

# HUMID 15



Undergraduate Literary Journal  
2021

# HUMID 15

## 2021

HUMID is the undergraduate literary journal of Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Produced with the generous support of the Department of English and Creative Writing, the views expressed do not reflect those of the Department, the College of Liberal and Applied Arts, the administration, or the Board of Regents at Stephen F. Austin State University.

# HUMID 15 Editing Teams

## **Fiction**

Christina Ellison  
Sara Laymon  
Tolina Rowlands  
Caleb James Stewart

## **Poetry**

DaQuan Allen  
Asacia Hernandez  
Ember Reed  
Teya Reed

## **Non-Fiction, One-Acts, Art, & Other**

Audree Campbell  
Preston Kines

## **Design**

Audree Campbell  
Asacia Hernandez  
Teya Reed

## **Proofreading**

Christina Ellison  
Sara Laymon  
Tolina Rowlands  
Caleb James Stewart

## **Events Coordination & Publicity**

DaQuan Allen  
Preston Kines  
Ember Reed

## **Faculty Advisor**

Dr. Sara Parks





# Table of Contents

## FICTION

- 3     Petra tou Romiou — Skyla Free
- 5     No More Dead Babies — Arianna Victoria Doughty
- 11    The Smoke and Mirrors of a Midtown Manhattan Bar — Rae Bynum
- 20    New Observations — Tristan Seidel
- 26    Bury Me Not — Jason Couch
- 34    Pancakes — Kaitlyn Stockholm
- 37    Look What Happened — Savannah Shelton

## NON-FICTION

- 47    Too Much Style for One Casket — Martheaus Perkins
- 51    Heart of the Home Away from Home — Brianna Dunston
- 55    Wonder — Shelby Hunt
- 57    Verisimilitude — Rae Bynum

## ONE-ACT PLAYS

- 63    Titanic Nebula — Emma Hill
- 70    We Lost the Title — Hailey Beatty

## POETRY

- 89    Clark Kent vs. the Mundane — Brianna Dunston
- 90    Cockroach Dreams — Martheaus Perkins
- 91    Not-So-Little Things — Rae Bynum
- 92    Looking for the House in Mustang Prairie — Savannah Shelton
- 94    Of Hamsters and Minds — Kaitlyn Stockholm

- 95 Our Dirt — Nathan Thompson
- 96 Perditus Lux — Savannah Shelton
- 97 Poison Dart Frog — Savannah Shelton
- 98 Swimming Lessons —Skyla Free
- 99 Take Your Time — Rae Bynum
- 100 What Happened to the Family Gerbil — Martheaus Perkins
- 101 Lash — Emma Hill
- 102 Dear John, — Rae Bynum
- 104 The Entomologist — Emma Hill
- 105 Tell Me What Happens — Martheaus Perkins
- 106 A Letter to Sissy — Johnathan William Potter
- 108 Light in the Dark — Mackenzie McAnear
- 109 Dragon’s Hymn — Kaitlyn Stockholm
- 110 Husband and His Dying Wife — Martheaus Perkins
- 112 Peary Platypus Soup — Savannah Shelton

## ART

- 117 Metamorphosis — Samantha Altamirano
- 118 White Phoenix, Dancing Clouds — Martheaus Perkins
- 119 Lake Livingston in October — Mary Deborah Talik
- 120 Fairbanks in June — Kaitlyn Stockholm
- 121 Lily Pond at Home — Mary Deborah Talik
- 122 Rebirth — Samantha Altamirano
- 123 Eyes in Color — Mackenzie McAnear
- 124 The Oracle — Skyla Free
- 125 Caged but Unbound — Skyla Free
- 126 Sunlight Falls Heavy — Megan Bynum

- 128 We Meet Again — Sam Berg
- 129 Resurrection — Sam Berg
- 130 What the Ash Grows — Sam Berg

## EDITORS' NOTES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

- 133 The Pearl Necklace that Attracted the Lazy Bee — DaQuan Allen
- 136 Flower of Pain — Audree Campbell
- 137 The Mighty Don't Fall — Preston Kines
- 142 The Wizard's Apprentice — Asacia Hernandez
- 143 Elias Crane's Unbearable Choice — Caleb James Stewart
- 146 Over and Out — Asacia Hernandez
- 147 Soldier Boy Going Home — Teya Reed
- 152 Introduction to Carrion — Asacia Hernandez
- 153 Climb The Gnarl — Christina Ellison
- 159 The Needs of the Swarm — Ember Reed



# Fiction

*“All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.”*

*- Ernest Hemingway, A Letter from Cuba (1934)*





# Petra tou Romiou

*Skyla Free*

“Hmmm... I think Europe... No, no. Asia! But South America is also nice... gah, it’s so hard to choose! I just want to travel. See the world! Do things! I just want to live.”

I had asked what you wanted to do, where you wanted to go after college, but like the other seventeen times I asked — I counted — you never settled on an answer. It was almost time for me to head back to my apartment — I lived off-campus, about forty minutes away in Johnstown, but every day after class I made time to hang out at your dorm. I don’t know why you chose Colorado State University, but I’m glad you did. We met freshman year, and every year since, our schedules have been the same. Maybe we could have moved in together, but your parents didn’t like the idea of you living off-campus with another girl.

“What about you, Cynthia?” you asked, your New York accent coming out. You often tried hiding it, but seventeen years in the heart of Queens is hard to hide.

“Oh. Well. Same as you, really. Traveling the world seems pretty nice.” The lie had slipped easily from my lips; I was perfectly content with staying in the U.S. Seeing the Taj Mahal, climbing Mount Everest, and coming face to face with dangerous animals were all things that could be experienced on T.V.

“Oh? You gonna be a hotshot photographer for National Geographic like me?”

“Nah, more like the person that carries around Miss Hotshot Harper Thomas’ equipment.”

“Uh huh, great use of your degree.”

“Hey, well, Liberal Arts can get you anywhere.”

In truth, you wanted to travel because you loved the world; you wanted a career seeing every inch of the planet: exploring caves, mountains, forests, and cities. I wanted to travel because of you. I couldn’t get you out of my head even when you left for the summer and winter and we didn’t talk — you worked three jobs back home to help pay for college since your addict of a father spent your savings on drugs. I loved you, every one of our friends saw it, but you didn’t, and it’s my fault for never telling you.

The white roses around your casket were wilting — some so badly they were barely a flower. But hey, that’s all your family could afford. It was a closed-casket service, probably because self-inflicted gunshot wounds to

the face are hard to fix. I sat in the first pew of the church where you told, in confidence, your preacher that you were gay, who then recommended church camp to your parents. Staring at the picture of you in front of your casket, I couldn't figure out *why*. Why you called me that night, not the hotline. Why I had to live forty minutes away. Why you didn't leave a note.

Your parents offered me a chance to speak about you — they said you always talked about me when you were home. In fact, they said I was the only thing you talked about. I know it was selfish, but I declined. What would I say? That I loved you? That I was planning on following you with your career just to be close to you? No way. Throughout the next hour, people spoke about your life, what you meant to them. Your mother was last: she spoke about how loving and joyful you were, about how you told her that you had met a nice guy and had planned to settle right back down here in Queens after college.

After your casket was put in the ground, I was the last to leave. Weeks later, I still hadn't flown back to Colorado. I was still in touch with my professors — they were lenient at first, but now they threatened to fail me, and their supply of online homework stopped. Your tombstone was modest, just large enough to fit *Harper Thomas* and two dates. By now, I think you would've told me it was time to go back. That I could finish my degree and fulfill my dreams of traveling.

I sighed, and pulled out my phone, searching *Safari* for a one-way ticket to Fort Collins, Colorado. A pop-up ad filled my screen as the travel website loaded — an ad for a special deal on a ticket to Paphos, Cyprus.

I finished my purchase, the confirmation email buzzing as I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Running my fingers along your name one last time, I stood, turned, and walked away. I would come back eventually, but for now, I had to learn Greek.

# No More Dead Babies

*Arianna Victoria Doughty*

## BIRTH PLAN

Mother's Name: Leeanne Whitefall

Father's Name: John Whitefall

Due Date: December 07, 2005

OB: Dr. Lindsey Taylor

Birth Facility: New Ark County Hospital

John clasped Leeanne's small hand as they strode through the emergency room's sliding doors. Her wedding ring pressed against his right hand. She was wrapped in a soft blue jacket, a gray knit cap pulled down over her shoulder-length blonde hair.

"*Hee-who*," they breathed together. John prayed the Lamaze classes they'd attended were worth the hours of his life they'd cost.

"Um, yeah can you help us, please? My wife is in labor," he said to the lady manning the desk. Her ID badge said her name was Sue Swanson. Alliteration names made him think of comic book superheroes; she, in her own right, was probably a superhero of some sort. You had to be if you worked at a hospital, right?

"Name?"

"John Whitefall."

"Sir" — she gave him a droll stare — "your wife's name."

"Ah, yes, of course. What's your name again, honey?" he joked, but his wife, who was focusing very hard on breathing, did not look amused. "Her name is Leeanne Whitefall. Here, take this." He handed her one of the many printed-out copies of their birth plan that had been meticulously crafted over the later months of the pregnancy.

"The orderly will show you to labor and delivery." They followed behind a nurse that chattered on, asking them way too many questions.

"Is this your first?"

"Yes."

"Are you nervous? Or excited?"

"A little of both."

"What do you both do?"

"I'm a writer and Leeanne is in marketing."

"What do you write about?"

“Um, well, tragedy, mostly... death within families and satirical dramas, that kind of thing.” He trailed off because she had that bored, glazed-over look in her eyes when people who had no interest in reading accidentally asked about his work.

The fluorescents hummed overhead. The white tiles with speckles of blue, red, and yellow underneath their feet. The nurse’s shoes were a bright white. He wondered if, at the end of each night, she put them in a bath of bleach before she went to bed. Or if they were simply new.

This Birth Plan has been written to express preferences and decisions made prior to labor. We understand if things do not go according to plan, but wish that the hospital staff, to the best of their abilities, accommodate our wishes for the birth of our child.

“John,” Leeanne called him back to the present. She was good at that. He smiled at her. Normally she was the embodiment of sunshine, but today fear clouded her eyes and she looked to him for guidance — which John knew was surely a mistake. John was never the steady one. He was prone to fancy and whim while Leeanne, although no one would dare call her boring, was the one who steered the boat of life they were on.

“Yes, my love?” He looked over at her, carrying the hospital bag they had packed more than a month ago and a diaper bag, the one with clouds and stars on it.

“Are you ready?”

They’d done everything right. They waited for both of them to be out of college and a few years into creating a career within their respective fields. They’d gotten married. And within the appropriate time, they’d conceived a child, attended all the classes, read all the books, listened to all the advice.

“Not in the slightest. But I don’t think he’ll wait.” He put his arms around his wife.

“No, he seems to have a proclivity for punctuality.” Just three hours after midnight on the day of her due date, Leeanne’s water had broken. Unless induced, babies were rarely born on their due dates. Four to five percent, to be exact.

### **Environment**

- Lights dimmed
- No unnecessary staff
- Would like to listen to a soundtrack of chirping birds for peace and tranquility

The room that they were brought to smelled of the sterile cleaners John associated with hospitals and airports. The entire room blushed in pink pastels. Very contrast to the room they had at home that Leeanne had designed and then supervised the creation of; John had constructed all the sweet, white furniture and painted the walls a soft baby blue, the color of spring skies on a sunny day, with puffy white clouds. Leeanne had claimed that this arrangement was only fair since she was already doing *all* the work when it came to making the baby.

Leeanne groaned as another contraction racked her body. They'd met in college. John had been convinced by his friends to go out drinking with them, for once in his life. They were the kind of friends that kept inviting him each week even though he always said no. But this week it was his third semester there and he'd thought "what if" — "what if" just this once he said yes?

It turned out to be the best "what if" he'd ever considered, because right there in that college bar he'd met the love of his life. She'd looked like an angel even under the yellow glow of the bar lights.

Normally he would have let this girl slip away from him, but that night was the night of "what ifs." So he went up to her and asked what she was doing for the rest of her life, and the rest was history.

### **Pain Management**

- We would like to have our child through natural and unmedicated labor and delivery
- Using the Lamaze method to manage pain during the delivery process
- As well as being able to move and walk through the pain if necessary

"Working like a champ, Leeanne. You're already at seven centimeters dilated. It won't be long before baby makes his appearance," said Jenny, the nurse on call. It had been hours since they'd arrived. John rolled his head back, closing his eyes to block out the harsh overhead bulbs.

John studied the lights of another room, with its long rectangular fixtures. An undergrad fiction class, the rumbling of the air conditioner nearly distracting him from what his professor was saying.

"John, what do you think about *Incarnations of Burned Children*?"

"What? Could you repeat the question?" His eyes focused on the professor whose name he couldn't quite recall but danced on the edge of his memory.

"What are your thoughts on *Incarnations of Burned Children*?"

"It was sad." John subconsciously rubbed his hands over his arms; each week, he forgot how cold the room was and failed to bring a sweater.



“Why?”

“Because the baby was terribly maimed.” He wasn’t a monster, after all. “Babies have the potential to be so much more, but the writer steals that from them.”

“Do you think that short story writers present the wounded baby as a way to elicit an emotional reaction from the reader?”

“Yeah, it pulls on the heartstrings.”

“The pain of children can be seen as an easy out for writers, just another way to manipulate the reader.”

The air conditioner clicked off and the room felt too quiet. From the hallway, he could hear the clip of a woman’s heels as she strode by.

### **Labor**

- No pain meds
- Those allowed in the delivery room: husband and the attending doctor
- Allowed to hydrate with water, ice chips, and popsicles

“It’s kind of funny, don’t you think?” Leeanne asked, pulling him out of memory.

“What is?”

“That we’re about to be parents. It feels like we’re still kids. Like, okay, we’re adults, right? But only, like, mid-level adults, not *adult* adults. But to him, we’ll be the adult adults.”

“I don’t think that’s funny.” He paused for a moment. “It’s kind of scary, though.” He couldn’t argue that he didn’t feel ready or up to the task of raising a baby. His own father had been absent from his life. Well, that was the nice way of putting it. John Senior had been a ladies’ man. If he had been born a woman, the world would have called him a whore. He slept around and never really settled down. And John’s poor idiot of a mother always welcomed him back at his every return, whether it was for the night or on a ruse of being a family again. Until the day she died. Although they’d never really been a family in the first place. “But what can we do?” John said to a not-listening Leeanne as she gritted her teeth through another contraction.

### **Birth**

- During the birth, we would like to have a countdown from “ten” to “push” into a contraction
- Non-medicated
- Husband and attending doctors only

Leeanne had pushed for an unmedicated birth so hard because her parents had both died when she was nineteen from an overdose. Logically, she knew the drugs were different, but she just couldn’t allow herself to have them

coursing through her body. She'd told him once that every time she closed her eyes, she imagined them there on that cold motel room floor, needles shot through their veins, eyes still open.

When she'd moved away for school at eighteen, she'd believed she was through with them, with coming home to see them washed out on the couch, with hiding who they really were from classmates and teachers and the concerned police officers who came to the door. She didn't need to protect them anymore. But that was a foolish thought; you could never truly leave the arms of your parents. For better or for worse.

If there was one thing she could do for their son, it was give him a clean start. They couldn't swaddle him in cotton forever, but when you have a kid, the only thing you can do is build them a sturdy foundation.

"Leeanne, I need you to focus," said the doctor, who wore teal scrubs and rectangular gold-framed glasses.

"I'm so tired." He could see she wanted to give up. John squeezed her shoulder, reassuring her it would all be over soon.

"Ten." When he was ten, he'd been given a black eye by a stray baseball. This is not what he wanted to be thinking about, but he still couldn't believe his shock as he stood there and took a ball to the face. He should have moved, he should have raised his glove, he should have done something, but he didn't.

"Nine." How many months they'd waited for their baby boy. They'd stressed, they'd worried, they'd laughed and cried. And he would be here soon.

"Eight." He'd been eight when he'd walked in on his mother crying over a toilet of blood. She'd miscarried. He always imagined it was his little sister even though it had been too early to tell. She'd bled and he'd puked, then she'd pulled him into her arms and held him as if he was the only thing in the world that tethered her to it.

"Seven." He and Leeanne had met seven years ago. Her bold red lipstick and her bright green eyes drew him in. Neon lights and bar fights.

"Six." The number of stories he'd already written where the child was met with a tragic fate.

"Five." The number of years he and Leeanne had been married.

"Four." How many months they'd tried before conceiving their son.

"Three." The number of people they would file on their taxes next year.

"Two." It had just been the two of them for so long.

"One."

"It's time to push! Come on, Leeanne, finish strong!" the nurse cheered her on. Their son slipped from her body and, for a moment, the whole hospital seemed to be holding its breath.

In that moment of quiet, John's heart raced and his head spun, consumed with the sudden horror that what if he himself had caused his baby to meet

his own tragic fate. He'd written his own fate half a dozen times and now it must be coming true. Then the sound of his first cries brought smiles and sighs of relief echoing throughout the room.

"A healthy baby boy," the doctor said.

"Nine pounds and ten ounces," the nurse called out. "Good job, Mama."

John and Leeanne shared a look of pure unadulterated happiness. They were parents now. They'd done it.

### **Postpartum**

- Breastfeeding only
- Baby to sleep in our room
- Release from the hospital as soon as both mother and baby are considered stable

It was long after his son's first cry that he sat peacefully, looking down at his tiny face.

"He's perfect," John whispered carefully, so as not to wake the exhausted Leeanne. His son's face was free of wrinkles and had yet to know anything beyond the hospital room, but when Andrew opened his eyes, they seemed to have age-old wisdom in them. John wondered if all newborns looked like this, but then he dismissed the thought. Andrew was special.

It was at this moment that John knew one thing: he would never write another story about a dead baby.

"No more dead babies, okay?" He lovingly smiled down at his sweet, chubby-cheeked baby.

# **The Smoke and Mirrors of a Midtown Manhattan Bar**

*Rae Bynum*

Talley's Bar is the place to be on a Saturday night in Manhattan. Some say it's better than tearing up the town or painting it red. You can find it sitting on 8th Avenue near Walter's Bar. Anyone can find it. The question is whether or not you want to. I know I did when I first walked in. I glided through the breath of cigarettes and cigars and almost felt at home. I felt that I truly could belong if I worked hard enough. After that, I didn't miss a single Saturday. Every Saturday came with a date. Every date came with a different guy. Every guy came with another chance to be accepted.

It had been two months since I first walked into Talley's, and the guy I was meeting was different from the others. Last weekend it was "Colton the Cowboy." I'd worn my pink and brown cowgirl boots from Goodwill and a bedazzled cowgirl hat from a friend's bachelorette party. I remember that cowboy smirk he gave me when I walked in with my thumbs hooked in my belt loops. I almost had him. Two weekends ago was a tattooed biker dude named "Duke." I'd worn tight jeans and my black leather jacket over a Guns N' Roses t-shirt, completing my outfit with a smokey eye for effect. I almost had him, too. But eventually, they all found out that I'm not who or what they want. Still, I was convinced Brad would be different. His online dating profile said he was looking for a girl who was "serious but knew when and how to have fun." I could be that. I could be anything.

It's easy when you don't know a thing about yourself.

"Red or black, Bailey?" I held each dress up, one at a time, in front of me and looked in the mirror. I turned around, expecting my black Lab to answer me since he was the only one around. He cocked his head, and his floppy ears fell to the side.

"Woof!"

"Red it is."

Yes, the red dress with the black heels. I loved that dress. The way it followed my curves and went with every piece of jewelry I owned made it a favorite. I matched my lipstick to the dress and pulled my dark hair into a sleek but slightly messy bun so that my neck was showing. The finishing touch, my thin gold bracelets. The girl in the mirror was ready for "Brad the Businessman."

On my way out the door, I yelled goodbye to Bailey. "See ya soon, drool bucket! And stay off the couch!"

I typically took a taxi to Talley's, but having just gone shopping for shoes, I needed to save on cab fare and decided on the subway. It was always damp in the flickering-lighted tunnels, but the weather chose whether it would be a cold-damp or a warm-damp. That night it was a cold-damp. I rubbed my arms as I entered the silvery train. I found a seat near the door so I would have less of a chance of being stampeded by exiting passengers. Subway passengers are almost always indifferent to each other's existences. Eyes stay glued to phones, and hardly anyone speaks unless a jolt causes a need for angry words in the event someone has the nerve to bump into someone else. I hated the subway and everything about it.

My phone distracted me from it as I refreshed myself on Brad's online dating profile and made a mental checklist of myself. As I started scrolling, my phone began vibrating with texts from the "LA Girls 4-Ever" group chat. I ignored the texts. They didn't fit the part I needed to play. I grabbed part of my seat with my other hand as I scrolled and found something sticky underneath with my fingers. *Gum. Typical*, I thought to myself with a grimace on my face. Suddenly, the voice of the subway boomed overhead like a god ruling over us. "8th Avenue Station. Next stop, 8th Avenue."

\*\*\*

God, it was good to be going "home." It was Talley's place, but I considered it mine too. It's one of the reasons the strange woman in the alleyway made me feel uneasy. She'd been there for a few weeks and I intentionally stepped around her to get to the stairs. She looked at me strangely with a weird look. I wondered if Talley knew anything about her.

It was dimly lit on the inside like always, and the pool tables were already occupied with the sounds of shouting and laughing and billiard balls clacking together. The building was old and smelled musty from water damage, but the place was relatively clean. Its walls were sparsely decorated with some pictures of good times past like the annual New Year's party and cringey beer-related jokes. One that always made me smile said, "Save Water and Drink Beer." The bar itself always had people leaning on it or sitting at it with arms placed firmly on the edge like it could support the weight of any problem. I wondered if my problems were too heavy. Talley, the owner, was drying a glass with a towel behind the bar when I walked in. He was a shorter, stout man with brownish-red hair that constantly hung in his face and a scraggly beard to match. Talley kind of reminded me of a young Danny DeVito. He smiled that same Saturday smile.

"Hey, Maggs!" he said, waving the towel at me.

"Hey, Talley. How's business?" I sat on one of the barstools and spun around.

"Oh, fine. Walter's crowd is a helluva competition. Ya know how it is." I could hear the thickness of Manhattan in his voice.

“Yeah, I bet. Speaking of ‘how it is,’ do you know anything about that strange woman out front in the alley? She kind of weirds me out.”

“Showed up a few weeks ago and hasn’t left. Surprised you’re just now noticing her. Guess she has a reason for being there, but it isn’t my business to ask her about it. She is odd, though. Lemme fix ya a drink.”

\*\*\*

Talley made me a Classic Old Fashioned garnished with a curling orange peel and a bright-red cherry dancing and bobbing with the ice cube. It was my favorite drink, and he made it perfectly every time. He wasn’t just a bartender, but a “mixologist.” At least that’s what he told all of his New York customers, all of whom he called “Mac.” It was a Big Apple thing in his time. Talley was probably my only true friend in the entire world, besides Bailey. I first met Talley when I was twelve years old. My father was a location scout for movie sets, and he traveled for work while my mother and I coped with his absence together in Los Angeles. The times I did see him, he made it a point to take me on a trip for “daddy-daughter bonding.” Eventually, his absence took a toll on the marriage, and he was away even more often. Talley was a friend of his since college, so anytime we were near Manhattan, we stopped at Talley’s Bar. I grew up with Talley. At twelve he gave me Diet Cokes, at fifteen it was Shirley Temples, and at twenty-one he made me my first real drink, a Classic Old Fashioned. My father never meant as much to me as Talley did. It sounds strange, but wherever I expected Talley to be, there he was. I couldn’t say the same for my dad. That’s why I moved to Manhattan as soon as I got done studying costume design at LACC. I could have someone to rely on. Film had always been a part of my life, and costume design came in handy for dating and designing for Broadway shows.

“So, who ya meeting tonight, Maggie?” Talley inquired, still drying glasses while he talked. He always wanted to know if I’d given up on my “dating escapades” yet to “work on me.”

“Well, his name is Brad.”

“Sounds like a tool.”

“Of course he would to you!”

“Just saying. You don’t need him. You’re enough on your own.”

“I’ve never disagreed with that.”

“But you would if I asked you outright, wouldn’t ya?”

“I — I don’t know.”

“Heard from your dad recently?”

“Nope. Just his love sealed up in envelopes like usual. Signed at the bottom.”

Our conversation reminded me of why I moved to New York from LA in the first place. My mother had died when I was eighteen from breast cancer. Apparently, it runs in our family. When she died, I blamed



myself. Cliché, I know, but I was the only one around, and I couldn't save her when she needed me the most. She always said I expected too much from myself. She left me a locket to remember her by, but I didn't want her memory. I wanted her. After college, I felt the need to get away and my father let me stay in his New York apartment. It was an easy apology for all the things he never had time to apologize for. It was a crowded space with Bailey and me, but it was a home.

Talley's tawny eyes looked up from the glass he was drying to the door. His glare could've killed had Brad been looking his way. Talley set the glass in his hand on the bar, slung the towel over his shoulder, and dried his hands on his black button-up shirt, adding to its various stains. "Ah! The tool's here!" he said too loudly.

"Would you let me handle this, please?"

A wink from Talley and he went to attend his customers at the other end of the bar. I waved at Brad from my seat, and he sat on the stool beside me. He was taller than he looked on his profile and his eyebrows were fuller in person. The swoon-worthy smile was the same, though. It made me feel a little flushed, and I started messing with where my locket usually hung. He was certainly dressed like the "businessman" he described himself to be. A royal blue suit over a white button-up, black dress shoes, and even cufflinks. His hair was perfectly coiffed and gelled, shiny like a Ken doll I had once. Prom Ken or something like that. I guess that made me Barbie. I could be Barbie.

"You're Maggie, right?" Brad said after looking at my profile again on his phone for reference.

I shrugged flirtatiously like I was shy. "That's me. And you're Brad?"

"The one and only." He chuckled and gave a little half-bow with his hand. This one was going to be interesting.

"What are you doing with your hand? That a nervous tick or something?" he asked, chuckling a little. I looked down, realizing I was still fiddling with a locket that wasn't there.

"Oh, no I just — I'm usually wearing a locket that my mother left to me, but I misplaced it somewhere recently." My face became flushed and embarrassed again. I typically didn't make a habit of telling my dates about my locket or my mother. Especially since it usually opened an entire can of worms that I liked to keep the lid welded onto.

"Huh. Weird," he said, shrugging off the subject like a cold chill. Then, we started talking about him for as long as possible.

\*\*\*

He left me earlier than the others had. After about an hour and a half, he noticed the three horizontal scars on my wrist that I tried to hide with my gold bracelets and asked about them cautiously. I told him they were "just a dramatic emotional phase I went through in my teens." It was a scripted

response that left out the catalyst of my mother's death. I rehearsed in the mirror before my second date at Talley's. I learned my lesson after awkwardly not having a justification on the first date. I guess I needed more practice with my mirror.

Before he left, Brad gave me *his* rehearsed speech and said, "Look, you're a nice girl, but I'm not really looking for someone who is — what's the word — high maintenance. You understand, right?" Yeah, I understood. I always understood. I told that same lie every time, on every date, to every guy. To me, it seemed no one could handle my flawed side. And that cut more deeply than I ever had.

