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*Aquila Review* publishes original art, creative nonfiction, drama, fiction, music, nonfiction, and poetry.

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## **Ed**

*Jeff Brainard*

If you were alive I believe you'd still be my guardian.  
Though my life is no longer a string of youthful indiscretions.  
Still you would advise me, always  
The practical older brother.  
How on earth did you ever become practical?  
You were the problem child, not I.  
How your escapades thrilled me!  
Coming home with an eye red as a sunset  
From one of your wild parties,  
Your pals boasted they had to stop you  
From throwing a rival from a balcony.  
If you got home at all  
I rolled into the boozy breath of your body  
All night long,  
Our bedroom having been given over  
To your allies.  
And of course you stole.  
Auto parts and guinea pigs, as I remember.  
I went to the barn myself  
To see the muddled critters scrambling for food.  
You had them all sold by the end of the day.

Step-dad, though, was your abiding antagonist.  
The big Swede was no match for your scrappy  
Interventions. The dinner-table brawl  
That had me running to escape his heavy hands  
Ended with me out the door and you two  
Hurling threats at each other.  
The end came a few weeks later just before  
You left for Germany as a Private in the U.S. Army.  
It started as a squabble over washing cars  
And ended as a fist fight in the driveway.  
Neighbors had to stop it.  
I felt responsible for Step-dad's bloody lip.

And then you came home,  
Collected your things, and left for good.  
You had a cheap apartment nearby.  
I'd go over for beers after school,  
Listen to your war stories  
About drinking and the German girl  
You fell in love with but couldn't bring home.

Soon enough, you married anyway.  
Los Angeles was booming.  
Life in the suburbs suited you.  
You worked out of your ranch-style house  
Sitting at a corner desk and typing reports  
All afternoon in your Family Room,  
Posh with a pool table and a three-stool bar.  
Whiskey and barbecued steaks at 6pm.

You never got the swimming pool.  
You told me later you knew something was wrong  
The day you came home from a Little League game.  
You had trouble opening the car door.  
For months you told no one your suspicions.  
You did your own research.  
A trip to the Salk Institute sealed your fate.

When you started to limp we took the trip  
To Baja you'd always wanted to take.  
Every morning we had *huevos rancheros*  
And margaritas for breakfast. In Cabo  
We splurged, could take in the Sea of Cortez  
And the Pacific Ocean  
Simply turning our heads.  
This was luxury and roughing it  
The way you liked. Having to help  
Bathe you was more of the same.  
Margaritas together in the shower.

What did you teach me?  
To defy pretension. To bury it.  
What do I remember most? Your laugh.

How you laughed at my juvenile proclamations,  
My boasts of the good life to come.

## Dyshan's Civil War

*Grace Olvera*

Dyshan walked slowly toward the lake. His bare feet against the emerald-green grass felt soothed after wearing soiled and worn-out boots that were too small for far too long. They were boots he was never meant to wear . . . boots that should have still been on his friend. He would never forget that day when he had searched through a field of fallen men; he had prayed desperately to find Robert amongst the wounded rather than the deceased.

“Dyshan, if you’re lookin’ for Robert, he’s in that pile over there.”

Dyshan had turned towards his sergeant and looked at him through squinted eyes full of hate. He’d kept his lips compressed to hold in all he had wanted to say.

“Boy, don’t look at me like that. I didn’t kill ’em. Now go over and take his boots, son.” “I’m not takin’ his boots, and I’m not your son . . . Sir,” Dyshan replied between gritted teeth.

“I’m jus’ gonna pretend I didn’t hear that this one time. Now git on over there and do what I said . . . son.”

“Sir, he’s not dead!” Dyshan cried out as he reached his friend. He dropped to his knees and covered a blood-squirting neck wound with his hands.

“Well, he’s ’bout to be. When he’s gone, take them boots.”

Though at the time his feet were bare, Dyshan would never have submitted if he had not been under direct orders. Orders were like bars to a cell, and a soldier was never free from them until a war ended or he was dead. Dyshan had hated himself for his compliance as he pulled the boots off his friend’s feet with hands still covered in warm blood.

Dyshan’s fingers clenched the strap to a tattered satchel, stained with dirt and the blood of nameless soldiers, that lay across his broad chest as he sat down at the edge of the lake. He slowly dipped his aching feet into the near-freezing water, and as his blisters and open sores met the healing liquid, the immediate burning sensation caused him to flinch. The dense forest of evergreen trees around the lake reminded him of back home. He and his brothers had often been in the woods building forts, playing at war, hunting. *My brothers. Gone. Who first taught children to play at war?*

The faint, mournful sound of a wolf howling broke through his thoughts and simultaneously met his mood. He wished he could be that wolf, running through his home with a pack. *A wolf’s life may have hardships, too, but is it not free?* Dyshan could only dimly remember the feeling of freedom. He took the dispatch

from his satchel, held it in his hand, and stared at it as the smell of musky smoke and roasting meat drifted from his nearby camp. He thought, *I should just throw this into the fire. I could be free. Look at this place. I could stay here and hide in the woods until this God-damn war is over.*

What was he even fighting for? He didn't know anymore. His eyes met the orange glow of the setting sun reflecting on the water, and he thought back to that young man. Three years younger. A lifetime younger. He remembered how brave and noble he had felt as he had signed that enlistment paper, and he recalled his pa talking about the importance of states' rights and how the "damn Yankees" were trying to take away freedom from the Southern states. Now he wondered whether states' rights mattered when your bayonet is piercing through the ribcage of a man who could be your neighbor or when you watch helplessly as your best friend chokes on his own blood from a gunshot wound to the neck or when you read a letter from your ma informing you of another brother's death. *Damn states' rights! Damn them to Hell!* Another thought forced its way into his mind that made his stomach turn. Despite the North's ruthlessness throughout the War, they had abolished slavery. Dyshan's family had never owned slaves, and he wasn't interested in trying to help someone keep theirs. What if the War had only ever been a futile attempt to preserve some men's freedom while keeping others from it?

Dyshan was exhausted. He took a deep breath, and he could nearly taste spiky, herbal pine and earthy grass. Oh, if he could only stay here and pull out his sketch book to draw as he used to. What a perfect scene lay before him. The sounds of chirping crickets and croaking frogs were like a personal symphony as he looked up at the night sky. Here was the same host of stars he was once so accustomed to staring at in wide-eyed wonder. It had been so long since he had looked up and pondered the meanings of the constellations. If God put patterns in the stars—dots that connected into pictures of lions and archers—surely there were patterns and meaning in the rest of the world. Peaceful reflections were soon interrupted by more ominous thoughts. Dyshan had always been told that killing in battle was not murder, but he still often wondered if God hated him for killing his fellow man on the battlefield.

"Are You still there?" he asked aloud. "Do You see or care about what we're doin' to each other down here?"

There were no answers. A single tear rolled down Dyshan's cheek, and that tear opened the floodgates to all the tears he had never given the chance to flow. He covered his face with his hands and sobbed freely for the first time in his memory. Those tears were long-overdue and healing.

After the last tear had fallen, Dyshan sniffled and wiped both eyes and his nose with the back of his hands. He looked at the dispatches again. A plea for

reinforcements. He knew it wouldn't matter. Nothing could stop the Yankees now, and he wasn't certain he wanted them to be stopped.

Dyshan pulled his feet out of the water, stood up, and began walking back to his campsite. It was not in his nature to mindlessly obey. He had always had a rebellious fire in his heart, but being a soldier had all but completely quenched it. He had considered desertion before, but never had he been given such a chance. His rebel heart cried out: *I want to be free again!*

Dyshan stood in front of the campfire where the gamey smell of a pair of plump, gray squirrels roasting on a spit over an open flame made him remember how hungry he was. Two squirrels all to himself. *I could eat better here than I have in several years.* He was a farm boy raised on the land, after all, and he could easily survive on what this place would give him. He had also ventured far enough off the path to his destination that he didn't think anyone would find him . . . if they even bothered to look.

The South was going to lose. That was certain now. Every commander and every soldier felt this inevitability to their core. When the War was over, he could just return home. Home. He could see his ma running towards him as she cried out his name, and he could feel her arms embracing him. As he took a bite out of unseasoned squirrel, he stared into the flames that small gusts of wind were blowing about and imagined instead, that he was eating warm rabbit stew with fresh bread and butter that his ma would have prepared for him on the night of his return. An owl hooting overhead startled him out of his beautiful fiction.

Dyshan quickly finished his meal, doused the fire, and began to put those wretched boots back on his feet. He stopped. He looked back towards the lake, the trees, and the glorious, starlit sky. He felt as if these particular stars were placed there just for him . . . like a choir of lights singing to his soul; they reminded him that there was still beauty left in this harsh world. How could he go on being a soldier in a war he didn't believe in? How could he continue following orders to the bitter end when he knew there was no hope? The answer came to him as swiftly as the cold wind that was biting his face. He would finish his mission and return to his unit, but he would not fight another day for "the cause" that was not even his. No. He would fight for the men beside him. He would use what strength was left in him to protect his brothers-in-arms and himself from dying in this God-forsaken war. He had borne witness to light and beauty and freedom in this peaceful place, and he would hold on to that until he was at liberty to find it again.

Dyshan picked up Robert's boots and walked with a look of somber determination towards the placid lake. He stopped at the edge, looked down at the boots, and then, with a forceful grunt, threw them into the water.

Dyshan's bare feet were tired, sore, and bitterly cold as he settled them into the frigid metal stirrups, yet an almost-forgotten smile spread across his face as he rode into the night.

## **Gray**

*Amanda Pirkey*

Gray looks like an overcast day.  
Gray sounds like thunder in the distance.  
Gray smells like a smoldering fire.  
Gray tastes like salty tears.

## **The Seagulls**

*Hadlee Coleman*

Spreading their long wings,  
They soar high up in the sky  
And swoop to the sea.

## **St. George Island**

*Morgan Elizabeth Sanders*

Ocean.  
Glittery blue.  
Glistening in the sun.  
The palm trees swaying in the wind . . .  
The beach.

## On Wanting to Be a Great Poet

*Dorie LaRue*

When I do housework,  
for background music, I turn on  
*I Shouldn't Be Alive*, a series  
where folly and entertainment  
collide. Clinking the dishes clean,  
mopping and stopping to glimpse  
yachts going down, avalanches crushing  
North Face wearing privilege,  
from another room hearing faint  
ghastly screams, "We're going to diiiiiiiiie!"  
somehow make distaff bearable.  
Sometimes a lean-jawed guy spots  
a lone search-and-rescue plane,  
or it's the woman with a PhD  
and mosquito rosettes all  
over her body who hears  
a hum increasing in pitch, getting louder  
and louder until she's sure this time  
it is not just another imaginary friend.  
They all do the same thing, yell their guts  
out at a pilot who can no more hear them  
than he can see the dried blood  
on their briar-shredded hands.  
They are just frantic dots to him,  
or if unlucky, more mountain-brown  
rocks, or drops of ocean froth,  
or drifts of soporific snow,  
and when he turns around,  
they think, *Has he gone for help?*  
*Did he see us? Has he given up?*  
*Was that an I-see-you-hang-on*  
*dip of a wing, or just part of its*  
*banking reactive force before*  
*hope levels, disappears*  
*over that granite outcropping*  
*never to be seen again?*

You never know the profundity  
of that delight-despair-dizziness  
until the end when the narrative  
is wrapped up by the survivor  
waving his nubs for emphasis.  
Eventually my house is cleaner,  
if not clean. I'm back in the rainforest  
of my skull. Sometimes I can smell  
the breath of a rescue plane.  
I've looked for it for years,  
thinking I may already  
be a winner of a contest  
and permanent ovation.  
My famous poet friend says,  
"There is a layer of poets  
that are perpetually second best."  
"It makes sense," she says,  
"just as the winners always float  
to the top, the best of the losers  
drift, perpetually, just below."

What bothers me,  
is there is no unlinking the little chains  
of bridesmaidary, no unseeing  
the understanding that rescue planes  
may even be hallucinations.  
I just have to button up my collar,  
look out over the weeds and stones  
and snow, stop looking up at the sky,  
and tuck in my shirttails of surrender,  
all this time, just white flags  
in waiting.

## **Stranger Trails**

*Samantha Gallegos*

There's not much to fear in the dark. At least, I wouldn't call it that.

They say that once you pass *el barrio*, things start to follow you. They wouldn't say what, though, and that's the trick. Something happens in the trees when you trail past by them. They whisper. Under the moon, they know that something dark lies within their hollow. This, I believe, is what I hear every night among the rocks and the trees.

There's something among us. You creep up the paths of dust and rumble and leave all except what can't be left behind. I often think of the mind that's going, that runs farther and faster than the unblessed soul perched over the bedroom windowsill. I suppose it's not what they mean. Even if they see, if they hear and they go, they can't all be travelers.

*Abuelas*, with their all-knowing hands and glistening eyes, pass on tales about magic that manifests best at night. I thought of this magic as a drink and a command, a *chancla* that doesn't go past their murmurs and these awaiting ears. I thought that their rules stayed between us, that only one kind of wrath exists for not listening; I suppose this is what they mean. They advise you to sleep before the witching hours start to cry. Something will reach out towards you and impulse you to gaze towards the density of trees cast between buildings. Hooded winds that graze against your skin, they will kindly pick your chin up until your eyes adjust to the midnight, lost in a space where the last of light remains. They say that the moonlight brings to life a set of eyes among the darkness that casts its sights towards the lonely. In November, the fog attaches itself better than in October. Step closer, and the humidity buries heavier than July. Stay longer, the cold fasts on the living stronger than any winter.

