one of theirs  
I must follow their unsaid rules  
Even though they said  
“Come as you are, and you will be ONE OF OURS”  
    But . . .  
        I know . . .  
            I . . .  
                Will . . .  
                    Never . . .  
                        Be . . .  
“One” of “[Y]OURS”

# Jackie's Lips

Charlie Dorlon

*This piece uses metaphor and place-focused descriptions to symbolize a person who has wronged the speaker, inspired by Natalie Diaz's use of people, place, and objects in "When My Brother was an Aztec."*

Jackie's kissing a picture of Jesus, and he says her lips taste  
like mac-and-cheese. She takes him to our usual haunts, where her  
car's  
bobblehead Virgin Mary dances on the dashboard in front of  
Nancy's where

we'd get kolaches after sleepovers, still wearing each other's pajamas.  
When she's with him, her car leaves behind a trail of armadillo  
roadkill  
down the road to church where he makes her repent. Jackie's  
lips

say all the prayers but only move along with the hymns, and she won't  
look at the book either, 'cause she doesn't want him to know. But I  
know  
how she used to sing when we crossed the wide desert, wild  
sage winking

like lavender flags along the road, and she knew all the words then. Now  
Jesus won't let her talk to me anymore. Now, he's grinning at me  
with his arm snaked 'round the soft, sweet fabric of her best red

dress, he's waving a bloody bandana 'round the middle of the ring,  
the roar of the Sunday crowd egging 'em on, and the bulls all paw  
up ashes. In the stands, Jackie's eyes find me and Jackie's lips  
say sorry. Then they form his name instead of mine.

# Photographs

Elizabeth Glogowski

The cat and I  
know each other well.  
Grainy with graciousness  
dirt and dust. My fingers  
hunt for fleas  
hooked on her black fur.  
My eyes leak from stone edges  
tremble, taper to see  
under the spell of  
afternoon clouds.  
The wind's northeast nerves  
ripple the tall grass, resemble  
the long shiny hair of  
those beastly men  
in the famous photographs  
smiling like they're telling you  
they love you back.  
Out of frame, young girls  
crawl behind on bare  
hands and feet.  
I do not know any  
of their filmy faces  
like I know this  
New York countryside.  
The flush of her skin  
her winter wounds  
our sun-dried siestas  
when she strums the strings  
of my guitar and I finally rest  
my dark, wired hair on her  
buried skeletons.  
Pull close the black cat  
plead to her back-ridden parasites.  
Could you gnaw

On my skin, too? Until  
I lose every scrap  
that's been touched?

## Year 8

Lacy Harlin

As amber eyes gaze into mine,  
Callused hands strum a tune.  
You always let me sing along,  
Though your eyes whispered *no*.  
Callused hands strum a tune,  
as I go back in time to when  
you let me sing along.  
You were gone too soon,  
so I go back in time to when  
I remembered your voice.  
You were gone too soon,  
And flashbacks roam my mind.  
I remembered your voice,  
treading narrowing roads.  
Flashbacks roam my mind,  
as amber eyes gaze into mine.

# Unsalvageable

Blake Harrsch

The Green was shy of two bodies today, plus the kids who went home for the weekend. There was a greedy sewer in our college town.

This week, when the hurricane rolled in with an unassuming feminine name (as they all go), the grates just couldn't help but open their barred teeth to the wide mouth that would digest her: the girl filled with wonder of freshman year, delivered to its belly by the current of the flooding street.

*Did you know her?* they asked, as we claimed our routine seats, fortunate to have each full of warmth. We answered unanimously, *no*, as if that somehow made it better, as if the morning after, when I opened the trunk to my reflection rippled in a pool of water, the spare tire a floatie, was the worst of it. Insurance needed no more than a day to deem it unsalvageable. How do they price a soul?

The next one happened a few days later, a stroke in quarantine housing. Her body was found by the cafeteria employee who saw the boxed lunches piling outside the door. Our phones received an email assuring this was a rarity, losing two in a week, the same week at that, and how exceptionally preposterous to occur in the first week of a new academic year.

No one remembers. Watch: the chapel bell  
clanging the arrival of the hour while students  
race to class, still dodging the inlaid seal  
on the footpath to Jubilee Hall, for fear of getting  
the curse that stops them from graduating,  
as if it were as simple as where you stepped.

## No. 47 Badagry Street

Obiageli A. Iloakasia

Every door my dusty feet enter resembles a familiar unfolding. The windows, with cracked louvers, spill secrets while I watch the night sparrows peck up food as dusk drags its curtain open. The only street I remember as a child is Badagry Street & after living everywhere else, I still write *No. 47 Badagry Street* when filling out my house address. There is something infinite about memory. About remembering. About reminiscing. In an English class, my student asked me about the fastest way to be happy. She is looking for joy. I asked her if she had childhood memories she missed. She talked about the first house she lived in as a kid. About walking with her dog through the dark doorway, into the quiet basement. About the basement being a safe shelter that silenced the mockery of bullies who mimicked her body movements in the classroom corridor. She remembered middle school days. She reminisced nights the concrete walls at home, swallowed demeaning voices that heaped sadness on her shoulders at school. There is a thin difference between remembering & reminiscing. She shut pain out & recalled pleasant experiences with her dog in the basement. Memory knotted her emotions together. What am I, you, or my student, if not a living entity bearing witness to the past through memory? My student is still looking for joy. My dusty feet are in constant pursuit of a place that does not label me a visitor when I walk through the door.