I kept my tears at bay and asked Talley for another Classic Old Fashioned. He made it slower than he made the first one, and I knew he was going to say something.

"I'm sorry, Maggs. Guess he wasn't the one."

"Yeah," I said softly, fidgeting with the missing locket again.

"But ya know, no one will accept you as you are until *you* do."

"You always say that." I got up to leave, swiftly wiping away one of the tears that got past my emotional barricade.

"It's the truth!" he yelled, trying to reach me. It sounded as though some desperation mixed with the New York in his voice. I stormed out of the bar, slamming the door behind me and ignoring the piercing stares from his other judgmental customers.

I tried to shake off Talley's words and put them out of my mind, but they wouldn't leave. They stuck to me like the gum under the seats of the subway. I left in such a whirlwind of emotion that I didn't even realize I started walking home in the wrong direction. More escapee tears were building up in my eyes trying to break down my walls. I tried blinking them away. My vision blurred. I didn't see the curb in front of me as the sidewalk came to an end. I tripped, and pain ripped through my knee as I fell to the jagged pavement. The fall created a crack in the dam, and the pressure built up in my heart broke through. I cried and hugged myself tightly, trying to stop my body from shuddering so violently. I remembered my first earthquake when I lived in California, and it felt a lot like that moment sitting on the curb.

"The hell happened to you?" The voice of an older woman broke me from my earthquake. It was the woman from the alley at Talley's. There were soft wrinkles in her forehead and beside her eyes that showed some aging, but she didn't look like a homeless woman. Her clothes weren't tattered to rags, and her spirit didn't seem worn. She smiled at me gently. I probably looked worse than she did.

"Nothing. I'm fine," I replied, stifling my sobs in a futile attempt to gain back some composure and whatever dignity was left. I got up and walked over to her. She was sitting on an old tire, abandoned pieces of litter floating

clumsily past. There was a streetlight nearby that shed its dusty light on the woman and her sitting place. When I got closer, I saw that her hair was laced with a few silvery strands to compliment her soft wrinkles. I sat in front of her on the cold and callous concrete. She made me feel welcome to talk with her, for some reason. It was like she was familiar.

“Rough night?” she asked, handing me a tissue from her purse.

I dabbed my eyes. My makeup was running and ruined. Good thing I didn’t have a mirror with me. I sighed heavily and took my hair down, shaking it out afterward. I let the dark curls cascade freely on my shoulders and down my back.

“You have no idea,” I replied, chuckling at how foolish and stupid I must have looked. I cursed myself for even contemplating telling this strange woman my testimony of my dating life. Or my life at all. I thought she would judge and laugh like my “LA Girls 4-Ever” friends had when I told them I planned to move to Manhattan. But she only shrugged and said, “I know a little about it. Dating problems?”

I nodded slowly, not knowing how she possibly could’ve known what kind of night I’ve been having every Saturday since I first walked into Talley’s Bar. She asked me to tell her about it and, somehow, I felt safe in doing so. I couldn’t explain why. Maybe because I had already spilled half of my emotions on the pavement of 8th Avenue. I told her about my faithful dog Bailey and “Colton the cowboy” and “Duke the Tattooed Biker Dude” and “Brad the Businessman” and about my father’s pity money and my mother’s death and the guilt and about my costume design education and my confusion about my place in this world and even about my scars. Not the lie I told everyone, including myself. The real story about my scars. That I punish myself for not being enough even when I don’t know what that means. That I reopen old wounds and wait for them to heal because maybe if I feel pain, I won’t feel so lost and somehow will be grounded to reality and this life that I don’t understand.

It was a lot to confess to a complete stranger, but I felt like I had known her my whole life. She listened deeply and fully to everything, nodding and occasionally making an “mmm” sound. After I finished bleeding my heart and soul to her, we sat in silence for a long time. The night was cool, and the bustling cacophony of New York was far off in the distance, faint with sirens, yelling, and honking horns. The night air felt light on my skin, and I could breathe for the first time in many Saturdays. Finally, the woman’s words broke the veil of the silence.

“You’re too young to have so much on you. Hell, you’re too young to be this old. Keep this up and your heart will give out on you. Take it from me. I was a lot like you when I was your age. I *was* you. That’s why I may be the only one that can help you now. And I learned far too late that the person who needed to accept me the most was *me*. Learn that now and live your life for you, not them.”

She lifted my chin with her forefinger to meet her face. The pad of her thumb wiped away another runaway tear. I was hurting, but it was a different kind of hurt than the kind Colton or Duke or Brad caused me. The hurt I was feeling was self-inflicted. My shoulders couldn't handle the weight of the world and carry my tears at the same time. I wasn't Atlas. I didn't know who I was, but maybe it was time to find out. Without needing validation from someone else who never took the time to truly know me.

"How do I know when I've found me? How do I love me?" I asked, worried I couldn't do what I knew I must do.

"All you have to do is look, but don't look out there." She poked a finger to my chest where the locket once hung. "Look in here. It's in there somewhere. I should know."

"Why do you care so much about this? About me? You don't even know me."

"I know you and everything you're going through like no one else can because, as I said before, I *was* you. I know how the smoke and mirrors of a Midtown Manhattan bar can hide what you're actually looking for. And I want better for you than what I gave myself."

I stood up, still confused about this woman's stake in my life, but thankful just the same. I began walking away, back down the street towards the bar in the direction of home, when I realized I never asked who she was. I turned around quickly as if she could disappear at any moment.

"Wait! What's your name?"

"Margaret," she said simply, still seated on the tire in that alley. I turned to leave, again reaching for the missing locket, when her words stopped me.

"Hey, stop fiddling with nothing!" She tossed something at me, and I caught it with both hands. When I opened my hands, I found my mother's locket nestled in my palms. It was gold and embellished with flowers and twisting vines. I unfastened it and found the engraving from a poem. It read, *What if I fall? Oh, but my darling, what if you fly?* How did she have it? Wasn't it lost?

"My mother's locket! Where did you find this?"

"Maybe you dropped it on your way into Talley's. Maybe you lost it in the move and it found its way to me. Maybe neither of those things happened. I found it where you lost it. The 'where' doesn't really matter. Many times, where you *find* something is more important than where you *lost* it. You're going to lose things, and sometimes you find them again when they are meant to be found. Other times you find things just because you are looking. You just got to look in the right place."

My breath was stolen by disbelief. I looked up from the locket in my hands to thank her. She was gone. I looked for her everywhere. In the alley, down the street, around the corner, but she was nowhere. Only her wisdom

and the locket remained, and I was left with a choice to make. I could keep searching for love where I would never find it, or I could search for me and find what I had been missing every Saturday and then some.

I walked home instead of taking the nightmare train again. I figured the night air would help clear my head of its sticky subway-gum thoughts. I could hear Bailey scratching at the door when I approached my apartment. He always knew when I was home. The key turned in the lock with ease, and I scratched my welcome wagon behind the ear as I came in. Kneeling in the doorway, I nuzzled my head to his fuzzy black one.

“Who’s my good boy, Bailey?” He never answered, but I knew that he knew it was him. If I didn’t have Talley, this pathetically loving black Lab I rescued from a flimsy cardboard box in a storm would be all I had in the world. He licked my wrist where the scars were as I nuzzled him. I think he knew when I was in pain. How could he not? I told him everything, and for a dog, he was a decent listener. I guess that’s what happens when you talk to someone who can’t talk back. We sat on the couch together that night, which was a special occasion for Bailey since I constantly told him to stay off the furniture. I told him about Margaret and the strangely apt advice she gave me. He licked the locket when I showed him. Weirdo.

“So, what do you think? Have I lost it or did that woman make sense? Who even was she? I don’t know that I can do it, Bails. Change everything. ‘Find me.’ I’m scared.”

He kept panting and staring at me. His breath was hot and wet, and his velvet brown eyes looked into me. It was like he expected something of me, just like Margaret did. I just didn’t know if I had the power to expect the same. I knew Bailey would always be there for me. Why was it so hard for *me* to be there for me?

\*\*\*

A week later, I didn’t meet “Paul the Professor” at Talley’s. Margaret said that *I* had to be the one to change me. So, I decided I would. She played a pretty integral part, though. I threw myself into designing for the Broadway shows and found myself feeling full. Full of pride, of ambition, of confidence. My worktable in the apartment is a mess, but I’m putting my life back together after having been the one to tear it apart. I finally responded to the group chat and my friends want to get together. I haven’t seen my dad yet, but I sent him a letter saying I wanted to. I still go to Talley’s, but for me. I went this past Saturday. Bailey and I picked my outfit together. Ripped jeans, red Docs, a t-shirt with an Emily Dickinson quote, a braid, and my own skin. The gold bracelets were banished to the abyss of my jewelry box and I wear my scars rather than having them wear me. My flaws are on full display. I walked into Talley’s with Bailey at the end of the leash. He put his paws on the bar and licked one of the customers sitting there. Talley smiled that same Saturday smile.

“Lemme guess, a Classic Old Fashioned?”

“If you’re not busy,” I said, smiling back and pulling Bailey off the bar.

“Not for my favorite customers.” He looked down at Bailey.

“Oh, and a water for him, please, Talley.”

“You got it, Maggs. And hey, I love the outfit. It’s very *you*.”



# New Observations

*Tristan Seidel*

Entropy, the nature of the universe to be characterized by random and casual chaos, from the largest of celestial bodies to the smallest of subatomic particles. The gradual shift from orderly to disorderly was thoughtless, sublime, even captivatingly beautiful from time to time. Danny knew this to be true, indisputable even, so why could he not grapple with the fact that he'd become a victim to it? Something had to be wrong, he thought, surely. But how could something that *just is* possibly be wrong, even when it goes against our better judgment? It clearly isn't logical to feel this way, but even so, he couldn't keep himself from thinking it. He felt desolate, he felt angry, but more than anything he felt terrified. Back and forth the ideas in his mind went, constantly moving, but never getting anywhere. In this moment of incredible uncertainty, there were only a few things he could be sure of: the rain, soaking through every layer of his dark clothes, fogging his glasses, and matting down his dark black hair; the hands of his father and his older brother, Ben, gripping his shoulders; and the words on the gravestone that obstinately read *Miranda Walker*.

It was his mother's name. He could see it very plainly, but at the same time, he believed it couldn't be true. It hadn't even been a week since he'd seen her last. Her eyes and her smile were just as bright as they had ever been, despite how weak she was at the time. He remembered the day he was informed of her sickness — pancreatic cancer. He didn't know what it meant at the time, but almost every moment of his free time since then had been spent researching. If there was information to be known, he was going to find it and become an expert on it. He couldn't imagine doing anything else; it wouldn't be logical. Amid his research and his mother's improving condition throughout her treatment, Danny came to the educated and logical conclusion that she would make a recovery. And yet here he stood, with the rest of his grieving family, watching how wrong he was staring him right back in the face.

"Danny, come on. You're going to miss the bus," Ben's voice sounded from beyond his bedroom door. Danny stood in his bedroom, examining his calendar. It was full of his scribbles marking the observable celestial events for the month. It had been a tradition between himself and his mother to outline and observe the displays in the night sky throughout the year.

"Right," he muttered. "The bus." Danny hadn't seen the value in going to school for seven months now. If his research and analysis of the world could

be wrong for no discernible reason, then what was the point? He wouldn't protest, however; it wasn't logical to protest something he could not control. He took a few more moments to make a mental note of this month's events: ISS flyover, lunar eclipse, meteor shower. Without a word, Danny tore his eyes away from the calendar, grabbed his bag, and left to board the bus.

"What events do we have for the rest of this month?" Ben asked as he sat down beside him.

"What interest do you have in that information? I can't imagine you will resume observing them with me," Danny said flatly. How odd, he thought, that his brother would ask such a question. Illogical.

"Just trying to make conversation with you, Danny. You know, talking?" Ben remarked, sounding defeated.

"Do you not find it illogical to engage in conversation over an event in which you will not be participating?"

"Look, I just don't feel comfortable with doing it anymore, alright?"

"I recall. You've stated it multiple times. Stating it again will not increase my level of understanding, Benjamin."

"Right," he replied. There were no more words spoken between the two for the remainder of the bus ride.

Danny spent the school day biding his time, watching the clock tick by to the end of each period. This had become his new routine for the school day. Sit, wait, next class, repeat. No longer did he raise his hand to answer his teachers' questions, no longer did he take notes or hang onto every one of his teachers' words. Even in his favorite class, astronomy, did he cease applying himself. He didn't deem it logical to exert the effort in a situation that did not seem to benefit him in any way. How could he know that what he was being taught was always going to be true? The bell rung, marking the end of the fourth period. Danny was interested to get on with lunch. He grabbed his bag and began to make his route for the exit.

"Hey, Danny?" his teacher's voice beckoned him. Danny turned to see his astronomy teacher. He had an odd look on his face, he thought. A look that didn't seem to fit with his graying blond hair and light brown eyes. He suddenly looked much older, Danny concluded. Odd.

"Yes, Mr. Colins?"

"We just started our lesson on the HR diagram today and I couldn't help but notice you didn't seem very interested. Haven't seemed very interested for some time now. Something going on?" His voice sounded concerned. Danny had always had great respect for Mr. Colins, but he could not seem to understand why he would ask such a question.

"No sir, I'm afraid there isn't anything going on," he replied.

"I see. No reason that your grades have been slipping either, then?" he asked, putting his hands in the pocket of his khaki pants.

"I feel as though I am applying myself to an acceptable degree."

"Acceptable degree," Mr. Colins repeated. The odd look on his face faded for just a moment. "Well, tell you what, how about I just have a quick chat with your dad and see what he has to say?"

"I'm afraid that's quite unnecessary, Mr. Colins."

"Sure it is." There was something odd about this reply. "Well, I'd hate to take up your whole lunch period. Why don't you get going?"

Danny nodded. There was something strange about the way that interaction just concluded. Why would he bring up an intention and then immediately drop it? Strange, he thought, odd.

\*\*\*

Danny stood alone in the backyard, preparing his telescope to observe the ISS flyover. He had roughly fifteen minutes before he would attempt to spot it.

"Heya Dan," his dad called as he began to approach. "Whatcha lookin' for tonight?"

"Hello, Father. I'm going to observe the International Space Station as it passes overhead. You could have checked the calendar — it's in the same spot it always has been," he replied coldly. "I don't imagine you'll be joining me."

"You know, saying 'dad' works just fine. Anyway, I actually came to let you know your brother and I were about to start a movie. See if you'd like to watch it with us?"

"No, thank you, Father, I'd rather observe the flyover if that's okay with you."

"Right," he replied. "Well, hey, uh. I got a call from your astronomy teacher earlier today. Told me your grades have been slipping, among other things. Anything you feel like you want to talk to me about? Talk to me at all?"

"Mr. Colins called you?" Danny was astonished. Why would he double back and call anyway? "Well, I'm afraid that there is nothing I feel the need to speak about, I would just like to observe the flyover. Excuse me." Danny returned to his telescope and began adjusting it to the region he expected to spot the ISS.

"Well," his father said. He sounded resolute. "You won't talk to your teacher, not your brother, and you won't talk to me. I think I'll schedule a meeting to see if you'll talk to someone else. Mr. Colins recommended me a specialist. I'll be scheduling an appointment with them later this month."

Danny turned to face his father. "There is nothing I need to speak about; the addition of a third party would not prompt me to do so," he exclaimed, louder than he expected. He looked closely at his father for perhaps the first time in many months. In the darkness, he could just see the same black hair as his own and his brother's, although shorter, receding in some places, perhaps a bit grayer. His eyes seemed darker — no, duller. Surrounded by lines that indicated age, or strain, perhaps both.

“Be that as it may, Daniel,” his father spoke, mimicking his son’s vernacular. “I’ll be calling them anyway. And if you’re right, then all we’ll be wasting is a little time. And you’re young, you can afford to waste time.” He cracked a small smirk. “I’m heading back inside. Maybe think about that movie a few more times. It won’t hurt, I promise.” His father reached his hand to ruffle Danny’s hair, a gesture that was promptly blocked by Danny’s own hand as he returned to his telescope.

He didn’t get it, Danny thought, he never got it. Observation is invaluable. Some of the fondest moments of his life were spent in observation. He recalled the day of the total solar eclipse just a few years prior. They’d spent the whole day together, Danny and his mother. They had breakfast together in their favorite café; he had strawberry pancakes and bacon. They made their own special eclipse glasses, using cardboard from an empty box of Danny’s favorite cereal. They drove out to the park near the edge of town to get a clear view of the eclipse. And... odd. Danny didn’t remember much about what the eclipse actually looked like. In any case, Danny moved on with his thought. Just because he couldn’t make observations with his mother anymore didn’t make them any less valuable. “Right?” he said out loud, much to his surprise. Danny hadn’t frequently been a victim to intrusive thoughts, so this was particularly strange. He dismissed it. He returned to his telescope and spotted the ISS.

\*\*\*

The sun had just set as the three arrived at the specialist’s office. The façade of the building was flat, monochromatic, with a set of glass double doors. Danny appreciated the simplicity of the design but was no more pleased to be there. Beyond the double glass doors was a small waiting room with a reception desk. He and his brother sat in the green faux leather chairs while their father spoke to the receptionist. “Dr. Wright will be with you shortly,” Danny managed to overhear from his place in the uncomfortable seating.

“Thank you,” his father replied, taking his seat next to Ben and Danny. “Well, boys,” he groaned as he sat down, “I hope you’re both ready. We’re about to meet with the owner of a bona fide Ph.D.” He nudged his sons’ legs, prompting no response from either. “Oh, come on, it won’t be that bad. We’re just going to chat for a little while. Real easy. In and out.”

“I still am of the opinion that an outside party is going to prove to be unproductive.”

“Then I guess we’ll see, won’t we,” his father replied, brushing off Danny’s remark. “Speak of the devil, I think that’s us.” He gestured toward a door on the other side of the room. Dr. Wright stood holding it open.

“Right this way, gentlemen.” She motioned them to follow her. She had thick brown glasses that rested in front of a piecing set of green eyes. Her hair was dark, sleek, pinned back into a tight bun. She wore a plain black pantsuit.

Danny appreciated the sleek professionalism. It put him at ease. He followed her with his family without protest. They walked down a narrow hallway ending in an office door bearing her name in straight black characters. Beyond this door was her office, housing a much nicer set of leather seats with diplomas lining the wall. Danny took note and admired her success as a scholar. "If you'll just have a seat in these chairs here." She took her place in her leather chair, opposite the ones for Danny and his family. "Why don't we start with the formalities? I am Dr. Wright. You must be Dad, I take it you're Ben, and that must make you Danny," she reasoned, gesturing to each of them respectively. "Now, I don't want to waste any time here; let's get right into it. So, Dad, what is it that's bothering us today?" She picked up her pen and notepad.

"Well Dr. Wright, I'm just a little concerned about my son, here. He hasn't been talking to me, or anyone for that matter. His teachers tell me he's been losing interest in school despite once being at the top of his class."

"I see." She scribbled some things down. "Danny, what do you have to say about that?" She pierced him with her green eyes. He felt unnerved for a moment, but offered the same, and logical, reply.

"I must say I don't feel that there is anything I wish to speak about. I feel that the level of engagement in my academics is justified."

"If this is a recent change in your behavior, then certainly there is a reason for this change, isn't that right? It would only be logical given the laws of cause and effect," she challenged him. Danny hadn't been challenged like this before. He felt his body tense as he attempted to conjure a response in his defense.

"It started when Mom died," Ben offered nonchalantly.

"Take it easy, Ben," his father began.

"I don't wish to talk about my mother," Danny interjected. His voice wavered slightly, but with a heightened sense of urgency that did not go unnoticed by Dr. Wright.

"Danny, you seem a little uncomfortable at the mention of your mother. Is there a reason talking about her makes you feel this way?"

"No," he said shortly. Sensing her anticipation, he continued. "There is not a reason. I just don't find it logical to speak about an unfortunate fact that cannot be changed. Is all," he finished shakily.

"Surely there's something to be said," she probed him further. "You loved her, didn't you?"

"I really do not wish to discuss this any further," he said quickly. He could not meet her eyes now, opting instead to examine the patterns in the carpet.

"They used to look at the sky at night, stars and planets and stuff," Ben offered again, unprompted.

“Observation of the celestial bodies and events,” Danny corrected him harshly. He was sweating now, restless in his seat.

“Ben, why don’t you let your brother talk,” his dad suggested.

“No, I think I’m quite done conversing, actually.” Danny began to stand up.

“Why don’t you sit back down there, Dan,” said his dad, shifting in his seat.

“Excuse me,” Danny blurted as he moved swiftly past his father.

“Danny!” his dad shouted as he tried to grab his son’s arm, just narrowly missing. “Danny?” he called again as his son exited the office into the hallway. He called again, but it was too late. Danny had already begun sprinting down the hallway to the front door. He neither had a plan nor did he apply any logic to his actions. He only felt, and that feeling was a desperate desire to be anywhere else. He burst into the main lobby, startling the receptionist, and made for the front door. The cool air hit his face and blew his hair as he quickly crossed the parking lot. It was dark now, save for the illumination from the occasional lights in the parking lot and street lamps lining the road. He heard his father’s voice call from behind him, prompting him to swiftly cross the road and enter the wooded area across the street. He didn’t rationalize where he would go, for how long, or how far. He only ran into the darkness of the night among the trees.

Once he felt as though he could not run anymore and his legs were about to give out from under him, he fell to his knees. His panicked sobs slowed as he attempted to catch his breath. For the first time since he began running, he took a moment to observe his surroundings. It was dark, of course, it was getting to be very late. A small clearing in the trees, not unsurprising to find in a wooded area. His knees were resting in a puddle of mud, to be expected; it had rained quite heavily earlier that day. He looked up. The sky had cleared significantly, and he could see the very beginning of what appeared to be a meteor shower. Ah yes, he remembered, he’d marked the date on his calendar weeks ago: a meteor shower visible to the naked eye on the night of the twenty-third. He checked his watch to confirm the date.

But, much to his surprise, the date on his watch read clearly the twenty-second. He rubbed his eyes and cleaned his glasses with his sleeve, but the date was the same. Unwavering, unchanging, the twenty-second. He looked again to the sky to see very plainly that the meteor shower was in full swing. How could this be? Danny has never encountered a celestial event taking place on the wrong date. And yet there it was, taking place before his very eyes. Despite the illogical nature of this situation, Danny felt an odd serenity, watching the sky above him. Brilliant streaks of light painted the night sky in brief moments. And for the first time in a long time, maybe even ever, he felt comfortable with the idea that sometimes things just were, despite our better judgment.



# Bury Me Not

*Jason Couch*

I first encountered death when Mama passed from scarlet fever. We were living in a little log cabin in West Texas. We locked Mama in her bedroom when the rashes started spreading; Pa didn't let me see her, even when she was on death's door and vomiting something fierce. We couldn't take her to the doctor; we'd be lucky if any man in the South would tend to a black woman. The last I saw of Mama was when Pa laid her tightly-wrapped body in our front field. I was five years old.

Fourteen years later, Pa was killed in a shootout in Sweetchapel, a town near the border west of the homestead. From what I heard, a man accused him of cheating at blackjack, and when my pa insisted the man was lying, they decided to take it out into the street. He drew a quarter-second too slow. I buried him in the plot next to Mama.

It's been three years since Pa died. I've never been one to fear death; even though it's touched my life so deeply, I don't spend every waking moment worrying when I'm gonna cash in my chips. That doesn't mean I don't sleep with one eye open or without a six-shooter under my pillow; just because I don't fear death doesn't mean I'm a fool. Love, on the other hand, is a whole 'nother matter. The thought of having someone take up a whole slice of your mind — to always wonder where they are, what they're doing, what you're gonna do with them when you see them again — it terrifies me. I've never let down my guard just 'cause my heart told me to, and for the first twenty-two years of my life, I thought I never would. But life has a way of wrapping the bedsheets around our heads when we least expect it.

It was a hot Sunday morning, and I'd ridden my Buckskin horse, Diablo, to Sweetchapel, hoping to pick up some coffee beans and spices from the General Store and a bottle of whiskey from the saloon. Maybe I'd even find an opportunity to get my hands on some reward money if there were any bounties that needed seeing to. I'd already secured a few, after all, and I needed the money. It was a hot day — a dry day — and there wasn't a single August breeze to be felt. As I exited the general store carrying my items, a young woman walked out of the Silver Dollar Saloon with a kind of unwavering grace, having hiked up her blue skirt so as not to drag it in the mud which splashed underneath her black boots. Her dainty hands held the skirt with a gentle grip like she could drop it at any moment. Her golden braid shone in the sunlight and very well might've blinded me if I hadn't glanced away so as not to look a fool. She turned her head and I glimpsed her face, shaped like

it'd been refined by God's own hands, with flushed cheeks and pink lips. I raised a quivering hand in a clumsy attempt to catch her eye.

I don't think she even saw me.

She crossed the dirt path to the store, and I'd've followed her right back in, surely to make a fool of myself again — I'd introduce myself; after all, I'd never seen her in Sweetchapel before — but a man in loud boots and a white hat approached her before I could, tipping his brim at her. She answered with a bright smile.

A bead of sweat rolled down my face. I adjusted my hat and turned, walking back in the direction of the post where I'd tethered Diablo. It's alright, I figured. I don't have time for that kind of thing anyway.

I shoved the coffee tin and spices in the saddle bag, hooked my boot into Diablo's stirrup and swung my leg over the saddle. I'd already begun forgetting the girl in the blue dress when I started my way back to the homestead. The dirt road crunched under Diablo's hooves. The wind-beaten Sweetchapel structures — the Silver Dollar Saloon, the old stone church, residences built from the ground up with peoples' blood, sweat, and tears — became more and more sparse as I rode eastward. Patches of white clouds graced the blue sky which stretched beyond my eyesight.

A half-hour passed me by before I reached the homestead. I dismounted Diablo, stabled and fed him, and made my way to the back door. I could already hear my dog, Walker, barking upon hearing my arrival. He was all high jumps, black fur, and slobber when I opened the creaky door.

Life was gonna be alright.

And it would've been if I hadn't bumped into the woman in blue a week later. Tumbled would be the more appropriate term. The rats had gotten to my coffee beans, and I happened upon her as I was leaving the store with yet another tin. As I was reading the label, something snagged the front of my boot and I lurched forward, hoping in the half-second I was falling that I wouldn't break my nose.

Something stopped me before my face could hit the wooden porch. "Good Lord, are you alright, sweetie?" Two slender arms in blue sleeves had caught me by the shoulders, and it took me too long to realize that they belonged to the girl I'd seen the week before. "Up you get," she said as she hoisted me back onto my heels. Her face was flushed, her eyes wide.

I suddenly found it incredibly hard to speak, muttering a clumsy apology and something about keeping my eyes where I'm walking. I bent over to pick up my hat but she'd beat me to it.

"It's no issue. I was on my way inside to see my brother. He owns the place." She brushed the dirt from my hat and handed it to me. "I hope you don't mind me sayin' so, but that's some beautiful hair you have," she said. I gaped at her. No one had ever complimented my hair. It was a nice shade



of brown, I supposed, but most folks favored white-people hair: all gold and straight. Mine was all coils falling down around my shoulders. I had my Pa's straight nose but my Mama's dark skin and curves. Before I could mutter a 'thank you,' she breezed past me and looked down at the wood panels, kicking at something. "Loose nail. That's awful dangerous. I have to tell my brother, he'll fix it right up."