Silence is awfully harsh on souls who are raised on guitar strings. When noise had its welcome, they had masks. Some of us wore them better than others; some had prettier kinds, and even less had charm peaking over. The fewer masked all that was real. No chance to savor a dance with a *fantasma*, for if you look down, they would say, chance you would see one foot fowl, the other hooved. You wear them only for the *fiestas*, so I suppose you could say that any day you navigated the streets, others were wearing some kind of *façade*. You see, they're for vision just as they are for our spirits. They shine while some remain hidden, satiate as some starve, listen intently as some disappear back into the labyrinth. Some sow legends like *vaqueros* banished in the wasteland, whistling for bones because there are no rhymes for us here. Out from the labyrinth and into the dead

mist of the other side: this side of life better embedded in the stories than death in its grip.

They speak of ways to practice and to heed. I thought of all the void they say not to peer into, the swirling of scented nothingness more dizzying than the ancient names some once knew them by. They often hint with slurring sentences while casting new sights with no delay and no haste. Mind who comes in; stand straight for whoever goes out; keep fortune close and wariness closer. Breathe for the dead, but hold your breath when surrounded by the unknown. Be but don't do. Some attempt to stick to the concrete. Some of them pray to remain in the sunlight, while others play with bonds and tease what is fated. There are many of us who aren't made readily aware of the creatures that lurk in the beyond because only here there's nothing past these boundaries.

Over here, though, there is talk of a wanderer who is looking for us. You can't find them in the heat, much less in the light of day. There will always be warnings of going out too far, too late, too soon. I think, always thinking, of getting away from here, from anywhere and everywhere, all at once. Gathered in groups, you tune in the laughter that comes of our caution. In the opposite scheme, they are just fools, toying with a beyond that does not exist, save what has already been created of ourselves. The monsters, these opposites say, are our own reflections, the very trouble shaped from crossing over into what some could never hold, much less bear. Could it be, that the fabled wanderer is in our own exhale, or truly fixates on our shadows, ever seeking to grasp our hand as the ender walks forward backwards? Perhaps if they could touch the black sky, then the opposing opposites may see the *lechuzas* fly overhead. Perhaps if the secret of life were shared with them, it would begin to answer all they could possibly ever dare to know.

Haunts. Nothing haunting like our reckoning.

There's a tale about a field nestled among the merging of weeping trees. They say when you don't speak loudly enough, or do not hush your tones, that when you recall God's many faces and forget your own name, you start to dream of *la bruja del sur*, waiting for you in home's town. Sweet, seething, everlasting and ever-ending. In this state of death, some mumble what you may never knew you could. Forsake the concrete and begin to hear the creaking planks beneath your feet. The humidity of the tepid lake stiffens. Kindred lightning bugs glide, passing by old railings. A sight to see, for crimson glaze and yellowed trekking. A bench beneath sheltered branches. A whistling howl. A shallow breath from the unknown. Then the calm of adrenaline. The prevalent, grasping ground. The unhurried, creeping, pricking sensation of having to walk and run simultaneously.

Labyrinth of *la raza*. Could some have imagined it was ever made for us? I thought—I believed, coming up this way, I would avoid the edge, ever pushing

into the ground's breaking south bearing no more than this weight. I thought this way came the end to the beginning, but now only think of unruly screaming into the rapid vanishing. I can hardly taste it. I can hardly *feel* it. And they predicted it. That way which winds back but never forward, seemingly down and not above, seemingly everything and nothing all at once; this unknown so engraved in the force of our bones holding us here. I've followed the universe to here, for this . . . .  
*No hay idioma para eso*, is there?

It's always when you're alone that you remember. They say if you close your eyes, and your lips begin to dry in the biting air, ghosts rise from the roots, chanting names within cracks in the earth. The hollers of warnings cast, screams from dreams within the *tap tap tapping* against the dying fright of fraught melancholy forgotten. The deep yawning of the traveler mapped onto the rigid bridge into the woods unknown.

It's always when you're not yourself that you remember. They say, if you reach your hand out, the decaying stops. The turning waits. You can finally hear the fluttering in the breeze, the breath of the grave, the lost within the wild.

I can hear you. I speak of you.

Can you hear me? Have you written my name?

Your melody still follows me.

Please don't come for me.

*Nunca paré de correr.*

## **Cats**

*Daniela Campos*

Curious creature who jumps high.  
Always sleeping inside.  
Tail fluffy like a cloud.  
Sneaky pet that likes to hide.

## **Nine**

*Daniela Campos*

One tail that stands high.  
Two eyes that hunt at night.  
Three mice to chase around.  
Four legs for running away.  
Five garbage cans to jump upon.  
Six strangers who leave some food.  
Seven friends to keep company with.  
Eight buildings that stand up high.  
Nine lives to spare.

## **Silent Hunter**

*Daniela Campos*

Crouched in high green grass  
Eyeing the perfect dinner.  
Soft pounce for the kill.

## **Just a Suggestion**

*Dorie LaRue*

The psychiatrist I worked for one summer when I was in college splashed his waiting room with ghastly art of forests and streams and mountains in pleasant pastels and weird light. Why not put real art up, I suggested, Van Gogh, Marc Chagall, Frido Kahlo, to which he replied, his patients did not need images that might upset them. He meant *trigger* but back then that word had not been invented, coming as it does out of our present world of daily shootings and movies about shootings and blood-bath hit songs.

One man had been coming for twenty-five years, as long as he had been married. I peeked in his fat folders where his shopaholic wife lived, and where he loved his mentally challenged child who kept him trapped in a loveless marriage. They were all trapped in loveless situations, marriages or live-ins or dusty apartments with dying parents. After I sent the bills out, I indulged myself with their stories and stale, bitter, yet satisfying-some-kind-of-thing coffee.

The twenty-five-year guy had wanted to be an artist or a revolutionary, but he had a mentally challenged teen now in special daycare with no one else to love him. Every week at three he came and sat across from the cheerful eyesore called *Summer Trees*, acrylic by knife, not even the real thing, just a machine churn-out. It must have been even more distressing for him, eyes accosted weekly with a gazillion shades of pink sunrise,

and soft preternatural green fairy trees  
and perhaps a discomfiting feeling;  
the man who advised him about life  
had impaired aesthetics, was deaf  
to resonances that transcended boundaries,  
exalted and decried some mystery  
inside us, strung it high,  
wrung it out, again and again  
until it settled somewhere like it  
knew it was home.

All I could do was wish him something better  
to look at, while he waited for the two o'clock  
claustrophobe to finish,  
Orlando's lost-at-sea lifeboat,  
for example, the sailor stretched out in  
nonchalant surrender, waiting to die.  
Maybe it would have triggered him  
to the source of suffering buried in all  
those stories which never went anywhere  
except hollow circles like birds make  
when they rise up after a gunshot  
badly aimed.

A little dark shark is tucked in the corner,  
a nice touch.

## **The Burn**

*Carolyn Breedlove*

The slowing plane banks,  
letting us down, ears closing, in preparation.  
This day began in cool sun,  
meadowlark-embroidered prairie wind-hush,  
the smell of smoke. That wind had turned,  
in the night, to give another sense  
than distant plume, of Fort Collins besieged by fire.

Short-term memory's the first to ash—  
recall of breakfast, what's already said.  
One hazy panorama, then,  
across all the plain of our lives?  
Or as little say in the moments  
that sear and glow as in wildfire:  
what you wore, what he said, the colors of the quilt?  
What wouldn't I give, what martinied small talk,  
for another afternoon under the sycamores,  
wind headlong through grass, Paw-Paw and Grandma  
at twilight, teaching me to say *bonsoir*?

Our flying beast completes its turn,  
catching from one side late day's flame,  
casting us all into light.

## **Pep Band**

*Daniel Vines*

The University of New Orleans:

where the basketball players are recruited from all over the world  
and the pep band is a bunch of miscreant  
guitarists scraped off the pavement of Frenchmen Street. We won

the Southland Conference and got invited to the tournament in  
Katy, Texas: a free ride and all the wining and dining a champion could want.  
We cruised to the championship game and finally  
got the national attention we deserved.

The players ran out into ESPN2  
and we (the pep band) stumbled out after them,  
dirty, dehydrated, and freely hungover. We won the championship  
(as overdogs do).

Erik Thomas won Southland Player of the Year and  
Frank snuck my wine into the arena.

Erik Thomas won Tournament MVP and  
Frank spilled the wine all over the stands.

Erik Thomas was named All-American honorable mention and  
Frank took off his socks to mop up the wine.

Clint threw up. That sax guy showed up at halftime.

And behind them, Frank played his cheap bass,  
drunk, barefoot, on ESPN2.

We are the champions of the Southland,

running on 4 hours of wilted sleep.

Now we play for the championship ceremony  
for 2 hours.

And we load the heavy equipment  
for 1 hour.

And we ride the bus back to New Orleans  
for 6 hours,

and the chairs aren't comfortable enough to fall asleep in.

And when we get back at 6 AM, I finally pay the ticket  
for the coattail ride to Katy, Texas:  
in the hotel mess we left: my keys;

in the New Orleans rain: me, my gear;  
out of the locked house: me.

# *Quarantine: A Play in One Act*

*Rachel Green*

## Characters

MAN — His age doesn't matter. He is dressed nicely in slacks, a button-up long-sleeve shirt (sleeves rolled up), and a vest. Think of Richard Gere in the movie *Chicago* without the hat and jacket.

FULL-BODY FEMALE MANNEQUIN — She sits on a chair with wheels. She wears a dressing gown, fuzzy-slipper heels, and a wig.

## Setting

The action takes place in a dressing room in late 2020.

## Scene 1

*(Lights rise on a dressing room. A Broadway-style makeup mirror sporting no glass and unlit lights stands on a small makeup table facing upstage. The makeup table holds makeup, eyeliner, a brush, and a jewelry holder with necklaces and earrings. The MANNEQUIN sits in a chair facing the mirror and the darkness of upstage; one arm rests on the makeup table while the other arm rests in her lap. A rack of sequined gowns slouches upstage left, and a small trunk squats upstage right. The trunk holds stockings, boas, and other assorted accessories; it is ajar, and many items are spilling over the side. Near the MANNEQUIN is another small table with a full coffee pot and a mug. A shelf at stage left faces center stage. The shelf holds wigged mannequin heads, boxed wigs, and multiple pairs of stiletto shoes. There is a door stage right that faces the makeup table.*

*Just beyond the dressing room is a basement scene that is barely discernible in the dimness [a washer and dryer, stairs, metal shelving with paint cans, etc.]. “Cell Block Tango” from Chicago plays softly in the background. The MAN enters through the door as the music fades out. HE speaks to the MANNEQUIN.)*

MAN: Where have you been?

*(Beat. HE crosses to the MANNEQUIN.)*

I've been worried sick about you.

*(Beat. HE bends over to kiss the top of the MANNEQUIN's head.)*

MAN (CONT.): I was, too. I know I said some things last night, but I didn't mean them.

*(Beat.)*

I really don't think now is the time to discuss this.

*(HE takes a few steps back.)*

Yes, I want to be with you, and, for the hundredth time, no, I'm not ashamed of you.

*(HE puts his hands on the MANNEQUIN's shoulders.)*

I am actually so proud of you; it takes courage to be as open and vulnerable as you are.

*(HE squeezes her shoulders lightly and looks into the MANNEQUIN's face.)*

You look so tired . . . . I wish you wouldn't stay out all night like that.

*(Beat.)*

You're right. I'm sorry. Can we please move on now?

*(HE takes a step downstage.)*

Want anything to eat?

*(Beat.)*

I'll just grab you a coffee then.

*(HE crosses to the coffee pot, pours a cup of coffee, and sets it on the makeup table.)*

Look, honey, your set starts in less than an hour. You really need to get ready.

*(HE tousles the MANNEQUIN's hair.)*

MAN (CONT.): At least you have your stockings on. Let me help you fix the seams.

*(HE bends down beside her chair and begins adjusting her stockings. He speaks to her while making the adjustments.)*

Do you think we should get some black ones? I think your legs would look great in black stockings.

*(HE caresses the leg of the MANNEQUIN. HE stands up and takes a few steps towards stage left.)*

I have the inserts for your bra. A little cleavage never hurt anyone.

*(HE removes bra inserts from a pocket in his pants and puts the inserts down on the makeup table. HE walks to the rack and begins to inspect dresses. HE turns and speaks to the MANNEQUIN over his shoulder.)*

You're still sitting? Please get moving or you'll barely have time to get your makeup on. Hey! Do that cat-eye eyeliner look with your smoky eyeshadow. It really goes with your costume tonight. Here. I'll help.

*(HE walks over to the mannequin and puts eyeliner and mascara on her.)*

What?

*(Beat.)*

Yes. You know I think you're beautiful just the way you are, but it's a show, sweetie, and you're the star. My star.

*(HE caresses the MANNEQUIN's cheek lovingly and then rummages through the trunk.)*

Why haven't you moved? Come on. Please. I promise we'll go out later and have some fun, just the two of us.

*(HE keeps his eyes on the MANNEQUIN as HE goes to get some shoes from the shelf.)*

MAN (CONT.): Yeah, you have been working a lot lately. Oh, that talent scout is supposed to be in the audience again tonight. I think he's really into you.

*(HE smiles approvingly at the MANNEQUIN.)*

I can just see your name up in lights on the Strip! Can you just imagine us prancing around Sin City, arm in arm, living the dream? Oh, my God, I can't even think about it right now! It gets me so worked up!