## In My Dream a Little Girl Sits in Front of the Black House

Obiageli A. Iloakasia

on Badagry Street & admires the stars  
in the white clouds she's held in her hands  
for a hundred years. She says it's a scenic view  
that ravished her retina until she sadly learned  
that stars walk into their death each time  
they leave her gaze. Stars have a lifespan.  
Until she understood  
that each time the living stars twinkled,  
it was the turbulence in her belly that triggered  
their glow like green fireflies  
flickering at dawn. In my dream, I hold the little girl's  
belly & nudge it to stay still. She's strained  
by the anxiety of adulthood &  
the gaiety of girlhood but I smile & say:  
*little girl, breathe.* On Southern Avenue, a young  
woman stands on the rail & trails  
every sunset with her belly, full  
of grief, turbulent with poems strapped  
into pages of her old beige diary. In my dream,  
the little girl is standing on the parapet of a bridge—  
she pulls out a piece of broken mirror  
from her pupil. I see myself standing  
by the seashore. Naming every grain of sand beneath  
my feet. Attempting to match-make them  
with the stars in the little girl's hands before they die  
so they have a companion in the afterlife.  
I fear the sand will outnumber the stars. *No,*  
the little girl counters, *there are more stars in the universe  
than all the grains of sand on all the world's beaches.*  
The little girl & I are back on the parapet, holding  
hands, calling on the water, *wata carry us dey go.* Falling,  
I land on my mother's lap & feel her arms around me.

The little girl is gone. The cloud is clear. My mother's eyes,  
mine. *Breathe*, I say to myself.

*Falling might be a dangerous adventure.*

## Skin Graft

Mairin Caitriona Landis

A lamb was born still last night,  
And the Farmer in all his mercy  
Taketht it away from the bleating ewe  
And skinned it clean and gentle, for  
One stall over a shivering orphan  
Stood above his poor mother,  
Still wet on the outside when  
The Farmer grafted a child  
From leather and twine.

A sign of the ram demonstrated  
Whose golden skin was stitched anew.  
He bore witness to this changeling child:  
Loved like the wet nurse loved Juliet,  
Like Esau with lambskin sleeves,  
Wrapped in his mother's blood,  
Caul across his face  
And skin across his back.

When the farmer brings her baby back,  
Leading him through the door with a rope,  
His mother won't ask questions.  
She won't pull at the stitches  
Or put her finger in his side because  
She can see ribs poking through—  
This is her baby,  
And her baby will not starve.

# I Have Never Known Silence

Sadie Lovett

*Inspired by my grandmother's account of the final day of World War II, this poem observes the similarities between sensory experiences of individuals on that day, in spite of the very different situations in which they found themselves.*

I have never known silence,  
only the clink of chains  
slipping from rubbed-raw wrists  
on emaciated frames  
bearing six points of censure  
and the gauntness of a life stolen.  
Dry mouths pop, expressionless,  
bare feet shuffle, directionless.  
They cannot escape  
the sound of suffering

I have never known silence,  
only the clink of chains  
from a 4-year-old's swing set  
as auburn hair falls to the side  
with a curious quirk of her head.  
She watches red, white, and blue rise  
to the ringing of each church's bells.  
They reverberate inside of her swinging body.  
She cannot escape  
the sound of victory

I have never known silence,  
only the screech of jets shooting past  
their cries mirrored by those beneath  
sprinting, gasping, hiding, weeping.  
They huddle, unnerved by the broken rhythm  
of their own sharp breaths.  
They awake to dust-stuffed throats

to the ringing of each child's ears.  
Death's melody reverberates  
inside of their little crushed bodies.  
Mothers cannot escape  
the sound of their own wailing

I have never known silence,  
only the screech of a jay shooting past,  
his white wings mirrored in the snow  
as he flits over ranks of chapped-faced men  
whose teeth chatter to the stuttered beat  
of their racing hearts.  
Guns surrendered, thud to the ground  
muffled by winter's cruel embrace.  
Men's minds resist, stuck in desperation  
a purpose ripped away.  
They cannot escape  
the sound of war

# Shapeshifting in the Spring

Joe Lozano

It was soon after the rain began  
when we fell into our restless  
selves, sinking with the sound  
of the water deeper into bed  
and each other, your legs lost in  
mine and time and we  
took the shape of the water  
once again overwhelming  
the window with the threat  
of Spring.

We wanted to be more than  
our bodies would allow—  
to blend the topography of our wounds  
into wings or tails or tulips or what  
ever we can think of when we see  
the weather that we make out of each other,  
wet and out of breath  
with the sense that we  
can be anything anytime  
we let our clouds collide.  
collecting the worry of our  
bones, we gave ourselves  
permission to drift and disperse  
and set loose the sun  
upon the field of our room  
to let the wildflowers bloom.

It was like we were dogs chasing  
those little yellows in the meadow,  
convinced in our innocence that we  
too could be butterflies.

# Pensando en los Ríos

Joe Lozano

Puedo escuchar la canción del agua,  
su balada un baile—  
como arrastra el sol por las venas  
del cañón, suave mientras los labios  
del río ahogan la luz.

Sin dormir, el río se curva  
y crece en la sombra de la luna  
brillante y azul y cayendo en cascada  
sobre la piedra caliza.

Los lobos se embriagan con la voz del río,  
vagando por la orilla en busca de la boca  
que lave su pelaje enmarañado.

Me vuelvo al río donde rueda  
mi lengua contigo.

Thinking of Rivers  
(English Translation)

I can hear the song of the water,  
its ballad a ballet—  
how it pulls the sun along the vein  
of the ravine, slowly as the lips  
of the river drown the light.

Sleepless, the river bends  
and builds in the shade  
of the moon, shiny and blue  
and cascading over limestone.

The wolves, drunk with the voice of the river  
wander its bank in search of the mouth  
that washes their matted fur.

I think of the river where my tongue  
rolls away with you.

# Bruised Apple

Victoria Nash

This Fuji apple—painted marbled red  
with golden flecks rippling over it:  
bark marred by a concave brown  
mush. The bruise: a natural reaction,  
safe to consume, does not indicate  
spoilage. The bruise: an invitation  
for microbes, for mold, for bacteria  
to begin the decay. For this apple sat here,  
a bruise appears before it is completely sullied.