Knowing I had a hammer laying somewhere around the homestead, I remarked that I'd come back and fix it later in the week, as if it was my responsibility.

She looked back at me, as if she were impressed. "Wow."

I asked her what was wrong.

"It's just, my brother would never let me do any kind of work like that."

At that moment, I could tell how different our lives were. I'd brought myself up. Her brother'd done it for her. She seemed well provided for, too. I didn't know what to say to her comment, so I simply offered — too fast to stop myself — to walk her home after I'd finished some business I had in town.

"Oh, that'd be pleasant!" She curtsied, lifting her blue skirt and showing her shiny little black boots. "I'm Josephine, by the way."

In return, I tipped my hat after securing it back over my thick hair. When I introduced myself as Ruthie, I realized how bland my name sounded when compared to hers.

"Pleasure to meet you, Ruthie," she said with a sweet smile. I couldn't help but smile back before she stepped inside the store, careful not to catch the hem of her dress on the nail.

I'd like to say I didn't wait for her to finish her family affair, that I found other business to attend to around Sweetchapel, but that would be a lie. I paced outside the general store for nearly fifteen minutes, kicking my boots in the dirt and wondering what to say when she'd exit the store. Would I act like myself and simply say what came to mind, or would I try to act smooth-tongued and self-possessed?

"You ready?"

I nearly jumped. In the midst of my inner sermon, I didn't notice her approach from the doorway. I answered yes and untethered Diablo, and we began making our way to the northern side of Sweetchapel. I tried desperately to make conversation. About halfway through town, I asked her if she'd ever ridden a horse. *You fool. Of course, she's ridden a horse. This is Texas.*

"Oh, heavens no, I was never taught to."

I asked her if she wanted to learn.

Her hair whipped around her head as she turned to gape at me. "Are you offerin' to take me on a ride?"

I told her only if she wanted to, praying to the Almighty that she'd accept, taking extra time to mention my homestead out east.

"I'd love to."

A smile wider than the western sky must've been plastered across my face. It was getting dark, so I figured we'd better get to it.

Getting her up on the horse was a battle. Diablo was frightened of her at first, and she of him, but I eventually coaxed her to gently lay her hands on his coat, and they grew accustomed to each other somewhat quickly. Once Diablo decided to stay still, I assisted her in hooking her little boot into the stirrup.

Once I was able to adjust her foot, she couldn't quite lift her leg up over the saddle on account of her skirt, so I elected to lift her up so she could ride side-saddle, but not before she'd slipped off more than once. After she was finally settled on the saddle, I stepped up behind her and swung my leg over Diablo's back, holding onto her waist with a gentle hand.

She was positively glowing when we reached the homestead. The moon shone on the log roof and the grass cast eerie, dancing shadows on itself. I tied up Diablo in the stable.

"Would you care to look at the stars together?" Josephine stood several yards out from the cabin, the night wind blowing her skirt around her ankles.

Without hesitation or question, I said yes, and I tore through the house to find a quilt to lay on the grass, thanking the Almighty that Walker was sound asleep in a chair.

"It's beautiful out here," she said as we stretched out on the dry field, looking up at the black sky.

I agreed whole-heartedly and mentioned that it was my family's homestead and had been for generations.

"That's awful romantic. I'd love to live further out from Sweetchapel. It's too loud there. I hardly get quiet time to myself, what with my brother and his friends bein' around all the time." When I asked her if she looked at the stars from her window, she replied, "Heavens, yes. Although it's nothin' like this."

I mumbled something pathetic about being too busy looking ahead of myself to look at the stars. Having never taken the time, I was hardly familiar with them.

She turned to me. "Really?" Her hands rested on her stomach. "I couldn't imagine not trying to find the constellations. It's awful fun." She turned back to the sky and pointed to the southwest. "You see that one? Those three little stars that make a sort of line." She moved her face closer to mine so I might see better. "Here." She held my rosy-brown hand in her pale one and pointed. "Over above that tree."

I squinted my eyes and was thrilled that, after a moment or two, I could indeed.

"That's Orion's Belt."

I wondered why a pattern of stars would need a belt, but I didn't bother to ask. It'd be a sure-fire way to make a fool out of myself. Instead, I simply commented on its beauty. I saw her turn her head toward me in my periphery.

"I think you're awful lovely yourself," she whispered in a timid voice.

Thus came the moment of the leap of faith. I scaled the chasm between our faces, gently touching my lips to hers. It took me a moment to realize she was kissing me back.

After a minute or so, I pulled back a touch, our noses still touching. I asked her if she'd ever kissed anyone before.

"No," she replied quietly. "Have you?"

I responded the same. I'd never even kissed a boy before, much less another girl. I kissed her again, and from that point until we broke apart, realizing she had to get home, the stars didn't seem quite so breathtaking. We mounted back onto Diablo and rode back to Sweetchapel, and I kissed her goodbye, promising I'd see her again in a few days.

I kept my promise.

Three days later, I made my way back to Sweetchapel and found her, once again, at the General Store. As soon as she laid eyes on me, she jumped with joy, ran to me, and wrapped her arms around my neck in a deep hug. We spent more evenings like that one at the homestead, talking about our families, our upbringings, our history. Her daddy was shot in New Mexico during the Civil War, and her mama lived three states over in California after landing a job at a factory, sending money back home to Josephine and her brother, who'd inherited their daddy's store. We stared at the stars and at each other, and she taught me new patterns of stars the likes of which I'd never heard before: Cassiopeia, Ursa Major, Libra; they were such trivial names for things so godlike and distant. I pushed the idea aside. One night, I pointed one out to the north that I recognized my mother showing me: the Drinking Gourd. Josephine laughed — "Silly, that's the Little Dipper" — but I thought the Drinking Gourd sounded better.

After a couple weeks or so, she invited me to stay a night in her home in Sweetchapel. I happily obliged. Her two-storied house was one of the nicest in town. It was no wonder, what with all the money coming into the family. Her bedroom was to the right of a wide breezeway. We climbed the steep steps, and she insisted that I make myself at home. I didn't want to touch anything for fear that I'd ruin it. She had so many knickknacks on shelves, I could hardly count them: a wooden bear, a heavy, green glass paper weight, several books that looked hardly touched; she laughed at my apprehension.

In awe, I babbled something about her house being awful nice.

"It's alright, I suppose." She moved to her bed and sat cross-legged on the quilt. "We haven't lived here for very long. Daddy insisted that we move when the war came."

I picked my nails, suddenly feeling awkward. It really felt like a home. It was somewhat of a wonder being in a home so lived-in, yet clean. Nothing like the homestead on which I grew up. I elected to sit on the bed too so as not to look like a fool rooted to the spot. I asked her if her brother was home.

“No, he’s at the saloon. I think he’d be mighty riled up if he knew I’d brought someone here without askin’. He doesn’t like me bringin’ people over, especially so late in the evenin’.”

It seemed to me that she needed to ask her brother permission for nearly everything she took part in. I couldn’t imagine living like that. I even said so.

“Well, he’s my older brother. He knows what’s best for me. After all, Mama trusts him, so I trust him.” She shifted closer to me. “Let’s not talk about my family anymore. I wanna talk about somethin’ else.”

Thank *God*. I asked her if there was anything in particular she had on her mind.

“Well, you, for instance.” Her eyes were full of what I guessed to be love; they were swimming with adoration, like two big blue ponds reflecting my own face back at me.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to hers, and a wave of warmth flooded from where our lips touched to where my fingers were touching her cheeks. My face felt like it was twitching, and I was almost light-headed; was this what it felt like to want someone in your life? I’d never felt about someone in this manner in my life, and I wondered if she hadn’t as well.

A knock on the door. The creak of hinges. I jerked my face from hers and saw a wide-eyed man I didn’t recognize standing in the illuminated doorway.

“Josephine?”

Josephine scrambled from the bed. “Flynn, wait —” but it was too late.

The man named Flynn had already flown back down the stairs. Josephine began to panic. “Oh, good Lord, this isn’t good. We have to go. You have to go home.”

I heard yelling coming from outside the breezeway downstairs.

I looked to the window next to her bed and whispered a word that was almost ‘outside.’

“Two stories?”

I hissed something back about not even being able to feel the drop, and with an eye on the door and both hands on her waist, I pushed her up and out the window. The yelling, like thunder, seemed to grow louder and louder, as if at any moment it’d flood into my ears, through my skull, out of my mouth. As soon as I heard the soft *crunch* of her boots on the dirt outside, I lifted my own leg over the sill and slid out of the room after her, trying to be silent as the grave.

My feet hit the ground with a louder crunch, and I hadn’t stood straight before what felt like the muzzle of a pistol, cold and hard, was pressed against the side of my head.

“I seen you in my store before,” called a voice several yards to my right. “You’re that little girl that lives on that homestead out East. I was wondering where Josie’d been spending all her evenings.” The pistol pressed harder

against my temple as I craned my neck to see whose voice I was hearing; in the moonlight, in front of two other silhouettes, one of which I recognized as the figure in the doorway, a man not much older than myself stood high with both hands in his pockets. A wide-brimmed, white hat obscured his face, but he was barely tall enough for me to see his mouth moving as he spoke. Behind him, Josephine struggled against one of his friends. "I'd like to know what makes you think you can doctor up my sister, making eyes at her like you're a man."

"Elias, don't. *Please*." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Josephine gripping the stranger's gray jacket as his friend held her back.

As he spoke, my left hand moved half an inch back for my six-shooter, which was concealed under my jacket.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Elias's warning voice echoed.

"Cause even if you blow me to hell, Flynn over there's got an advantage on you. And he never misses. So why don't you keep your little hands where I can see 'em, girlie."

Still unmoving, I figured I might as well ask who he thought he was, pointing a gun at his sister's acquaintance. Elias didn't seem like the sharpest knife in the block, and the more he talked, the more precious seconds I had to figure how to escape the mess I'd gotten myself into. I didn't dare move, but I decided to try my luck with my words. I said something about wanting to know why I was being held at gunpoint by some bastards I didn't know.

"I'm her brother. Who're you? Cause you sure as hell ain't her *girlfriend*."

Josephine piped up again. "She's just my friend, Eli."

"Shut your goddamn mouth before I shut it for you." His voice echoed.

"Flynn, where'd you say you found 'em?"

The man with the gun to my temple spoke up, unmoving. "You sent me up to get Josie, and I found 'em on her bed. Looked to me like they were swapping spit. Looked awful guilty, too."

Elias turned to Josephine. "Seems like you've been nailed to the counter, little sister." He rested his hands on the front of his belt and turned back to me. "Care to explain yourself?"

I kept quiet. I didn't want to piss off Elias more than I seemingly already had. Trying to gauge my surroundings, I figured that my odds of wasting Elias were slim given the pistol being held flush to my head. My hand only needed to move another inch to where my gun rested in its holster. I was fairly speedy with a firearm, but I'd never taken on four at once. If I tried to run, they'd shoot me dead on the spot.

A scoff. "You deaf or somethin'?"

Elias didn't strike me as the sharpest knife in the block, and I made sure he knew it by inferring that he was taking what Flynn said without so much as a grain of salt.

A pause. Now's my chance.

Two pistol blasts echoed off the walls of the buildings, and Flynn crumpled to the dirt next to me. Smoke floated from the barrel of my pistol; Flynn hadn't even gotten the chance to fire. But where did the other shot come from? I could hear Josephine screaming. Why was she screaming? Why was my shirt warm?

Elias's voice. "Let her go. That one's done for."

Two arms wrapped around me as the ground flew up to my head. Surely, I hadn't fallen. Still, I was lying in the dirt. My hat rested upside-down in my periphery. I pressed a hand to my stomach, and it came away red and wet.

Josephine was saying something, but I couldn't quite make it out. I only caught the end: "We just gotta wait for the doc to arrive."

I told her not to wait too long and gulped with a smile. Even then, I knew he'd never come.

"You're funny," she laughed, her tears like stars in the moonlight. The warmth on my stomach soaked down both sides of my waist and pooled under my back.

My voice was ashes in my throat. "I'd hate to die," I realized as I looked past Josephine's sweet face and into the sky behind her.

"Dear God, don't say that. You're not gonna die, sweetheart." Something wet fell onto my face. "I have to find a bandage, or-or a shirt, just something to —"

My tender, bloodied hand grasped her sleeve, staining the sky-blue fabric a sickly purple. I didn't want her to go.

She cupped my face in her hands, her soft fingers stroking my cheeks; for a moment, it was like nothing in the world existed, outside her skin and mine. "Okay." A pause. "I won't."

The heavens yawned above me, and I figured I could almost make out Orion's Belt to the distant southwest, where Lady Night's deep blue cape was swallowing the sunset's last shade of pink. I wondered what else was there, what else I was never gonna get to see — California, the beach, Asia — after I'd fallen asleep. I wished I'd said something to Josephine when I first saw her that Sunday. Maybe then I'd've avoided this predicament. I tried to rationalize, but it was growing awful difficult to keep my thoughts together. I shouldn't've waited. Too much life is wasted on waiting. We say the same words to each other each day, tread the same paths, laugh at the same jokes. We'll repeat the cycle tomorrow, and the next day, again and again, until our lives stretch out behind us like piano keys — weeks, months, years — each octave chimes out the same repetitive melody with little variation. There has to be sheet music somewhere. Where is it? I can't find it. Maybe I left it at the homestead. I'll ask Pa if he's seen it around. No time like the present to take up piano.



# Pancakes

*Kaitlyn Stockholm*

Kris wondered if others had the same feeling she did as she made her way toward the dock, like they were walking through static in a television.

The moon went behind the clouds, making it darker than she anticipated. It wasn't until she nearly tripped on the edge of the dock that she noticed him, an older man standing at the edge. The mud running from the bottom of his jeans to his shoes matched his sports coat about as well as his silver hair matched the glint of the revolver pressed to his temple with a shaking hand.

The static cleared in an instant as his finger moved to the trigger and a scream got stuck in her throat. The squeeze of the trigger was the conductor in a swift symphony, followed by the haunting pop of the firing pin, her feet hitting the dock in time with the pill bottle falling from her hand, a crescendo into the scream that finally managed to escape her throat, his body smacking limp onto the dock as the final note.

Kris fell to her knees next to his body, shaking, unable to keep herself from begging him to stay with her, to move to where she could find a pulse. It wasn't until he moved, lifting a hand to his head that she realized there was no blood.

"What the hell?" she shouted, moving away from him.

He steadied himself, looking at her distressed and seemingly more disappointed in her presence than anything else.

"I didn't think anyone else would be here." He looked down at the gun still clutched in his fist. He released it as he sat up, hanging his legs over the edge.

She moved from her knees to sit cross-legged. What she assumed was his requiem was playing over and over in her head, slowing as she caught her breath. The pill bottle she'd dropped caught his eye.

They avoided eye contact, but neither retreated. They just watched the water move with the wind. He started making short comments, breaking the long moments of quiet. She responded or did the same. At some point the comments turned to small talk, and the small talk into conversation.

They talked for hours as crickets chirped, accompanied by a band of cicadas, as if they weren't here to do what they were here to do, as if they had known each other for years.

"What do you want in life?" he asked. Kris thought it was an odd question, considering the circumstances.

He seemed to notice her confusion. "Say the first thing that comes to mind. Close your eyes, take a breath, and I'll ask again."

Kris did what he suggested, making a show of the deep breath she took, finding it easier to clear her mind than expected.

His voice broke through the crickets, cicadas, and the water lapping against the dock.

“What do you want in li —”

“Pancakes,” she blurted.

\*\*\*

It was a quarter to twelve when she found herself seated across from him in a corner booth at a rundown diner still managing to hang on. With syrup-covered pancakes in front of her, he had a cup of black coffee.

“You brought a car?” he asked, not looking up from the napkin he was scribbling on.

Kris picked at her food. “Figured it would make it easier... for them to find...” She stopped there offering a question to him. “How many times?”

“Two.” He shrugged. “Guess it’s not my time yet.” He took the napkin and folded it, placing it in his pocket. “You got parents that tell you not to talk to strangers?”

She half-nodded, half-shouldered. “I’d argue we know more about each other than most people in our lives.”

“Fair assumption.”

Once she was finished, he put a twenty on the table and they left. She insisted on taking him home, and he allowed it. It was a small place not far from the lake. The porch lights were off, but, in her headlights, she was able to see him turn to her and smile. He gave her a quick salute and went into the house.

Kris went back to the lake a few times, but he wasn’t there. Four days later, the news reported on a body found earlier that morning. Some fisherman had found him in an old flat-bottomed boat. Cause of death was ruled on the scene. The police would be releasing the rest of their information and the name of the deceased once they were able to inform family first.

No family was found, or at least never came forward, and after a week or so, a local funeral home offered to hold a vigil for him. Her mom had found her in her car, still in the driveway, knuckles white around the steering wheel. She offered to drive her to the church.

It wasn’t until she was sitting in the passenger seat of her car that she noticed the familiar sports coat crumpled on the floorboard. When they got to the church, she slipped it on and went in, her mother a steady force behind her.

It wasn’t crowded, not that she had expected it to be, but there were people scattered amongst the pews. She stared straight ahead at the casket donated by some mental wellness group in town.



That night she snuck out to the lake to sit out on the dock, still wearing her dress and his sports coat. She found his napkin in the pocket.

*I'm sorry it ended this way, but I couldn't think of anything other than having someone to say goodbye to. Bye, stranger — Ray.*

Whenever she felt like going back to the lake late at night with no intention of coming back, she'd instead end up in a corner booth at the diner with a stack of pancakes in front of her and an old sports coat lying beside her.

# Look What Happened

*Savannah Shelton*

I've said it once, and I'll say it again: the whole thing was Leo's fault. Nobody believes me, because Leo's dead now, and *surely, he couldn't have started it*, but they're wrong. In the end, it doesn't come down to who killed who or what was done about it. It comes down to whose fault it was. People just don't like to blame the dead.

In Leo's defense, he didn't mean to die. It just sort of happened. None of us were expecting him to get killed, but then again, we weren't exactly surprised. We all told him at least once that his smart mouth would eventually get him into trouble, and he wouldn't be able to talk his way out of it.

He never listened and look what happened.

Leo was my brother, older by a grand total of three years; every second of which he lorded over me in increasingly hurtful ways over the years. It wouldn't have bothered me so much except he never did anything to our younger brothers. Just me, the adopted daughter. If he'd messed with all three of us, I could have let it go. But he only ever picked on me, which made his death more of a retribution than a tragedy.

Don't get me wrong, Leo was a great success according to everyone else, but to me, he was a real jerk. One day, we were walking to school and I had on a new hoodie that Mom had bought me for my birthday. Naturally, I was proud of my present, so I decided to wear it to school to show off, and Leo kept looking at it for the entire walk. He didn't say a word to me, just kept glancing at that hoodie. I didn't say anything either, even though the staring creeped me out, because I thought it would just set him off. That was something else about Leo that only I knew: it didn't take a lot to make him mad. Around our parents and relatives, he was the perfect child, showing off his manners and kissing up to the adults, but when I was around, he always seemed to be on edge. Once, I sneezed on him by accident and he nearly broke my nose because I got snot on his arm.

When we were only a few minutes away from school, right by Pitt's Pond, Leo decided to make his move. Pitt's Pond was an enormous puddle that takes up nearly half of Pitt Street where it meets up with Keeler Drive. Local legend says that it's so old, it's been handicapping cars for decades, even before Miss Hattie March was born.

It had rained a lot the week before, so the pond was full of murky, muddy water, and even though I was wearing a new hoodie, my shoes were old, so I had no problem walking close to it. That's when Leo pushed me.

I don't remember how hard he pushed me, or how long it took for me to fall. All I know is one minute I was walking by the puddle and the next, I was laying in it, freezing mud and water seeping into my clothes. More importantly, my hoodie was ruined.

I started crying right then and there, which was stupid, but it was my new hoodie that Mom had bought for *me*, and Leo had just messed it up for no reason. So, I sat there in that disgusting puddle and cried in frustration until Leo kicked my foot and told me to quit being a brat and get up. I didn't listen at first, overwhelmed by anger and grief, but then he pointed out that the longer I sat there, the worse it would get.

I stood up real fast after that and stomped off, wiping at my nose and eyes with a gritty, dirty hand. Like earlier, Leo didn't say anything, he just trailed after me the rest of the way to school. When we got into the main hallway and were about to separate, Leo grabbed my shoulder and stopped me. He held on so tightly, I could already feel a bruise blooming. I tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip and gave me his best death-stare.

"Listen," he said. "I just did you a favor. The kids in your class would've done anything to wipe that stupid smirk off your face, so I helped you get rid of it. You're welcome." He let go of me, then made a show of wiping his hand on his jeans while backing towards the adjoining hallway. I ran to class as fast as I could, rubbing at my wet eyes again before my classmates saw.

His 'favor' didn't do jack; I got teased and pushed around the whole day because of my muddy clothes, and every time my teacher looked at me, she pursed her lips and glared in disapproval, muttering about how "young ladies should dress appropriately for class." When we got home, my mom lectured me for an hour about how expensive that hoodie was, and if I couldn't take care of it then it was just a waste of money, which made me tear up again before I was banished to my room to do homework until dinner. Later that evening, Leo stepped up and told her that it really was an accident, that I had slipped and fallen into the puddle, but he didn't mention anything about the reason I slipped. Mom apologized for being so harsh, but even then, it was still one of the worst days of my life.

Another time, when I was twelve, Leo thought it would be funny to rub poison oak all over my bed and pillows the day before a presentation at school. I was in so much pain, and so itchy, I had to stay home and accept a zero for the assignment, since my teacher didn't think "a little bit of poison oak" was a good enough excuse for skipping class. That was another supposed accident, with Leo claiming that I probably just got into a patch of it. I argued back and told my parents what he did, but they still believed him, saying that there was no way he would ever do anything like that.

I found proof when I saw his red, bumpy hands later. After I approached him and told him that if he was going to mess with poison oak, he should at

least be smart enough to wear gloves, he slammed his bedroom door over my hand in a rage. This time, Mom and Dad didn't even ask, assuming that their "accident-prone" daughter had done something stupid again. I explained what happened, but after the poison oak incident, and my "outlandish claims" against Leo, my credibility had been decimated. They waved it away as a mistake and moved on.

The worst thing Leo ever did was make our school lunches and then switch his peanut butter sandwich with my ham and cheese. One bite of the sandwich and I had one of the worst allergic reactions in my life. Afterwards, in the ER, he claimed it was an honest, if deadly, mistake, but I saw the look in his eyes when I bit into the sandwich. I'm not sure if he was trying to kill me, but he definitely wanted to see how I reacted. He knew what peanuts did to me. He just wanted to see it for himself.

I didn't even try to fight back with that one. If my parents didn't believe me about the poison oak, how could I convince them he made me have a severe allergic reaction just for kicks?

Other incidents like these are scattered throughout my childhood, all labeled as mishaps by Leo and my parents. After a while, once I realized my parents never listened, I stopped claiming otherwise; not only because it was pointless, but also because I was afraid Leo would stage something even worse as punishment for snitching.

My parents never listened because Leo was the golden boy, the eldest child who could do no wrong. He was a straight-A student, decent athlete, and vice president of his class. He was also *born* into our family, unlike me, the adopted child who liked to accuse her sweet, angelic older brother of atrocities he could never even consider committing. In our family and community, he was untouchable.

The closest he ever came to justice was when I was twelve and he poured soda on me at a wedding and our grandmother saw him do it. She took me to the bathroom to get cleaned up, then dragged him outside and gave him a scalding talking-to. After he'd been chewed out, she told my parents what happened, and they decided that it would be best if we just left.

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing on the way home. I was the only happy person in that car, and *I* was the one who had been wronged in the first place. It was hysterical. Leo sulked about getting caught the whole way back, and it took every ounce of self-preservation to not rub it in his face. For once, he knew what it was like to have real consequences. My parents didn't say anything, most likely shocked beyond belief that their precious boy had done something wrong. If they had listened to me before, it wouldn't have come as such a shock, but I wasn't about to point that out and ruin my own joy in the process.

After that, Leo was different. He became moodier, snappier, and meaner. It was as if getting in trouble at the wedding had snapped a leash on his

attitude, despite the fact that he hadn't really been punished for what he did. At first, I thought he was being stupid and spoiled. So, he got caught being mean to me, big deal. He'd barely received a slap on the wrist for it and was overreacting. But as we both grew older, I realized it wasn't the act of being caught that bothered him, but the fact that he hadn't been able to brush it off as an accident. Our grandmother *saw* him pick up the can and pour it on my lap. There was no denying it. That's what got under his skin, that he couldn't just wish it away and go back to being everyone's favorite. And his relentless anger about that teeny, tiny situation made me more afraid than ever.

Throughout our teenage years, I had no idea how to handle Leo. On one hand, I was tired of his stupid games and started to realize how petty and childish he was. I learned how to stand up for myself and our brothers, if he ever tried to hurt them. I grew more independent, more confident that the older we got, the less power he had over me.

On the other hand, Leo grew just as much as I did. His mood swings increased, and stories started drifting around our school, stories of kids with broken bones and bruises, and marks to match on Leo's knuckles. He was popular and charming when he wanted to be, but the moment anyone so much as looked at him wrong, he took it upon himself to punish them. As I knew from experience, he also hurt people for no reason other than his own enjoyment and pride.

I don't think any of the parents ever knew, including ours. Like me, Leo's victims at school were terrified of what he'd do if they told on him. So, they made up their own stories to counter the ones about Leo. A black eye from bullying was called the result of an accident in P.E., bruises that looked like fingers were from wrapping rubber bands around arms to keep them safe, broken toes became products of poorly placed classroom objects, instead of an intentional stomping by a boy who was older and tougher than they would ever be. I tried to reach out to some of them, to reassure them that it would get better with time, but they ignored me, their fear of Leo stronger than their desire to be understood and comforted. By the time he graduated, the only people our age who weren't scared of Leo were his friends and Tori.

Tori was Leo's girlfriend throughout his senior year, and I can honestly say that she was the only person I've ever known to stand up to Leo and call him out without suffering any consequences. Leo was enamored by her, and she had the miraculous ability to keep him in line, if not make him a better person. He was tolerable around her, sometimes even nice. And since cronies always follow their king's lead, his friends also became less jerky when she was around.

At first, I was determined not to like her, thinking that anyone willing to date Leo must have a few screws loose, but then I met her and we became immediate friends. For the first time ever, Leo and I had a shared interest.

Tori also kept Leo's wild side in check. Soon after their second date, when Leo wanted to go cliff-diving with his friends, Tori stopped him and told him she had one rule: if she couldn't convince him not to do something, then she had to go with him. He didn't take her seriously until she followed him outside and got into his friend Adam's truck, daring him to leave her behind. They were inseparable from that moment on, and the two of us girls grew close as well.