*(Beat.)*

Baby, you look gorgeous! If anything, you could stand to gain a few pounds.

*(Beat.)*

Of course not. I'd never criticize your appearance. You know I love your body!

*(HE walks over to the MANNEQUIN and whispers loudly in her ear.)*

If we had more time, I'd show you.

*(HE returns to normal volume.)*

Now please get ready.

*(HE walks back to the dress rack. HE turns back snappily to answer the MANNEQUIN.)*

God, do we have to do this now?

*(HE is exasperated. THEY have had this conversation before.)*

Your act is great. I've told you this. I'll never understand your self-esteem issues. You're gorgeous, talented, and adored by me and your fans.

*(HE fiddles with the jewelry on the makeup table. HE chooses a necklace and drapes it over the MANNEQUIN's head.)*

MAN (CONT.): Get up, baby. I'll get your costume. Just please finish getting ready.

*(HE brings a dress over to the mannequin and holds it up to show her as HE talks.)*

Hurry, please. Your fans are waiting for you. I love you, too, babe.

*(HE drapes the dress over the mirror. HE kisses the mannequin on her head and turns her around so that SHE is facing down stage. A light shines on the MANNEQUIN as HE exits through the door. Something about her looks familiar, but her face is in deep shadow. The light intensifies and rises to reveal her features. Just when the light brightens enough so the audience can see her properly . . . blackout.)*

## **If**

*Rachel Green*

If you were me and I were you,  
You'd see the many things I do  
And I'd find out what makes you *YOU*  
If you were me and I were you.

If I were you and you were me,  
It would be fun to try and see  
Ourselves as one and one as we  
If I were you and you were me.

If they were us and we were they,  
It would only take one day  
To find such wonderful things to say  
If they were us and we were they.

If we were they and they were us,  
They'd see our difference as a plus.  
The world would change without a fuss  
If we were they and they were us.

## **Look, Kid**

*Te'yana Pugh*

Look, kid, if you were “normal,” you wouldn’t be you,  
So when stuff gets tough and when tough gets rough,  
When you have to find another way, when your wheelchair rolls the wrong way,  
When your mom barges in your room to make sure you’re okay,  
Just remember, if you were “normal,” you wouldn’t be you.

Look, kid, if you were “normal,” you would have a clue.  
It’s not all rainbows and sunshine when everything is always in plain view.  
It’s easier to use your imagination when you’re always in a dark room.  
You can’t see the hairs on Mrs. Goalie’s chin  
Or the crazy way she chews.  
Sometimes I hide under my blankets so I can see the world just like you.  
Look, kid, if you were “normal,” you would have a clue.

Look, kid, if you were “normal,” then you would know that no one is normal  
anyway,  
And if you’re worried about what you’re missing—like what the radio plays,  
How it sounds to clap, tap, the loud crack of fireworks, cries . . . the sound of  
gloom—  
Just remember that before long, due to age, everyone in the world will say,  
“Huh?” and “What?” and just nod their head “Okay.”  
Look, kid, if you were “normal,” then you would know that no one is normal  
anyway.

## Links

*Jeff Brainard*

Step-dad thumped the nearest bale now and then,  
his amateur eye lamenting the late  
wind. Every time he swung he strained his years,  
puffing in his fat to see the little  
ball flutter through the ladies' turf. Pouting  
with conviction he churned through the noon sun  
till the dew had all burnt off and the grass  
no longer stuck to our clubs.

Mother watched  
from the car and rubbed her knees and the white  
mounds about her toes thinking of Father  
and of days that went faster. A winking  
man he was! He'd have set the town on fire  
if he thought the town would laugh or at least  
grant him the luck of a hopeless son:  
just the kind of man you hear years later  
got run over by a truck.

Step-dad brought  
Mom a cardboard cup of coffee each time  
he bought another basketful of balls.  
I called him a Lazy Buddha  
and whacked away a pile of tees to  
every one of his. Oh, he was all right:  
He had built half of everything there was  
to build from soup gardens to telescopes,  
and the green coupe that Father'd left  
he dismantled for a tractor to putt  
about the yard and sow his peas. Mother's  
hopes were that her legs would go completely,  
that people would care for her who didn't  
care for her in some white place not unlike  
the Dakotas where Father fell asleep  
on the ice fishing minnows and they had  
to chip him out next day with iron mallets.

The grass was wet when we left again,  
and there were as many empty coffee

cups as iron baskets. Mother put her arm around my shoulders as the ball-boy cursed us for the divots and shoved off swinging his rake to gather up our Sunday putts.

## **A Short Slog**

*Bennett Sewell*

I got to hurtin' to myself about my friend  
Sitting in the pew before his service began.  
I had watched and felt as his early weather came at him  
only to wish it had turned out differently.  
The first spoken words and the unspoken silence  
were the same as he made up his mind about himself,  
the same ones that he spoke to himself later on over and over again:  
“Cry it out, suck it up, get used to it.”  
Once she got around to it, Old Mattie told him that, lying in his crib,  
as she stuck a sugar rag in his mouth.  
But he never did.

## **C.V. and Me and My Dog Truth**

*Bennett Sewell*

It was as quiet as it had ever been or was ordained to be,  
as quiet as the North Star who is visible to all, yet only speaks when spoken to by  
wandering souls lost in the night of their own making.  
C.V. and Me and my dog, Truth, were together again,  
The Front Porch Climber's Association seeking personal mountain tops where all  
things true are revealed to us, where there are more answers than questions.

C.V. sat in a silent rocker, comfortable with itself from many years of service.  
I sat in a complaining swing that I had oiled into submissive silence in anticipation  
of C.V.'s visit.

Truth slept on the porch floor, his breath silent as it moved in and out.

Truth was his name because when he spoke, I had learned to listen.

He disliked most snakes and liked most visitors, as did I.

On a small table within easy reach of C.V. and me was a half-filled bottle (Old  
Mountain Top) and two small, clear glasses labeled "His" and "Mine."

Truth did not drink.

As we sat, the incessant wind died down, gone to where it goes when that happens,  
allowing the silence that lives in the dirt to rise up to tree top levels, just like shade  
does when protected from the sun by tree leaves, engulfing us, C.V. and me and  
my dog, Truth, not seen but ever so strongly felt,  
demanding to be used, to pull the outside in, to push the inside out, to work it all  
over, even for old friends who had long since quit responding to the push and pull  
of life without due consideration.

C.V. shook the silence first:

"Silence is what it makes of itself.

Silence is the space between what was just said and what might be said.

Many times, it is so overwhelmed by what was just said or might be said  
or clotted with what was said or should've been said in the distant past  
that it has difficulty saying what it has to say.

Silence is where ships go to load and unload.

Some do, some don't. Some sail forth, some sink.

That is what I have to say. What about you?"

“Well said, C.V., old friend. Well said.

I say:

Silence was the space after I raised my small hand before I was called upon.

Silence was the space after I asked the question that came from the deepest part of me before she answered in harmony from the deepest part of her.

Silence was the space after I received the warm, wet newborn in my outstretched arms before I was able to say what I felt.

My son was also silent in wonder of his new place after having said what he had to say for the first time.

Silence is the space where I stand in front of that granite marker in the family plot.

When I read the chiseled name

and remember the same one that I gave to him was given to me.

When I read the chiseled date

and remember the short time that was ours together.

When I read the chiseled last four words: ‘Till we meet again’

and wonder of this meeting place that I sail forth to.

That’s what I have to say, C.V.

What about you?”

There was a long silence and then Truth’s tail hit the floor as it wagged.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Was he dreaming or listening?

C.V. shook the silence once more:

“Well said, old friend, well said.

I say, ‘*Bon voyage.*’”

## **On Karen and Dearest Claudia**

*Dorie LaRue*

In my newest chapbook  
of poems, *Sweet Ruin*,  
by my favorite poet, Tony Hoagland,  
straight from the secondhand bookstore,  
someone wrote on its flap,  
*Dearest Claudia:*  
*On your birthday, poems*  
*I love to a friend I love.*  
*Karen 2005.* What could be  
more amazing than the recognition  
of a brilliant poet, a penchant  
for anaphora, and a declaration of love?  
I wonder about Karen with her unfortunate name  
now in 2021, how her heartfelt  
act of love was so carelessly thrown  
aside. Who were these two?  
Were their names normally, comfortably  
linked by other friends almost like one word?  
*Oh, here's Claudia-n-Karen, glad you could make it.*  
Did their other not-so-wonderful friends spot them  
as an inviolate rule, having afternoon coffee together?  
Shopping? Bar hopping? I picture their lunches,  
their multitudinous cell phone conversations,  
hear the echoes of their therapeutic laments and laughter.  
Their hating the same people, politicians,  
horseradish. When meeting unexpectedly,  
I am sure, they even kissed like the French.  
No! I have to think Claudia is dead,  
and her philistine family tossed the book  
with her other effects no one wanted.  
I like to think that is what happened  
and not just that Claudia moved on  
forgetting that one amazing  
piece of luck in time I would kill for.  
I don't know. Maybe the colon after Claudia  
turned Claudia off, the way it smacks of business

and often precedes a list or an explanation.  
Or maybe that Karen really was a Karen in the making,  
a ruinous symbol marrying both ageism and sexism,  
in one perky proper noun,  
and Claudia had her principles.  
No! I don't like to think they drifted  
apart, found better pals, or got married  
and dumped their single friend.  
No. For my peace of mind,  
Claudia has to be dead.  
And Karen at times can barely  
finish her espresso, blinking  
back her tears,  
at Starbucks.

## **Lost**

*Leo Castell*

If you were a forest  
then the tallest trees  
would be in your eyes,  
piercing night skies.

Your voice hides in a mist  
like a haunting breeze  
gently giving rise  
to butterflies.

These memories of eerie beauty  
live in a candle your moonlight kissed  
and by its glow, I hope you find me  
tending to this flame that still tries  
despite having said our goodbyes.

## **Six**

*Hadlee Coleman*

One lonely meadow draped with  
Two clouds of fog is grazed by  
Three brawny bucks with antlers.  
Four dainty does and their  
Five spotted fawns dance between the  
Six enormous pine trees in the back.

## **Among Giants**

*Jeff Brainard*

What better place to lay a claim to fame  
Or decry plunder than poetry? “All felled,”  
Cried the fearful Jesuit. Most of us  
Indeed, are second growth, five hundred  
Years old on average. But the Ancients,  
Almost as old as gnarled Methuselah,  
Flourish in sacred groves the saws couldn’t  
Reach, and seeded a skein of green oceans  
On the foggy, lachrymose northern coast  
Of California. I am ancient; I survived.  
I am not the tallest. That’s Hyperion,  
Recently discovered by your teams of  
Canopy Scientists, zealous, high-minded  
Adventurers, really, willing to crawl  
On their bellies under the beached whales  
Of our fallen sisters and, Lilliputian-like,  
Stand at our monstrous heels to shoot rigging  
With bows and arrows into our branches  
To ascend another forest, really,  
Teeming with birds, squirrels, berries,  
Burls and hanging gardens, and, once belayed  
To the summit, plot with laser beams the height.  
Hyperion. The tallest living thing on Earth.

“Trees are our lungs turned inside out,” a poet  
Writes. Trees are the other kingdom. We are  
Not like you. You’ve found this out yourselves.  
We age, but we do not age. The more we age  
The more we grow. So it is with myself.  
But . . . Those smart young men scaled me again.  
Five years have passed; five long years. I haven’t  
Grown an inch. They rappel to my waist.  
True to form, I’ve gained weight, to the tune of  
Thousands of board feet of clear heart lumber.  
Still, this is depressing. They also found  
A woodpecker’s ravenous boring. Sap oozes.

It's a scratch, but it's enough. Theoretically,  
We could grow forever, *live forever*.  
Three thousand years is nothing to laugh at.  
It's the water. It's a long way to the top.  
It's the plumbing. At the top, I'm parched.  
Leaves tremble, few and small. In the end  
We share your beastly fate. Gravity kills us.

## **As the World Turns**

*Carolyn Breedlove*

Along the Trinity the trees are considering fall,  
shoulder to shoulder,  
limbs akimbo, crossed,  
leaning to murmur to one another  
whispered consultation in East Texas twang,  
settling again, uneasy, solemn,  
contemplating low water stilled.  
The cypresses can't help themselves:  
already gone, russet overtaking them  
like recurring old age.  
Yet they're kind enough, in this cutthroat world,  
not to say that they're just the first,  
not to point out the yellow even now  
edging into everyone else's green.

## **Aunt Mabel's Cup of Passion**

*Dorie LaRue*

Under the protection of bankruptcy  
Uncle John eased into an alcoholic  
and one morning after  
threw the Easter ham straight  
into Aunt Mabel's  
blue-heavy hydrangea bushes.  
Drunk, Uncle John stole his  
neighbor's lawn mower  
and sold it to a stranger  
and one moon-void night  
filled his wife's gas tank  
with sugar.

Really no one's uncle,  
and Mabel no one's aunt,  
but it was she whom  
the whole church adored  
because, but for the capriciousness  
of God, went we. And her eyes  
behind her legendary specs,  
constantly considered,  
in a sweetly tenacious way,  
the lilies of the field,  
though truth be told her cup  
made Christ's passion look  
more like a walk in the park.