This human leg, my leg—flesh marbled  
with pale blue veins peeking through:  
hide marred by deep purple mixed with  
puke green. The bruise: a natural reaction,  
part of the healing process, does not indicate  
spoilage. The bruise: a sign to be more  
careful, to be protective, to be aware of  
my surroundings. For this leg, my leg, stood here,  
a bruise appears before it is completely healed.

This human soul, my soul—invisible yet marbled  
with colors combining and separating:  
veneer marred by a concave feeling mixed with  
mush. The bruise: a natural reaction,  
part of the healing process, does indicate  
spoilage. The bruise: the feeling of  
aching, of protective scabbing, of something  
to begin helping. For this soul, my soul, held here,  
a bruise is after the tarnish completely ends.

# Latticed Trellis

Victoria Nash

Crossing diagonally, iron frames clamber up the garden wall. Flowers climb them: royal purple trumpeting morning glories layered perfectly and bright red roses in bloom are chaotically intertwined, despite the trellis desiring ordered perfection.

I am these wallflowers. If I scream, will I even hear it through the trellised cage woven through my mouth? This decorum within is tired and nice. Will I hear my yell or will the thorns I try to bear grow inward? I yearn to clamber away from this trellis, to be confident, to be heard.

Yet, my knees hurt. I have stood too long in reverence; I have knelt too long in reverence. I have walked up ladders for unguaranteed chances that will never come from restricted growth. I am tethered on bended knee; I am tethered to stand upright. I am latticed to the system of uphill battles not promised to be won, and I am tired. And my knees hurt.

# This is a True Story

Marley Ramon

Everything in my house is broken  
This is a true story

There's asbestos in the walls  
that we found when the fridge exploded  
A faulty pipe flooded the kitchen and  
the water seeped into the wood and  
molded the counters from the inside out  
Sledgehammer to panel  
and the foundation ain't much better

The showers don't work at the same time  
The water pressure is nonexistent  
We moved in because my parents fell in love  
with the garden  
A garden the previous owners  
made sure was dead in the time  
it took to collect signatures and money  
and weld a family name to cracked bedrock  
The pipes are broken and  
the fish are dead  
and there are weeds  
where there were flowers

The air conditioner doesn't work  
and it's eighty degrees inside the house  
Hotter inside than out  
You have to turn the shower off to use the sink  
My mom tried to kill herself today and  
the right sink in the master bedroom doesn't work  
The bathroom vent connects to my sister's closet  
The fan in my room can't turn off  
My mother tried to kill herself and  
my sister's blinds don't shut and

I called the police myself  
It took them more than half an hour  
to get to my house in the city  
while my mom told me  
everything was my fault  
like the blue stain on the counter  
I didn't really call the police  
I called 911 and  
asked for mental health services and  
they told me they could help me  
and I got two officers an hour later

The bathroom caulking peels up at the ends  
and they threatened to arrest my mother

You get splinters walking in the house and  
we talked them down from prison to a hospital  
The front door won't lock and  
The hospital released her that same afternoon

Our back door sticks  
There's asbestos in the walls  
it's eighty degrees  
and my mother has been caught and released  
with less care than a bass  
She still isn't speaking to any of us

There's a nail poking out in the hallway  
Watch your step  
The sink still doesn't work

This is a true story  
Everything in my house is broken

# What Won't be Written

Marley Ramon

How do I write  
*I wish you died a hero*  
in an annual card

How do I tell my father  
that I'd love him  
had everything happened differently  
that apologies mean nothing  
penned with same buried blade

How do I tell my father  
that every sunny day is undercut  
by the night he hit my mother  
that leather belts still raise my hackles  
that I will always hear the buckle  
bend around denim loops when he raises his voice

My father is a better man than his father  
So I am told

No one had to teach my mother to be better  
No one had to hold my wrists or stand between us  
He told me he'd take me to a ring if I were a boy  
No one had to tell me not to pull through ropes  
and bear some family mantle

There's a heavy dust in every grayed-out photo  
a hanging weight to the name almost given  
A swing and a miss  
a jump just barely  
and a wind-brushed nape

There's a folded flag and leather belt  
that will pass to me in a will I won't read  
There's a card expected once a year

How do I wish him everything he deserves and not feel cruel  
How do I bid him happy days away from my doorstep  
How do I tell him I will always love him  
but I will not see him again

# PCOS

Kira M. Tjomsland

is the abbreviated (meaning: polite) way to hide  
medical jargon—  
po-ly-CYS-tic o-VA-ri-an SYN-drome does not  
roll off the tongue,  
but what I wouldn't give  
for it to roll smoothly, the well-oiled machine  
supposed to grant me motherhood  
machine, indeed—  
call me a lemon.

As I scroll through “period pain simulator”  
challenges, my unshed blood boils  
not from want of pain, but from the pain of wanting  
more than just the cramps;  
I crave the scarlet letter package.

I bend over my sink daily  
to shave my glaring side effects—  
face that longs to kiss,  
arms that long to hold,  
legs which long to carry,  
but likely never will.

My mother lived the nightmare  
of IVF for me,  
fighting the “it’s just hormones”—  
empty consolation behind stone-cold lab coats—  
demanding a diagnosis  
Now it’s my turn.

“Just hormones,” you say,  
you’re right! Look at my lab  
results of your invasion (meaning: impolite)  
testosterone spiking through the roof

and tell me that you'll do something more  
than shove contraceptives down my throat  
leave me more broken than when I walked in  
and call your twenty minutes of "work"  
on this lemon  
a job well done.

# The Pelican and the Swan: An Apology to PCOS

Kira M. Tjomsland

Story old as monks  
and gothic spires,  
Mother Pelican, you are memorialized  
in marble, for your sacrifice in blood  
that feeds your wandering brood

Mother Pelican, did it hurt?  
Seeing your young and stabbing  
your own breast  
to see them live?

As you perch in permanent pain  
maidens and mothers lift your petrified cry

Mother Pelican, did you know  
most people think you are a swan?  
She may sing a pretty requiem  
but her song is not bathed in holy blood  
and neither is mine.