After a few months of knowing Tori, I decided to tell her about Leo's abuse, not only of me, but also of our classmates. I had no idea if she would believe me, since no one else ever did, but I felt the need to tell someone after being pushed to the side for so long. I told her everything, from the hoodie incident to Caleb Price's dislocated shoulder a month earlier after he bumped into Leo in the hallway at school. All the alleged accidents, the bruises and cuts and broken bones, came spilling out of me, and she sat with me for over an hour as I vented and cried and hated my brother for every single one of them. When I was finished, I was terrified of what she was going to say or do. But I had no reason to be afraid; her expression hard as stone, eyes lined with tears, Tori took my hand, squeezed it, and reassured me that she would put an end to the abuse.

Soon after, the incidents at school ceased. Whispers no longer followed my brother down the hall, and I began to breathe, really breathe, for the first time in years. I still don't know what Tori said to him, but it saved more people than she could ever know.

Thanks to Tori's bravery (and Leo and I's tentative truce due to the fact that I was best friends with his girlfriend), I was soon allowed to go on trips and late-night food runs with Leo, Tori, and their friends, Adam and Seth. Things were tense between Leo and me, as usual, but Tori acted as a bridge between us and smoothed down any ruffled feathers. Our parents, naturally, were thrilled to see us finally getting along. Despite my deep mistrust of my brother, those trips with his circle of friends were incredibly fun, and I couldn't help but lower my shields a bit as time went on and I was left alone.

The summer after Leo turned nineteen, we went on a trip to a nearby waterpark for a few days. We stayed there and swam and soaked up as much sun as we could, then packed up and started back home on the third evening. I wanted to stay the night and leave in the morning, but everyone else was tired, ready to be back, and willing to drive through the dark.

On the way home, Leo and Adam sat up front, and Tori, Seth, and I were squeezed into the backseat. It was around ten o'clock when Adam announced from the passenger seat that we were only fifteen minutes away from home, and we all breathed a sigh of relief. Even though we didn't have long, I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the seat for a quick nap.

I woke up to a jolting stop and a loud noise, my heart jumping with adrenaline. Tori grabbed my hand, eyes wide, as Leo spat out curses and got out of the car, slamming the door so hard it rattled the whole vehicle. I blinked a few times, trying to clear my hazy vision. When my sight returned to normal, my heart sank. Our fun trip was over.

Looking through the cracks in the windshield, I realized the front of Leo's car had collided with the back of the silver one now parked in front of us, hazard lights flashing. Adam told me the guy had just pulled out in front of us and slammed on his brakes. Leo hadn't had enough time to completely stop before the impact, but he'd slowed down enough to avoid major injury.

In an ideal world, Leo and the other driver would have gotten out of their vehicles, introduced themselves, talked about the accident in a civil manner, and then discussed where to go from there in terms of insurance, police, and settling any disputes.

This isn't an ideal world.

The four of us watched through the fractured windshield as Leo stalked over to the other driver, who was already out of his car and assessing the damage. I couldn't tell exactly what Leo was saying, but we all heard him shouting through the walls of the car. The other guy said something to Leo, his face stormy, and my brother replied with more shouting and elaborate hand gestures.

Apparently, that wasn't what the other man wanted to hear, because he began yelling as well. Seth suggested that someone should get out and try to calm Leo down, but we were rooted to the spot in fear, even Tori. This was edging into dangerous territory. If Leo didn't shut up and leave it alone, the situation was bound to end badly.

After a few more moments of arguing, the man held out his hands and suggested something that made Leo pause. The driver said something else, backing away from my brother, and turned to get something from his car.

That's when Leo did it.

To this day, I still have no clue what he said, but one second the other driver was cooling off and turning away, and the next he'd spun around and punched Leo in the side of the head. Leo slammed into the front of our car, sending it lurching, and slid to the ground. Tori, Adam, and Seth screamed and rushed out of the car as he crumpled out of sight. The man kicked at Leo, only stopping when Seth all but tackled him and held him back. Tori and Adam crouched and disappeared from view to crowd my brother as Seth continued to push the other driver back and try to reason with him.

I stayed where I was, my stomach fluttering as my mind replayed Leo's head colliding with the hood. I could still feel the jolt of the car, could feel my heartbeat spiking as my brother disappeared from view, but it wasn't a bad



feeling. In a weird way, it was... euphoric. It felt right. But I knew that these emotions weren't normal and that I didn't give a shit what happened to Leo, so I stayed in the car and hoped.

After a minute or so, Tori stood up and pulled out her phone, tapping out a number with shaking hands. Her eyes stayed glued to the ground, to Leo, the entire time she was on the phone.

The conversation lasted maybe three minutes, but in the middle of the call, Adam began shouting and straightened up, pacing in front of the car with his hands buried in his hair. Tori knelt down by Leo again, panic on her face, phone still pressed against her ear.

I knew Leo was dead the second Tori stood up and began to cry. It was the only reason she'd move from his side. Then, and only then, did I get out of the car and walk over to my friends, relief flooding me and draining the tension from my shoulders. I didn't even look at Leo's body, more focused on Tori and the boys and my own elation. The driver was the one who broke the silence, starting to ramble about how it was an accident, he didn't mean it, were they sure he was dead —

Leo's friends were shaking and crying, their faces contorted in grief. The driver's rambling petered off into nothing once he realized no one was listening. But I was stuck on that word, on *accident*. All of our lives, Leo had done so many terrible things to me and to others and lied about them the entire time, never hampered, never punished. Now here he was, dead on the road, because of an accident and his own smart mouth.

It wasn't sad. It was poetic justice.





# Non-Fiction

*“The roominess of the term nonfiction: an entire dresser labeled  
nonsocks.”*

*- David Shields, Reality Hunger*



# Too Much Style for One Casket

*Martheaus Perkins*

In hindsight, shaking our backsides to “Shining” by DJ Khaled and Beyoncé (the freshest dance trend on Facebook) before the funeral may not have appeared ideal. I was the videographer capturing my mother and two aunts — at a combined age of 130 — *shake what their momma gave them* on the day of their mother’s funeral. No adjective for the day rose above the mundane: April bleached-blue skies, undernourished clouds, and indecisive warmth. Even the woodland creatures hit the snooze button that morning. Yet, there we were, arrayed in seal-smooth, dark death garb, splashing life on a languid dawn. Usually, it would be safe to consider your adult children twerking like rave girls two hours before your funeral as a bad sign. However, our dancing served as an animated eulogy with terrible optics. She was “our rock” in the way that cliché was first written: when the desert dwellers of the Bible needed a sturdy simile for God. To update the ancient phrase for 2018, she was our paid light bill, our smartphones, and our Brickhouse (to borrow from the song). My grandmother, whom I called Ne Ne, would have been so proud of how flamboyant and sexy we were at her final celebration. Perhaps that conviction gave us the confidence to dance and cackle before trotting ourselves out to confront the grief spectators.

Our tribe drips gobs of concentrated chic wherever we go. We slash gashes in the ozone when we are together; the centralized suaveness burns hotter than Hades in a sauna. So, you could imagine the pressure produced for my family when one of us kicks the bucket. The most terrifying part of the arrangements was that we were in charge of dressing her — HER: the impetus of the family wardrobe! She could not have spent her entire life dressed like an affluent goddess only to show up to Jesus’ party dressed like some peasant. We had two family meetings prior to that morning to discuss her casket apparel. My aunts and mother threw out style propositions like state representatives on the Congress floor.

I was the only one of us who had not seen her yet. To me, she was still the dying woman trapped in that loathsome home for the *not quite dead*. To my aunts and mother, she had blossomed into something else — something worth exhibition. That was difficult to imagine due to how I left her: motionless and gray in that beige hospice bed.

Ne Ne developed brain cancer when she was sixty-nine and never made it to seventy. Excuse the understatement, but there is nothing gentle about brain cancer. It started with miniature strokes that she failed to notice, which

caused her to not be able to say “Sonic.” Yes, the restaurant was our omen to losing the center of our family. This, we would later learn, was an early symptom of speech aphasia. You know when a word is on the tip of your tongue, and it won’t take the dive off the board? Its imprint is still there, but fog blocks its features. She lost so many words to that fog. Words she had used since she was skipping to school poured out of her memory by the hour. What started as not being able to say “Sonic” became not being able to say names of streets. Then the name of the preacher’s wife. Then the titles of her programs. Then her ABCs and nephews. Then everything.

I still tell myself that she never forgot our names after she lost all speech. She always held us so tight.

The day after her diagnosis of “*head blueberry* will eventually turn into a *head strawberry*,” she brought a razor to my aunt. To Ne Ne, there was no need for the gradual pain of losing it; she shaved her salt-and-pepper hair in one afternoon. I was not sure how the genetics would work out, but I always knew I would inherit her hair; it was my birthright. The silver sheen bouncing on strings of pearl white with a foundation of youthful black all sat dead at Ne Ne’s feet. From that day on, her head was like a shaven porcupine.

She was a woman of utter extravagance. I remember when I only knew her as the spunky storyteller — who dressed well above her tax bracket — that always had a smile because, as she would say, “happiness is my body’s gas.” But on the day of her funeral, I kept envisioning a speechless, gray shell trespassing on my memories of her.

We piled in her burgundy GMC Envoy and set out to arrive much earlier than the start of the service, which — at this point — felt like a macabre art gallery showcase. The whole system seems archaic. There is nothing that says a *celebration of life* more than inviting friends and family to see a lifeless husk painted up and pumped with chemicals to stave off the rot for a couple of days.

She gave me my sense of humor, as well: telling jokes when you are not supposed to tell them. Distasteful, dark humor served — and serves — as an impregnable fortification around my gooey, soft insides. I had not shed a tear after learning Ne Ne was dead. From the night they told me to her funeral day, I never got close to waterworks. I scolded myself for not crying as we drove to the casket. How inhuman can you be to not shout and shriek when the person you love most ceases? I tried to force myself to cry; I did the stupid face, did not blink, and etched despair across the walls of my mind, but not a millimeter was produced. I tried bullying myself (*what am I, a sociopath or something?*) but that just made me snicker in the backseat.

She was my first friend.

I thought that and could not think about anything else. When I was born, the doctor handed me to her first and — I am told — baby me calmed down

in her arms. I guess that was when she put her incantation over me: preserving the Do Not Cry Rule that had been kept in the family for generations. The only time I witnessed my grandmother cry was after a vocal practice she and I had. We sat in her room for three hours attempting to recite the alphabet. She would trip on a “G” or an “L” then send a barrage of insults toward herself. Even with this, she would still smile for me. I hugged her; then, left her room. She did not know I was there, but I heard her sniffing after I was gone. Ne Ne had far too much pride to appear teary-eyed in front of her grandson. It was hard to convince her that she was not a burden and that — even if she were one — she was worth the task. She loved us a little too much to accept that being a strain on us was acceptable.

The self-loathing paused when my foot touched the interior of the *Wayward House for Dead Bodies*. The stage play mentality possessed the adults as they started panic-walking all over Triumph Church to make sure we were ready for showtime. I — the young bimbo playing the role of emotionally typical, bereaved grandson — took my place in the congregation room.

Ne Ne and I were alone for our final time. First, I focused on the sea-green floor. Then, my eyes toured the room, steadily growing more disappointed with every crooked picture of Saint Peter or oversized crucifix. There was only one spot left to land my eyes.

There she was: a statuette trapped in a dream.

My composure melted so suddenly and so completely I wondered how it managed to withstand the morning breeze. I only noticed my tears after feeling cool, tender kisses on the side of my nose. It was the first time I remembered crying since third grade. Back then, I was in the backseat of my grandmother’s Envoy tearing up because my summer with Ne Ne had come to an end. I hid tears from her, then; eight years later, I stood rash-eyed for her, again.

Before I had a chance to interrogate my heart, our silence was stolen by the encroaching hoard of groaners. I imagined what her sneering whispers about them would have been: “Here they come *with all the answers*, showing up to fight fires with leaf blowers.”

I found myself watching the eyes of every person who came to glare into the coffin. Miniature funerals could be found in their shifting eyes as they saw her. First, their eyebrows drew close to each other — an inquisitive stare to confirm that the morgue had not sent the wrong package. Then, after they realized it was her, their pupils danced about their sclera like curious fish in a bowl — frisking every part of her. I knew they were trying to rationalize what they were seeing, coming to terms with her uncharacteristic motionlessness. Finally, their jittering eyes stopped on one fixed point: her eyelids. Once they understood those two doors were permanently closed, they subsided into the final judgment of, “She looks at peace.” Some even had to murmur the report aloud.

She was more than a peaceful sleeper.

Ne Ne must have been the most beautiful dead thing in the history of the universe: gentle as autumn woods, respectable as the fall of an elder nation, glamorous as a star's final simmer. And, not to mention, she was working the hell out of that salt-and-pepper wig.

There were so many pounds of jewelry on that corpse she would have been confined down there during the zombie apocalypse. That was probably for the best; her knees were bad. She wore seven rings, so succinctly magnificent. It was as if they were donations from each continent and each had clustered all their treasures into one piece. Her necklace and earrings matched: shadow diamonds that wars could have been waged over. Wrapped around her left hand's stiff-straight, ashy fingers was a bracelet with charms of children shackled to the small chain. It was a trinket she was gifted during her time as a pre-school teacher.

Her alligator-textured moccasin slippers were so affable that the creature must have eagerly offered its life when it heard the opportunity to be amongst the ensemble. There was not a misplaced thread in her pale stockings. Her cheeks and lips burned zesty red. She reeked of elegance and devoured the era. Cleopatra herself would have traveled across the ocean just to take notes.

Queenly precision was used to tailor her suit. Her jacket and skirt were wrinkleless and completely untouched by a messy world. Her blazer wrapped her in a strong, stately frame. Its buttons were swirls of hazel and coffee brown with the depth of canyons. The skirt blanketed her knee and went no further toward her moccasins. Her cuffs cut right where the hand and wrist met. The suit had a delicate pastoral pattern of skewed flower petals detailed with white lace.

But it was the outfit's dominant color that had the most to say. It was the green you see when you close your eyes and conceive unspoiled spring spruces. It looked like the mother of all greens — the green of life which birthed chlorophyll and Christmas and city lights and envy.

Even when they closed her coffin, that green was plastered in my conscious. As they lowered her, the meaning of the day was gifted to me. Maybe I was wrong about funerals. Her style would be eternally cemented within the ground in life's green; there would be no need for competition or further argument as to who lived the brightest. She was practically wrapped in solid, polished gold.

*No one can outclass you now, Ne Ne.*

# Heart of the Home Away from Home

*Brianna Dunston*

Upon reading the word “kitchen,” you, like a lot of other people, likely picture your kitchen at home. My friend sees her kitchen, the one she walks through every day: pale blue cabinets, two ovens, a gas stove, countertops cluttered with small kitchen appliances and drink mixes and drying dishes and spatula/wooden spoon/ladle holders, one yellow light over the sink, a trashcan with a locking lid that still occasionally has to be placed onto an end table in order to keep the dogs out of it. It’s lived-in, in use, mundane but familiar.

Or maybe you don’t see your current kitchen, but one you used to know, one that will slowly become only the stuff of old family stories. Another friend has a family story: not from the kitchen in her current apartment, but her mother’s kitchen in her mother’s house, where plant seedlings were grown on the counter and a cast iron griddle was used to grill chicken after my friend’s father set the outdoor grill on fire. One Thanksgiving, the sink — full of dishes and soapy water — fell right out of the counter, but her family took it in stride and lightened the mood by discussing what they were grateful for as they mopped up the mess with beach towels.

Or maybe you don’t see a familiar kitchen at all. A former classmate claimed she’d just see a random kitchen rather than her own. Her kitchen at the time was very compact: you’d have a hard time getting the refrigerator door all the way open if someone was standing behind you. The kitchen she envisioned was more open, probably something like the staged, sterile-looking open-concept “after” pictures from HGTV or the DIY channel.

Or maybe you see someone else’s kitchen entirely.

\*\*\*

The kitchen at my house is almost exclusively my mother’s and sister’s, the most culinary-forward members of the household. I am almost always a guest or temporary help for peeling potatoes while trying not to simultaneously peel off my fingertips or butchering the task of butchering broccoli heads. The closest I could come to calling the kitchen mine would be when I washed the dishes alone, but this ownership was fragile: my job, dishwashing, was low on the totem pole and would always be a lower priority than my sister needing to rinse her hands after cooking.

When I see the word “kitchen,” I do not picture the kitchen at my house: scuffed wooden cabinets, countertops made of easily-stainable plasticky stuff, dust gathering on the barstools because the peninsula is too cluttered with mail for anyone to sit there, the ceramic sink with silver-grey scars left behind by



my mother's three-gallon stockpot scraping against it when I'm rinsing away tomato stains and congealed fat, the light above the sink that would shudder when you first turned it on. There's a stain on the popcorn ceiling from when the previous owners of the house had a pressure cooker full of chili explode. The fridge isn't "new" anymore, but it still feels like new with its stainless steel doors and ice maker. When we first got the fridge, after the hardware store had delivered and installed it, my dad was washing one of the shelves in the sink and managed to ding the corner of the shelf in such a way that it exploded into a million cubes of tempered glass that promptly scattered themselves all over the kitchen floor.

I wasn't there when it happened. I don't know if they were frustrated and angry like I was the time I spilled pink lemonade concentrate on the floor and couldn't get rid of the stickiness for the life of me. Or maybe they went into a panic like the time I dropped and chipped one of the ceramic Rachel Ray bowls my mom had painstakingly earned through some promotion at Albertsons. At the very least, I suspect they were not discussing what they were grateful for.

\*\*\*

If I try to picture the kitchen from my childhood home on the corner of Rocky Lane and Deering Drive, I have a hard time seeing it how it was rather than how it is, how it has been ever since we moved out of my maternal grandfather's — my GungGung's — house. GungGung is still there, now the sole user of the kitchen and also the only person left to clean it, so it's not very clean. There are grayish spills on the floral tile. The bamboo-patterned wallpaper is hidden behind shelves of clutter. The sink is always full when we visit. Some visits, the floor crunches beneath our shoes with each step.

The kitchen I remember had cans of SpaghettiO's behind the yellow cabinet with the terry cloth plastic bag holder hanging from its handle. We kept boxes of cereal in the space above the oven. Some Saturday mornings, my parents would get out a commercial-sized ice cream tub that had been repurposed to house GungGung's homemade pancake mix and would let my sister and me help ladle Mickey Mouse shapes onto the pan. Once, when I was very little, I managed to get my hands up on the counter while my mother was chopping vegetables and she nicked one of my fingers. On nights we'd have steamed rice with dinner, my mother would shape my sister's and my portions into bite-sized rice balls. Some nights, when we're all seated at the table in my mother's and sister's current kitchen, my mom will sneak us a single rice ball along with the rest of our rice portion, just for old times' sake.

\*\*\*

And the word "kitchen" does not conjure up images of my ex-boyfriend's HGTV-esque renovated kitchen with the ceramic tile patterned like wood flooring that my father longed for after seeing it on shows like *Fixer Upper*;

the microwave drawer that elicited disgusted faces from my entire family, especially my father; the dark brown/turquoise/white color scheme that made perfect sense with what I know of my ex's stepmother: she's what I'd call a Texas Turquoise Lady, the kind of person that hangs up cross walls and cow portraits and is really into the western/ranch aesthetic while simultaneously being horribly averse to the dirt and mess that would accompany an actual country lifestyle. Their wardrobes usually include some form of animal print like snakeskin or zebra, mascara, flip-flops or sandals with thick foam soles, and, naturally, turquoise jewelry.

And I don't picture the commercial kitchen at my grandparent's old restaurant where my GungGung made yeast rolls with cinnamon sugar swirls in industrial-sized muffin tins and my sister and I would stand in the meat locker to cool off after chasing each other around the closed restaurant. Nor did I picture the kitchen in the house that my uncle inherited from my paternal grandmother with the sickly-green linoleum floor that was so slanted that my cousin used it as a built-in ramp for his Hot Wheels (until my uncle's Texas Turquoise Lady girlfriend had the kitchen remodeled). I don't picture any of my paternal grandmother's many kitchens: not the one with the white gas stove and the little wire cart that she kept stocked with white bread and dollar-store snack cakes and pies, foods that were rare if not implicitly forbidden in my household; not the one at the lake house with the big central pantry and soft blue walls and a window where I looked out on the dead mesquites in the backyard while picking little needles out of my fingers after my first encounter with a prickly pear; not the one in the trailer house in Waco, which my family helped clean out in preparation for new renters not too long ago; not the one she currently uses with the perpetually-sticky floors, the water damage around the fridge's ice dispenser, and the tiled countertops that never allow you to successfully sweep crumbs out of the grout. I don't see my Nana's kitchen in Alabama, with cabinets full of home-canned pickles and apple butter and salsa in mason jars and cast iron cookware galore. I have plenty of memories of these places. I see them clearly, and yet, at "kitchen," none of them are the first to come to mind.

\*\*\*

My best friend lives in a subdivision of cookie-cutter houses that's far enough from the main part of town that you can get more square footage for less money. Whenever our friend group would get together, he'd usually host at his house because his family had a tendency to be out on the weekends, so we could get away with saying a swear word here and there. His kitchen cabinets and countertops are dark. The lighting is warm. The ceilings are high. Over the years it's gradually collected various small appliances: a countertop wine cooler, a sleek black electric kettle, an espresso machine, a toaster oven that saw more use after the glass door on the actual oven shattered. It

wasn't a family space the way mine was — maybe some days that made the kitchen feel lonely, but when I was there I liked how it was private.

I've never really cooked in it, but I have stood at the counter with him and peeled garlic into a plastic shopping bag for another friend's recipe. When the sink faucet was broken, I tried to thaw shrimp with the beverage faucet until the filtered water ran out and I had to switch over to the bathroom sink. Once the faucet was back in working order, I would play fight with him over letting me wash the dishes only to get sprayed by the water pressure that escalated way too quickly, and then I'd get back at him for laughing at me by flicking water in his face. We'd eat Jersey Mikes or Pho House at the bar attached to the island while YouTube parody musicals or Dreamworks movies played on the TV. We roasted marshmallows using his countertop s'more maker and debated whether marshmallows should be browned or burned (burned, obviously. It adds a layer of smokiness to the flavor and it's fun to blow it out when you've lit it on fire). When we did sleepovers, I'd be the first one awake in the morning and would eat time by emptying out cans of flat soda and tossing old red solo cups before he could wake up and catch me cleaning. One of our friends once spilled sweet tea all over the ottoman in the adjacent living room and, instead of panicking, I was able to be calm while helping wipe it up, and we all laugh about this story now.

When I write or read about characters cooking or dishwashing or chatting over dinner, they're in his kitchen. They play seven minutes in heaven in his pantry. They make breakfast at his stove, lit by the sunlight coming through the living room blinds like it does when I'm clearing candy wrappers off the counter at 9 a.m. Characters can have a seat at the barstool with masking tape on its spindle that wiggles from leg to leg as you get into it.

So when I see the word "kitchen," I don't see my mother's and sister's territory claim, nor the now-dirtied remains of my childhood kitchen, nor the designer sterile spaces of television and Texas Turquoise Ladies. I see someone else's kitchen entirely: a place where I don't have to worry about being in the way, where messes can be funny, where the ceilings are high enough to give me room to breathe.

# Wonder

*Shelby Hunt*

I wonder if you remember. I remember. I think about the years of innocence we spent together, becoming who we are now. We were friends, and still are, but it's not the same. The times we spent together will forever be irreplicable. I will always remember what we went through and how both of us changed. Your hair was always buzzed. Mine, short and wavy. You kept it short because you had cancer and it would fall out in the shower if you scrubbed with shampoo too hard. The day your mom told us about the leukemia changed the way I looked at you. We didn't talk a lot during those years. You were sick, tired, and weak. I missed you at school when you weren't there. I would listen to my mom's phone calls just to know how you were doing, because I was so scared you would leave this life and leave me behind.

You had good days and bad days. The bad days suddenly cleared up and we were growing now. You were the happiest soul when they cleared you from cancer. You were a miracle. The good days were ahead, and we spent more time together with our friends. We'd play fast-paced games in the dark, down in the cul-de-sac. We called it the Island. Together, we would chase each other and march through the woods like we were in survival mode.

Now, looking back, it seemed so surreal. That memory feels so precious to me. I remember being jealous of your other friends who shared your same contagious laugh. It was like I couldn't let you go. Freshman year, things changed. I was scared and nervous about high school. You were energetic and excited, as usual. We were teenagers and things weren't as they used to be. We began to lose our innocence and forget the memories we shared as kids. The funny thing is, we became even closer that year, though our feelings were distant. We became part of a new group of friends. It was exciting and new, and we did things together we wouldn't have done as kids. We found out more things about each other, but I was always the closest because I knew you. Your cancer, your vulnerability with me, and the memories that held us together all those years. We had an understanding that we were friends, and you couldn't change it because we couldn't just forget.

I remember your first girlfriend. She was my friend, and she and I were different. Brown hair, cheerleader, makeup, and a funny personality. I never understood why you went for those girls. The opposite of me because they weren't like you. We were similar in so many ways.

When I found out I was moving, the first thing I thought about was you. I was no longer going to see you. I would no longer live behind your house. We wouldn't graduate together. The moment I told you, I couldn't read your face. You had gone quiet, but then tried to be supportive and ask me questions. You never told me how you felt about it. I just remember leaving — not even saying goodbye, just leaving town. We kept in touch. I didn't think we would, but we did, and I was happy about it. I wondered if you thought about me. I thought about you a lot.

What it would be like to be with you and find our way back to each other? I dream about you sometimes. Not on purpose; you just show up in my mind and I can't get you out. I'll never know what you felt for me because I will never ask. What's the point? We live different lives, but there is always a part of me that wishes I was living in yours.

The question, "Have you ever been in love?" scares me. I've never been asked this, but I wonder what my answer would be. Love seems so familiar in a way I can't explain because I've never confronted it. Maybe it's because we were too young. Part of me wishes you were my first kiss, and not some asshole who didn't care about me. I never told you about it because I was so upset and hurt. Just like I'll never tell you that I was in love with you and to this day I still love you. Your personality, your laugh, and your miracles. Whoever you end up with, I hope she understands you and cares about you as much as I have and still will.

# Verisimilitude

*Rae Bynum*

My face is not my own. I share it with another like me. Before I was born, my sister and I were one singular egg, then we split into two separate beings. Or did we? Identical twins. Megan and Rae. Baby A and Baby B. Born at the Brownwood Regional Medical Center. We were born with the same weight of exactly 4 lbs and 12 oz. We were born with the same DNA. We were born with the same face. Perfectly healthy and perfectly new, we came into this world with identical pink faces and identical pink bows glued to our tiny, delicate doll-like heads. Perfectly the same. Perfectly imperfect.

I didn't recognize this perfect imperfection until kindergarten. We took first-day-of-school pictures in our front lawn next to our crepe myrtle trees and gave the camera the biggest smiles our small faces could handle. So many pictures. So many memories to look back on someday. I distinctly remember my cheeks hurting from all of the smiling. I only wish those smiles could've lasted. My sister and I made friends as any five-year-old girls do. We said hi to everyone we saw and giggled out the first-day-of-school nerves together, trying to ignore the absence of our parents. Later, we would hear about a little girl named Jensen Hutchins who went home that day and excitedly told her mom that she "made two friends with the same face!" Suddenly, my world was turned upside down. With that innocent story, everything changed. My sister, the one who had been there all along, my built-in best friend, was me.