Aunt Mabel worked  
in the canning center, slinging  
slabs of beef "like a man."  
At church, her lenses  
resembled cut glass crystal  
designed by the globs  
of fat slung all week,  
which, if left unsmeared  
by the teasing boy,

did not entirely obscure her view  
of the stained-glass Jesus's  
tap dance on water, the vestibule  
cloyed with flowers from someone's  
bright garden, the front pew of children,  
like bobbing daisies,  
none hers. She was our hero,  
a sufferer more real than those  
in our Catholic cousins'  
*Lives of Martyrs*. Codependent,  
they call it now.

Never mind I ended up too busy  
with college and marriage and divorces  
to much remember her because her  
telltale symptoms were mirrored  
in my own floor to ceiling misery,  
weeping at Walmart, pointlessly plotting revenge,  
an Ahab anger at God, love-shorn stories with  
the saddest endings flapping out of my mouth  
like ugly jay birds. Once I came  
home by bus and plane and my bored  
brother's Dodge Dart. Aunt Mabel was dead,  
John's storm-wracking vapor trail  
eclipsing her prolonged plod.  
If I remember it was winter that visit.  
The road was a little dim although  
the headlights were on, bright, that  
moment night first seeps around the  
beams, asserting its doomed desire  
to hone and control. I think we were passing  
their long scrub oak-lined driveway  
devoid now of curses and specious cures.  
The clouds must have parted  
just at that moment and the moon  
lit up the trunks right angled to  
the iced over gravel, like a strip of coastline,  
and above, but just for a second as I said,  
limbs whipped in nervy dance. At that point,  
I shivered, or as they say in the South,

a rat ran over my grave.  
“That old gal is pushing daisies,”  
my brother said, out of the dark  
in his side of the car,  
like there were daisies in winter.  
or hydrangeas round as full breasts  
in someone’s blue bottomless gaze.  
“It’s not spring, man,” I said.  
“Choose another cliché.” It was dark  
enough after that for the yellow blade  
of a comet or even a shooting star  
subtending like a tiny leaped fish  
to punctuate something,  
but nothing happened. No  
one ever tells the truth about love.

## American Beauties

*Aaron Brand*

At the Spokane transit mall, the kids mill around  
and stir up some damage, kick raindrops  
and toss tobacco back and forth  
in the fluorescent field of evening:  
an argument about spare change  
and beer dough. One friend pulls Rose over  
to another friend wearing the Misfits  
black T-shirt: imagery bloody, simulated  
screams, black boots in the designed air  
above a stage, reckless love for the mosh pit.

She wants a hug . . . .  
Just hold her. Her tears fall  
to his shoulder. She thinks of resting,  
quarts of milk, and money  
for one night's rock.

I roll a smoke. She asks for a light.  
I'm interrupted and halted between my thoughts  
as if they're pages and I can't find  
the bookmark. I'm catching her tune.

I'm sure there is a lyrical dream in the punk rock days:  
piercings on Rose. Her purple lipstick  
is a paradox smile, and her cheeks glitter  
under the early shimmer of stars  
and nightscape clouds.

Here in Spokane, these nights, spilled glue  
blooms in the soul—cigarettes to save  
in back pockets, torn Levis.  
It's a cold Spring, and honky-tonk tunes  
blast from disheveled Chevys

while Friday night stares through me.

## **Crush**

*Leo Castell*

15 years, 10 months, and 18 days.  
By the time I'm your age,  
you'll be 59.  
That's scary.

But what am I afraid of  
if the gap only compels me,  
and the gossip is only background noise  
drowned out  
by the demure melody of your voice,  
the sound of which kisses my ears,  
and is but a prelude  
to a delicate smile  
where I catch fleeting glimpses of your iceberg?  
Taunting me with your past.  
Our future.  
Or lack thereof . . . .  
It dares me to try,  
and descend your icy depths  
risking bitter cold rejection  
on the off chance  
that a woman born in summer  
could wait for a man born too late.

## **The Nature of Happiness**

*Carolyn Breedlove*

Looking out into bright, pale morning,  
I feel the tug and glow of happiness swelling,  
the way it does: inexplicable, unbidden;  
and think nonsensically,  
this time I'll hold onto it,  
mark the sensation to know it always,  
pin it, a butterfly dosed, relaxed,  
treasured in acetone and mothball nostalgia.  
Of course it doesn't work that way. I know that,  
know it's more like whistling into darkness  
again and again from the porch  
for the dog, long unwalked since my surgery,  
off on her own once unleashed.  
I know just where she's gone, up past  
soccer fields, independent, but then I'm  
an hour later to bed.  
Not a pinned butterfly, but like—  
well, look: it's like earlier, stepping off  
the deck into thick leaves as into  
a sea, wading out toward the back fence  
where, here and there, they gleam  
wetly from the streetlight, bare trees  
a block over silhouetted in a colder  
future not quite upon us; how the leaves  
come with us no matter how hard  
we resist, off boots, or blown through  
an open door, so that we look up  
to find one under the kitchen chair, all the way  
into the living room, or as yesterday,  
leaving the doctor's office, two of them beached  
on the runner to the door, content, out  
of the rain, and I smiled to acknowledge them,  
our secret, old friend.

## **Knight and Merchant**

*Carter Jones*

The Imperial Rose Café was well-known in Grayhall, a coffee shop in the style of those from Before. It was a frequent haunt of the Imperial household and visiting regents and nobility from across the world. Wealthy merchants frequented the place as well. Even the common folk crowded around the tables outside, enjoying the cool air that wafted from within and enjoying the cheaper coffees from the menu. The Rose, as she was known, was a place beloved by all the citizens of the Imperial Capital.

Knight-Prefect Henry McDonald eased into the cool air of the coffee-house. It had been some years since he'd visited here. It had been some years since he'd been summoned to the Capital at all. His business here . . . well, he hoped it would be over soon—another uneventful trip and then a return to his rustic prefecture to settle disputes between landowners.

As he settled into the queue, he jumped as a hand clasped his shoulder.

“Henry! Henry McDonald! Is that you?”

He turned, surprised. Something inside him went cold, but his face didn't show it. His face showed nothing at all.

“Roland Freeman.”

“Yes, yes, that's me!” The man, Roland, was smiling like an idiot when Henry turned to face him. He was dressed smartly, a grey suit to match his greying hair. “Look at you! That uniform . . . are you a prefect now? When did *that* happen?”

“A long time ago. And you . . . you look well, Roland. I never would have expected to see you in Grayhall, of all places. It's a long way from Westmarch.”

“Oh, well, you know, business and such. Would you mind if I get you a coffee? I'd love to catch up with you! It's been awhile since we were lads running around Thistledown!”

Henry was silent for a moment. “Aye, that'll be fine, I suppose.”

Roland beamed. “Good, good. It's not every day I get to entertain a prefect!”

After an interminable wait in the queue, they found a corner table and sat with their coffee before them. Roland was as giddy as a schoolboy. Henry

maintained a straight face. He had not expected to see Roland here. Not *here*. Not now.

“So, Henry . . . I mean, Lord Henry . . . .”

“*Sir* Henry. I’m Knight-Prefect, actually.” He indicated a small cross on his lapel. “But we can dispense of the formalities. What brings you to Grayhall?”

In his excitement, Roland lapsed into the old Westmarch dialect. “Why, I live here, silly! I’ve lived here since me ma and pa left Thistledown! We left Westmarch for good, actually. Not long after . . . well, not long after the Revolution. How did ye come to be here? I thought John Tull was the prefect here, but—”

“He is. My prefecture is south of here. The Dale, it’s called.”

“Oh, aye. The Dale is a rightly fine prefecture. I have partners down there. Never been myself. When did you come to the Empire? I thought your pa was a servant in the house of Lord Walter Millican.”

Henry tensed. “Lord Walter was a madman. After the Revolution, he had my father killed. Would have killed us all, but we made our way south. The Empire was kind to take a good many refugees following the Merchants’ Coup.”

Roland’s face fell. “Oh, well, I’m sorry to hear that.” His face brightened again. “But how happy is this? Old friends from Westmarch reunited in Grayhall! Who’d have thought it?”

“Who indeed.” Henry’s countenance remained inscrutable. “What have you been doing here in Grayhall?” Henry knew. Henry knew very well.

“Why, uh, well, I’m the President of the Eastern Star Trading Company. We do weapons deals, mostly, to folks out West and . . . and people up North.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“Well, why shouldn’t I be honest? We’re old friends, hometown boys. We grew up together. A little business with Westmarch . . . well, I didn’t know about your pa, but that’s the Thanés for you.”

“You know what I mean. Most people don’t think of Eastern Star as doing much with weapons—mainly raw materials for building infrastructure, mana condensates, and the like.”

“Ah, well, aye, but weapons are where the money’s at.” Roland shrugged. “And that helps the other stuff go along as well. Business is brutal, but that’s the world we live in these days.”

“Aye. I suppose it is.”

“Seeing as you’re a Knight and all, *Sir* Henry, I might have some things you’d like to look at. I’m always happy to cut a deal for a friend. Have any problems with ghosts where you’re at?”

“Some. Not as much as we used to.”

“Good to hear. Fine to hear. Are you married yet?”

“Aye. I have a wife. Two fine children. Boys. Yourself?”

“Ah, no, no . . . no time for all that family stuff, unfortunately. Maybe in a few years, when I retire from the Company.”

Henry closed his eyes. A frown settled on his lips.

“Roland, I . . . I’m glad to see you’re well. But I must confess that I’m not glad to see you.”

The cheer that had adorned Roland’s face began to fade. “Why’s that, Henry?”

“We go way back, we do . . . all the way to our boyhood days . . . just lads in Thistledown romping about Westmarch, playing pranks on the girls and chasing rabbits. I’d hoped to be here and gone back to the Dale and never see you again—turn a blind eye, I would.” Henry opened his eyes and looked squarely at Roland. “But now that I’ve seen you, I can’t do that.” He tapped his lapel. “Knight’s honor and all that.”

“What . . . what do you mean, Henry?”

“You know very well what I mean.”

“But, but, Henry, *Henry*,” Roland said, pleading now. “You were a Thane’s serf yourself. You know, you *know* what those people are like. We’re not supposed to be living like bloody peasants in a bloody fiefdom. It’s not—”

“Not what, Roland? What happened in Westmarch is done. Bygones are bygones. But this isn’t Westmarch, is it?”

“Henry, Henry, listen, it’s not—”

“Not like that, you’re going to say. Not like that at all.” Henry’s face remained cold. “It’s never like that when it comes time for the nut-cuttin’. But it’s all the same, Mr. Freeman. You’re plotting a coup.”

Fear replaced the happiness on Roland’s face. “No, Henry, I’m no—”

“You are. And if you’re not, you’re helping those who are. A key player, as it were.”

The coffee had grown cold in front of them but not as cold as the feeling in Henry's chest. Conversations bubbled around them, cheer and laughter. The Rose was in full bloom . . . except for their little corner.

"Henry, I—"

"I didn't want to do this, Roland. I didn't want to run into you. But here we are."

"*Henry . . .*"

Roland's eyes opened in shock, his mouth forming an *O* of surprised horror as he slumped forward slightly. His heart had stopped beating. Henry had stopped it. Knights in the service of His Majesty the Emperor were always strong with the Gift—strong and cunning and most of all *loyal*. To the Emperor and no one else. No one. Not even childhood friends.

An ambulance was called to retrieve Roland Freeman, and the medics declared him dead on arrival. Heart attack. Sir Henry McDonald felt a bit dead inside as well as he sat himself at the dinner table that night with his wife and children. Honor did not always feel honorable, he mused, and comforted himself with the thought that at least no one would miss Roland tonight.

No one except Sir Henry McDonald.

## At the At Home Café

*Aaron Brand*

The orders  
of blue  
rain outside  
here  
sweep  
the eyes      smear  
needing coffee  
brown  
taffy  
rustle  
pink  
satin dresses  
and  
dishwasher  
suds  
candy  
clang  
claps  
onion  
blackened  
sweet beside  
swirl  
yogurt  
the morning  
fry cook  
and grits  
bacon  
in overalls  
thighs  
sweat  
and students  
miss wives  
farmers  
consider  
news  
in the air

wasps  
wish  
glad tidings  
seasonal  
grins  
their rigs  
gossip  
with gravel  
with stone  
hard words  
and the  
oil  
changed

## **Cookin'**

*Bennett Sewell*

There once was a young couple from Boyce who took up in a house with a rotten joist.

They began their life together with old family recipes in new pots and pans.

As the years passed, she always spoke to him whether he was there or not

Of the meager household allowance

Of rats and fleas

Of missed children's birthdays

Of his ever-roving eyes.

As the years passed, he always spoke to her

Of how fortunate she was to have him

Of her failure to manage the house and children

Of her failure to make his bed properly

Of her long, curved yellow toenails.

As the years passed, she never spoke to him whether he was there or not

Of the vicious voices that circled endlessly in her head screaming the truth  
of her deserved lot

Of the dark despair that only the taxi delivered bottle could momentarily lift.

As the years passed, he never spoke to her

Of his secret lair of pleasure where delicious fantasies became reality

Of where deals were struck with an endless supply of the gullible.

As their soup of life simmered and the flesh fell from their bones,

it becomes easy to see that even with new pots and pans,

the gumbo tastes the same if you only use an old family recipe.

## **Making Out in Many Places**

*Aaron Brand*

Passion swims: two dogs in the river. The light  
turned off in a nearby Datsun to cover up  
the arc of sweater leaving shoulder.

Drunken fingers fumble through the designs  
of thighs, curve of knees. Hands idle in the place  
beyond parking spaces. Thoughts of red umbrellas.