I am the swan, and I am sorry  
they think we are the same.  
I wish I had made, could make, could take—  
It is selfish of me to want the pain  
but can't I be a mother too?

# The Tenderest Part

Marcus Tsai

The day after a storm, the land a soft tongue. He lays each  
footstep behind him like a farmer planting seeds. In his right hand,  
sunrise strips naked against the polish of a rifle. He knows, better than  
anyone,

the barrel's black, unblinking eye, the echo a bullet makes in a body.  
He is

no farmer. And now: the dead hog. Twenty feet away—the asterisk  
lodged in its neck. If you listen, you will hear it: the echo ringing  
across the land like a telephone, like a pair of scissors taken to the  
delicate lines

of a family tree. *What will the pig's sister say when her brother doesn't  
come home?* Mom asks when she finds the hog in the driveway, the man  
wrestling a knife under its skin. *They're invasive*, he says, and with  
each word the hog's blood pools outward, into

its own continent, enclosing him in smooth, unfamiliar shores. But Dad,  
I understand you. Even here, surrounded by walls and cool, regulated air,  
I am touched by your strained grunting. Even here, my hands  
are your hands. Wasn't it you who showed me the delicate tendon of  
life?

How it is measured not in years, but in distance: the empty space  
between my hand and the trigger? Yes, you treasure life  
in your own strange way.

A few hours later, your hunting knife carves  
its final path through the hog's tough muscle. Belly, flank, shoulder,  
separated into plastic bags and stowed in the deepest part of the freezer.  
But the loin, the tenderest part, you carry to the kitchen. It stews  
the entire day, its aroma filling the house like a song. When dinnertime  
comes,  
everyone links hands; you dip a serving spoon into the roast.  
On the opposite end of the table, Mom tries a piece, and when  
she sets down her fork, she is smiling.

## Know Me

Marcus Tsai

Say you've had a few  
drinks too many,  
so the sky ripples like soft  
fabric and my voice carries  
across the ocean  
of your sleep, fractures  
over the sand, this tidal  
wave coming  
like the sting after a slap.  
Just wait for it.  
Say, perhaps,  
you wake and find me curled  
against your chest like another  
crescent moon. We'll  
have fruit for breakfast  
in the kitchen, where we can look  
at each other and you will  
know me completely.  
We didn't meet just last night—  
instead, we're eons  
old, this spearing  
grapes or slicing watermelon  
just one of our many rituals. Say:  
All our secrets  
already learned. All our pasts  
already twined. Kiss me over  
the beige tablecloth and our lips  
are so familiar they merge.  
We eat with twin tongues, the same set  
of teeth. Say: Pass  
me an orange, and I will  
already have one in my hand.

# Little Brother

Marcus Tsai

Toddler, fresh tuft of dandelion, little brother  
blew in suddenly through the window, carried

on the flexed arms of a summer breeze,  
the small droplets of sweat peppering his skin

reflective as the backs of spoons. One look  
at him was many of myself, the flat nose,

the dark eyelashes; one scoop of ice cream  
meant twenty sticky fingers, which we washed

under the long tongue of water  
drooping from the garden hose. In the backyard,

summer heat pinching our skin, little brother  
and I searched for the dandelions, their bright heads

explosions waiting to happen. And within the minute:  
I found one! Little brother bounding toward me,

the potential energy of so many wishes  
clutched in his small fist. Little brother,

go ahead. Fill your lungs with wind. Meanwhile,  
the yard, the house, the world

quiet in anticipation.  
This dandelion detonates

and blasts the earth into a new orbit. Seasons chariot  
across the sky. Like a universe, the backyard grows

a new mile every second, your body shrinking  
into a bead strung along the horizon's faint curve, and each

morning, the sun opens behind you like the grandest  
of doors. Little brother,

you don't need wishes to make it  
but I'm sending a few anyway. May these

white parachutes find your yard. May summer come  
and turn these seeds to flowers.

**Prayer in Mexico City, 2012:  
For my Younger Sister**

Isabelle Veenstra

We step on snails that slither across concrete stairs  
and stain our dirtied feet with garden green.  
We pick up limes succumbed to gravity and scoop  
our thumbs inside, flicking tongues to catch  
the dripping juice. We're kitchen sisters, taught to  
wrap and press tamales, tortillas.

After dinner, her eyes crane up as I climb the fixed vertical,  
rusted-loose ladder. My arms bruise from brick  
and grit, my knees scratch and scrape past dusted  
grout, grip a sprout of green, and when my hand  
falters, falls, she wraps a leaf against teared cheeks.  
She presses grass to bloodied palms and prays  
a hushed hymn against my arm. I feel her lips  
mouth the words across my prickled-scarred skin.



# BACK MATTER

## Contributors' Biographies

### Creative Nonfiction Authors

#### Riley Brokeshoulder

Kansas State University

Riley graduated from Kansas State University in May 2025. She finished *summa cum laude* with a BA in English and a minor in French. In her last year, she served as the Social Media Chair for her university's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. Riley is now participating in New York University's Low-Residency MFA Writer's Workshop in Paris, France. She previously has been published in the 8th issue of *105 Meadowlark Reader*.



#### Karoline Hartner

Franklin Pierce University

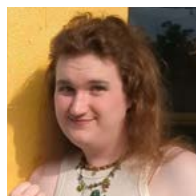
Karoline is a senior majoring in Forensic Accounting with minors in Finance and English. She serves as President of her university's Sigma Tau Delta Chapter, and she presented original work at the Sigma Tau Delta 2025 Convention. Passionate about fraud investigation, she recently completed a 30-page paper on Bernie Madoff, which she will present at her university. After graduation, Karoline plans to pursue a master's degree in Fraud Investigation. She has a growing interest in the legal field.