After the Jensen revelation, I began to see the whispers and odd looks directed towards us in Walmart or even during the Sunday service at church in our small-town home of Brownwood, Texas. Classmates assumed we were the "same person" even when they were old enough to know better. We even had an English teacher named Mrs. Grimes in fifth grade who didn't bother to learn our names and just resorted to calling us both "twin." Once the innocent confusion faded away through the passage of time, the "same face, same person" motif that followed us at school became fodder for jokes of all shapes and sizes. (To this day, everyone thinks combining our names to make "Reagan" is original.) The jokes were mostly intended to be harmless fun, but I found it interesting just how much harm that harmless intentions can do. Identity seemed like an out-of-reach daydream for an unoriginal girl. I was lost. Between the jokes and the strangers who thought us a rare breed of human, I was constantly searching for myself in a never-ending odyssey. When I looked in the mirror, I saw both Rae and Megan. It was never just me in the reflection. My sister and I would talk about it sometimes. I'd sneak to her room in the middle of the night after our mother had tucked us in and,

having mastered the art of shutting doors with no sound, I crawled in under the covers next to my sister. It was safe there. She was safe. We'd lie there and talk for what seemed like hours until our eyelids could no longer bear the weight of fatigue. Neither one of us appreciated the narrow-mindedness that we often confronted as a result of our very existence. That is another thing. Even purely existing was problematic. We could never be separate. It was as if we were not only born identical in every way, but also were conjoined twins who could never be genuinely apart. While we weren't inseparable by flesh and bone, we were by people's ideas about us. When someone thought of one of us, it was inevitable they would think of the other.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be another person? Well, in a sense, I know exactly what that's like. I learned through experience to be ready to respond to either Megan or Rae. Megan learned to respond to either Rae or Megan. It was like we could be each other whenever the need arose. Sometimes we were brave enough to correct those who mixed us up, but other times we refrained and stayed silent. It was easier that way. I could be Megan. I could be Rae. She could be Rae. She could be Megan. After all, was there even a difference? I thought there was, but doubt crept in like an uninvited guest you can't say no to. Sometimes people would ask if it offended us, and we'd say, "No! It's fine!" But was it truly "fine?" Our mom tried to make us feel better about it on occasion. She would tell us stories about when we were infants in our double stroller, and people would take us at face value, saying, "Aw, Double Trouble!" While they didn't mean any harm by it, our mother would respond sternly but gently, "No, double blessing." It was a cute and powerful story to me. But it didn't always evict my uninvited guest.

Some people dare to argue that identical twins are no different than any other siblings. I renounce that conclusion. It couldn't be more wrong. We understand each other on a different level than the rest of the world. We are as close as two people can possibly be. I'm not saying Megan and I have telepathic powers and communicate through our minds, which is a common piece of twin mythology. (Though we did have our own language when we were young to exclude our English-speaking parents from our conversations.) I am simply saying that the outside world cannot comprehend what it's like for identical twins. Even fraternal twins are not the same. They were always separate. Being identical is special, and it comes with challenges different from other siblings. Other siblings are recognized for their individual talents and tastes. Other siblings can be told apart based on those celebrated differences. Other siblings do not share a face.

It was around middle school that I developed a superpower: invisibility. I decided it was better to not be noticed at all than to be noticed for something that wasn't me. No one knew me. And that was okay. The amazement over



“the girls with the same face” fad became boring, and Megan and I faded into the background. We ate lunch alone and played on the playground during recess alone. There we were. Unpopular. Unnoticed. Unoriginal. We felt unwanted too. But, then again, we always had because few cared enough to distinguish one twin from the other. Those that did care enough became fewer and farther between. Our identities became a tangled, intertwined web of confusion weaving in and out of each other’s idea of self-worth (or rather, lack thereof). After all, can anything derivative of something that already exists be of value? We so often felt like we had to compete with each other for worth. Who got the better grade on the math test in Mr. Kay’s class? Who could run faster in pre-athletics to impress Coach Martinez? Who did the teachers like more? Who won more medals at gymnastics meets? Who was the real twin and who was just the copy or “the other one?” Who was better? It all seemed to matter. Our own definitions of self-worth relied heavily on how we defined the other’s worth.

High school made things different for us. The world can never be turned right-side-up again, but it was in the latter half of my secondary education that I learned the world could still function upside-down, and, just maybe, it was better that way. Megan and I diverged from each other when we discovered for the first time that we had different interests and, hopefully, futures. I had always loved being a “wordsmith,” and Megan found solace in art. I would create these worlds in my head that I could control on paper. Places where my individuality not only existed but mattered. Megan created ceramic pieces that spoke in a language people had to pay close attention to to understand. Pieces that tangibly expressed who she was. We became increasingly preoccupied with our own interests and realized that this was how we could define ourselves and develop identities. Our authenticities and originalities and uniquenesses bubbled to the surface after being hidden for so long. Hers through clay and glaze and paint. Mine through diction and syntax and figurative language. We were becoming our own. Ironically, however, we graduated at the top of our class. I graduated valedictorian and she graduated beside me as salutatorian. How proud we were of each other in our purple gowns embellished with white stoles and medals and purple and gold cords representing our accomplishments. How proud we were of ourselves. We were excited for what would come next.

Megan and I began our college careers in the Fall of 2020. Our destination was the same: Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Five hours from the narrow-minded small town of Brownwood, Texas, though dearly missed in occasional homesickness. The road to success is unpaved, but we’ve learned to adapt to navigate it. We memorized our degree plans, eager to tell anyone and everyone about them. Megan is pursuing a BA (or BFA, she hasn’t definitively decided) in studio art with an emphasis in



sculpture. I am pursuing a BFA in creative writing with a mandatory minor in literature. Will we be starving artists in the future? Maybe. Will we rise above the “impracticality” of our dreams? Also, maybe. The uncertainty of the future is frighteningly exciting. And different. Our paths are diverging ever further, and so are we. Our individual identities are relying less and less on the other’s as time continues its march. We are becoming independent and free. Quiet confidence is still confidence, but someday, I believe we will hear ourselves roar with it.

Now we look back on those first-day-of-school kindergarten pictures with pride. Two little girls stand in front of pink and purple crepe myrtles in the yard of our childhood home. With wonder-filled eyes, they smile widely at the two reminiscing women staring at them with those same, yet older and wiser, wonder-filled eyes. We see just how far we have come since Jensen first made “two friends with the same face.” To rephrase a line from *The Bard*, what’s in a face? As it turns out, a person’s core self does not show itself in their face. Identity lies far beneath the surface of tawny brown eyes, thin lips, and freckled noses. A mirror cannot reflect the soul and eyes cannot often see beyond what is before them. I still struggle with seeing only myself in the reflection sometimes, but it helps when I see Megan be herself bravely and boldly. Her strength of heart enables me to be brave and bold. I realize now that it wasn’t so bad being her all of those years, but it isn’t anything like being me. I’ve decided I like being me.

Far too many people are afraid of being different or standing apart from those around them. Another face in the crowd. Another voice in the cacophony. That’s all I’ve ever wanted from life. I’ve always been afraid of being like everyone else because I felt like I was born that way. And that uninvited guest that I mentioned earlier? I forgot to say that it had a voice. It often used to whisper to me things like, “I share a face with someone, I am unoriginal in the eyes of outsiders, I am the same as someone else.” All of these are untruths as I would come to find out. *My* truth is that everyone is their own. Everyone else is already themselves, so we couldn’t possibly be them. We have to be who we are. Tediously carving and etching our identities into something we can be proud of. Once we understand this, we can find courage. Because it takes the strongest kind of courage to embrace verisimilitude and perfect imperfection.

# One-Act Plays

*"Thin slices of theatrical time are often deepened by the conventions they adumbrate, widened by the spaces they leave open, and fattened by the unruly temporal experiences they both call to mind on the page and generate in performance."*

*- John H. Muse, Microdramas: Crucibles for Theater and Time*



# Titanic-Nebula

*Emma Hill*

## CHARACTERS:

AOKO — JA'EL's unborn daughter, half-Martian and half-Earthborn. Since Martians are simply relocated humans who have lived on Mars long enough to change physiologically, AOKO's DNA is 100% human.

JA'EL — an Earthborn woman traveling on the interstellar cruiser *Titanic-Nebula* whose plans to find a habitable planet for other Earthborn to relocate to have so far proved unsuccessful. She's watched her people be abused, scorned, and murdered by the higher-class Martian population, and from a very young age her goal to free her people has brought her nothing but more pain, fear, and a burning anger for the Martians. To board the *Titanic-Nebula*, she had to convince a guard to let her on as an illegal stowaway, and things got out of hand as he demanded a prize in exchange for his silence.

## SETTING:

A womb.

*A trestle board with a single loaf of bread sits center stage. The walls around the trestle board are red, a dark red, slowly pulsating with what might be a heartbeat. One light illuminates the table.*

*AOKO, an ordinary mid-teen girl with blue skin, is staring at the loaf of bread before her on the trestle board, playing with a knife in her hand. The light, which until now has been directly on AOKO, widens so JA'EL is visible. She is huddled in a corner, wearing dull gray clothes signifying her station as an Earthborn and clutching her stomach. JA'EL stands. AOKO does not move as JA'EL reaches a hand out to touch the wall, then recoils as it ripples.*

JA'EL

I guess I was too close to the engine. This is the weirdest one yet.

AOKO

You just can't remember the others.

JA'EL

*(still looking around and circling the table but keeping a very obvious eye on the loaf of bread and the knife)* And yet this still seems a little too simple. I expected more... excitement.

AOKO

Sorry to disappoint. What brought you close enough this time? Curiosity?

JA'EL

*(diffidently)* You don't have many options as a stowaway. I saw an empty closet; I utilized an empty closet. That's all there is to it *(she slides onto the bench opposite AOKO, eyes still fixed on the bread)* So, are you a passenger? Or are you a figment of the Dream Boat?

AOKO

I'm real.

JA'EL

*(looks up sharply)* Are you going to remember enough of this dream to cause me trouble?

AOKO

Who said it's a dream for me?

JA'EL

I'm asleep. I know I'm asleep. And this... *(glances at thudding walls again)* ...isn't exactly the kind of room you'd find on an interstellar cruise. From what I know, anyway.

AOKO

*(sadly)* What you know.

JA'EL

*(refocused on the bread)* You going to eat that?

AOKO

That's why I brought you here: to talk about food. You're really not eating enough.

JA'EL

It's a dream. No one brings anyone anywhere in dreams.

AOKO

Your dream might not be my dream.

JA'EL

*(plunks forehead on trestle board)* I didn't ask for a metaphysics lesson! I just needed a nap! What do you want from me?

AOKO

It's not that hard, or it shouldn't be for an Earthborn scholar like yourself.

*JA'EL's body tightens; she subconsciously clenches her fists.*

Your dream is simultaneously my reality, because the *Titanic-Nebula's* engine warps perspective. This is real for me; it's a dream for you. And, since we're in *my* reality, I think it's appropriate to request that you eat a solid meal.

JA'EL

Give it up. I haven't been hungry lately.

AOKO

Fine.

*AOKO slices off the bread's heel with the knife and begins eating as JA'EL, practically drooling, watches.*

JA'EL

What are you, anyway? You seem fairly humanoid, and I'm not suffocating in this atmosphere — although it's hot, very hot, and humid. Is this what your planet's like? What do you breathe, primarily?

AOKO

I don't have the answers you want. This is not a planet. It is certainly not your Planet B. I appear this way because I want to — because this makes me happiest. Just as you appear how you wanted — happiest.

JA'EL

I'm hardly happiest. I feel like I haven't eaten in weeks here! Why... *(she pauses and slowly brushes her fingers over her midsection.)* Oh.

AOKO

*(takes another bite of bread)* It's going to be difficult to save the Earthborn while you're battling morning sickness.

JA'EL

Well, I won't have to deal with it too much longer, anyway. We land in a week.

AOKO

Only a week?

JA'EL

Yes. And then everything will go as planned. Like I promised them.

AOKO

Yes. And the Martians will finally respect your people.

JA'EL

They will have no choice.

AOKO

Do you respect the Earthborn?

JA'EL

What sort of question is that? I'd die for them. They are all I have!

AOKO

That's not what I asked, but I understand a little better now. Your mission requires exceptional pride and a harsh lack of self-respect. That's how you're able to do what's necessary.

JA'EL

*(grazes her stomach again)* And it's nothing that can't be undone. Nobody would want it, anyway.

AOKO

*(eyes on bread)* Why?

JA'EL

Are you kidding? You know why! We're little more than slaves to them, and he — they — all of them would reject it, just as they reject us. You don't understand how it feels to see them guarding every inch of this place. I haven't... seen him yet... but the others must know. He must have told them. They look at me like they didn't come from Earth, like their ancestors weren't our brothers and sisters, like we're a subspecies...

AOKO

I understand. It wouldn't fit, so it's better for it to never be. (*looks up at walls*) And you. Do you fit? Will the Earthborn take you back, after they hear what you've done? No one sanctioned this mission, did they? This was all you. Will they understand?

JA'EL

Why do you know so much about me? Are you a spy? (*stands*) Who are you?

AOKO

Just another passenger. And what would a spy be doing watching *you*? For someone so intent on restoring honor to her people, you don't seem to value yourself much. The more I watch you, the more contradictions I see. If a spy were watching, they'd have no clue what it is you want — any more than you do.

JA'EL

I know what I want. I want resource independence for Earthborn. I want our bodies to be our own again, not sold to the Martians in exchange for basic necessities. I want to be free. And I want you to let me the hell out of here.

AOKO

Then we want the same thing — and I'm not stopping you. This is your dream and my reality, remember. So, you can leave whenever you want. I, of course, am not so free.

JA'EL

What's keeping you here? You're a passenger on a luxury cruise! You can go anywhere you want, right? You aren't bound by being human. I know. I'm the only one here.

AOKO

But I'm not like the other passengers. Like I said, we want the same thing. This is why I called you to this dream. For a long time, you haven't valued



your own life or the one depending on you. I want to see that change as badly as you want to see the Earthborn free.

JA'EL

I told you, I just haven't been hungry. And whatever's inside me isn't a life. It's a parasite. I'm planning to deal with it, like I said.

AOKO

Because of its origins?

JA'EL

It's a parasite because I don't want it. I didn't ask for it. And if you want me to value myself so much, you understand why I'm getting rid of it as soon as I can. It's the only way to make all this — all I've done — finally worth it.

AOKO

To accomplish your mission and find a new planet for the Earthborn.

JA'EL

Yes.

AOKO

This is worth ending a life?

JA'EL

It's not a life! Even if it were a life, it would still be worth sacrificing to see my people free. My own life would be worth sacrificing in an instant. I'd do it. *(voice breaks)* I have, *nothing*. *(AOKO stares down at her own hands)* So now you have nothing to say? It wouldn't be happy, anyway. I... I can feel it, sometimes, even though that makes no sense, even though it's too soon. *(JA'EL reaches for both her head and her stomach, rubbing her stomach almost frantically as if trying to locate the life within)* It feels... it feels just like me. And I can't let anyone else live like this. I get so... angry, so often, because if I could just be stronger, if I could just think more quickly, maybe I could save them, and then *this* comes along, someone who will be as angry as me, with *their* blood...!

AOKO

You have a textbook hero complex.

JA'EL

Shut up. You don't... *(stops, looks at AOKO)* That's an Earth term.

AOKO

Yes.

JA'EL

But... you're blue.

AOKO

Because I chose to be, and the *Titanic-Nebula* lets it be so. It's funny; I chose blue because of Shakespeare. Do you remember the play you read the year your class was drafted for the Moon Fields? (*JA'EL just stares, her trembling hand back against her stomach*) The one with the fairies fighting over the little mortal boy. The fairy king and queen caused seasons to change, rivers to vaporize, crops to fail over him. That's how wanted he was. And you thought it was the funniest thing that he had no lines, no name. Why would they want him, when he didn't even speak up for himself?

JA'EL

(*hoarsely*) The fairies never made any sense to me. And I never knew why he was blue in the pictures.

AOKO

Yes, I know. (*JA'EL'S stomach growls, and they stare at each other; suddenly incredibly lonely*) And now, he has a voice. I have a voice. It doesn't change my voice, that I was created in violence and wickedness. It doesn't change my being, that you hate both halves of me with your whole heart. I've known you did since the beginning. But even so, the choice you will make — the wanting or the ending — is still only yours. Of course, it's always been, and it always will be. Just like your choice to give everything you could to save the Earthborn, even your own dignity, even yourself. I just want you to know what you're choosing... and I needed... I had to know what you wanted, deep down. I think I do now. (*Slowly, she begins slicing the rest of the bread*) Would you like some?

*AOKO holds out a piece of bread to JA'EL. Still a little shocked, still holding her empty stomach, JA'EL sits back down at the trestle board. She takes the bread, and they begin to eat.*

END.

# WE LOST THE TITLE

*Hailey Beatty*

A Space Odyssey  
by People with Nothing Better to Do

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

AMBER "CAMILA" — a freshman who is a straight-A student who just happened to be allowed to hang with the upperclassmen. She plays the sassy co-pilot to Captain Moonlark, who also appears to be the main character. In real life she is sweet, naive, and easily able to have fun.

MARTIN "STORMFIGHTER" — a geeky sophomore who has nothing to do on Saturdays. No one can tell what the species of the thing he's supposed to be playing is; he seems to change from an elf to a dragon, which is weird because they are in space. He is also the playwright's boyfriend and has a dog named Bullet, who ate the script.

NICK "THE ARCHER" — an aspiring actor, also a sophomore, who plays the only straightforward character in the play. He has the same line, all the time.

MARTHA "SERAPHINA" — a sophomore who plays some sort of space witch who can conjure flames. Seems to change motives and archenemies. She is also the prop master and set designer. She's very cheap, though, and tends to only use what she can find. She can seem mean but she really doesn't mean any harm.

LUKE "CAPTAIN MOONLARK" — a sophomore, the cameraman, and the Captain. He isn't used to acting, but is open to try new things in hopes to impress Amber (yes, he invited her).

RACHEL — the playwright. She's an introvert, and a little scary, and a junior.

## NOTES

Scene 2 — Five of the characters will be on Zoom, so you will probably want to use projections.

**Words in bold mean they are using character voices.**

## SETTING

Luke's basement, which is full of various props and cheap camera and lighting equipment. Script paper littering the floor.

## TIME

Right before quarantine because of COVID-19.

## SCENE 1

SETTING: Basement set with props made to look like the inside of a spaceship.

AT RISE: AMBER, NICK, MARTIN, and LUKE are crowded around a poorly-decorated cardboard box with a stick sticking out of it, acting as controls, and acting like the box is a control panel. Everyone is reading from a script, whether it be in their hands or laid front of them.

AMBER

**Just read the manual!**

LUKE

**I don't need to read the manual! A Captain knows his ship like the back of his hand!**

AMBER

**You've been wearing gloves for two years!**

LUKE

(opens his mouth to reply, then starts to flip through his script)

Wait...

(MARTIN, trying to stay in character, reaches for the "controls" and accidentally shoves the stick too far into the cardboard box, it falls in there with a loud clunk)

NICK

**We're going to crash!**

MARTIN

Cut!

(everything stops, LUKE runs over and struggles to turn off the camera)

AMBER

(searching through her script)

Am I supposed to have the manual in my hand? Do we have that?

MARTIN

(yelling)

Martha, do you have the manual?!

MARTHA

(enters)

Manual?

NICK

You know, from the list.

MARTHA

Oh right, sorry, uhhhh...

(picks up a book lying on a random shelf)

Here's the manual.

(she hands it to AMBER who takes it and reads the title)

AMBER

The manual is Webster's Dictionary?

(MARTIN crouches down and starts rummaging through the box)

MARTIN

Luke, why are you using the control panel to hoard marbles?

LUKE

(suddenly serious)

Don't mess with my marbles.

AMBER

Why are they in the control panel?

LUKE

(suddenly self-conscious)

It's because before it was the control panel, it was where I stored my marble collection.

MARTIN

Who collects marbles anymore?

(emerges with the stick, marbles spilling out everywhere)

LUKE

Hey!

MARTIN

Sorry, Luke, but we are now hurtling in space towards...

(examines the script)

Certain doom, apparently.

AMBER

Is it an asteroid field... the sun?

NICK

(shrugging)

All I get to say is, "We're going to crash!"

(pauses)

Where's Rachel, again?

MARTHA

She's sick, remember?

AMBER

(her phone rings in her pocket)

Oops I forgot to tell Sarah I was hanging out with friends today. Sorry, can I go take this?

(she exits where MARTHA was standing)

MARTIN

(to LUKE)

Dude, why haven't you asked her out yet? She was standing *right there!* For, like, *ten minutes!*

NICK

She also seems to enjoy this,

(gestures to the script)

whatever *this* is.

(under his breath)

*This is definitely the weirdest thing Rachel has ever written.*

(to MARTIN)

Are you sure this is the right script?

MARTIN

Yes, it's just my dog got a hold of the scripts that Rachel gave me, and I can't get more until she's better. But that doesn't matter, *ask her already!*

LUKE

(anxiously)

Because she's... she's...

(shakes his head)

I got her here, didn't I? Isn't that enough for one day?!

MARTHA

He does have a point.

MARTIN

(to MARTHA, annoyed)

Just wait until I...

(checks his script)

Stab you with my elven sword!

MARTHA

Wait, that's not right, you're a dragon.

MARTIN

What?

MARTHA

Yesterday you were breathing fire!

MARTIN

You're right, and the scene we did before that, I was a talking frog-thing.

(AMBER enters. MARTIN and LUKE exchange frantic motions behind her back, MARTIN urging LUKE to "ask her out" LUKE saying "no")

MARTHA

(nodding to AMBER)

Alright let's get back to work, I want to set somebody on fire!

AMBER

Wait...

(looks through the script)

Where is that?

MARTIN

Oh, we lost most of your script too.

AMBER

Oh... uh... Luke, are you going to start the camera again?

(she turns to LUKE and catches him in mid-silent-fight with MARTIN, he freezes)

LUKE

(struggling to recover)

What? Oh! Right, of course you... are so smart...

(stares star-struck for a bit)

MARTHA

(annoyed)

*Cameraman!*

(LUKE jumps and quickly runs up to the camera and turns it on, everyone else takes their places around the control panel, while MARTHA straightens it up and puts the stick back where it was supposed to be, she exits the way she had entered before)

LUKE

(raises his arms in an L)

Lights! Camera! Action!

NICK

**We are going to crash!**

LUKE

(reading his script and running over to take his)

**Not today!**

AMBER

(blowing her hair out of her face)

**Yes, *today*, if you don't read the manual.**

(she realizes she doesn't have it, then goes to retrieve it)

NICK

**We are going to crash!**



MARTIN

**We have to steer clear of the** - uh... something with an l or a t... maybe an h  
(tries to examine the paper, groans)

Bullet ate that too.

NICK

(getting irritated)

**We are going to crash!**

**To crash is what we will do!**

**Crashing is going to happen! Anytime now, we will crash!**

AMBER

I don't think that's the line.

NICK

It's improv, it needs more variety.

AMBER

(looks back at her script)

**Just read the...**

(pauses, fear in her voice)

**Abandon ship! She's...**

(squinting at the paper)

She's what?

LUKE

**Here!**

MARTIN

Martha! That's your cue!

MARTHA

Hang on! I have to get this on.

(a beat)

*There!*

(she enters wearing a completely black, fluffy bathrobe)

LUKE

**It's her! In her scarlet robe! She has boarded our ship! Seraphina!**

MARTIN

(breaking character)

Martha, did you not have a red robe?

MARTHA

No.

MARTIN

Not even your sister?

MARTHA

She did, but I didn't want to wear her clothes.

MARTIN

It has to be *red*, otherwise it doesn't make sense.

MARTHA

Good point. Luke, close your eyes and when you're saying the line, imagine it's red.

AMBER

(laughs)

We could change it to be black.

MARTIN

No, Rachel doesn't like us changing the lines.

LUKE

(to AMBER)

Rachel is Martin's girlfriend,

(teasing his friend)

*he would never do anything to upset her.*

(MARTIN chucks some marbles at LUKE, AMBER laughs)

NICK

(sort of sing-songy)

**We are going to crash!**

AMBER

Are we still recording?

MARTIN

Let's just keep going, we'll edit this out later.

NICK

(more monotone)

**We are going to crash!**

AMBER

(flips through the more torn part of her script)

Where are we? Oh... uh... what's supposed to be my weapon?

MARTHA

Oh, sorry.

(she exits)

(MARTIN accidentally shoves the stick into the box again)

MARTIN

Ugh! Cut!

(LUKE turns the camera off, and MARTHA enters, handing AMBER a banana and a nerf bullet, MARTIN searches for the stick again, more marbles spilling on the floor)

AMBER

What?

MARTHA

It's the 365-Blaster and the Bullet of Vanishing.

LUKE

Where's my nerf gun?

MARTHA

That's mine.

(she pulls the gun out of her robe pocket)

New girl gets the cheap props.

LUKE

Everything we have is cheap.

(phone rings)

AMBER

Sorry, it's Mom, she's been nervous about this corona thing, I'd better take this.

(she exits)

MARTIN (to LUKE)

Dude, ask... her... out!

LUKE

(panicking)

Shhh...

NICK

He's right, that was the whole point of today. Considering we don't have the whole script, or Rachel.

LUKE

I — I can't. Do you know how hard it was to ask her to come here? I — I was sweating in places I didn't know I had.

MARTHA

Gross, but true, I was there.

LUKE

What if she says no. What if she says *yes*!

MARTHA

(groaning)

Pull yourself together... honestly...

MARTIN

Come on man, you have to do it. She saw your *marble* collection, and she's still here.

LUKE

(considering this)

I guess, you might have a point...

Fine, I'll ask her-

(AMBER enters)

No, I won't.

AMBER

Won't what, Luke?

MARTHA

(examining her script)

So, who do I hate the most? Is it Camila or the Captain?

(MARTIN pulls out the stick again and NICK walks over to MARTHA to help, LUKE is awkwardly stuttering, while AMBER picks up the fallen dictionary)

NICK

I thought it was me.

MARTHA

Why don't I just set you all on fire? Martin, tell your girlfriend her script needs to make more sense.

MARTIN

Easy, that's my lady you are criticizing.

MARTHA

Lady?

(snorts)

That's only one person's opinion.

MARTIN

Hey!

LUKE

(quickly)

How about we start recording again —

(a new ringtone sounds, and MARTIN pulls out his phone)

MARTIN

It's Rachel.

NICK (to MARTHA)

Uh-oh, I think she heard you.

(MARTIN exits)

MARTHA

(shrugging, unconcerned)

How about let's just say I just torched Martin, so we can at least practice something.

(LUKE turns on the camera and AMBER picks up the banana and the nerf bullet)

MARTHA

(laughs a very-well-done evil laugh, clearly she's done this before)

**I have killed your little friend, and now I will kill each and every one of you.**

NICK

**We're going to crash!**

(mutters to LUKE)

**Since we are about to *die* maybe you can take this opportunity to ask the question?**

LUKE

We're in a scene!