A voice in last night's bed alone, midnight  
unashamed of snowflakes. The silvery eyes  
through curtained windows wore the longing

across the night, all the desperate zippers  
receding like smiles in shadow. The day  
hung on like an avalanche, and they think

it's like fishing for love in a rented room  
or stealing for home, headfirst in the dirt  
beyond the spin of merry-go-rounds

in a neighborhood park, poorly lit with a cool  
buzz of trash and soda cans, anything you can leave  
behind and remember. Necking under the bleachers

while stars punch up clouds in summer sky, as simple  
as jeans beneath the dash, a foot leaning on the gas  
when the tank has enough to get them home.

***The Tragedy of King Robert the First:  
A Comedy in One Act***

*Kenneth Robbins*

Characters

ROBERT DEVEREAUX, THE EARL OF ESSEX  
QUEEN ELIZABETH THE FIRST  
THE EARL OF TYRONE  
THE BARD  
EXECUTIONER  
CHORUS OF COMMONERS

Setting

The action takes place in Elizabeth Tudor's England during the early seventeenth century.

Scene 1

*(The stage is set with all the accoutrements that will be necessary for the enactment of our story. On it is a CHORUS of at least six actors of a mixture of genders. Each actor is dressed like a commoner from Queen Elizabeth's reign. THEY are engaged in preparing for what is to occur during the action of the play; for example, several people are practicing their stage combat movements, others are engaged in a game of cards, and one person is sharpening his oversized axe so that it is ready to do the job it will be asked to do at the play's end. Into this tableau of non-action comes the hero of our play. HE introduces himself to the audience because HE isn't sure that the production's program has been successfully printed or not.)*

ESSEX: I am Robert Devereux, son of Walter Devereux, first Earl of Essex, and Lettice Knollys, a ward of the powerful Lord Burghley. I am Queen Elizabeth's Prime Minister of sorts and stepson of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, favorite of Elizabeth I. Thus, you can see, I am somebody!

*(To a member of the CHORUS.)*

Here, slave, do me.

*(The CHORUS MEMBER combs ESSEX's bountiful hair; HE speaks to the audience.)*

ESSEX (CONT.): I pray you will forgive me for boasting, but boasting is what I do best. I am without question the most handsome dude in the kingdom. Am I right?

*(The CHORUS responds halfheartedly.)*

CHORUS: Yeah . . . .

ESSEX: And if I were miraculously transformed into a person of the female gender, I would undoubtedly be the most beautiful woman in the world. Yes?

CHORUS: Yeah . . . .

ESSEX: In which case, if Mr. Marlowe had witnessed my beauty, he would have written of me and not Helen of Troy: "The face that sank a thousand ships." Of course, he would be referring to the demise of the Spanish Armada, which I accomplished almost single-handedly, but that is neither here nor there. I am right, am I not?

CHORUS: Eh . . . .

ESSEX: My glamorous face and well-honed sexy body are of little note when compared to my exquisite intelligence. Yes, you are in the presence of a living genius!

CHORUS: Ha . . . .

ESSEX: Give me a problem, any problem, as complex as possible, and I will give you its resolution in the twinkling of an eye or the dropping of a tear. Come on, come on, don't be shy. Pose to me what you will.

*(The CHORUS MEMBER who is combing ESSEX's hair pulls a strand of hair from the comb and holds it forth.)*

CHORUS MEMBER: If it is true that every hair on your head is numbered, how many do you have left now that this has been extracted?

ESSEX: Too simple. Five million, four hundred ninety five thousand, six hundred eighty two, assuming that in your strand you hold twelve of my hairs.

CHORUS MEMBER: Only eleven, sire.

ESSEX: Then six hundred and eighty three.

CHORUS MEMBER: How do we know if you are right or not?

ESSEX: You doubt my capacity to know the composition of my own physical being? Rascal. I'll have your head ere long. Besides, I wouldn't lie. I cannot lie. I must not lie. Telling lies is a sin. And I am above all sin. All.

CHORUS MEMBER: You're perfect, then?

ESSEX: More than perfect. I am pluperfect! If you don't believe me, ask my mom. She'll confirm not only who or what I am but what I am destined to be.

CHORUS MEMBER: And that is?

ESSEX: To be King!

CHORUS MEMBER: Yeah. King of the Liars' Club.

ESSEX: King of this kingdom, you dolt! Robert the First, King of England. I will be the greatest king this kingdom has ever known. I will rule with grandeur over the New World, which I will rechristen Robertlandia—or maybe New Essex, something like that. My reign will be chronicled throughout the ages as the grandest of them all, the model for all monarchs who have the misfortune of following in my steps. Yes, King Robert the First, the first among monarchs in the history of the world!

CHORUS: Yeah. Boasting is what he does best.

*(QUEEN ELIZABETH steps past a curtain and into a spotlight.)*

QUEEN: Do I hear the ravings of my servant, my sex slave, my own Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex?

ESSEX: Here, Your Grace. At your service.

QUEEN: Whom are you entertaining now, pray tell?

*(HE indicates the audience.)*

ESSEX: Them, Your Highness, gathered to pay homage to your ethereal being.  
Kneel, scum! Kneel, kneel, kneel!

*(Whether or not the audience kneels is yet to be determined. Of course, the CHORUS kneels . . . halfheartedly. The QUEEN turns to ESSEX.)*

QUEEN: Come with me.

*(SHE leaves with him following like the loyal servant HE is. The CHORUS clusters around the curtain through which THEY have gone. After a momentary pause, sounds of heavy love-making are heard, amplified if necessary. The CHORUS moves away from the curtain while speaking intimately to one another as well as to the audience.)*

CHORUS: Yeah, right on, brother.  
Boasting as an art form.  
You ask me, the colony of Virginia is wrongly named.  
Maybe the man is the best.  
At least at one thing the best—screwing the—  
Nyet, nyet, nyet, don't turn naughty.  
What a shame the Earl is secretly married.  
Secretly? Everybody knows about his Molly.  
Everybody but the Virgin Queen . . . heh, heh, heh.  
Sh, sh, she's coming . . . she's done.  
More like, it's him that's done . . . heh, heh, heh.

*(The EARL returns while adjusting his clothing. A female CHORUS MEMBER wipes lipstick from his face; SHE giggles as SHE does so.)*

ESSEX: Right. That was . . . .

CHORUS: The best sex of your life?

ESSEX: No, no, no. Oh, no, no, no. Best sex of her life.

*(Offstage.)*

QUEEN: What?!

CHORUS: Uh, oh.

*(Offstage.)*

QUEEN: What is this I hear?

ESSEX: You shrieked, my dear?

*(Offstage.)*

QUEEN: Married!!!

*(Adjusting her clothing as SHE comes, SHE bursts through the curtain. SHE grabs ESSEX by the hair and pulls him to his tiptoes.)*

QUEEN: Married?

ESSEX: My Queen, my sweetums—

QUEEN: Don't sweetums me, you mongrel. Is it true? You married that wench Francis Walsingham? Without my permission? How dare you. Isn't she the widow of Sir Philip Sidney? Do you wish to make her widowed yet again? Answer me!

ESSEX: My wife, yes, and mother of my child. The brightest young lad in this kingdom as well as the next.

QUEEN: Argh! You deceitful, arrogant, sty-keeper! You foolish pup of a pewter mug! I should throw your handsome, gloriously proportioned sexy carcass into the Tower and forget about you as quickly as possible! Guard!

*(A CHORUS MEMBER steps forward.)*

Take him out of my sight this instance. To the Tower, if you will.

ESSEX: If Your Highness no longer wishes to play hide the zucchini with me, perhaps you might send me to Ireland rather than to the Tower.

QUEEN: Ireland? That god-forsaken cesspool of corruption and unwashed hair? Just what might you do in Ireland, hmmm?

ESSEX: Bring that rogue Tyrone to his knees. Bring the Irish Rebellion to its rightful conclusion. I am, of course, your most accomplished military tactician and valiant warrior, the soldier against whom all future soldiers will be measured.

QUEEN: God forgive me for cuckolding such a nincompoop. And how would you do such a thing? Taming the Irish has bewildered all others, so what magic do you possess?

*(ESSEX demonstrates each of his boasts to the best of his ability by using a CHORUS MEMBER as his dummy.)*

I will engage Tyrone in combat like he has never dreamed. He will crawl before me in absolute defeat and beg of me his life and that of his Irish whore, sometimes called his wife. I will wrest his horse from between his legs and leap upon his prone body with lightning speed. I will rip the sword from his grasp and plunge mine own to the hilt in his groin. I will wrap my hands about his throat and twist and twist until his head spins like a top. I will gouge his eyes from his head. I will pluck his tongue from his mouth. I will—

QUEEN: Enough! I get the gist. And you will accomplish all of this—this—this carnage on your own?

ESSEX: I might need a few men by my side. A small army. Tiny. No more than ten thousand men. Give or take a few.

QUEEN: A small army, you say?

ESSEX: Maybe twenty thousand. Not a man more. Armed, of course. And mounted, naturally. In less than a fortnight—no, even sooner—the Irish revolt will be a thing of the past.

QUEEN: Well . . . .

*(To the world.)*

Make it so. No more than five thousand men, lightly armed, however. That is all the manpower we can afford. This damn recession is killing me. Be gone, be

QUEEN (CONT.): gone, and take your widow with you. I don't care to see the face of Francis Walsingham ever again.

ESSEX: But my face?

QUEEN: What of it?

ESSEX: Is it not worthy of . . . your blessed admiration?

QUEEN: Yes . . . . Stop by for a quicky with queeny ere you go.

*(SHE exits.)*

ESSEX: A mirror! Quickly, a mirror, a mirror, a mirror!

*(The CHORUS MEMBERS scurry about; one steps forward with a small mirror.)*

Ah, there you are, my swell fellow. A little touch of rouge.

A splash of *aquafleur*. A brush with a brush and a squiggle with a triggle. There. All ready. I wish the Irish to see what a true English gentleman looks like when they first encounter me.

*(To the audience.)*

What do you think? Aren't I what one calls "it on a stick"? Or "Out of this world, kinky girl"? Or "If I can't love this, I can't love nothing"? Yowser. Whassup! To Ireland we must go!

*(HE and the CHORUS scurry about the stage, basically going in circles and bumping into one another. ESSEX stops, licks his finger, and raises it aloft; then HE sighs with a loud "Ahhhh." HE points in every direction, sending the CHORUS about the stage and through the audience. ESSEX finds the edge of the stage and jumps off it. HE climbs back up while acting as if he is wet through and through. HE stops the commotion with a loud proclamation.)*

Ah, Ireland. I am dying, Ireland!

*(A CHORUS MEMBER dressed like an Irish rebel rushes to ESSEX. The rest of the CHORUS is equally adorned and stand aside as the CHORUS MEMBER*

*attacks. A battle commences. As ESSEX defeats his first opponent, another rushes forward, then another, and another. ESSEX fights to the best of his ability, but HE is overwhelmed. The CHORUS-MEMBER rebels close in on him. HE pulls a sports whistle from inside his tunic and blows on it.)*

ESSEX (CONT.): Time out! Jeez.

*(The CHORUS MEMBERS retire . . . except the first one, who sits beside ESSEX on the stage.)*

You guys gotta learn the rules of engagement. Okay? I mean, who ever heard of twelve against one? Not fair, dude. Distinctly not fair.

CHORUS MEMBER: Four, not twelve. And the fourth rebel hardly counts. He's our resident wuss. I guess you noticed that.

ESSEX: And all these strange weapons you brought against me.

CHORUS MEMBER: You mean the sling-blades? The garden-hoes? The pitchforks? We have to use what we have. No disrespect intended.

ESSEX: And the first rule of any combat. Surely you are aware of the first rule of combat.

CHORUS MEMBER: What rule might that be, Sport?

ESSEX: The hero always wins! Oh, for heaven's sake. Isn't that clear to you guys?

CHORUS: I guess that depends on who you consider to be the hero.

ESSEX: Me! Me, me, me! I'm the obvious master here. I'm better dressed, and I've got better make-up, better hair, better weapons, better everything. So it shouldn't take a playwright to tell you that it's me that is supposed to win. Sheez.

CHORUS MEMBER: All right, Sport. The next battle, we'll let you win. But after that? Sorry, but you'll be on your own.

ESSEX: But that one victory is all that I need. Give me a simple, unqualified victory, and I'll be on my way home the conquering hero flanked by one of the best armies my Queen will have ever seen.

CHORUS MEMBER: Tell you what. Let's call this first engagement a draw. That way we all go home happy. Deal?

ESSEX: Deal.

CHORUS MEMBER: Put it there, Sport.

*(THEY go to shake hands, but this turns into a battle of biceps, which the CHORUS MEMBER wins. HE then dances about the stage with his fellows as ESSEX tries to soothe his aching hand. The CHORUS MEMBERS remove any evidence of their time as rebels and return to ESSEX's entourage once again.)*

ESSEX: I can't go home like this. My hair is a mess. My tunic is soiled. And on top of that, most of my army has deserted, leaving me virtually alone. I need recruits. New recruits. New Lords and Earls and Dukes and Knights.

*(To the audience.)*

Okay, tell you what. Each of you raise your right hand. All of you, women, children, old farts, everyone. Raise your right hand, and when I lower my sword in your direction, you are to say as loudly as you possibly can: "Yes!" Right. Hands up. Hold them up. Good.

*(With as much authority as HE can manage.)*

I hereby proclaim each of you to be Knights Errant in my fateful army! Do you accept my proclamation?

*(HE points his sword at the audience and receives as many voices saying "Yes" as he might expect. Obviously, there aren't that many. HE shrugs and sheathes his sword.)*

Stupid crowd. Wouldn't know a decent deal if it kicked 'em in the wazoo. Bunch of English majors, so what do you expect?