#### Aisling Beatrice Lake

University of North Florida

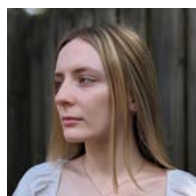
Aisling graduated *summa cum laude* with an MA in English and Creative Writing and now is working in editing and copywriting while pursuing her PhD. Aisling has worked as a Writing Consultant and Graduate Assistant at her university of four years, and she enjoys writing short fiction and creative nonfiction. She aspires to teach creative writing at the university level. She hopes her writing makes you feel something real and beautiful.



#### Allison "Alli" Sadler

Western Kentucky University

Alli is receiving her BA in English in December 2025 from Western Kentucky University. Her work has been featured in her university's journal of undergraduate writing, *The Ashen Egg*. From 2023 to 2025, Alli served as President



of her university's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. When she is not writing, she is elbowing her way through a mosh pit with her husband or adding to their shared vinyl collection.

### **Ella Stott**

Utah State University, Logan

Ella is a creative-writing student, the Copyeditor for the student run newspaper *The Utah Statesman*, a writing fellow, and a tutor. Her work has appeared in the *Voices of USU* anthology, *Intraminutia*, and *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*. Her book, *That Doesn't Sound Like Him*, won second place in the 2023 Utah Original Writing Competition. When not writing, she can be found participating in undergraduate research and dancing.

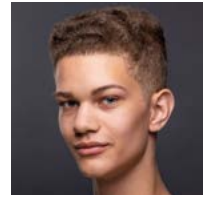


### **Fiction Authors**

#### **Austin W. Dabney**

Fisher College

Austin graduated *summa cum laude* from Fisher College in 2025 with a BA in English. "The Motley Girl" is his first publication, and it received the Isabel Sparks President's Award for Original Prose at the Sigma Tau Delta 2025 Convention. Austin intends to further his literary studies at the graduate level in both creative and critical ways; he is especially interested in the presence of Black and bi-racial people in American literature. Before his academic career, Austin was a professional ballet dancer.



#### **Katherine "K. E." Dahl**

University of Illinois, Chicago

K. E. Dahl is an undergraduate junior pursuing a double degree in English Literature and in Marketing, although creative writing has remained a consistent passion of hers since childhood. She writes both short- and long-form pieces focusing primarily on historical fiction; she takes great inspiration from the rural setting of her hometown and the cityscape of her current Chicago residence. Besides writing and reading, her main interests are collecting music and old technology.



**Abigail “Abby” Grace D’Antoni**University of North Georgia, Gainesville

Abby is an English major with a Literature concentration. They are a repeat published poet in their university’s *Chestnut Review* and Chapter Treasurer of Sigma Tau Delta. They enjoy writing and reading poetry and short stories, Earl Grey tea, and crafting in their free time. They aspire to publish more creative and academic work and teach college-level literature.

**Raquel Elliott**Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville

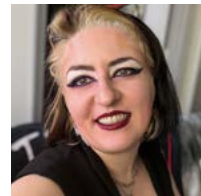
Raquel graduated from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville in 2025 with a BA in English and a minor in Creative Writing. With assistance of her minor, she puts stories on paper, specializing in fiction. She won the Mimi Zanger Award in Fiction at her university for her short story “The Good Nights Fade.” She plans to continue her academic career at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, working toward a graduate degree in Library and Information Sciences.

**Huici Gunawan**University of Illinois, Chicago

Huici is a Chicago-based author currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Writing fiction (a hobby when she was young) has transformed into something she hopes to do professionally. Her pieces tend to explore complex interpersonal relationships and character psychologies. A few authors who inspire her work are Sally Rooney, James Baldwin, and Ali Hazelwood. In her spare time, she enjoys watching movies and playing with her dogs.

**Fiona Haborak**The University of Texas at Dallas

Dr. Haborak is a data-entry clerk who recently (May 2025) earned her PhD in the Bass School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology at The University of Texas at Dallas. Published in *Transformative Works and Cultures* and in *Interactive Film and Media Journal*, her research focuses on identity, social media, sapphic fan cultures, cosplay, sociology, and fan studies. Her creative works explore identity, trauma, and grief and are featured in zines and journals including *Caustic Frolic*.

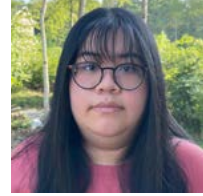


**C. J. Jones**University of Kentucky

C. J. is a senior from Louisville, KY, who is pursuing a BA in English with minors in Creative Writing and History. He serves as Co-President of Graphite, the university's creative writing association, as well as Vice President of his local chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and a member of the Board of Directors for WRFL, the university's independent student radio station. In 2025, he was awarded the William Hugh Jansen Award for Creative Writing.

**Thiri Lin Bo**SUNY at Albany

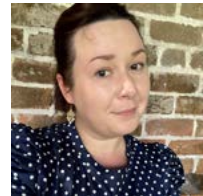
Thiri is a junior English major with double minors in Creative Writing and Education. She has published in two Young Writers' USA Competitions, and she volunteers as an editor for her university's online literary journal *ARCH*. In addition to reading and writing, Thiri enjoys playing video games in her free time. She hopes to one day publish her own collection of horror stories.

**Carmen Lok**University of South Florida

Carmen is a first-year graduate student in the MFA Creative Writing Program. Prior to her graduate studies, she completed her BA in English at Southern Arkansas University. Her primary focus at her current program is fiction writing, in which inspiration from her Malaysian Chinese background motivates her to explore the intersections of culture and identity in everyday life.

**M. K. Rees**University of Houston-Clear Lake

M. K. graduates in December 2025 with her BA in Literature and minors in Women's and Gender Studies and in Sociology. She served as the Secretary for her university's Sigma Tau Delta chapter in her senior year. Her short stories have appeared in *The Bayou Review* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*. She plans to apply to MFA Programs to study Creative Writing.