(LUKE and NICK argue with each other in the background being ignored by the girls)

AMBER

(reading from her script)

**I knew we should have just read the manual.**

(MARTHA and AMBER start to fight each other in character)

LUKE

I can't... she'll say no. Every girl I've tried to ask out has said no.

NICK

That's just because you can't get the words out of your mouth. Martin was right, you should ask her.

LUKE

He only thinks that because he's not single.

NICK

*I'm single!*

LUKE

I thought you were going out with that cheerleader.

NICK

I made that up.

(a beat)

*Ask her!* You never know what might happen, it might be too late!

(NICK pushes LUKE over to AMBER and LUKE seems to struggle with his decision)

MARTHA

(laughing madly)

**Your time is up!**

(aims the nerf gun at Amber)

(LUKE finally relents and walks over to AMBER, very nervous)

LUKE

Amber I...

(MARTIN enters quickly)

MARTIN

(worried)

Rach doesn't have the flu, she has COVID, all our parents have been told already, they'll want us home. Nick, you need a ride?

(scene blacks out)

## SCENE 2

SETTING: Two weeks later. The basement is set with props made to look like the inside of a spaceship.

AT RISE: LUKE enters the room with a laptop getting ready for a Zoom meeting with his friends. He sets the computer down on the cardboard box and ensures that it faces him.

LUKE

(quietly clearly to himself)

Alright, here we go.

MARTIN  
(appears)

Can you hear me? Hey, man!

LUKE  
Hey, Martin. What's been happening?

MARTIN  
Probably the same as every other house in America. Nothing.

LUKE  
So, about the same as before the quarantine.

MARTIN  
Yep.

(NICK and MARTHA appear)

NICK  
Is this thing on?

MARTHA  
Hello.

LUKE  
Nick! Martha! You made it!

MARTHA  
(sarcastically)  
Yeah, it's a wonder we could fit this into our busy schedules.

NICK  
Hey Martin, is Rachel coming?

MARTIN  
Yep, she's all better now.

MARTHA  
How about Amber?

LUKE  
I... I asked her...



MARTIN  
(excitedly)

Out? You asked her *out*?

LUKE  
...to join us.

(MARTHA scoffs, MARTIN and NICK deflate, disappointed, RACHEL and AMBER appear)

LUKE  
Amber, you made it!

AMBER  
(smiling)  
Of course! I had a lot of fun last time.

MARTIN  
(relieved but trying unsuccessfully to hide it)  
Rachel! You're okay. I mean, I knew you got better, but it's good to see you're still alive!

RACHEL  
Easy, Martin it was just a cold. So how do y'all like the script so far?  
(there is an awkward silence)

MARTIN  
(clears his throat)  
Muffin, I'm sorry, but your script —

MARTHA  
(interrupting)  
Your script doesn't make any sense because Martin's dog ate it.

RACHEL  
(in a low voice)  
What?

MARTIN  
(stuttering)  
I-I, I'm sorry... it's just... Bullet, and you know how German Shepherds can be... But it still makes no sense. I mean we can't figure out who Seraphina's arch nemesis is...

RACHEL

Who?

MARTIN

Seraphina, the fire space witch lady.

LUKE

So, Amber about last time, I was going to ask you...

NICK

I only have one line!

MARTIN

My species keeps changing!

MARTHA

What are we crashing into? And if they are crashing, why do I bother boarding the ship?

RACHEL

Wait...

(starts rummaging around in her room)

LUKE

(plucking up his courage again)

It's just I ran out of time last time and I want to ask, just in case the world does end. Uhhh... when this is all over, would you go out with me? Like, on a date?

(there is silence, no one speaks, the only thing we hear is Rachel rummaging through her things)

AMBER

(excited)

What? Really? Me? Of course!

LUKE

(relieved)

Oh good.

MARTIN

You finally did it!

MARTHA

A boy growing a spine, it's a beautiful thing.

(RACHEL appears on screen again)

RACHEL

I figured out what's going on. I must have given you guys the wrong script.  
That was my very first draft.

MARTIN

Oh.

(looks relieved)

Great, so it's not my fault. So... what am I?

RACHEL

Martin you idiot, you're a *shapeshifter*, that's why you keep changing!  
Honestly, we talked about this, why don't you ever listen?

NICK

(laughs)

She got you there, Martin. So, I don't have the exact same line?

RACHEL

Your repeated line is a gag, Nick. Didn't you notice that it was the name of the title?

NICK

We lost the title!

(BLACK OUT)

# Poetry

*"Having once experienced the mystery, plenitude, contradiction, and composure of a work of art, we afterward have a built-in resistance to the slogans and propaganda of oversimplification that have often contributed to the destruction of human life."*

*- A.R. Ammons, "A Poem is a Walk"*



# Clark Kent vs. the Mundane

*Brianna Dunston*

He wears glasses like a mask.  
With them on, he is as brilliant  
as his smile, as the glare on his lenses;  
and his shoulders are squared  
like the corners of the frames;  
their prescription makes everything  
just clear enough to see.  
In the Smallville of the office,  
he seems bigger by comparison.  
He sees through people with a glance.  
He hears every word whispered,  
even those said in the break room  
all the way across the office,  
but they never affect him.  
He is invincible.  
He works so fast he flies.

But at the end of the day,  
when the glasses come off,  
he is no Superman.  
Instead, his eyes grow shadowed,  
his smile goes slack,  
his shoulders slump.  
Metropolis is big and blurry,  
and every sound that echoes in his head  
reminds him he is only human,  
weighed down by the day's Kryptonite.

# Cockroach Dreams

*Martheaus Perkins*

I lost a dream today — it came and went.  
It scuttered out my ear, then down my neck,  
with newly-sprouted twitchy cockroach legs.  
It stroked beneath my hairs and crept on flesh.

    This creep of mine was once a youthful wish  
    that festered into what I now resent.

    Where left behind, evicted dreams infest.

    In time, relinquished dreams form haunting pests.  
Below my pillow, *hopes for love* now skulk,  
as *plans to leave home* skid across my plate,  
and *goals of “author”* slither up the wall.

    So, pray your courage keeps the critters calm,  
    and pray your dreams won’t meet a cockroach fate.  
    Betray your dreams and watch them crawl away.

## Not-So-Little Things

*Rae Bynum*

The way the sky creates a morning dew,  
    And each and ev'ry blade is kissed with wet  
As if Nature were Herself to say, "Fret  
    Not of relevance, you're tender and so new."  
Each flake of snow makes a sweet, swift debut,  
    And endowed with beauty's soft silhouette.  
We treasure nature's gifts without regret.  
    We cherish the way dawn makes days anew.

    Yet blind are we to our own great design  
Of intricate and infinite wonder  
    And delight. Can we begin to see just  
How not-so-little things are we? Redefine  
    Our value and our worth. Perhaps ponder  
That blessed origin from the ground's dust.



# Looking for the House in Mustang Prairie

*Modeled after Richard Blanco's "Looking for The Gulf Motel"*

*Savannah Shelton*

*There should be nothing here I don't remember...*

Nana's house in Mustang Prairie with the robin-red shutters  
and cracking brown brick walls should still be  
slumped like a weary gravestone on the side of the highway.  
My sister and I should still be hiding in the guestroom  
from our parents who are standing at the door,  
ready to leave, yet still chatting with Nana  
while balancing boxes and bags crammed with  
new sweaters and blue jeans, dishes of turkey and dressing  
and sweet potatoes from Christmas dinner,  
red, green, and gold "Season's Greetings" cards  
stuffed with twenty-dollar bills, glittering Barbies  
and FurReal Friends and Mad Libs booklets  
all from Nana, all because we're poor, we've always  
been poor, and the clothes and dinner and money  
are her way of helping us out under the guise  
of Christmas presents and leftover food she,  
living alone, can't eat before it spoils.

*There should be nothing here I don't remember...*

My mother should still be shuffling around  
the cramped galley kitchen of the house in Mustang Prairie,  
her Easter sandals clip-clopping on the faux-tile floor,  
glowing in a new sundress from JCPenney's  
as she helps Nana prepare lunch, stirring globs of sour cream  
into mashed potatoes, making sure the ham doesn't burn  
as it's warming in the ancient oven. My father  
should still be sitting on the squashed couch,  
deep in discussion with *his* father about cattle prices  
and turkey hunting, watching my sister and I gallop  
around the living room while high on Peeps and Robin Eggs.

*There should be nothing here I don't remember...*

My sister and I should still be playing Skip-Bo,  
my Nana should still be alive, reading her  
paperback detective stories by the bay window  
during afternoons in Mustang Prairie. She hums  
“Brown Eyed Girl,” released when her children were young,  
her husband cancer-free, their home in Dallas.  
They should still be able to hold each other  
as tight as they did in their wedding photo,  
flushed and grinning and without a single care.

*There should be nothing here I don't remember...*

My sister should still be seventeen, bringing  
her new boyfriend to the house to meet Nana  
for the first time. I should still be sixteen,  
obsessed with books and the way writing  
stories makes me feel alive — but I'm not.  
I'm twenty-one, driving along Highway 14,  
looking for the house in Mustang Prairie, for the life  
it should still hold, but doesn't. I want to blame  
Nana's husband for giving her secondhand smoke  
and ruining her liver, I want to chase the auctioneers away  
with their legal documents and business attire, I want  
to fill the rooms with sunlight and laughter,  
I want to find the house in Mustang Prairie exactly how it was  
and pretend for eternity that nothing lost is lost.

## Of Hamsters and Minds

*Kaitlyn Stockholm*

I think my hamster died. Not Carl, he's fine.  
You know, the one that runs the metaphorical  
wheel in my mind? Hold on, it may be mice.  
God, how should I know? I'm historical.  
Wait — hysterical. Either way, he's stiff.  
Break out the matchbox coffin, call the priest,  
a night service will be held on a cliff.  
My head feels empty — quiet at least,  
though I won't find use in a stagnant mind.  
Two — no — To whomever this may concern,  
my brain hamster died. Thank you for your time,  
but I give up, leaving my heart to yearn  
for a brilliant life. I'll still be around,  
I guess, just lying somewhere on the ground.

# Our Dirt

*Nathan Thompson*

I see

The cracked watch shine there, under muck and grime,  
Lost, this face of time, buried only slightly —  
So the ring of hours may still be counted  
As the tick of its final seconds scrape the dust off its face.  
Our dirt is a collector of things.

I hear that

A penny dropped is forgotten —  
Gone, not worth the sweat it once was.  
Left to rust, copper becomes the color of dust  
And returns to soil, the labor of time now fertile.  
Our dirt is a collector of things.

I'm told that

A young boy once sprouted wings and soared  
Through the clouds.  
Mist bathed his cheeks.  
Wind filled his lungs.  
And he flew — so close to the sun,  
He burned, shriveled, and fell — all with a squeal.  
And joined this sacred throne, of mulch made from bone.  
Our dirt is a collector of things.

And I feel that

If I can grasp onto this earth tight enough,  
And ignore the ringing clock, rusted coin —  
I can connect with those who have moved beyond,  
Those who lay in a silent grave.  
I can touch those whose stories I've read.  
Then maybe  
I too, will feel the sun burning against my back,  
And be free from the fear of falling as I soar off into the sky.  
Forgetting that our dirt is a collector of things.

# Perditus Lux

*Savannah Shelton*

Do you remember the blazing sun  
reaching desperate fingers through the leaves  
of the old oak tree, stretching, aching,  
grasping to touch the grass beneath our feet?  
Do you remember our scarlet skin,  
peeling off our arms and backs as easy  
as boiled shrimp shells? Do you remember  
our hair bleaching from copper to brass?  
The scorching beauty of cloudless summer days?

Please tell me you do.

Do you remember the pale shimmering  
at the bottom of the pool, light stark and holy  
amid the swirling dirt and drowned locusts?  
Do you remember the brilliance of the asphalt roads  
at 4 p.m., blinding us with molten gold reflections  
and erasing the lines that kept us safe? Do you remember  
the beaming sun making the dewberries swell  
and burst and stain our hands purple  
before they ever reached our lips?

Please tell me you do.

Do you remember the rays bending through  
the stained glass windows at church,  
painting the pews *redgreenblue*  
every Sunday morning? Do you remember  
the lemon, orange, grapefruit filter  
cast over the sky and cornfields at the close  
of each day? Do you remember our childhood  
bathed in the same light that began the world?  
Do you remember how we took it for granted?

Please tell me you do.

# Poison Dart Frog

*Savannah Shelton*

Each summer, my sister wore a yellow dress  
to the family picnic. It flowed like liquid butter,  
fluttering and flaring around her in silky waves.  
There was a scarlet sash around the waist,  
which she always tied in a perfect bow.  
I used to dream of wearing it, but it never fit.

Last summer, she got engaged  
at the picnic, and even the sunlight  
rushed to congratulate her, cascading  
over the corn-colored creases  
of the dress. Her pearly smile  
was brighter than the ring on her finger,  
and I was happy for her, but next to her  
radiance, I felt like a frog:  
short, underfoot, green with envy.

This summer, we buried her  
in that same dress. Her fiancé  
sat next to me in the pew,  
and I might've thought he was dead too  
if it weren't for the ceaseless tears  
sliding down his face.

The old wooden church was packed,  
sweltering with the season.  
In the coffin, she was illuminated,  
a single golden star among an expanse  
of black-clad mourners.

It was a vicious seizure they thought,  
but I knew better, and so did the empty bottle  
stashed behind my dresser. I was still furious  
after the funeral, blood boiling at the injustice —  
I was finally an adult, old enough  
and tall enough to fit into the dress.  
But even after I got rid of her,  
she kept it anyway.

# Swimming Lessons

*Skyla Free*

Suffocating, surging waves separate me from shore,  
cacophonies of ceaseless crests sweeping away  
feeble attempts at progress against the surf  
in desperate hope of surviving the viperous stabs  
of charcoal water that chokes me cheerless.  
The Island fades, leaving me to the fatal flood —  
necrotic cold corrodes all hope of happiness,  
grasping me in dismal frigid spirals,  
drowning me in desolate depths of defeat  
while people repeat and repeat: “Just swim.”

# Take Your Time

*Rae Bynum*

Hold it gently in your hand,  
And use it as wisely as you can.

Run through fields of happiness and flowers.  
Squeeze every sweet drop out of the hours.

Sing wrong notes and write bad rhymes.  
Dance a new dance, color outside of the lines.

Take a chance and ask that one person out,  
For you could be the one they dreamed about.

Move to a new city with new faces and new lights.  
Don't let fear steal any more of your clear nights.

Read that dusty forgotten book still sitting on your shelf.  
You never know what will make you more of yourself.

Because every moment spent and deeply tasted  
Is a moment of life that is earned, and not wasted.

So, embrace the uncertain things and be your best "you,"  
And maybe others will follow too.



# What Happened to the Family Gerbil

*Martheaus Perkins*

Son, I seem to have eaten the family gerbil;  
I swear it was an accident.  
He must have climbed out of his cage  
And made his way to my sandwich.

I swear it was an accident.  
I would never kill your gerbil,  
And I was too busy eating my sandwich.  
This is how he would have wanted to go.

I would never kill the gerbil;  
He must have committed gerbilcide.  
This is how he would have wanted to go;  
He seasoned himself for me.

He must have committed gerbilcide  
And didn't want his body to be a waste.  
That's why he seasoned himself for me;  
Poor thing has been feeling down lately.

I'm glad we didn't waste his body,  
Because he was so tasty.  
He didn't taste like he was feeling down,  
Because he was well-fed.

That's why he was so tasty.  
That's why he climbed out of his cage  
And rested below my salami and Swiss cheese.  
Son, I seem to have eaten the family gerbil.

# Lash

*Emma Hill*

To say “You don’t understand”  
when I’ve never tried to know, only  
held your remnants when they shattered,

kept it together when you kept  
pretending you weren’t  
scattered through these halls, stuck  
to people’s souls; unwhole,  
I scraped you  
together, to bring you home  
kiss you  
love you  
hide you from invisible  
battering invisible battles

I’d never understand

— it all  
unburdens me. Now  
I am allowed to feel fury.

## Dear John,

*Rae Bynum*

You yelled so much, and yet left everything unsaid.  
You threw a steaming plate of shrimp carbonara at her head.

She fell through your grip like a limp spaghetti noodle.  
Every attempt to flee or fight unfailingly felt futile.

You treated her like a drunken bar fight night.  
Echoing skulls collided with whiskey tied on too tight.

Whiskey-stained breath trailed behind with bleeding hearts in tow.  
Whiskey-soaked memories were made with power all for show.

We can never truly forget, but then, we never truly knew.  
Now your face is a mugshot, and bars are your view.

Your face is purple hands on my mother's arm.  
Why did she ever fall for your pale blue-eyed charm?

Your face is missed AA meetings and changes you never made.  
Did you think that these shattered lives would just fade?

You are a busted chin and dented hood of a white car.  
No flower or stitch can fix, no hammer can unscar.

Your flowery sorries on the black kitchen counter sit.  
Dropping pink petals of wilted lily love in hope that she'll forget.

Now you are a stranger, your face remains unknown.  
Now you are my mother's healing and strength finally shown.

At last, she's seen through your witty Wonderwall lies.  
I wish you hadn't ignored her pleading and desperate cries.

Her face is precious forgiveness of herself.  
Leaving these tearful memories for dust on the shelf.

Her fading-flowered regrets now belong to the trash.  
Wilted Stargazer Lily love; love and life can happen in a flash.

She is healing crusty crimson scabs, so strong, so brave.  
No other can rescue, no clever lie can save.

Her bright smile gleams through her mosaic soul.  
She knows now that she doesn't need you to be whole.

She is her own savior and forever mine as well.  
Dear John, I forgive you,

But you put us through hell.

# The Entomologist

*Emma Hill*

Such an unnatural silken green, the wings  
fluttering beneath his shadow, this boy  
— my boy; and he picks it up, the moth,  
a Luna moth half-crushed by it, my car  
— this car; I brought him home in this car. His hands  
were red then, and wrinkled. He tilts it, the cup  
that held his after-school snack, down empty, the ground,  
where the Luna moth limps inside, its mouth

— no. It doesn't have one. It lives to breed, its flight  
cyclical, murdered by default to make room for them — the children,  
more born with no mouths.

# Tell Me What Happens

*Martheaus Perkins*

Tell me,  
what happens to the corpse of a porch butterfly?

Tell me,  
who the lonely sparrow flies for —  
flies from, to what — for what?

Tell me,  
will the trees ever get fed up  
of us and you and all the damn  
cabinets and calendars and cutting  
boards we use them for,  
and leave the greedy  
breathing their last breath  
as oaks laugh from their rocket ships  
on a one-way trip to Mars?

Tell me,  
where will all the dirt go when they clean it away?  
when *Mr. Clean* and *ShamWow* team up to stab dirt in the eye.

Tell me,  
when I'm burned, at my request, can you take my dust  
and let it be the breath of new stars  
in new places?  
Or let my dust create the vocal structure  
for a new alien to ask new questions  
for new problems?

Tell me,  
what happens if lightning breaks up with thunder? What  
happens when angry dolphins find dynamite? What  
happens when babies have nothing to laugh for? What  
happens to the corpse of this porch butterfly?

Tell me. Tell me. What happens when I die?  
Please, I must know. Tell me before I go.

# A Letter to Sissy

*Johnathan William Potter*

At six, they'll chide you for running out so soon after the rain stopped,  
for muddying your white shoes and browning the tile floor.  
They'll tell you that rainbows have no end,  
that there are no leprechauns,  
and that there is no pot of gold to be found.  
They'll say, "Go to your room! You're grounded!"  
and you won't talk to them again until the next morning  
when the sun is out and the grass is dry.

At eight, they'll scold you for leaving sweets uncovered on the counter,  
for attracting ants and spilling milk on the still-mud-stained floor.  
They'll tell you that there are no flying reindeer,  
that the USPS doesn't service the North Pole,  
and that the man at the mall is a fake.  
They'll say, "Go to your room! You're grounded!"  
and you won't talk to them again until  
fireworks pop and welcome in the new year.

At eleven, they'll berate you for wasting the veggies meant for dinner,  
for leaving them in the yard and inviting the neighborhood vermin.  
They'll tell you that rabbits don't carry eggs,  
that they don't bring baskets of chocolate and jellybeans,  
and that you're getting too old for make-believe.  
They'll say, "Go to your room! You're grounded!"  
and you won't talk to them again until  
a guinea pig named Pepsi becomes a part of the family.

At thirteen, they'll shame you for kissing a girl beneath the bleachers,  
for airing out the closet and spelling her name across the bedroom wall.  
They'll tell you that the real God doesn't use a bow,  
that the real God is from Jerusalem, not Greece,  
and that the real God will never honor that kind of love.  
They'll say, "Go to your room! You're grounded!"  
and you'll vow to never talk to them again until your feelings change.

You know they never will.

Today, I am writing this to tell you they're wrong.

The truth is you're never too old to believe  
in something others won't.

There is magic out there to be found  
so long as you don't give up the search.

Now and forever, lace up your sneakers  
and chase every rainbow you can  
until you find love in whatever form it may appear.



# Light in the Dark

*Mackenzie McAnear*

I was born of flint and stone

Slow at first, I soon grew

I glowed brighter as the sun dimmed the skies

I move freely, but am contained within stones

I jump and dance,  
weaving my way through Wood.

I grow eager and try to escape my stone prison

I feel myself wither away inside.  
As I'm poked at.

I grow and grow.  
The things around me back away

I burn and burn  
Burning my way through Wood

I'm doing this for us.  
Nothing will hurt us ever again.

The cold fear comes again,  
but this time it does not stop.

No. I want to live!  
Darkness, save me, old friend.

I was cut from my family

Chopped into pieces

I was introduced to a horrid thing

Fire.

I'm tortured by it.  
It plays with me.

I heal my wounds as quickly as I can  
I grow relaxed and strong.

I harden.  
I will away the scars,  
but to no avail.

I feel a sharp pain in my bark,  
Fire has come back with full force.

I try to stay alive  
Why do you do this to me?

You don't know your own power.

I look down at what used to be me.  
Now a smoldering pile of ashes.

The light diminished below me.

I don't save.  
I consume.

# Dragon's Hymn

*Modeled after Lee Ann Roripaugh's "Year of the Snake"*

*Kaitlyn Stockholm*

I was born in the year of the dragon.  
Maybe that is why I have  
a heated tongue and a temper that could rival fire,

why I long for centuries  
of sleep to quiet the raging chaos  
in my head,

and why I collect people like gold, silver,  
and precious gems.  
One after another, and another after them,

they make a mountain  
in my cave, each day growing, changing, waxing.  
For as long as they let me,

I hold them close and tuck them away in my  
cavern-heart.  
There, they are safe; there, they fade inevitably

into memories. Unlike  
gold, silver, and precious gems, they can leave.  
The mountain wanes

as swift and silent as the wind,  
without warning  
or cause. They leave, and I'm left

to hope their dreams  
are filled with fields of forget-me-nots,  
and when snapdragons

line their path,  
they  
think of me.

# Husband and His Dying Wife

*Martheaus Perkins*

I know an old, Southern white woman  
who calls me “sweetie” and “dear.” Her words —  
warmth you get when you hug fresh clothes from a dryer.  
She tells me about loss while I count  
newly-grown grays and whites in her hair.  
Before rants, she fluffs her head like a worn pillow.

Tonight, her husband faces away from her vacant pillow,  
staring at strewn nightstand pills, praying his woman  
does not die in the hospital to a lung disease that steals her air.  
The panting ceiling fan takes the place of the nightly words  
he’d share with his wife. With each cycle, he counts  
a shaking sound that reminds him of the dryer.

Now, he will have to learn how to use their dryer  
to wash their sheets and the set of pillowcases.  
Now, the filthy wrens and pouting pups will count  
on his wrinkled hand instead of the woman’s.  
Now, he must call other old crows to hear gossiping words  
about Enid’s promiscuous niece and Harriet’s garish hair.

He hasn’t the slightest idea how to comb his granddaughter’s hair  
without her shrieks waking the street. He still cannot set the timer  
for an uncharred carrot and pecan cake. When he tries to get a word  
in at the Sensational 60s Club, they shush him. He can’t be a widow  
with his cowboy wardrobe. He’ll massacre the petunias his woman  
planted in May and he isn’t trained to overshare on his Facebook account.

Though, he’s not thinking about any of this, and it’s not what will count  
as important. No, he’s really thinking about running his hand through her hair  
and calling her *hon*’ with that vulnerable purr, telling her he will always be her man.  
He’s scheming to bring his old jacket to the hospital. The one that kept her dry  
decades ago, when she forgot an umbrella on their second date. He’ll sit near her pillow,  
reciting old stories like a jester before arguing with a nurse for more time —  
more words.

As he slips into his dreams, I write these words  
marinated in doubt. How has this husband counted  
lifetimes go by while keeping his heart soft as a pillow  
for his wife? Tonight, I will dream to grow gray hairs  
with someone, too. In a love that never turns dry.  
But that dream never includes waiting for a dying woman  
as I count the hairs  
left on her dry pillow  
mouthing words I didn't have time to say.

# Peary Platypus Soup

*Savannah Shelton*

You need plastic-knife-diced pears  
from the tree in your grandparents' backyard,  
icy water from the front garden hose,  
catalpa tree and sycamore seed pods  
(enough to make your hands itch for hours),  
a couple handfuls of fresh front-yard grass,  
and dry, dead leaves if they can be found.

Mix it all in a blue plastic bucket,  
borrowed from Paw-Paw's shop,  
with a pear-tree stick, the rough bark  
biting your palms as you stir.  
(Use as many pears as you need  
to overpower the old-shoe odor  
of the sliced catalpa.)

The cloying, sweaty stench  
will stick with you, gliding  
up your nostrils, sliding  
through the stitching  
of your raggedy t-shirt and shorts,  
so even if you lie, Grammy  
will know you made it.

Though your family knew  
of its origins, only you and your sister  
held the name. Obsessed  
with a turquoise platypus on a Disney  
Channel show, and puzzled  
that the pears in the tangled tree  
were never put to use, the two of you

created a punny name that was only  
slightly alarming. You made a deal: each summer,  
when you were bored together in your  
grandparents' creaking, musty house, you'd

make the soup outside in the sidewalk-sizzling  
heat. It belonged only to you,  
a childhood pact of sorts.

But now, at fifteen, you watch your dad  
rev a rusted chainsaw (at Grammy's request),  
slicing your heart raw by felling  
yet another memory. The tree creaks  
and topples, shriveled pears  
dotting the ground like the weary  
gravestones at Powers Chapel,

where a crumbling corpse, once called Paw-Paw,  
rests under loose dirt, the cancer in his brain  
finally vanquished. The catalpa tree,  
grizzled and ever-watching,  
still leans severely over the sidewalk  
in the front yard. It's alive and well,  
just like too-happy, tumor-free Grammy,

but it doesn't matter. Without the pears,  
the soup is just another fish-gut-goopy  
fusion of the meager plant life  
of Rosebud, Texas. Without the pears  
it means nothing but a sticky blue bucket  
and a return to the inside of a dark, dusty house  
that was never fun to begin with.