*(The stage is empty for a moment. Then the QUEEN enters, obviously at home in her private quarters. Her appearance is grotesquely different from how SHE appeared previously: her hair is frizzled, her gown is glumpy, her face is a maze of wrinkles and caverns, and her girdle hangs limply about her hips. SHE has in one hand a banana and in the other a zucchini. As SHE prepares to enjoy either one or the other—or both—ESSEX storms in, obviously worse for the wear from his travels. HE stops in his tracks, amazed at the sight before him. SHE, too, is startled beyond belief. SHE stands and screams. HE screams at the sight of her.)*

QUEEN: Out! Out! Out! Outoutoutoutoutout . . . !

*(SHE exits screaming. ESSEX is dumbfounded.)*

ESSEX: What in Hell was that?

*(HE paces.)*

She'll have my head! Well, she can't have it. It is too precious and belongs exclusively to me. She will drag me through the streets. She will ruin me. She, a ruin herself! How can she bear to gaze in a mirror with a visage like that!

*(HE shivers.)*

Ew . . . . I'd kill myself. I would, indeed. And I would die hating her, she whom I have loved . . . . Ah! Heavens.

*(To the audience.)*

Knights Errant. The time has arrived. Never has this glorious isle needed me more than now. How can any of you rest knowing what all of us now know: that our sovereign is a hag! Worse than a hag. A hideous hag!

*(As HE speaks, the CHORUS returns quietly, not wanting to draw attention.)*

Gentlemen . . . and ladies, too. The time has come. The rebellion is at hand. The three virtues that we must fight to restore—virility, masculinity, and personal beauty—must become our mantra, our catchwords, our standards for our renewed patriotism! The world must belong to those of us who are most worthy of self-worship and of gazing with deep affection into the world of the mirror! Are you with me, soldiers?

*(The CHORUS MEMBERS respond halfheartedly.)*

CHORUS: Yeah . . . .

ESSEX: Where is your enthusiasm?

CHORUS MEMBER: Enthusiasm for what exactly?

ESSEX: For, for, for . . . I don't know. For action against the Queen!

*(The CHORUS MEMBERS turn their backs on him.)*

CHORUS MEMBER: That's a pretty far bridge to cross, Sport.

ESSEX: Help. Obviously, I need help. I need something to rile my legions and gentle followers to take the action we require. Who is good at riling? Who? To whom may I turn in this my greatest moment of need? Who, who, who?

*(A CHORUS MEMBER has dressed himself to look like a poor representation of the poet William Shakespeare, the BARD.)*

BARD: You called?

ESSEX: Who—?

BARD: Precisely.

ESSEX: Did I—?

BARD: Somebody did.

ESSEX: Why would I—?

BARD: Only you would know.

ESSEX: What do you—?

BARD: Do? I think you know that.

*(HE indicates the audience.)*

BARD: I think they do, too, or are at least they're a bit suspicious of my profession.

ESSEX: What might you do—?

BARD: Do for you? That is still unresolved. But I am here. We might find a resolution to that question ere long.

ESSEX: Aren't you that—?

BARD: Poet? Does it show? Honestly, I work on that aspect of my appearance every day, and you see the results.

ESSEX: I write po—

BARD: Poetry as well? So, what is new? Every man in the kingdom past the age of seventeen writes sonnets. How do you expect them to pretend to woo if not with pretty words? Please share a verse with me. Give me a reason to feel rewarded by my being here.

ESSEX: You want me to—?

BARD: Recite? Please. I am all ears.

*(HE has taken a tablet from his tunic along with a ballpoint pen. HE stands ready to record ESSEX's poem.)*

ESSEX: Well, if you—

BARD: Of course I insist.

*(ESSEX strikes a handsome pose. HE brushes his hair from his eyes, repairs his tunic, and clears his throat.)*

ESSEX: As far as queens go, you are supreme.  
As far as women go, you are my queen.

*(The BARD puts his tablet away.)*

BARD: Hmmm.

ESSEX: I'm not finished . . . .  
No matter how stringently I endeavor,  
I cannot void the impulse to be clever.

BARD: Hm . . . . Early in my career, I discovered that not all verse need rhyme  
. . . at least, not all the time.

ESSEX: But it is the rhyme that makes a poem sublime. Sure-ly you agree.

BARD: Sure-ly with glee. Well, I have enjoyed our little *tête-à-tête*, but work  
calls. I am stumbling through a new play that is at war with my creative  
compunction.

ESSEX: At war? How—?

BARD: I feel that I have forged an impossible path for my heroine, one Helena.  
She has married the King's son, Bertram, who despises her intensely, so much so  
that he proclaims that he will refuse to join his new wife in matrimonial bliss until  
she has conceived of him and given birth to his son. You see my dilemma.

ESSEX: That sounds kinky.

*(The BARD takes out his tablet.)*

BARD: Kinky? That's a new one. I don't know that word.

ESSEX: A little ditty I acquired while in Ireland. Kinky is as kinky does. I don't  
have the foggiest as to what it might mean.

BARD: Leave that to me. Perhaps I can make Bertram a trifle kinky and see how  
that goes. Thank you, sire.

*(HE turns to leave.)*

ESSEX: But, sir, master, ere you go—

BARD: I can be of service to you? How so?

ESSEX: As I perceive it, the theater—your theater, the Globe—is a place where  
high passions flow—

BARD: Are aroused. Yes. Upon occasion.

ESSEX: I was wondering if—

BARD: What? You need your passions aroused?

ESSEX: That is near the mark. I need my followers to—

BARD: Restore their passion on your behalf. Clever. A most ingenious use of the theatrical mode. Just what do you have in mind?

ESSEX: *Richard II.*

BARD: A vintage piece from my illustrious past, yes. Pretty poetry there, don't you agree?

ESSEX: Many end rhymes, yes. I was wondering if you and your men—

BARD: Oh, they are hardly my men, sire. They are each and everyone their own man. I own no one.

ESSEX: Perhaps I might engage you and the Lord Chamberlain's Men to offer a special engagement of *Richard II*—

BARD: With you as patron? Ah, I fear that we are pretty solidly booked for next year. We might have an opening by midsummer . . . 1605.

*(ESSEX pulls a bag of coins from his tunic.)*

ESSEX: Name your price.

BARD: The Lord Chamberlain's Men are not for hire, sire—

ESSEX: Forty shillings?

BARD: Done. When?

ESSEX: This Saturday, February the seventh.

BARD: 'Twill be chilly, don't you think?

ESSEX: No matter. This Saturday, the Globe, *Richard II*, sans act four. We really don't need act four. It's too kinky for my tastes. With you as the king and myself as Bolingbroke.

*(Offstage screaming rises.)*

QUEEN: I am Richard the Second!!

*(No one seems to notice.)*

ESSEX: I have here a few additional lines—a new ending, so to speak.

BARD: You wish to be seen as the usurper, the thief of the crown?

ESSEX: Precisely. And with this new ending—

BARD: I see that it is Bolingbroke who actually kills the king.

ESSEX: Just so.

*(Offstage, more loudly than before.)*

QUEEN: *I am Richard the Second!*

BARD: I sense the Queen may not be fond of a play that deals with regicide, sire.

ESSEX: She'll never know. She won't be there.

BARD: If you say so.

*(The BARD bows and leaves as the QUEEN, now with everything about her appearance back in place, rushes in. SHE is shrieking.)*

QUEEN: Of course I will be there. I am the Queen! I am everywhere. I know everything. I know when God sneezes. I know when God takes a nap! *I know all!*

*(SHE leaves. After a stunned pause, the CHORUS begins setting up for the enactment of a dumb-show from Shakespeare's play.)*

CHORUS: Hate the damn theater.  
I rarely go any more.  
Richard as a character is such a wuss.  
Doesn't know his ass from a hole in a bucket.  
Wonder what our man is up to.  
No good, that's for sure.  
You ever met an actor that you liked?  
No. You?  
No.  
Can't stand playwrights, either. Putting words in people's mouths is like—  
That Hamlet guy last year was a hoot!  
Couldn't stop laughing.

*(The stage is set. In dumb-show, ESSEX enters, sword in hand, and BARD enters on hands and knees wearing a cardboard crown something like the kind one gets from Burger King. ESSEX demands that HE surrender the crown. HE does so, takes it back, then offers it again only to take it back a second time; HE then bestows it upon ESSEX, who is overjoyed. HE wears the crown with glee. When the BARD reaches for the crown yet again, ESSEX runs him through with his sword. The BARD dies an agonizing death after thrashing about for far too long. ESSEX mumbles something like "Oh, come on" and stabs the BARD a second and a third time. After the BARD is dead, ESSEX struts about the stage. The CHORUS cheers him gloriously. Somehow, the QUEEN has become part of the audience. From this new position, SHE rises and screeches.)*

QUEEN: I knew it! I knew that narcissistic beater of boys was a traitor! Arrest him! Lock him away! Try him for sedition! Judge him guilty of treason! Away with him! Away!

*(ESSEX is dragged off stage. The BARD rights himself and wiping away any blood—if, indeed, blood has been used in his death. Proud of his successful portrayal of the doomed king, HE is all smiles . . . only to be confronted by the QUEEN, who has by now made her way onto the stage.)*

And you! You! Are just as guilty as he. Guilty of treason. Guilty of sedition. Arrest him! To the tower with him. Get him out of my sight.

BARD: But, but, but, Your Highness, my Queen—

*(HE is dragged away, too. SHE turns to the audience.)*

QUEEN: Isn't it amazing? You try to help these people, and they turn against you at first light. I don't know about you, but I need a stiff belt of home-brew. I've earned it.

*(A CHORUS MEMBER brings her a mug of wine, which SHE drinks. Then SHE tosses the container into the audience; as SHE does so, the CHORUS arranges the stage for the forthcoming trials.)*

Okay. Down to business. Judge, jury, and executioner—you're looking at her. First, bring in that rogue poet everyone seems to admire so much, that teller of tales often more risqué than prudence can bear.

*(The BARD is brought in. HE is now in chains. The QUEEN finds a chair and sits.)*

CHORUS: Kneel, you cur.

*(HE kneels.)*

QUEEN: What is your name?

BARD: Willy Shakespeare, Your Highness.

QUEEN: What do you do for a living?

BARD: I am a teller of tales more often than not too risqué for your tender ears, Your Grace.

QUEEN: Are you sorry for that, sir?

BARD: It's a living.

QUEEN: On the afternoon of the seventh of February, did you and your company of players, perform a slightly altered version of your play, *The Tragedy of Richard II*?

BARD: We did.

QUEEN: And you knew that I am Richard the Second? You did know that, did you not?

BARD: Not till now, madam.

QUEEN: Did you and your fellows willfully join with Lord Essex to arouse passions within the public for my removal from my throne?

BARD: We did it for the money, Your Highness.

QUEEN: He paid you well, did he?

BARD: Forty shillings don't come our way often, but when a payday like that happens along, we are betrothed to playing, come willy or come nilly. Forty shillings is a respectable figure for our poorly paid players.

QUEEN: Equal, you think, to thirty pieces of silver?

BARD: Ah, I sense your drift. Judas knew what his stipend was purchasing when he accepted it. We were being paid merely to perform an ancient and irrelevant play. Nothing more.

QUEEN: Then your defense is that you were clueless as to Essex's purposes? That he was advocating regicide within the walls of your Globe?

BARD: It isn't so much our defense as it is the truth, Your Grace. Our involvement with Essex was economics, not politics. In fact . . . if I may?

QUEEN: You may.

BARD: It had not occurred to me that a play presented within the confines of a theater might be conceived as having any political power whatsoever.

QUEEN: Even now? After this?

BARD: It didn't work, did it?

QUEEN: No. Obviously not.

*(SHE considers him.)*

Let him go. He is innocent . . . at least of this crime.

*(As the BARD rises to leave.)*

QUEEN (CONT.): Tell me, maestro. Would it cost me forty shillings to purchase from you a restaging of *Henry IV, Part 1*? How I dearly loved your Falstaff.

BARD: Forty shillings would do nicely, Your Grace. We are at your service.

*(HE leaves.)*

QUEEN: Cash flow. The best excuse for villainy is cash flow. One might think we live in a capitalist society.

*(ESSEX is brought in. HE, too, is now in chains.)*

QUEEN: Well, my dear boy. What do you have to say for yourself?

ESSEX: Sweetums, I think you will find that my poem stretches to rhyme, but at least with a few tweaks I can make it scan.

*(HE kneels.)*

My prime of youth is but a front of cares.  
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain.  
My cup of corns is but a field of tears,  
And all my good is but vain hope of gain.  
The day is gone and yet I saw no sun,  
And now I live and now my life is done.

*(The QUEEN rises.)*

QUEEN: Sweet but insincere. Clever but hardly original. Beggardly but without begging. Do you have naught else to say for yourself?

ESSEX: Pass your judgment as I know you will, but know this: he who is so judged is your superior in every way. That fact cannot be altered.

QUEEN: You're so damn boastful, my lord.

ESSEX: Boasting is what I do best.

QUEEN: And being your sovereign is what I do best. Guilty as charged. Guilty as sin.

*(But SHE is crying.)*

I sentence you to death, Robert Devereux, death by the axe. And may God have mercy on your soul.