**Vanessa Reyes**University of North Georgia, Gainesville

Vanessa is studying Writing and Publication with the hope of entering an MFA program in Creative Writing. She earned a BSFCS in Fashion Merchandising in 2022 from the University of Georgia, but she has returned to school to focus on her writing. Her work explores the intersectionality of being a Hispanic woman raised in the Southeast United States.

**Emily Rutland**University of Southern Mississippi

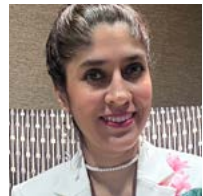
Emily is a 2025 graduate from the University of Southern Mississippi with a bachelor's in English and a minor in French. Her fiction has appeared in *Product Magazine*. Her poetry collection *Those Lost in the Wood* was recognized at University of Southern Mississippi's Undergraduate Symposium as well as her research "Girlhood in *This One Summer*," which won first place in her division.

**Derek Whorley**Randolph College

Derek graduated from Randolph College in 2025, receiving a BA in English Literature. During his time in college, Derek served as Editor-in-Chief for Randolph College's undergraduate literary magazine *Hail, Muse! etc.* He has presented his creative piece "Haruspicy" at the Sigma Tau Delta 2025 Convention. Derek continues to pursue his career in the publishing industry. Currently, he works in an envelope factory, and he continues to write.

**Poetry Authors****Nikita D'Monte**The University of Texas at Dallas

Dr. Nikita D'Monte finished her PhD in Literature in December 2025, with a concentration in gender representations in Japanese anime and manga. She is a past President and active member in Sigma Tau Delta. Her love for poetry developed when she was ten years old and, supported and encouraged by her parents, she continues to express herself in her poems. She finds poetry cathartic and therapeutic, and she can often be found recommending poets to her peers and friends.

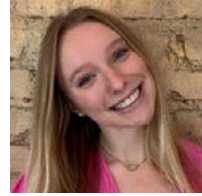


**Charlie Dorlon**Chatham University

Charlie is a senior who is double-majoring in English and Creative Writing. Originally from Texas, their work explores both place and identity. Their poetry won Honorable Mention in Convention Theme at the Sigma Tau Delta 2025 Convention, and their critical work won Paper of the Year at the 2025 Northeast Regional Honors Council. In their free time, they enjoy knitting, crocheting, and playing games.

**Elizabeth Glogowski**Nebraska Wesleyan University

Elizabeth recently graduated with her bachelor's degree in English and Writing. During her time at Nebraska Wesleyan, she was an Editor of *The Flintlock*, the student-run literary magazine. In her senior year, she was awarded the Promising Writer Award through the English Department. Elizabeth now plans to pursue her MFA in Creative Writing. When she is not writing, she is reading poetry or spending time with her cat.

**Blake Harrsch**University of New Hampshire

Blake, Writing Instructor and Co-Editor of *Platform Review*, holds an MA in English Literature and BA in English Honors and Philosophy from Seton Hall University. She recently flocked north to University of New Hampshire, pursuing an MFA in Poetry. Her work appears in *The Word's Faire*, *Pinky Magazine*, and *Echo Review*, among other journals. When Blake is not writing at the duck pond, she can be found gallivanting through thrift-store aisles. [www.blakeharrsch.com](http://www.blakeharrsch.com)

**Obiageli A. Iloakasia**University of Memphis

Obiageli was born and raised in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria. She is the author of *Kàmbílí*—a finalist for the 2022 SprinNG Women Authors Prize—and *October Blues*. She is the recipient for the 2024 Creative Writing Award for Poetry at the University of Memphis. She is studying for an MFA in Creative Writing. She is currently the Lead Poetry Editor for *The Pinch*.



**Mairin Caitriona Landis**Duquesne University

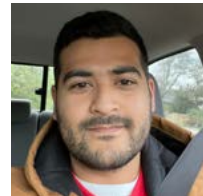
Mairin graduated *summa cum laude* from Duquesne University in 2025, earning her BA in English Writing and Communication Studies. She graduated an Honors Fellow and received several awards for writing and service. She worked at the university writing center and completed internships with Literature Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon Press. Mairin now works at Carnegie Mellon University and volunteers at the International Poetry Forum. Her work can be found in several journals.

**Sadie Lovett**Pepperdine University

Sadie is majoring in English Writing and Rhetoric with a minor in Creative Writing. She has served on the reading team for Pepperdine's *Expressionists* literary magazine and also works as a Staff Writer for the *Pepperdine Graphic Newspaper*. She recently studied abroad in Florence, Italy, where she developed her linguistic skills through Italian language development and leadership skills through her role as a Resident Advisor.

**Joe Lozano**Texas State University

Joe is a first-generation US citizen and a recent graduate of Texas State University's MFA Program in Creative Writing, through which he earned his master's in Poetry. Joe is the son of hard-working Mexican immigrants. He grew up in Austin, TX, where he continues to write and work in his community, hoping to inspire, support, and develop alongside a new generation of bilingual writers while balancing his life as a father, husband, and community advocate.

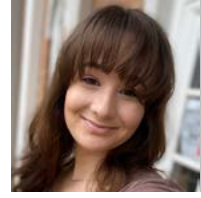
**Victoria Nash**Hartwick College

Victoria recently graduated from Hartwick College with her bachelor's degree in English and Music and a minor in Creative Writing. During her time at Hartwick, she served as the Spring 2024 Managing Editor of and was published in Hartwick's literary magazine *Word of Mouth*. Victoria lives near Columbus, OH, where she continues work on her craft and can be found practicing her harp or reading to her family's goats.

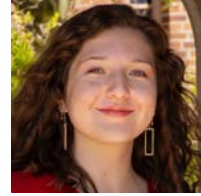


**Lacy Harlin**Southern Arkansas University

Lacy is an undergraduate, majoring in Mass Communication and double-minoring in Writing and History. She is a self-published author, motivational speaker, and freelance writer for several South Arkansas newspapers. She has experience in writing for a magazine, covering-up-to-date local news, and working independently on passion projects. Lacy's goal is to help others and to share her story.