# Art

*"We have seen that the particular types of subjects (mythological and religious themes), far from being chance inspirations of the artist, far indeed from originating in aesthetic preoccupations as such, owe their presence in art to profound connections with conscious and unconscious life of society."*

*- Walter Abel, The Collective Dream in Art*







## Metamorphosis

*Samantha Altamirano*



## **White Phoenix, Dancing Clouds**

*Martheaus Perkins*



## **Lake Livingston in October**

*Mary Deborah Talik*





## Fairbanks in June

*Kaitlyn Stockholm*



## **Lily Pond at Home**

*Mary Deborah Talik*



## Rebirth

*Samantha Altamirano*



## Eyes in Color

*Mackenzie McAnear*





## The Oracle

*Skyla Free*



## **Caged but Unbound**

*Skyla Free*



**Sunlight Falls Heavy**  
Left Side View  
*Megan Bynum*





**Sunlight Falls Heavy**  
**Back Detail View**  
*Megan Bynum*



## **We Meet Again**

*Sam Berg*





## Resurrection

*Sam Berg*



## **What the Ash Grows**

*Sam Berg*

# Editors' Notes & Contributions

As students of the pandemic, we became overworked — emotionally, mentally, and physically. In short, our creative growth slowed. We faced new and unforeseen complications that pushed us to evolve as students, peers, and members of the community. As we take on this new year's fresh start, we hope this issue will allow new life to enter the small world we affect. We believe, in this time of uncertainty, HUMID 15 can provide a sense of hope that will spark life in our classrooms and our university.

Our fifteenth issue symbolizes the fresh starts and new beginnings of a world in recovery. Therefore, our self-published works, included to help fill the gap in our last year's productivity, also adhere to themes of overcoming, change, and revival. We have all been forced to handle hardships alone, but now we can come together and give encouragement where it is needed through words and a sense of community. Regrowth may start as a small, tender shoot, but its rise is exponential.

Sincerely,

*The Editors of HUMID 15*





# The Pearl Necklace that Attracted the Lazy Bee

DaQuan Allen

*In this piece you will be brought into a conversation between John, Me, and I. In a combination of non-fiction and figurative language the reader will see what it is like inside the mind of DaQuan Allen while working in a garden.*

“Hey, are you done pruning those trees?” asked John.

“Yea, I’m done,” I responded. “What’s next?”

“Pull the vines off of the Hollies.” Those trees suck. The leaves always poke me as if they do not want me there.

“Do you know where the gloves are?” I asked.

“Yea,” John yelled over. “Check the truck.” I wonder what we’ll have for lunch today. It’s about 11, no telling.

“Passenger cupholder,” I yelled for reassurance.

“Yea,” replied John. As I closed the truck door, I had a good look at the trees and I could see the task ahead of me.

“Wow, the vines are really all over that tree.” It is worse on the right, so I’ll work my way over there and I’ll grab this ladder for when I get to the right.

The closer I got, the more the sentiment of the Holly began to tickle my brain. As my arm reached into the arms of the tree, I thought to myself, ‘Is this invasive, Does the tree like this?’ As I untangled the vines from around the lungs of the tree, I began to see the vines were silently suffocating the Holly. The leaves that appeared to belong to the Holly were unraveling with every pull to reveal the prickly points I so despised.

In that moment I knew the tree must be relieved. As my arms reached into the arms of the Holly, my sentiment towards the task changed. Our exchange felt more like a hug than a prickly punch. I could not help but to observe the sentiment of the Hydrangea at this point. The vine had grown grape-like pre-pubescent flowers sure to bloom in coming sunrises. The buds were reminiscent of pearls around the neck of the queen, magnificent in the reflection of the sun.

“These vines are like necklaces around the Holly,” I exclaimed to John.

“I know what you mean,” responded John. In that moment it occurred to me that the necklace acted more like a noose as it hung onto the suffocating tree. ‘Should it matter, the sentiment of the vine. For it too is a murderer to the tree, as I to it.’ Does that make my act just? The more I pull, the more I worry that I am no better than the noose around the tree. As I hug the Holly, I kill the Hydrangea.

The way the Holly leaves bounce back, it reminds me that although I am taking one life, I am liberating another. My actions are utilitarian, and I must rest with that. I made my way up, down, and around the tree, eventually to my waiting ladder. Before I climb up, I step back and observe my work. It is no longer a task of ‘pull the vines from the Holly,’ it is my moral obligation to stop this attacking Hydrangea from killing this defenseless Holly. As I walk back to the Holly, I reach my hand, grab a leaf, and say,

“Why does thy thorns only cut its helping hand, and not the vines of its apparent aggressor?”

“¿Porque estas acariciando el arbol, wey?” yelled John.

“What?” I replied.

“Why are you touching it like that?” asked John.

“No reason,” I said, embarrassed. “I’ll get back to work.” As I climb a ladder, I see a part of the tree that is less Holly and more Hydrangea. I look around to see where to start and notice a small yet unidentified flying object. I have noticed it, but it is focused on the magnificence of the beautiful buds radiated by the sun. As a fly to a night light, this tiny UFO was locked in on the mission. I should take a video. The little wings were fighting to fly against the furious four-mph wind. It’s so beautiful, I will give him a poem.

To me, the blossom was but a reach away  
To the lazy bee, it felt like eternity.  
As the flying scurry fought fearlessly against the wind  
It had its sights set on the sapling.  
To the lazy bee, the baby bloom was irradant  
To me, it was but a mirror of the sun. A moon.  
As its small sails began to slice the winds  
It grabbed the green grape-like pearls.  
Success.  
To me, the lazy bee has achieved serenity  
To the lazy bee, he had not even seen me.

As the lazy bee landed on the Hydrangea blossoms, its tail went from being pointed like a dragon fly to curving inward towards the plant. Its tail, striped with a gold that resembles honey, is illuminated by the sun. Just as the sun reflected light from the flower, so too did it from the lazy bee. I could see all its eyes, and never once did it break concentration.

“I am sorry,” I said to the lazy bee, “but, I am about to rip all of this out. You deserve a warning, at least.”

“Who are you talking to?” yelled John.

“I’m calling it a lazy bee,” I replied, “but I really do not know.” As I wave my hand to shoo it away, I hope that its nest does not dwell along the spine

of the Holly. As I pull back more Hydrangea, the Holly is freed. I track the invasion down the ladder, down the Holly, down to the root. Its many roots. The more I pull, the more it appears that everyone who has done this before me starts on the left and becomes the lazy bee on the right. The top of this Holly is no longer Holly. The more I pull, the more Hydrangea shows. The necklace has already choked this tree. I was not liberating the tree; I was loosening the ever-growing chains around its lungs.

“Hey,” yelled John “It’s lunch, let’s clean up and go. Do you think you’re done or what?”

“Nah,” I replied. “It’s pretty bad around the top.”

“I think you’re good, I saw you getting it from the bottom and that’s where it is coming from. The top should die.” No, it won’t.

“Ight bet,” I replied. “What is for lunch today?”

“My granny made tacos today,” replied John. “She’ll make some cheese quesadillas for you.”

“Bet,” I replied while pulling out my phone. “What do you think this bug is?”

# Flower of Pain

*Audree Campbell*

Digging upwards and  
Crawling out of

this earthy womb.  
My first breath,  
Blindingly beautiful light,  
And a wall  
Of green in

Front of and above me.  
With newfound energy  
Inspiring me to climb.  
Growing thorns  
Along the way,

I hope it's worth the journey.  
Finally,  
A perfect spot  
To unfold my petals,  
Show off my boldness  
And rest.

# The Mighty Don't Fall

*Preston Kines*

I can begin this story in many places, but for now I will begin with two brothers who were selected to fight a war so far from home that the thought of their mother's famous pot pie couldn't even register a memory of taste. Two brothers who grew up together in the plains of West Texas where their days of tractors, hunting rifles, and getting drunk behind the barn off their old man's Ballantine were far, far behind them. 4,499 miles behind them.

\*\*\*

This story can begin specifically with the elder of the two: Sergeant Perry of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division who touched down on the beaches of Normandy on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944. It was on that merciless day that the newly-promoted sergeant from Texas fearlessly lead his men across the beach and into the trenches of their German adversaries. There they fought for life, for country, and for the liberation of men and women they didn't know.

\*\*\*

The story may also begin, although it would be a short one, with the younger of the two, Corporal Perry of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and how when he was dropped so far off course that after landing somewhere in the godforsaken countryside of Normandy, would be among the 502 counted as MIA.

\*\*\*

We can also begin in 1949, four years after the war had ended and Sgt. Perry had started a family with his newly-wed wife of the year prior. A young Southern belle named Lily, together they bore a son who would carry his father's name with all the pride of a young boy whose father had been treated as a hero in their small Texas town can muster. Though they would always just call him Junior.

\*\*\*

Or perhaps we can start in 1953, when the Perry family would welcome another son to the family, though this child will bear the name of the brother his father lost that day in Normandy. Michael. This name would never truly fit him, and there was not much pride to be had in it. Michael did not grow up to be much like the man he was named after, and though his mother would more so refer to him as an endearing "Mikey," his father mostly just called him "boy."

\*\*\*

Another place to start would be on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1965 when our country's leader, ol' son-of-a-B-Johnson addressed our nation and made the decision to send U.S troops into Vietnam.

"We do this in order to slow down aggression," he said.

"We do this to increase the confidence of the brave people of South Vietnam who have bravely born this brutal battle for so many years with so many casualties," he continued.

"And we do this to convince the leaders of North Vietnam and all who seek to share their conquest of a simple fact. We will not be defeated! We will not grow tired!" he stated through his teeth.

"We will not withdraw either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement." He lied.

\*\*\*

A better place to start would be 1969 on the first of December, when the draft lottery for the Vietnam War took place. Shortly after, twenty-year-old Junior was on his way to 'Nam to serve his country as his father and uncle did. Leaving his parents and sixteen-year-old brother Mikey home in Texas. The day he climbed those two steps onto the bus that would take him to what many thought was a death sentence was the day he became a man. His mother cried the mournful tears of a mother afraid to lose her son, Mikey choked back the tears swelling in his eyes, trying to look strong for the brother that always looked after him, and their father, no tears, only the proud look of a father who sees himself in his son leaving home to fight the good fight, the fight he fought. Mikey had never seen his father look at him the way he now looked at Junior. Two small steps were all it took. The doors closed behind him.

\*\*\*

But if we are to truly start anywhere, we ought to start in late May of 1971. The war in Vietnam had continued, and Junior had not come home, though he wrote when he could. But the next letter he received from home had carried with it devastating news. His hero has passed. Sgt. Perry suffered a heart attack in his home while his faithful wife Lily of twenty-two years was at her Ladies Bible Study, and now-eighteen-year-old Mikey was staying late after school, reading an acceptance letter from a college in California to his English Teacher, a Mr. John Coleridge, who had encouraged him to apply.

It was Mikey who found him later that evening. Lying lifeless on their living room floor.

\*\*\*

The town mourned the loss of their local hero, Lily mourned the loss of her beloved husband, tears fell onto the letter that Junior held in his hands as he learned that the man who molded and shaped him into his own likeness had gone from this earth. He had not heard his father's voice in two years and amidst all the gunfire, napalm strikes, and mortar rounds, he had begun to

forget what his voice sounded like. He would never hear it again. Mikey shed no tears for his father. He did not hate his father, but he never truly knew if his father hadn't hated him.

Mikey stood on his mother's right side as his father received a soldier's send-off and his casket was lowered into that hole for all eternity. A hole not deep enough to hold all the disappointment Mikey knew he took with him to his grave. His mother reminded him that even in hard times, "The Lord is good, Mikey."

And Mikey supposed He was, at least He gave Sgt. Perry one son he could be proud of.

\*\*\*

A week after the funeral, Mikey walked onto a stage on the football field of his high school, took his principal's hand in one hand, his diploma in the other, looked towards the camera, and forced a smile. That night, he and his mother sat across from each other at the local diner and ate blueberry pancakes (his favorite) although neither of them had much of an appetite.

"Momma, I have something to tell you," he said as he poked at a blueberry.

She let out a soft but despairing sigh. "What is it, Mikey?"

He knew she hadn't meant to sound so bothered by his statement, but she probably assumed that he was going to confess to liking boys or some other horror twist to Southern moms in the 70's. He knew she suspected him of it, although it wasn't true, the girls here just didn't take much of a liking to him. A boy who graduated the year prior had confessed that to his parents the night of his graduation. He wasn't exactly welcomed back home... or back in town.

"Mr. Brown said he could use a hand at the grocery so I can save up some money this summer."

"Oh... well, that's great, Mikey." She tried to sound sincere. "But I thought you were to goin' to start workin' the Allen Ranch like Junior had? It's hard work but a decent livin'."

"Well, Momma, you see... I got accepted to a college... in California."

She dropped her fork.

The check came soon after. The car ride home was a lot of shouting, Lily wasn't one for shouting, but boy you had thought she'd spent her whole life raising that Southern twang to a loud roar by the way she lashed at Mikey.

"College?!"

"In *California*?!"

"You just gonna leave me here?! Your daddy is gone! Your brother is away fightin' a war that ain't his to fight! And you just wanna up and leave to some fairy-infested college?!"

They made it home to their moderate-sized house with a sign above the front door that read, *Jesus is in this home*. Lily got out of the truck and slammed the door shut. Mikey followed.

"You go up to your room now, boy."



*Boy.*

"I ain't nobody's boy, Momma!" he yelled. "I may not be the man Daddy wanted me to be, I may not be Uncle Michael. But I can be my own man, and this is how I'm gonna do it!"

She slapped him.

"Your room. Now."

\*\*\*

Mikey spent the rest of that summer working the Allen Ranch as was expected of him. Lily was right, it was a decent living. Which is why he did it. A lot of the money he made went to helping Lily with the house bills, times were hard now that Sgt. Perry had passed, but they got by alright, and Mikey was still able to save some money to get him to California come the fall semester, though Lily didn't know he still intended on doing so.

It was two weeks before Mikey was to get on a bus just like Junior had, but this time the doors would not close and send him away to a war halfway around the world. No, these bus doors would close, and he would start on his way to a new life out west. Mikey thought he may write a book. He was always good in English and that is what he was going to study at this college in the Golden State.

\*\*\*

It was just a week before he was to leave for school, and after a long day working in the sun, rebuilding a stretch of fencing that was knocked down on the Allen Ranch, Mikey stopped at Mr. Coleridge's house so that they could finish up some forms and documents that he would need when he got to school in California.

"Mikey, I have something I'd like for you to have," Mr. Coleridge said to him, standing up from his office room chair. He led Mikey to a carport behind his house and there sat an old Buick, Mikey didn't know what year it was, but it didn't look new by any means. "She ain't much, but I've been tuning her up over the summer and I think she'll get you there in one piece," Coleridge said.

"Get me there?" Mikey asked.

"Yup. She's all yours, kid," he said as he handed Mikey the keys. "She'll be here for you when you leave next week. No need to bus hop your whole way to California."

Mikey did not know how to thank him, not just for the car, but for always encouraging him, and helping him when he needed it. He knew he would have never seen a college campus, not even in his dreams, had it not been for Mr. Coleridge.

\*\*\*

Today is the day. The day Mikey leaves this small Texas town behind him and doesn't look back. He left a note for his mother to find when she returned home and in it he does his best to explain why he has left and what it could

mean for him to have this opportunity and how he doesn't resent her for not wanting him to go, but that it would be an injustice to himself if he doesn't at least try. Mikey concluded the letter with a, "Love Always,"

Signed.

Dated.

Out the door.

Mikey came to get the Buick, I gave him a hug, told him it was an amazing opportunity and that I couldn't wait to hear of all the great things he sees, hears, and writes in California. Mikey then got into the driver seat, reversed out of the carport, and I watched him head west.

\*\*\*

Mikey made it to the Golden State, and he couldn't believe what he saw. Hills, palm trees, and more beautiful women than he thought existed. He immediately felt self-aware of how he must have looked after such a long trip and while he was parked on the campus of his new school, he brought the visor down from inside the Buick and... a photograph fell onto his lap. Surprised, he picked it up off his thigh and looked at the photo. He immediately recognized two of the three men in the image, young, handsome, smiling men in military uniforms. His father, Sgt. Perry, his uncle, Corporal Perry, and a third he didn't recognize but as he squinted at the name patch it read,

**"J. Coleridge"**

And on the back:

"Brothers in arms, the mighty don't fall."

\*\*\*

But the mighty did fall. He fell right out of the sky somewhere in Normandy and he was never seen again. I was there that day, a Private with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division under the man I had known as my best friend in a past life. But he was never the same after losing his brother. And when we got back from the war, we fell apart and our friendship along with it. I hadn't spoken to Sgt. Perry in over twenty years, but I know Mikey doesn't deserve our same fate. He may not be a man like we were, but he is mighty, and I'll be damned if I see another Michael fall.

# The Wizard's Apprentice

*Asacia Hernandez*

Cupped in shivering hands  
a sweet-potato vine  
with crisped yellow leaves  
fights for existence.  
Crimson clung to Lily's face  
as the dam broke behind  
her cerulean aching eyes  
while she begged for forgiveness.  
"Hush, child, I see no fallacy,  
I can help, and I'll do it happily."  
The Wizard gave a small smile,  
revealing a few silver teeth.  
Reaching into his left sleeve  
he pulls out a twelve inch  
long carved oak pipe  
and brings it to his lips.  
His breath deep and audible.  
Lily stood before The Wizard,  
knees knocking, hyperventilating,  
with grimy, chipped nails and small  
calloused hands full of dirt.  
The Wizard got on his knees  
to face Lily. He exhaled onto  
the dying vine. Lilac wisps  
danced along the crumbling leaves.  
Chartreuse pulsed through the vine  
and new buds rose in waves.  
The leaves curled open  
like a baby's hand.  
"Take care of her, Lily."  
The Wizard tipped his purple  
hat, and disappeared into the forest.

# Elias Crane's Unbearable Choice

*Caleb James Stewart*

Elias Crane had been able to turn into a bear for quite some time. This is not his origin story; you don't need to know about his first full moon transformation, or the rampages he took before he learned to control his powers. What is important for our story is that Elias can now turn in and out of his bear form at will, and that Elias is in love with two women.

Elias got off work on the day he had to decide and stopped by a flower shop to get flowers for his wife. Elias was never a romantic, but he knew his wife loved the color pink, so he grabbed the first bouquet of pink flowers he found and scrambled home.

There at home waited his wife, Janice, slaving over dinner, waiting for the love of her life to come home once again. Though, while she usually cooks his dinners with love, there is a sense of anger behind today's meal of grilled chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes. Janice found out that Elias has a secret.

Elias walked through the door of his two-bedroom apartment and immediately presented the bouquet to his cooking wife, who forced a smile while accepting the flowers, replacing the month-old flowers that rested in the vase with the new, unwilted petals.

Elias kissed his wife on the cheek as she put the flowers in the vase. "How was your day?"

"Are you cheating on me?"

Elias was taken aback from this question, and actually moved several steps back from his wife. "What kind of question is that?"

"The kind that you haven't answered yet. Elias, are you cheating on me?"

He hesitated for just a moment. "No, I am not."

Janice was not satisfied with the answer, but wanted to trust her husband. "Then my day has been fair."

Elias removed his work boots while sitting at the dining table before moving to the sink to wash his hands. "Only fair?"

"Well, I still haven't heard back from any job applications, so I've been stuck at home all day. Where do you go at night?"

Elias turned off the sink and started drying his hands. "Janice, I go to our bedroom, with you. What is this about?"

Janice threw down her spoon and placed her hands on the counter to show her exasperation with her husbands' answers. She turned suddenly. "You don't

think I hear you when you slowly move out of bed, or don't think I hear you when you come back? I know you sneak off somewhere in the night, and I want to know where."

Elias thought for a second on how to answer. "Do you need help with dinner?"

This answer landed Elias with a private dinner reservation and a one-night stay on the couch for the night, their bedroom door being locked. This was of no concern to Elias, because while he may not be going to bed with his wife, he does in fact sneak off during the night to someone else.

Elias opened the window to the fire escape and silently climbed down the five flights of stairs to the bottom. He quickly got into his car and began driving across town. He parked in his usual spot near the woods and got out of the car to begin undressing. Once he was stark naked, he turned into a bear and headed into the dense forest down his usual path.

The transition from man to bear was no longer a strange feeling for Elias, instead it was much like changing clothes and walking on all fours. He had learned to walk on his hind legs, but it drew less attention to walk like a normal bear.

At the end of the path lay a cave mouth that Elias entered most nights. As he crawled into the cave, his eyes adjusted to see the figure of another black bear laying down ahead of him.

"Oh, you're back," growled the bear as she began to stand up to meet Elias.

"I told you I would be."

"Do you know how many bears have told me they will be back and never did?" She sniffed Elias. "Still smell like human."

"There's nothing I can do about the human smell. Are they sleeping?" Elias started looking around the small cave.

"Yeah, they had a long day. Taught them how to fish, Older One almost taken by another male bear." The female bear took a second to look at her cubs. "You could've prevented that."

Elias thought for a second. "I can't promise that I can be here always. But —"

"Why are you here?" She put her body between Elias and their cubs, "Most males would've left by now, gone off to find another mate, but you, you stay. No, not even stay, half-stay."

"It's not as simple as stay all the time. I wish I could, but —"

"But what?"

How could he make her understand? How could he tell her he spends half of his life as a human? It seemed impossible. "I'm needed elsewhere during the day."

"But they need you here, Younger One and Older One. Imagine if they were the first cubs in this wood to grow up with a father. Imagine what kind of knowledge that the two of us could pass to them."

Elias stood in silence for a moment, before the female bear growled again. “Obviously you have a decision to make. Go back to where you spend your days, and don’t come back unless you plan on staying.”

“But — ”

“Go!” Her roar echoed through the cave, enough to stir the little bear cubs awake. She looked at her children, but by the time she turned back, Elias was gone.

\*\*\*

Elias sat in his car, staring down at the message on his phone from Janice.

“Well, this changes things,” he thought to himself. There was no real reply he could make to the text, but the words almost seemed to yell at him:

*I’m pregnant. If you don’t plan on staying, don’t come home.*

Elias, fully clothed and in his human form, dropped the phone in his passenger seat. He had no idea how to reply. He buried his head in his hands and screamed into them. He had to make a decision about who he would return home to, and this decision was one that had to stick.

He could go with his bear life. He loved being a bear. The feeling of nature all around, the freedom, it was something that couldn’t be topped. He also very much loved his mate, and already had two cubs with her, who apparently could do well with a male influence in their lives. But most bear males leave their mates, and most cubs don’t grow up with fathers, so really, they would be on even playing field with almost all bears.

But is that what he really wants for his kids — cubs? To be on an even playing field with all other bear kind? He knew what it was like to grow up without a father, how could he leave these cubs fatherless?

But isn’t that what he would do to the human child that is about to be brought into the world?

He could choose to live his life out as a human, with his wife, who he made a commitment with before God, who he loves very much. Humans can do so much more in life than bears. They can drive cars, get coffee, wear clothes! And his wife was pregnant. If it weren’t for this, he would be back in those woods, with her never hearing from him again.

He sat and contemplated, he picked up his phone and tried to text back but couldn’t, he got out of car and looked into the woods, he got back into his car and turned it on, and then off and then on again, he looked at his phone, he watched as the sunrise peaked over the treetops. A new day dawning. His wife would expect him to be home soon. Home forever.

Would he return to his apartment, or to the cave? He got out of the car, still turned on, and walked towards the woods. He breathed in the fresh air of the woods. Elias Crane made his choice.

# Over and Out

*Asacia Hernandez*

My words were never enough to get through, and now, I bid you adieu  
Your constant deflection is nothing short of your true confession, lost in our  
disconnection, trapped in your imperfection  
You are the epitome of decrepit, your presence: septic, I've accepted the truth,  
you were never a relic  
Sentiment was an allowance dealt by my hand, your appearance I shall not  
miss, good riddance  
You are a cold shiver and migraine, you're one I'll never reconsider, I'll never  
debate, I should have left sooner, it's time to unleash my hate  
Your kingdom is one that will feel the wrath of my reign, despite the aftermath  
and the pain, I will come out sane, free from your ball and chain  
Undeterred by disgust, you are not my responsibility, I will adjust, I need you  
out of my life, it's a must.

# Soldier Boy Going Home

*Teya Reed*

In the middle of an empty field, the soldier wandered aimlessly. He was incredibly skinny and couldn't be any older than twenty. His most prominent feature was the bullet hole in his neck; his spinal cord and muscles were visible through the gaping space and he had blood and tissue splattered on his dirty uniform. The sun filtered through him, making him flicker in and out like the beginning of a movie tape that humans were so fond of.

"Ho, soldier," Lakel called and slowly moved towards the man. Her long legs crossed the distance easily.

He jumped and spun around, rustling the leaves under his feet as he slowly started to solidify. The muscles in his neck stretched and sealed, pushing out the maggots and worms that had made a home there; his legs were covered in pus and rot as those muscles began to heal; the little rotten teeth he had left fell out and new ones pushed through his gums and the gashes across his face and hands healed. He looked like the bright-eyed teenager he once was. He started to scramble away from Lakel until he noticed the two pairs of large, ivory wings trailing behind her.

"Are you an angel?" he whispered.

"Of sorts," she replied. "Are you ready to go see your brothers in arms?"

"What about Michael? And my mom and dad? They're expecting me. I can go home, right? The war's over?"

"I'm sorry, borgarmaðr. There's no going back home. You died on this field twenty-one years ago in 1918, during the Hundred Days Offensive, days before the war ended with an armistice. The rest of your squad is waiting for you in Valhalla. Now, you can go and be a soldier in the largest army in the world, or you can go to your family in Hel."

"Where is Michael?" He fell to his knees and frantically shuffled forward, grasping her trousers. "Please tell me he isn't in Hell! He doesn't deserve it. Don't punish him for being a faggot, it's not a sin." He sobbed, burying his head between his shoulders, his forehead pressed against Lakel's leg.

Lakel patted him on the head and gently pulled him away from her pants. Taking his hands in hers, she tried to calm him enough to listen.

"You have the wrong afterlife, borgarmaðr. It's H-E-L, not H-E-L-L. The people there aren't suffering. They're living their lives just as they lived them on Earth. I can try to find where Michael was placed, but it will take some time. Right now, you have a choice. Go to your family and live a mundane eternity in the afterlife, or come with me to Valhalla and be revered as a hero."



He nodded and stood up, brushing the debris from his uniform. Twigs were sticking out of his laces, so Lakel knelt and started pulling them off. The soldier jerked and tried to pull her off the ground.

“No, angel! Someone as holy as you should never do that for someone like me!”

Lakel glanced at him and continued to pull out the twigs. “I’m not holy. I’m a soldier like you. I’m showing my respect for your service by making sure you are presentable as possible. Why else do you think your wounds are healed and your uniform is no longer torn? I’m sorry that I couldn’t clean the grime from your skin or your uniform. When we get to your final destination, you can take a few soaking baths. Perks of being dead include never running out of hot water because the afterlife takes care of all of the needs of its residents.”

“I thought it was because I was dead.” He bowed his head to her. “Thank you, angel, for helping me feel human again, even though I’m still dirty.”