*(SHE exits the stage weeping. Her wails of anguish can be heard even as SHE gets further and further away. ESSEX is prepared for execution. The play at this point not surprisingly becomes rather somber as a CHORUS MEMBER becomes the EXECUTIONER when HE dons a head-covering of black and brings forth a woodsman's axe, which he proceeds to whet with a piece of stone. A block for ESSEX's head is placed as another CHORUS MEMBER speaks directly and quietly to the prisoner.)*

CHORUS MEMBER: Prepare yourself for death, which will be this day.

*(ESSEX, now prepared for his beheading, turns to the audience.)*

ESSEX: May it please God to send down his angels and lift up my soul to His mercy's seat. Executioner, strike home. This crowd is patiently waiting for the blow of the axe.

*(HE gives the EXECUTIONER a small bag of coins and then kneels with his buttocks to the audience. As the EXECUTIONER lifts his axe, two CHORUS MEMBERS raise a piece of colored cloth to shield from sight the actual slicing off of ESSEX's head. The axe crashes. The CHORUS emits a mixture of "Ah!" and "Oh!" and one "Oops!")*

CHORUS MEMBER: Sorry about that.

*(The EXECUTIONER raises the axe a second time, and down it comes amid several gasps and an "Ah, come on, man." The EXECUTIONER raises the axe a third time, and for a third time it comes down hard and firm.)*

CHORUS: It's about time.

Something for him to boast of wherever his soul resides.

He short-changed the executioner, that's what he did.

What're you doing for dinner tonight?

CHORUS (CONT.): Got me a hot date.  
She got a friend?  
Whew! Another day—  
—another dollar.  
Or shilling.  
Whatever.

*(The CHORUS MEMBERS vacate the acting space. ESSEX's body lies in a patch of red light. After a moment of silence, lights fade and a circle of light rises on the curtain US. Into the light ESSEX pokes his head. HE is all smiles in spite of the traces of blood on his neck. By the way, all the audience can see is his head—his severed head.)*

ESSEX: Hm. No angels. Oh, well. I didn't really expect such an exit. I read somewhere that the human brain continues to function for several seconds post severance. So here they are, my several seconds . . . ideal for reflection but not repentance. No! I'm beyond repentance. I am, after all, perfect, right? Right?

*(Offstage, halfheartedly.)*

CHORUS: Yeah . . . .

ESSEX: So forgive me if I boast, but boasting is what I do best. You see, it takes more than an executioner's chop to silence this brilliant brain—

*(All life leaves ESSEX's head, and, as severed heads are prone to do, it drops clumsily and noisily to the stage floor as a blackout descends that brings this ridiculous play to its expected end.)*

## **Heads and Tails**\*

*Daniel Vines*

I  
How does it feel to think you're always right?  
How does it feel when you win a petty fight?  
When all in sight is for your conquest and might  
and you have to win so you can feel alone?

How does it feel to wager your wages away?  
How does it feel to keep grief or debt at bay?  
To take your life and flip it  
into a wishing well and pray for heads or tails?

How does it feel to be on edge all the time?  
How does it feel to depend on your friend's face and eyes?  
When someone else's throne sits in the courtroom you own,  
and you must sit in the pews, afraid and still alone?

It's a game of heads and tails.

vi  
How does it feel to think you're always wrong?  
How does it feel to hate your own sad song?  
To live your life stuck inside your head,  
a mirror for a face and a casket for a bed?

How does it feel to have never made a bet?  
How does it feel to see love as a threat?  
To live your life so afraid of offense,  
you fortify a trench and do not move?

How does it feel to live inside a box?

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\* Author's Note: "Heads and Tails" offers anaphoric, reflective questions to two opposite personalities: an arrogant, reckless extrovert and a melancholy, overly cautious introvert. The questions aim to bring out the same desperation shared by the opposite personalities, the introvert ("vi") being the relative minor of the extrovert ("I"). They are presented as two sides of the same coin, a mirror reflection of one another.

How does it feel to always have on socks?  
To confine yourself to the comforts around  
and to never let your real feet feel the ground?

It's a game of heads and tails.

## **Calling It Dark**

*Carolyn Breedlove*

We can call it dark if you say so,  
though topping this black cylinder, pale  
sky's still a choppy sea of cloud,  
and I know, out there, every terrace and hollow  
up to the edge of the seething woods.

I've cut it too close—again—  
and we're out of time. Still,  
not the dark of the television box  
we crouched inside playing house,  
not the lush, seducing summer night,  
nor the open freezing black  
twinked with a million sharp lights  
(cold, too, for all we know)  
over that Colorado creek, nor  
the long bruising insomniac trek to dawn;  
nothing like pin the tail on the donkey,  
nothing, nothing at all like blindness—  
of which I know nothing—  
nothing like nothing.

Not like the early October morn when,  
awakened by the commotion of you hunters leaving,  
I went out and lay on the black driveway,  
still ever so faintly warm from the sun,  
and stared into the restless, sighing night  
till, just at the instant I could make out green:  
all around, in the woods, the barrage.

## **Hunting**

*Jason Clayton*

Mary put the book down and glanced outside. It was a Saturday night. The house was quiet. The pastures outside were still, and the warm, moonless night hung over the countryside, heavy and numbing. Beyond the barbed-wire fences, the woods were black and silent, guarded by the oaks and pines, and nothing within moved.

Mary sipped her beer as a car rolled down the dirt road at the end of the driveway. That was almost an eighth of a mile away. She wasn't expecting her roommate home for a long while.

*She'll probably stumble in at half past three burping up Devon's D.N.A.*, she thought. She chuckled and picked the book up from the coffee table. It was *Wuthering Heights*. She'd been cussing herself for two weeks, ever since she assigned it. From the summary, she assumed everyone in her class would be pleased. She'd never read the book herself, but several of her college friends gushed over it; she quickly realized how wrong she was. The kids found Brontë cumbersome, and she herself found the story hard to follow. At this point—11:45 p.m. on a day she'd committed to forcing herself to read the damn thing already—she wanted to toss it into the fireplace and watch it burn.

Mary stretched on the blue-and-white striped couch. The baggy shirt she wore pulled up to her panty line. The book fell onto the floor. She swore, leaned to pick it up, and muttered, "Who am I kidding?" as she pushed it further under the couch. The scented candle on the end-table was almost completely gone. The whole room smelled like roses. She took another drink of her beer, finished it, and stood up to go to the kitchen. In the hallway, she tripped over her high-heeled boots (the ones that made her friends sing that Nancy Sinatra song) and swore with gusto.

Mary heard the gate clank closed at the end of the walk as she dropped the bottle into the garbage just inside the kitchen door.

"What the Hell?"

She froze in the hallway. At nearly midnight, there shouldn't be anyone out and about in this part of the Braley Bottoms. Mostly old people and a few cops lived out here, and they were asleep long ago. She shrank to the floor. At once, the house seemed very empty and very large. Small sounds grew closer on the porch, then three short knocks on the front door.

Mary sucked in a breath and held it. She looked down the hallway at the door. Three more knocks issued forth then a pause that seemed painful.

“Hello?” It was a male voice, quite young by the sound of him. “Can someone help me, please? I broke down up the road a ways, and my cell phone is dead. Hello?” He knocked again.

Mary rose from the floor and stepped down the hall. Surely he would hear her heart before she actually got to the door. She wasn’t even sure what she was doing. She had no idea who this was, but still—

The light from the hallway fell on a gorgeous young man with golden hair and eyes the bright, ruddy color of freshly-turned earth. He looked a little pale, but his skin was clear of any blemishes. He wore a white Abercrombie shirt with buttons down the front and stonewashed jeans.

As the door opened, he smiled. It was unguarded and sincere. “Hi! I’m so sorry to bother you this late, but can I use your phone? My battery is dead.”

Mary smiled. She was completely at ease. “My phone’s broken.”

His face fell.

“But do you have your phone?” she blurted.

He pulled an iPhone from his pocket.

“Oh! Well, you can use my charger and charge your phone. If you don’t mind sitting in here with me.” She smiled a little wider.

He smiled and looked away bashfully. “Sure. I don’t mind.” Her smile grew into a toothy grin. “All right! Come on in!”

He followed her inside. She led him to the kitchen. “The charger’s plugged into the wall there.” She pointed at a plug above the counter. “I’ll be right back.”

Mary stepped into the bathroom. She was a very attractive woman, only twenty-six. She fixed her hair in a few places, checked the sleeping shirt she was wearing for stains, and checked her breath. She gargled some mouthwash and removed her panties before she went back into the kitchen.

The kid was standing by the counter. He joined her at the table. “It’s really nice of you to open your home up to someone you don’t even know at this awful hour.”

Mary smiled at him. “It’s fine. My name’s Mary Turner.”

“No kidding? You teach one of my cousins in Redwater, I think.”

“Really? Who?”

“Eddie Frank.”

Mary laughed. “Seriously?”

He smiled and shrugged. “Yeah. He’s an odd one.”

“He’s sweet,” she offered.

“Well, I guess he’d have to be, wouldn’t he? What else does he have?”

She laughed again and slapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Oh, stop it!”

“Hey! But I’m not wrong!”

Mary blushed and giggled.

“Am I?” he asked.

She looked down. “No, you’re not. But that’s not very nice.” She met his gaze. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh, I’m Joey,” he replied.

“Joey Frank . . . I guess you are, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, you just said—oh, never mind.”

She studied him for a moment. His lips were full. His hair was tousled just the right way. His body was lean and hinted at the muscles of an athlete, sort of like the Satterfield kid, with his pecs filling out the Abercrombie wonderfully. The thought of the Satterfield boy made her mouth water a bit. Had it really been two months?

“Can I get you something?” She lingered on the last word. “A drink, maybe?”

He paused to consider it. “I could go for a whiskey.”

Mary’s face brightened. “Good call! I think I’ll have one, too.” She stood up and opened the freezer. “Can you reach in that cabinet and grab some glasses?”

“Sure.”

He rose and turned. Mary caught a glimpse of his ass in those Wranglers and nearly dropped the bottle of Crown. It was absolutely perfect. The muscles in his back danced her favorite tune under the shirt as he reached around on the top shelf. She sat back down with the whiskey and took a moment to appreciate the way his sleeves tightened around his upper arms as he brought the glasses down.

“Here you go!”

He handed her the glasses. As she poured, he sat in the chair beside her. When she handed him the glass, their fingers touched, and it seemed almost like an electric spark shot through them. It reminded her of the youngest Hanson kid that day he handed in his essay. She’d never looked at the janitor’s closet by the girl’s bathroom the same way since.

They toasted to nothing in particular and drank. Mary didn’t kill it in one try; to her chagrin, neither did he.

“So what do you teach?” Joey asked.

“Sophomore and A.P. English,” she replied. “Occasionally I sub for the theatre teacher. She’s off on maternity leave.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Not really. All they do is sit around and watch musicals.”

“Do you like musicals?” he asked.

Mary raised an eyebrow. “Do you?”

Joey thought about it. “*Touché.*”

He took another drink. She found herself praying he would dribble some on his shirt. He set the glass down. “So what’s a pretty girl like you doing at home on a Saturday night?”

She giggled and blushed. “I decided I was going to read *Wuthering Heights* tonight if it kills me. I assigned it to the kids in my A.P. class, but I’ve never actually read it, so I thought I should get that out of the way. What’s a pretty boy like you doing out on a Saturday night?”

He glanced away with a bashful chuckle. “Oh, I was just at a party.”

“Oh, really? And you left before midnight?”

He scowled. “Cops showed up.”

Mary gasped. “Your car broke down the same night the cops busted your party?”

He couldn’t suppress a grin. “Yeah, it sucks.”

“No shit. What was going on at the party?”

“Nothing spectacular,” he said. “I was hoping to seal the deal with this girl I’ve been seeing, *but . . .*”

“The cops crashed the party.”

He shrugged and reached for his drink. “Hey, what can you do? And the last message I got before my phone died was from her saying that she thought it was a sign that we shouldn’t do ‘it’.” He put air quotes on it with his free hand. He shook his head and raised the drink to his lips. “Virgins . . .”

“Hmm.” Mary looked off into the corner. “I remember my first time. It was in a barn at my best friend’s Sweet Sixteen.”

“So when he asked you for a roll in the hay, it was literally—”

“Damn it, I’m sick of that joke!” But she was laughing. “So how old are you?” she asked.

“What is this? Twenty questions?”

“It can be. I ask something then you ask something. No subject is off limits. No family, though.”

He considered it for a moment and nodded his head. “Okay, sounds good. I’m sixteen.”

“I thought you were seventeen.” She really didn’t, but this seemed to please him, and he chuckled again like he was a little embarrassed. “Okay, your turn.”

“Hmm . . .” He took a sip and looked out the window over the sink at nothing in particular before turning his attention back to her. “What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?”

She blushed. “Uh . . . okay, lemme think . . . one day a few weeks ago, me and this guy I used to see snuck into the janitor’s closet down the hall from my classroom.”

His eyes widened. “Holy shit, are you serious? That’s awesome!”

“Yeah. It was fun. How old were you the first time you did ‘it’?” She attached the air quotes.

“I was fourteen. It was with my best friend’s sister. She was sixteen.” Mary opened the bottle and poured him more whiskey.

“What else can you tell me about that closet?” he asked.

She burst out laughing. “You’re hung up on that?”

“Just interested.” He winked and took a drink.

She refilled her glass. “Well, it was during lunch. All the kids were in the cafeteria. The other teachers were either with them or in another part of the building. It was perfect timing. Not a soul came down that hallway until *way* after we were done.”

“Sweet.”

“Yeah. Okay, bucko, spill. What’s the craziest thing youuuuuu’ve ever done?” She sipped her drink.