**Marley Ramon**Mercyhurst University

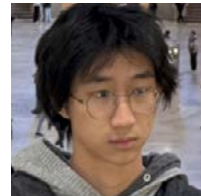
After graduating from Mercyhurst University with BAs in Political Science and Art, Marley moved to Washington DC. Her work has been published in *JourneyWoman*, *Aurooras & Blossoms*, and *Scholastic Writing Awards*, and her collection "Between You and I" was New Mexico's "That Poet is Dope" Champion Chapbook. In the 2025 *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, she received the Centennial Selection for Poetry and was awarded the Eleanor B. North Award. When not writing, Marley enjoys playing water polo and drawing.

**Kira M. Tjomsland**Palm Beach Atlantic University

Kira is thrilled to have her work in the *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* again. Her other creative works (featuring fantasy, travel, and ekphrasis) are published in journals that include *The Bluebird Word*, *Timada's Diary*, and *Blue Crystal Literary Magazine*. Kira graduated with her BA in May 2025 as the Outstanding Graduate of Palm Beach Atlantic University's English Department and as Senior Editor of the university's *Living Waters Review*. She now lives in South Florida with her husband Cade.

**Marcus Tsai**The University of Texas at Dallas

Marcus lives in Texas and recently completed his BA. A Pushcart Nominee, he is the Winner of the 2024 Robert Bone Memorial Creative Writing Contest and a recent alumnus of the Kenyon Summer Workshop. His work appears in *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *The Common Language Project*, and *Dulcet Literary Magazine*, among other publications.



**Isabelle Veenstra**University of Maine at Farmington

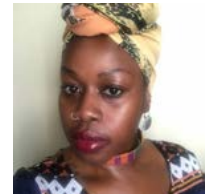
Isabelle is pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing, a BA in Art and Design with a Concentration in Graphic Design, and a minor in Film Studies. They have worked as the Design Editor of *Crashtest*, a student-run magazine, and have been recognized at a national level by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Their work is a translation of bodily experience blurring boundaries between genres and attempting to reveal the world's own magical realism.

**Faculty Reviewers****Lisa Bell, PhD**Fort Hays State University

Lisa Bell is the Writing Center Director and Instructor of English at Fort Hays State University, where she serves as the Co-Advisor for the Sigma Tau Delta Chapter. Her teaching and research focus on developmental writing and first-year composition programs. She believes that writing education is the foundation for solid communication skills and encourages her students to explore their worlds through words.

**Sonia Mae Brown, PhD**Philander Smith University

Dr. Sonia Brown is an Associate Professor of Language and Letters and the Southwestern Regent of Sigma Tau Delta. She earned her PhD from Howard University and is an Erotic Scholar whose work explores Black literature, sexuality, identity, and performance. A dedicated community activist, Dr. Brown teaches students how to live sustainable lives through their connections to the soil and their communities. In her free time, she enjoys gardening, writing, cooking, and curating creative spaces that nurture joy, growth, and self-discovery.

**Michael Frizell, MFA**Missouri State

Michael Frizell is Director of Student Learning Services at Missouri State University and edits *The Learning Assistance Review*. An ICLCA Certified Learning Center Professional (Level IV, Lifetime) and 2024 CLADEA Fellow, he serves as Vice Chair of the Council of Learning and Developmental Education Associations and on *RiLADe*'s editorial team. Frizell edited *Learning Centers in the*

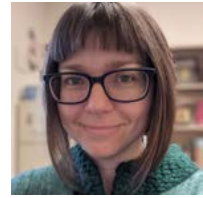


21st Century and has written nearly 200 biographical comics for TidalWave Comics.

**Madeline B. Gangnes, PhD**

University of Scranton

Dr. Madeline B. Gangnes is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Scranton, where she teaches courses on nineteenth-century British literature, environmental and climate literature, utopia and dystopia, science fiction, and literary works. She specializes in Victorian studies, comics, and illustration, with a special interest in late-Victorian illustrated periodicals. Her scholarship appears in venues that include *Victorian Periodicals Review*, *Victorian Popular Fictions*, *Studies in Comics*, and *The Edinburgh History of Children's Periodicals* (2024).



**Emily Ruth Isaacson, PhD**

Heidelberg University

Emily Isaacson is a Professor of English and the Director of the Honors Program at Heidelberg University in Tiffin, OH. She earned her degrees at Augustana College and the University of Missouri-Columbia. She has previously taught at Florida Atlantic University and Chowan University. Having published on early modern city comedy (especially that of Ben Jonson, she pivoted her scholarship to pedagogy and now is researching how to encourage empathy through teaching early modern literature.

**Kriss Larkin, PhD**

Southwestern Oklahoma State University

Kriss Larkin is an Instructor of English at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She holds bachelor's degrees in Sociology and English from Middle Tennessee State University, a master's degree in Literature from Belmont University, and a PhD in Literature from The University of Texas at Dallas. Exploring the interplay between sociology and English is a central passion, as she seeks to integrate the popular with the academic.



**Shirley F. Manigault, PhD**

Winston-Salem State University

Professor of English, Dr. Manigault holds the doctorate, master's, and bachelor's degrees in English from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Wake Forest University, and Bennett College, respectively. In addition to teaching,



she has served as Special Assistant to the Chancellor, as Associate Dean, and as Chair of English. A recipient of awards for teaching and service, she has interests that include development and assessment of writing programs.

### **Jennifer Randall, PhD**

Dalton State

Dr. Randall has taught at Dalton State since Fall 2011. Before Dalton State, she taught at Hampton University, Kennesaw State University, Midlands Technical College, Coker College, and Western Carolina. She received her BA in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from Converse University, her MA in English with a concentration in Composition and Rhetoric from Western Carolina University, and her PhD in Rhetoric with a concentration in Medieval Literature from Georgia State University. When she is not running her four children to activities or teaching, she likes to hide and listen to music (K-Pop to country).