Lakel stood up and brushed crushed leaves from her trousers and knee-length boots. She held out her hand to the soldier.

“Have you decided where you want to go?”

“I want to be with Michael. I don’t care how long it takes to find him; I’ll wait right here until you do, if that’s okay. I never wanted to be a soldier. It was the safer option for me after my parents realized I like men more than women.” He took her hand and scoffed. “I guess that doesn’t matter now that I’m dead.”

“We can start looking for him. I’m not leaving you here. With my luck, another Valkyrie will come and forcefully transport you to Valhalla and report me for insubordination.”

Grasping his hand tightly, she teleported them to the only person she knew could find the soldier’s Michael. Immense golden pillars held up the marble roof soaring above the only furniture, a large oak desk in the middle of the spacious room. The receptionist was clicking at the typewriter and occasionally glancing up to check the clipboard floating above it. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a neat bun, and she wore gleaming pearls around her dainty neck. Lakel pulled the soldier behind her as she started walking toward the desk. Their footsteps echoed on the marble floor, and the receptionist looked up.

“Hey, Lakel. What are you doing here?” Her voice was clear and pierced through the span of the room. “I thought you were scolded the last time you brought a soul through.”

“It’s not my fault, Kristine. The souls we pick up should have a choice in their final resting place. Not all people that die a heroic death want to go to Valhalla.”

“So, this is another soul you want me to help sort into Hel?” She glanced over the spectacles perched on her button nose.

“Not quite. He wants to join his friend from the war. I was hoping you could find where he ended up in the afterlife, if he is even dead. I’ll owe you a drink this weekend. Shara can come along, I know how sweet you are on my sister.”

“All of your favors from me are going to get me fired one day.” Kristine sighed and pushed her chair away from the desk. “Follow me, we need to check the records room.”

Lakel turned to the soldier and grinned. “Isn’t this exciting? You might be able to see your friend Michael sooner than originally planned if Kristine can find him.”

The soldier smiled back, but it was a somber one. “Why do you keep only calling him my friend? I was planning on proposing to him when the war was over. I know we wouldn’t have legally been able to get married, but Michael was the love of my life.”

Lakel’s eyes widened. “I’m so sorry, soldier. I didn’t realize your relationship was closer than normal. That just means we need to search faster so you can plan that proposal. In the afterlife, anyone can get married to whomever they want to.”

The soldier’s smile could have lit the world at that news.

“Are you guys coming? We don’t have all the time in the world,” Kristine called from across the room by a door carved from the wall.

“After you.” Lakel gestured for the soldier to lead.

Walking into the room, Lakel felt claustrophobic. Shelf after shelf was stacked to the ceiling and they all looked like they would collapse if someone nudged them. Stacks of paper were strewn all over the floor and the boxes on the shelves and floors were fit to burst. She shuddered, dreading the thought of having to go through all of that paper to find Michael.

Kristine beckoned from a few shelves down. “These are the shelves holding the information of all of the people that died during the years of 1914 to 1939. Michael should be in here somewhere if he’s dead. The war had us so flustered that we couldn’t keep the records organized.”

“Michael was still alive in 1918.” Danny fidgeted with his sleeves. “He went to the hospital to have an arm amputated because it started festering from infection. He never went to get it patched up after it was shot. I didn’t notice anything was wrong until one night, he couldn’t move his arm. I forced him to go to the hospital. I just hope it was caught in time.”

Kristine looked cheerful with the soldier’s information. “Well, that narrows it down to five shelves instead of six. Thank you, Danny.”

Lakel looked confused. “Who’s Danny?”

“He’s your soldier boy. Why do you never look at their names when you go to pick up their souls?” Kristine was exasperated.

Danny shuffled his feet. “Can we start looking now? I am starting to smell myself and want to find Michael soon.”

Kristine patted him on the shoulder, then took out a handkerchief to wipe the blood from his uniform off her hand. “Go right ahead. Yell if you need anything.” She moved toward the door.

Lakel spun around from looking at one of the boxes on the shelf next to her, accidentally hitting Danny with all four of her wings and sending him into the shelf behind him. “Wait! You’re not going to help us?”

Kristine deadpanned. “I am helping you by allowing you in here. Now I have to go and stay at the desk or I really will be fired, which would mean I won’t be able to help you break more rules in the future.” She glanced behind Lakel. “Besides, you should probably apologize to Danny once he wakes up for throwing him into the shelf.” With that, Kristine turned and pranced out of the room, her high heels soundless against the marble floor.

Sheepishly, Lakel turned around to find Danny unconscious in the middle of several boxes. A piece of paper gently fell onto his face and stuck to the blood still there. Plucking the paper off his face, she glanced at it to see who it belonged to. The paper stated that Michael Davis — born July 27, 1986 in Manhattan, New York, and died November 6, 1918 in a hospital in Beaumont-Hamel, France — was placed in the eastern quadrant of Hel as a bartender because he succumbed to infection and didn’t die fighting. Lakel didn’t know if this Michael was the one she was searching for so she placed the paper by the open door, ready to start a stack of Michaels for Danny to go through once he woke up.

By the time Lakel had enough of searching through the stacks for soldiers named Michael, she had a stack of two hundred people. Going to a still-sleeping Danny, she gently kicked his leg.

“Get up, soldier. I’ve compiled a list and want you to go through it before I spend more time searching for him.”

Danny jolted awake and looked suspiciously at Lakel’s wings. “Are you going to hit me with those again?”

“That was an accident. Sometimes I lose track of how much space they take up. Sorry.” She hauled Danny to his feet and shoved the stack of paper into his chest. “Go through these and see if your Michael is in there. We’ll keep searching tomorrow, but we will need to leave soon. Kristine is almost done with her shift and no other receptionist is going to let us be in here.”

Danny took a seat on the floor and started skimming through the pile. As the stack of Michaels that he hadn’t gone through grew smaller, Danny seemed more discouraged. By the time there were only three left, he was moving through the stack at a snail’s pace. Slowly peering over the last few, Danny froze when he saw the last page, the one that had been stuck on his face. He grew excited and jumped up, waving the piece of paper in Lakel’s face.

“It’s him! You found him!”

Lakel grinned at Danny's enthusiasm and snatched the paper from his grip. "Let's go tell Kristine and then head over there. You might be able to see him before dinner. This sheet is detailed; it even has the bar he works at listed."

After giving Kristine their thanks, and Lakel promising to bring her sister for drinks later that night, Lakel grasped Danny's shoulder and teleported them to Hel, just outside the bar where Michael should be working. It was a small bar, meant as a place for the quieter people of Hel to meet and have a drink.

Danny fidgeted with his hands. "What if he doesn't want to see me? What if all of the love I thought we had was just adrenaline from the war? Oh God, I'm not even clean! How would he want to see me like this?"

Lakel squeezed his shoulder. "If it is true love, he won't care what you look like; he will be glad that you are back with him. If it was all a lie, I will take you to a place full of men that will love you for who you are and won't care that you like men."

Danny nodded and took a deep, fortifying breath. "Here I go." He pulled on the door and held it open for Lakel as she walked into the bar. It was a quaint place made of a simple wood and was relatively empty due to it being before dinner. There were a few patrons scattered around the bar, and a bartender stood behind the counter, drying a glass. Danny stepped around Lakel after closing the door and then froze.

The bartender glanced up through his thick, black bangs and dropped the glass he was holding. "Danny?" he whispered.

"Hey, Michael," Danny whispered back.

The bartender leapt over the counter and grabbed Danny in a fierce hug, tears streaming down his face. "I thought I lost you forever. They wouldn't tell me if you had made it or if you died with the rest of us. I can't believe you're here." He pulled away and framed Danny's face in his giant hands. He stared at Danny's face for a minute and then brought him in for a passionate kiss.

Lakel smiled at the happy reunion and made a promise to herself to visit in the future to make sure they were doing okay. She turned and teleported home, happy with the little joy she could bring to the afterlives of soldiers.

# Introduction to Carrion

*Asacia Hernandez*

I drove through winding roads of pine,  
ignoring the familiar speed limit sign.  
The road was dark, but these streets were mine.  
The buck met my windshield, our destinies, combine,  
this was it, the brutal, mutilated, end of bloodline.  
The buck fought to realign his broken spine,  
fragments of bone splintered, paralyzed at the waistline.  
My father found the wreckage, as I descended to meet the divine.  
Red and blue lights painted the night sky, as he cried, *Caroline*.  
He pleaded with paramedics, *piece her together again — Frankenstein*.  
My spirit soared, the pain gone, somehow, I felt fine.  
There, on that road, my father planted my shrine.

# Climb The Gnarl

*Christina Ellison*

It was the middle of the summer of 1850, and Marigold sat at her desk. She was attempting to finish the thank-yous to those who had given her gifts for her twelfth birthday, but all she could focus on was her sweat soaking into her new yellow day dress. Marigold had opened her bedroom windows hoping wind would take out the thick Georgia heat, but the wind was nonexistent, so the hot air remained stagnant and stale.

By the time Marigold signed her name at the bottom of her seventh card, the temperature was overwhelming. In a flurry of movement, she stood, grabbed the ends of her dress, and shook the fabric every which way; if the wind wouldn't come, she'd make her own.

A rustle came from outside, followed by a "What's going on up there?" and a "Are you decent?" Marigold stopped her impromptu whirlwind and peeked out one of her windows. Not two feet below, hanging onto the ivy that clung to the house, one hand covering his eyes, was Jonah Winsley — barn boy and peach-picker.

"I am," said Marigold. Jonah dropped his hand from his face. "Did you need something?"

"Can a friend not say hello once in a while?" said Jonah.

"You said that to me when I was on the porch," said Marigold. "An hour ago."

"Fair enough," said Jonah, climbing up the two feet and settling on the windowsill. "But in that hour, I have made a decision."

"And what decision would that be?"

Jonah gave an audacious smile. "I'm gonna climb The Gnarl."

"Oh, bless your heart."

"I *am*."

Marigold stared back, incredulous. "No, you're not."

The Gnarl was the name the two had given the large hickory tree behind the orchard, all twisted and knotted and looking not unlike the hands of Marigold's Great-Aunt Olive. Its peak was at least one hundred feet, and Jonah and Marigold had often entertained the idea of climbing the monstrosity, but neither of them had thought to commit to the act in reality. Until now.

"I'm going whether you like it or not," said Jonah. "I thought it'd be polite to tell you, is all, in case you wanted to come."

"Why would I want to come watch you fall to your death?" Marigold crossed her arms.

"Aw, c'mon, Mari, have some faith in me."

"The only faith I have in you is you giving me a headache."

"Can you not brush it away?" asked Jonah.

"That's not," said Marigold, "how headaches work, Jonah."

"Could be," he said, and swung his feet over the sill, beginning his descent down the ivy. "Anyway, like I said, I'm climbing The Gnarl today, so you can either stay in there doing whatever you were doing, or watch me make history."

\*\*\*

Marigold landed on the ground with a firm *thump*.

"Nice of you to join me." Jonah was leaning against the wall of ivy, tapping his fingers against his palms. Marigold assumed it was a habit, a tick Jonah had developed; he was often tapping his elbows or rubbing his shoulders or massaging his feet. "Let's go."

Marigold had to pick up her pace if she didn't want to fall behind. Though they were roughly the same age, all of Jonah's appendages were longer. He liked to use his height to his advantage, holding Marigold's book above his head or hiding peach buckets on tall shelves where she couldn't reach if she tried. Even if Jonah wasn't rushing to The Gnarl, Marigold would still have trouble keeping up.

"Don't you have hay to be sifting, or something?" Marigold asked.

"Finished all my work early so I'd have plenty of time for this," said Jonah.

"You've thought about this for longer than an hour," said Marigold, "haven't you?"

Jonah looked down at her, eagerness in his dark eyes. "Ever since I first saw it."

Jonah's father, Mr. Winsley, had been working as a stableman since Marigold could remember, making sure Great-Aunt Olive's horses were fit for carriage rides and Marigold's father's daily trek into town. Jonah himself had arrived a mere two months ago as additional help during peach-picking season and as Mr. Winsley's apprentice. As the only two children on the land, Jonah and Marigold wasted no time in befriending one another.

From then on, Jonah had tried numerous times to lure Marigold into the stables — whether to assist him with his duties or to laze about in his company — but every time Marigold thought of the animals kept in there, she was reminded of when she was five and had almost been trampled by Great-Aunt Olive's prized palomino, Lady Luck. Marigold avoided the stables at all costs.

"You've spent two months thinking about some dadgum tree?" said Marigold. "Why not climb a peach tree and call it a day? It's safer."

"It's boring, is what it is," said Jonah. "Plus, I've already done that."



They had reached the rows of peach trees, near-ripe fruit begging to be picked, sweet aroma filling the air in the heat's wake. The peaches wouldn't be ready for picking for another week, so the orchard remained empty of workers and the children remained unbothered. Jonah reached out, plucked a peach from a low-hanging branch, and chucked it at Marigold, who wasn't paying attention and let out an affronted, "Ow!" when the fruit collided with her arm.

She stared at the peach on the ground, no doubt as bruised as her arm would be. "Now, that's a waste of good fruit. You know how well we sell this year determines your pay, right?"

"Like Ms. Olive is gonna run out of money any time soon," said Jonah.

Marigold turned to face her home. It was a simple two-story brick building, ivy covering the side that faced the orchard. Her father told her that soon after she was born, her mother having died in childbirth, they had moved from their tiny townhome in busy Atlanta to Great-Aunt Olive's home right outside Greensboro. Great-Aunt Olive herself was a widow and the only remaining relative with enough room to house two more people, and though capable enough, she welcomed Marigold and her father with open arms, never dismissing extra hands around the house. Her father said Great-Aunt Olive was past her prime and needed assistance, but Marigold figured her father needed someone to help him grieve and help raise his daughter through the early years.

Marigold regarded the expanse of the peach orchard and the size of the stables. If not for the lackluster interior of the house, and if her father didn't need to work at the grocers in town, Marigold would consider her family part of the elites, her house an estate, herself an heiress.

"Mari... Mari." Another peach hit her arm. Marigold glared at the culprit, who was now a few feet ahead. "Are we going, or what?"

She huffed. "I'm coming." Marigold gathered the skirt of her dress in her hands and jogged to catch up. "Just stop throwing peaches at me."

\*\*\*

The afternoon sun peeked through the branches of The Gnarl. Up and up the children's eyes rose, their heads tilting back to take in its entirety. Marigold spied Jonah wiping his hands on his pant legs, though she wasn't sure if the action was out of habit or nervousness.

"And you're *sure* you want to do this?" she asked.

"That's what I said, wasn't it?" said Jonah. "I reckon if I jump, I can reach the lowest one over there." He pointed to a thin branch.

"Why didn't you bring a ladder?" said Marigold. "Then you wouldn't have to worry about whether you'd be able to reach it or not."

"Why didn't I...?" Jonah paused. He frowned. "Hush your mouth." He brushed off the comment and continued. "Once I get on it, I can use the knot



above it as a foothold to push myself there,” he pointed, “and reach *that* branch,” he pointed, “and –”

“Are you gonna do it or not?” Marigold asked, growing impatient.

“Don’t rush me,” said Jonah, striding towards The Gnarl.

“You rushed *me* here,” said Marigold. “I don’t see why I can’t do the same.” She watched him walk further. “Don’t die!” she called as an afterthought. She flopped down where she stood, a good twenty yards from the tree.

Marigold once asked Great-Aunt Olive about The Gnarl, though she had called it “the big tree beyond the orchard.” Great-Aunt Olive said the tree had been there when *her* mother and father were the ones maintaining the orchard — though back then the orchard was family-run and of a smaller size. Marigold asked if she had ever thought to climb the tree, but Great-Aunt Olive scolded her, telling her that a girl of Marigold’s size and stature — and sensibility — should never attempt such a reckless act.

“I made it!” called Jonah. “I’m on the lowest branch!”

Marigold tried to spot Jonah’s gangly limbs through the patchwork of leaves and branches, but couldn’t; she’d have to take his word for it. To pass the time, she pulled up the blades of grass around her by the handful, ignoring the beating of the sun as best she could.

Though the weather was scorching, Marigold adored the summertime. Summer was when Great-Aunt Olive focused on peaches more than Marigold’s studies, giving the girl more time to roam. She wanted to venture into Greensboro proper, but her father shot her down every time.

“The city isn’t a place for a lady,” her father would say.

“But Jonah says it’s not more than a street of wooden buildings,” Marigold would respond. “And the people there are really nice. Doesn’t sound dangerous to me.”

“I want you safe, Marigold,” her father would say. “And to do so, you must stay at the orchard.” He didn’t even take her to the church in Greensboro, making the journey to a podunk chapel in the opposite direction instead.

“Mari!” Jonah called. “Look how high I am!”

Marigold brought a hand to her forehead, shielding her eyes, and squinted at The Gnarl. About halfway up, through a hole in the leaves, was Jonah, waving his arm like a madman.

“Be careful!” she called back.

“It’s easy! You should try!”

“I’m fine down here!” Marigold gestured to the space around her.

“Suit yourself!” Jonah put his free arm back around the trunk of the tree and continued his ascent. Not too long after, a branch snapped.

“Jonah?” Marigold called, worry warping her voice. She stood and approached The Gnarl.

“I’m okay...” came Jonah’s voice. “A branch broke from under me, is all.”

Marigold passed under the ends of the branches, nearing the trunk. Once at the center, she scanned the limbs above her. It took a little searching, but there Jonah was, holding on for dear life near the top of The Gnarl.

“You don’t look okay,” said Marigold.

“It’s all fine and dandy,” said Jonah, clambering onto the branch. “Limbs here are a bit thin, I — ah!”

Another *snap* broke through the Georgia air, but this time Jonah came down with it. Marigold couldn’t take her eyes off his body as he toppled from branch to branch, lower and lower and lower. There were *thumps* and *cracks*, but she couldn’t differentiate between the branches and Jonah as the source of the sounds.

Jonah’s body eventually made it to the ground, a horrifying *thud* accompanying the sight.

“Jonah!” Marigold rushed to the boy, prepared for the worst. And the worst it was. There was blood. So much blood. White bone broke the skin where Jonah’s left elbow should have been, and his knees were contorted in ways human anatomy protested. She couldn’t look at his face for more than a few seconds, all smashed and scraped and *his eyes — what happened to his eyes?*

“Jonah?” Marigold said again, barely more than a whisper.

Jonah didn’t respond, but she saw his right-hand move — inch by struggling inch — toward his face. As soon as his fingertips grazed his cheek, the scrapes disappeared. Marigold blinked.

*They disappeared.*

Jonah touched his eyes and the gore was gone, restored to their original spherical shape. He tapped the bridge of his nose, and it righted itself. He rubbed his chest, and it rose and fell as if it hadn’t been fighting to do so before.

Marigold watched as Jonah fixed himself, watched as he pushed his bone back into his forearm, reconnected the limb with a sickening *click*, and sealed the wound with one swipe of his hand. Then he rose onto his feet as if none of this happened, as if he wasn’t surrounded by blood-stained earth. He tapped his arms, no doubt tending to areas needing minor attention.

Jonah turned, facing Marigold, and stiffened. He must’ve not expected to be seen. His eyes were wide, scared, petrified. “Mari...” he began. He held out a hand to her, but retracted it. “Don’t tell anyone.”

Marigold opened her mouth to answer, but all that came out was a scream. Oh, how she screamed and screamed and screamed. Her throat turned raw, but she couldn’t stop.

\*\*\*

“You and Pa are the only other ones who know,” Jonah said.

Once Marigold's voice gave out, she had stopped her screaming, and now the two were sitting against the trunk of The Gnarl, though there was a noticeable gap between them.

"Pa says this... *gift* skips a generation," he continued. "I've had it since I was born. Drove my mama crazy — Pa's side has the gift, you see? Drove her crazy enough to leave us." He gave a short laugh. "I don't think I remember a single thing about her."

Marigold stared at the grass at her feet, the words registering in her mind, then fleeing just as quick.

"I'd never left Greens till recently, when I came to work for Ms. Olive. Pa'd dragged me around from job to job, but I'd always end up exposing my gift — one way or another — so we'd have to move before enough ruckus built up. Stories started passing 'round town about me, until they grew bigger and changed into stories that never happened. I figured that's why your pa never let you near Greensboro: he doesn't want you to be around the cause of the stories. Joke's on him, I guess. But —"

"My mother died when I was born," Marigold muttered.

"...I'm sorry," said Jonah.

"Can you..." Marigold's eyes rose to meet Jonah's. "Can you heal other people?"

"No," said Jonah. "I've tried, with Pa, even though he's the one who told me no. And I can die, too, in case you were wondering, but it takes a lot. Grandpa Winsley got his hands chopped off by people who knew about the gift — at least, that's what Pa told me to make me behave. It's worked," he smiled, "somewhat."

"I... I don't know what to do," said Marigold. She took a breath to steady herself. "I don't know if I can live with this secret. It's like I'm meeting someone completely new."

"I don't wanna leave," said Jonah. "Not this place, and not you." He extended his hand, placing on the grass between them. "Can we try?"

Marigold stared at Jonah's hand, then at the arm it was attached to, the one that had been fractured not minutes before. She thought of the power in that hand, the power coursing through this boy she thought she knew.

Marigold stared at Jonah's hand. Then placed her own in his.

They could try.

# The Needs of a Swarm

*Ember Reed*

I want to be limitless.

I want to know what it's like to push  
against the boundaries of my skin, feel them give  
way, and

release.

Like a swarm of bees leaving the hive  
jumbled, confusing, and terrifying to observers,  
but free.

I want to break from the confines of my  
bones and search for the beautiful bits of the  
world. Hidden away like sprigs of baby's breath,  
they call to me. Pulling me further from myself  
and summoning the swarm.

I want to follow the calls of the flowers,  
disappear from the world I know and  
reemerge to find a fresh perspective.  
But my skin clings tightly, like an old  
molt, refusing to split.

And the swarm festers.



# Contributor's Notes

**Samantha Altamirano** is an emerging artist in the midst of obtaining a Bachelor in Fine Arts degree. Samantha's work often reflects the duality between mind and body to express a range of emotions that depict the human experience. Through the use of portraiture, the figure, and poetry, these works aim to represent an expression of the soul as well as inner truths of the mind.

**Hailey Beatty** is a first-year creative writing major at SFA. Hailey usually likes to write science fiction or fantasy stories, but sometimes likes to write more relatable comedies. Hailey went to Hutto High School in Hutto, Texas, where they did sound design for the Theater department for four years, and found their love for writing scripts as well as prose. Hailey would like to use their degree to get better at writing and become an author.

**Sam Berg** is a social work BSW major at SFA. This is her first publication. Originally from Clifton, TX, Sam currently resides in Nacogdoches, TX.

**Megan Bynum** is a studio art major at SFA. Emphasizing sculpture as her primary discipline, Megan endeavors to evoke intense response from her viewers as they interpret her works. Her pieces typically appeal to the audience's greater sense of human interconnectivity or self-reflection, believing that each experience will come with a chance for deeper understanding of the self and others.

**Rae Bynum** is an undergraduate student and creative writing major at SFA. She is originally from Brownwood, Texas, but moved to Nacogdoches, Texas, to further her education and earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in creative writing. Rae has been an aspiring writer for as long as she can remember and longs for the day her work is published so that she can share her ideas with the world.

**Arianna Doughty** is a junior majoring in creative writing at SFA. Proud to be a native Texan, she hails from Bastrop, Texas. Arianna is a writer for *Her Campus* magazine.

**Brianna Dunston** is a senior creative writing major at SFA from Odessa, TX. She has served multiple semesters as the president of Subplots, a creative writing student organization at SFA. Brianna was a 2020-2021 T.E. Ferguson

Creative Writing Scholarship recipient and the first-place poetry winner of *Piney Dark 2020*. Her work has been featured in *HUMID 14*.

**Skyla Free** is a junior at SFA, working on her Bachelor of Fine Arts in creative writing. She plans on attending an MFA program after SFA. In the future, Skyla hopes to travel the world, climb Mount Everest, and sell prints of pictures she takes of her travels, while publishing her novels in the meantime.

**Emma Hill** is a published author of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. She has appeared or will appear in several literary journals including *APPLAUSE*, *Route 7 Review*, *ANGLES*, *HUMID*, *Blue Marble Review*, and local chapbooks. When not writing furiously, Emma is enjoying her final year in SFA's creative writing undergraduate program. Recently, she self-published a children's book called *Smelly Davis Needs a Bath*; you can purchase it on her website, [www.emmahillbooks.com](http://www.emmahillbooks.com).

**Shelby Hunt** is a sophomore at SFA and is currently studying creative writing to pursue her dream of becoming a publisher and writing her own novels.

**Mackenzie McAnear** is a junior who transferred to SFA from Lone Star College in the Fall of 2020. She is majoring in English and minoring in creative writing. Mackenzie hopes to use the skills and connections she makes at SFA to become an editor. Her favorite type of writing is poetry, then fiction, and lastly, non-fiction.

**Martheaus Perkins** is a second-year undergraduate student at SFA in Texas. Currently, he is pursuing his BFA in creative writing. During his freshman year of high school, he wrote for "The Unsolicited Opinion," a comedic newspaper column, and has work published in the anthology *Depths of Summer (Wingless Dreamer)*, edited by Ruchi Acharya. As an African-American writer, Perkins's heroes include Maya Angelou, Billy Collins, and Langston Hughes.

**Johnathan William Potter** is a creative writing major from Rosenberg, Texas. He has published works across multiple genres in journals such as Midwestern State's *Voices*, where he was awarded third place in their President's Award for Prose, and Howard University's *The Amistad*.

**Tristan Seidel** is a second-year creative writing major, recently changed from a theatre major. He is a junior with plans to graduate in Spring 2023.

**Savannah Shelton** is a senior creative writing student who will graduate with her BFA in December 2021. Savannah is from a tiny town called Westphalia,

Texas, where the cornfields outnumber the people, and she enjoys reading, writing, baking, and annoying her roommates.

**Kaitlyn Stockholm** is a senior at SFA completing her bachelor's degree in history with a focus in secondary education and a minor in creative writing. Originally from Beaumont, Texas, her family moved to Denton when she was seven and she lived there until moving to SFA. Kaitlyn plans on getting her masters in creative writing before teaching full-time. Her world revolves around her faith, dog, family, friends, students, and her incredible roommates.

**Mary Deborah Talik** just loves taking pictures. "Those were some of my best landscape photos."

**Nathan Thompson** is a creative writing BFA student at SFA. His play, *The Fabric of Our Reality*, was produced as a part of the off-stage 2018-19 Centennial High School series and his poem "In Waves" was published in *HUMID 14*. Originally from Frisco, Texas, Nathan currently resides in Nacogdoches, Texas.





## Contributors

Samantha Altamirano  
Hailey Beatty  
Sam Berg  
Megan Bynum  
Rae Bynum  
Arianna Doughty  
Brianna Dunston  
Skyla Free  
Emma Hill  
Shelby Hunt  
Mackenzie McAnear  
Martheaus Perkins  
Johnathan William Potter  
Tristan Seidel  
Savannah Shelton  
Kaitlyn Stockholm  
Mary Deborah Talik  
Nathan Thompson

**Stephen F. Austin State University**  
**Nacogdoches, Texas**