### **Shelly Sanders, PhD**

Abilene Christian University

Shelly Sanders has enjoyed teaching creative writing workshops for the last 20 years as Professor of English and Writer-in-Residence at Abilene Christian University (ACU) in Abilene, TX. She enjoys advising ACU students as they prepare and publish the university's literary journal, *The Shinnery Review*, and she also recently served as fiction editor for *Aethlon: A Journal of Sport Literature*.

### **Nicole Sheets, PhD**

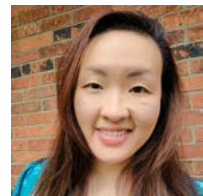
Whitworth University

Nicole Sheets is Associate Professor of English and a Sigma Tau Delta Chapter Advisor at Whitworth University in Spokane, WA. She is the Managing Editor of *Rock & Sling*, a journal of witness housed at Whitworth. Her writing has appeared in *Mid-American Review*, *Image*, *Bellingham Review*, and other journals. She's very proud of the green beans she grew for the first time in her little garden.

### **Yu-Li Alice Shen, PhD**

University of Southern Indiana

Yu-Li Alice Shen is a playwright, English professor, and audiobook narrator. Her plays have received awards from the American Playwriting Foundation, ATHE-KCACTF, and SETC, and they have been fully produced in New York and a handful of other states. In her spare time, Alice sings and plays ukulele at



local assisted living facilities; co-hosts a humor/improv podcast called “Going Terribly”; and lends her quirky, versatile voice to the audiobook narration industry.

## **Editorial Team**

### **Carie S. Tucker King, PhD**

The University of Texas at Dallas

Carie King is Clinical Professor in Literature and in Communication Studies and is the Sigma Tau Delta Chapter Advisor at The University of Texas at Dallas in Richardson, TX. She is the Managing Editor of Publications for Sigma Tau Delta and a proud member since 1989 (inducted at Baylor University). She has been published in *Health Communication*, *Communication Design Quarterly*, *Journal of Surgery*, and *Technical Communication*, and she has co-edited and authored five books, including her monograph *The Rhetoric of Breast Cancer*.



### **Adrianna Bailey**

Prairie View A&M University

Adrianna, a recent graduate of Prairie View A&M University, is a writer whose work explores language, storytelling, and cultural critique. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and an emerging voice in literary analysis and creative fiction. With a passion for psychological thrillers and contemporary literature, Adrianna is committed to shaping narratives that challenge, inform, and inspire both academic and general audiences. Adrianna will continue developing her voice and expertise through her enrollment into the Fall 2026 New York University Master of Arts in Professional Writing Program.



### **Hana Ishige**

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Hana, a recent graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, majored in English with a double minor in Creative Writing and Advocacy and Public Writing. During her time of study, she was an Editor of her university's magazine, *The Coraddi*, and she interned for the literary journal *The Greensboro Review*. She is a huge enthusiast for books and all types of stories, often spending hours of her day reading. Currently, she pursues her passion for writing through digital and social media marketing.



**Starla Jade Parker (she/her)**

Nicholls State University

Starla, a recent graduate of Nicholls State University, is an editor, writer, and artist out of Baton Rouge, LA. She is teaching English to students with dyslexia. She is an Alumni Editor for *The Mosaic Literary Magazine* at Nicholls State University. She also collaborated on an open-source textbook for all entry-level English courses for the universities in Louisiana. Starla is an MFA student at Eastern Kentucky University and serves as President of the Sigma Epsilon Chapter. She has multiple publications in *American Weirdo Magazine*.



## About SIGMA TAU DELTA

Since its inception in 1924, Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society has modeled its mission to confer distinction for high achievement, promote interest in English language and literature, foster exemplary character and fellowship, and exhibit high standards of academic excellence.

In 1972, Sigma Tau Delta was accepted as a member of the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS). Currently the Society has grown to include nearly 800 active chapters with more than 1,000 Faculty Advisors; more than 7,500 members are inducted annually.

Sigma Tau Delta has continued to flourish and expand, branching out in 1996 to found Sigma Kappa Delta for the growing two-year college system, and in 2004, it established the National English Honor Society for secondary school students and faculty. The English Language Arts Honor Society for students in grades 6–9 was launched in 2023. Sigma Tau Delta is now the second largest honor society in the ACHS.

Through hard and dedicated work, Sigma Tau Delta has built upon the strong foundation of its founder Judson Q. Owen, whose initial foresight shaped the Society; three subsequent executive secretaries/directors—E. Nelson James, William C. Johnson, and Matt Hlinak—added their own visions to the Society, and many other individuals further shaped the vital, growing organization we are today.

### ***Sigma Tau Delta's Journals***

The Sigma Tau Delta journals publish annually the best writing and criticism of undergraduate and graduate active chapter members of the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society.

*Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* was founded in 1931 as a quarterly publication highlighting the best creative writing of the Society's members. At the fall 1998 meeting of the Board of Directors, the Rectangle went to a once-a-year publication schedule, providing a more professional look and permitting the inclusion of more student writing in each issue.

*Sigma Tau Delta Review* was added as a societal journal in 2007 and publishes critical essays on literature, essays on rhetoric and composition, and essays devoted to pedagogical issues.

### ***Annual Submissions***

The best writing is chosen for publication from hundreds of submissions. Not only do these refereed journals go to chapters worldwide, but they also honor the best writing in each category, with five awards totaling \$2,500.

As of 2016, the Sigma Tau Delta journals are catalogued with the Library of Congress. There is also an annual reading at the Sigma Tau Delta convention by any of the published writers in attendance.

All active undergraduate and graduate members of active Sigma Tau Delta chapters are invited to submit their work to the *Review* and *Rectangle*. Chapter Advisors, faculty members, alumni, and honorary members are not eligible to submit.

Submissions for the 2027 journals are due between March 16 and April 13, 2026.