Joey whistled. “Let’s see. *Oh!* I’ve got one. It’s really embarrassing, actually. I was at the lake with some people one night in the summer.”

“School people or random people?”

“Bit of both. Anyway, we were skinny-dipping on the boat ramp, and drinking beers from this guy’s cooler in the back of his truck, and . . .” He chuckled sheepishly. “This girl I know came up to me—and she was *wasted*—and offered to blow me. And I was pretty toasty, and I said, ‘Sure! What the Hell?’ So we went back behind the truck where everyone was getting the beer, and I stood there beside the driver’s side door while she . . . got down in front of me. No one even knew what we were doing. People kept coming up to the truck to get beer. They’d walk very close to us, but no one saw us. They figured out what we were doing when we came back around the truck, though.”

“Nice!” She raised her glass. He raised his. They made a clinking sound that rang out like a bell in the empty house. His eyes flashed across her chest. She smiled wider.

“It’s your turn.” She spoke a bit softer.

He looked at her for a minute. He looked into her eyes. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. “Have you had sex with any of your students?”

She chuckled. Her eyes flitted from his eyes to his mouth and back. She nodded. “Have you had sex with any of your teachers?”

He shook his head. “When was the last time you had sex with a student?”

“Two weeks ago.” She was speaking quietly, almost a whisper. “A boy came in during lunch to talk to me about an essay he turned in. We flirted a little, and then we went into the janitor’s closet down the hall.”

Their faces were closer now. His eyes were locked on her lips. She scanned his face one more time for unease.

Something clanked outside. They jolted. Mary went to the window.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

She watched for a moment and then turned around. “It’s a ’possum.”

He relaxed. She hopped up onto the counter and faced him. His eyes caught a glimpse under her shirt and jerked away. She chuckled and very deliberately lifted one leg up in the air and over the other.

“It’s my turn, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

“What on Earth has got you in such a spin all of a sudden?”

He smiled. It was sly and competent. “I’m not in a spin. I’m perfectly fine. I’m afraid you’ve wasted a question, Miss Turner.”

Her smile fell a bit. She wasn’t as sure of herself as she had been. It felt like she’d lost some of the control she had over the situation.

Joey walked over to the counter. He stood in a spot almost in between her legs. He rubbed his chin in a parody of sagacity. “Hmm . . . have any of your students ever been jealous of each other? You know, after . . . .” He made a rather comical hand gesture. She gave him a shaky laugh.

“No. Well, there was that one time. When I asked Kody—the kid from the closet—to stay after class, this other boy looked upset. I think I heard they got into a squabble during lunch. Surprised the Hell out of my coworkers. They’d been best friends since kindergarten.”

Joey whistled. “You broke up a ten-year friendship?”

She slapped him on the shoulder. “Hey! You’ve had your question! It’s my turn!”

He laughed and looked away as if he were suddenly embarrassed. Mary felt the power shift back into her hands. “When was the last time you had sex?” she asked.

He chuckled and glanced at the floor. “About three weeks ago. It was in a cemetery.” Mary snorted. “What?”

She doubled over. She inhaled and snorted, and that made her laugh harder.

He crossed his arms over his chest, looking amused and indignant. “Hey! Why are you laughing at me?”

“It’s just so random! Oh, *shit!*”

She’d leaned over too far and was about to fall. Joey reached out, grabbed her shoulders, and leaned her back. In doing so, he’d crossed the distance between them. They locked eyes, and Joey smiled.

“Have any of your students told you they love you?”

Mary scoffed. “Where did that come from?” She laughed to shake it off.

He shrugged. “Just curious. From what you said about the two kids fighting over you.”

Mary pursed her lips. “Maybe once or twice. Does it really matter?”  
“But do you love them?”

She was flabbergasted. “It’s not your turn!” She recovered her composure and added, “But if you must know, I believe there are all kinds of love.”

He locked eyes with her again, and a different kind of smile crossed his face. The illusion of control vanished. He’d played into her every move, always one step ahead of her. She saw this now. From the moment he came through her door, he’d allowed her to lure him until he was ready to pounce.

Mary kissed him. He made a small sound and nipped at her bottom lip. It reminded her of the Wharton kid in her car, after the class trip to Shreveport. The Wharton kid with his pouty lips, strong hands, the tears in his eyes that day with the Hanson kid—

She raked her fingers up Joey’s back, relishing the rush of power and arousal that always swelled within her when she remembered the tears. He groaned and kissed her harder. She twisted her fingers around the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head. A few of the buttons popped off and scattered on the floor. His body was like sculpted marble. It reminded her of the Satterfield boy that day after Wednesday service. She ran her fingers along the grooves in his torso, and he shivered.

Joey lifted her from the countertop and set her down on the table quite neatly. He started kissing her jawbone and her neck. Mary ran her hands over his back.

“You’re like an animal after prey,” she gasped. She stared up at the ceiling light over the table in languorous ecstasy.

Joey kissed the skin of her neck with deliberation. Two of his teeth had grown nearly an inch.

“Well, we have that in common, don’t we?”

He bit into her throat like an apple. She tried to scream, but one of his teeth was lodged between her vocal folds. In agony, she clawed and groped ineffectually at his back, his chest, his hair. She tried to push him off, but he was too heavy. Her struggles grew weaker as he drank, and, eventually, she was still.

Joey cleaned himself up at the sink. He would’ve felt bad for her, but the tears of his latest progeny weighed heavy on his heart—how the poor boy expressed his heartbreak and humiliation at her hands—and he put any thought of mercy out of mind. The teacher smelled like the fluids of at least ten adolescent boys; he could taste them in her essence like a cloyingly-sweet chemical, some part of them she stole when she took their virginites and tossed them aside for the next one. He managed to wash her stench off himself at the sink, but he conceded that he would have to burn the shirt, maybe the pants. When he was done at the sink, he used the shirt to wipe the bowl dry, doing his best to ignore the taste of her guilt

and trying to set aside the urge to find an innocent for better-tasting nourishment. He collected the handful of buttons that were on the floor as well as the extra glass. He was considerate enough to turn the lights out before he changed his skin and flew into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deputy Pate looked down at the body. A pool of blood had gathered around her head and dried her hair into a lumpy mess. Her eyes were half-open with only the white showing. Her mouth hung open in one final gasp for breath. Two deep puncture wounds glared out at him in the middle of all the red.

“Pate?” Deputy Johnson eyed the body and froze. The clipboard gave a dangerous lean atop his palm.

Pate reached over and snatched the clipboard away from him. “Anything new, Johnson?”

“Neighbor down the road said no one came down the road after about eleven forty or so, until the roommate came home at one.”

“And by then the girl was already dead.”

Pate looked at the paperwork. The neighbor’s testimony was short. She was an old woman with a few cats, very much the busybody. Some dogs down the road started howling and “carrying on” around eleven forty-five, according to another neighbor, a retired officer with thirty-five years’ experience. The dogs started up again around twelve-twenty, and were silent after that.

Pate glanced back down at the girl and tasted bile.

“I’ve got to get some air. Johnson, when’s the M.E. supposed to be here?”

“I think he’s up the road.”

The German Shepherd out in the yard started screaming. That was what Pate thought at first. It wasn’t a scream exactly, but it wasn’t a howl; it wasn’t a whine; it wasn’t any sound he’d heard a dog make before. He ran outside with Johnson and saw the dog pull away from the officer holding his leash. When the officer pulled him closer, the dog urinated a bit and whined.

“What’s going on?” Pate called.

“I think Abe caught wind of somethin’ he didn’t like!” The dog sniffed around fitfully and pressed on down the driveway. “He found somethin’!”

Pate and Johnson followed. When they reached the end, an old man stepped out of a parked Ford truck.

“Someone hurt that poor teacher?” the old man snarled.

“Mr. Hillis, I need you to get in the truck and go home,” Pate said.

The old man spat on the ground. “How many of my neighbors have to die before you pigs do somethin’ about this?!”

“Mr. Hillis!” Pate exclaimed. “We’re doin’ the best we can!”

Another deputy, a younger man, came down the driveway. “Grandpa! What the blue hell you doin’ out here?” The younger deputy tried to walk the old man back to the truck.

“You tell that Sheriff that if he don’t do somethin’ about this, there ain’t gonna be any more people left down here! We’re droppin’ like flies while he sits on his ass up there in New Boston!”

“That shit pisses me off,” Johnson grumbled. “Why does everybody talk like we ain’t doin’ nothin’?”

“‘Cause we ain’t makin’ anything better!” Pate said. “This is the tenth murder in four months. Four of those murders were on this road. Add that to the twenty kids who’ve gone missing in that time and you’ve got one fucked-up scenario. And officially, the Sheriff’s Department does not believe that these deaths are ‘in any way’ connected. Bullshit!”

The law-abiding citizens of Bowie County were getting aggravated with the Sheriff’s Department. It was getting to where even the arrested men and women were getting more irate about the crime rate than they were about their own incarceration. “Why are you arrestin’ me when people are droppin’ like flies?” had become the preferred argument whenever someone—anyone—was picked up by police in Bowie County.

In conversation amongst themselves, the deputies grouped the victims into two groups: good and bad. The killer(s) always struck people at opposite ends of the social spectrum. Five of the murdered were convicted sex offenders or people at least accused of (usually) multiple sex crimes. On the other hand, three of the other victims were young, attractive teachers, including the newest victim. One was a married father of three, and one was a youth minister who ran a daycare with his wife.

The victims were bled out, either through the jugular—like the new one—or the femoral—like one of the other teachers. If they were at home—and several of them were—they were alone, either in the bedroom or the living room; and they were usually in a state of undress at the time of death. A few, usually but not always the ones convicted of violent or multiple sex offenses, were mutilated nearly beyond recognition. (The youth minister, for example, was found floating in the Red River north of Texarkana with his head and genitals missing.)

What marked them all as being of the same mind were the lack of evidence at every crime scene, the pairs of identical puncture wounds on all but the most brutally dispatched victims, and what the deputies collectively called “missing blood” because the amount of blood on the scene and the amount of blood in the

victim's body just didn't add up to the amount of blood a normal, healthy human being would need to survive. And if these victims had one thing in common, it was their health.

The old man drove away. Deputy Hillis apologized and stepped over to his cruiser to answer his radio.

"Pate? Johnson?" The dog handler waved them over. His voice was small and confused. "Abe found somethin'."

Pate felt excitement grow in his chest as he approached. He pointed his flashlight at the ground and froze. The dog sat beside the spot of light and trembled.

Large paw prints in the dirt headed up the road toward the cemetery.

## **Meridian\***

*Daniel Vines*

V

I been on this road so long,  
it seems like the same old song:  
a million trees beg the same old lonely sun.  
It makes me wonder as I run,  
which way gets me higher up,  
cause I don't see a sign to heaven.

It's always the smoothest ride;  
the roads are paved with concrete lies.  
I'd say I'm moving up, but I'm just going back.  
And it takes me to a different place  
but I'm still on the same old plane;  
I'm always stuck here in the middle.

V

When I'm going down 20 in  
between Birmingham and Louisiana',  
I cross the crossroads called Meridian.  
And lord, do I get the itch  
to turn that wheel just another inch  
and run away down to New Orleans.

V

Lately I don't have a home;  
all I got is walls and roofs,  
and like a tired ghost, I float on through.  
Then I can see all around,  
but my feet can't touch the ground,  
and I'm still stuck here in the middle.

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\* Author's Note: "Meridian" combines a spiritual restlessness with the "on the road" trope associated with traveling folk singers. In the prose sense, the speaker always finds himself in Meridian, Mississippi (where many interstates connect). This is symbolically equated with always being "on the way" but never getting home as well as feeling stuck on a track going left and right but unable to go up and down (spiritually). The Roman numeral "V" (a musical dominant) separates each verse, indicating a longing to go back home to the "I" (a musical tonic).

I built a fire within myself,  
kindling hope and helium,  
to reach some satisfaction, I don't know.  
But it doesn't take me there,  
I'm just bloated in the air,  
and I'm still stuck here in the middle.

V

When I'm going down 20 in  
between Alabam' and Louisian',  
I cross the crossroads of Meridian.  
And lord, do I get the itch  
to turn that wheel just another inch  
and run away down to New Orleans,  
but I'm still stuck here in Meridian,  
I'm always stuck here in Meridian,  
I'm always stuck in  
I'm always stuck in  
I'm always  
I'm always  
I'm always  
stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck . . . .

# *Season of the Wild Children*

*Heather Vaughan*

## Characters

JOHN, 21, MATTHEW's younger brother

MATTHEW, 25, JOHN's older brother and SARAH's boyfriend

SARAH, 20, MATTHEW's girlfriend

## Setting

The action takes place in a luxurious hideout in the Guadalupe Mountains of Texas.  
The time is the present.

## Scene 1

*(JOHN, MATTHEW, and SARAH have just returned from a bank robbery. MATTHEW and SARAH enter SR. JOHN follows behind. HE carries a heavy duffel bag. SARAH places MATTHEW in a chair beside a mirror at the end of a large dining table. HE is panting in pain from a wound in his right arm's upper shoulder. HE was shot during the chase. Wild-West music plays softly in the background and slowly fades out.)*

SARAH: Dear God, Matthew! They really got you! Here. Hold this while I grab some first aid.

*(SHE gives MATTHEW a rag to press over the wound. SHE runs to a nearby bookcase to retrieve the kit and returns.)*

Those dang coppers! Why didn't you shoot back? What were you doing, John? Too damned scared? You were supposed to handle them, not me. I was the driver and did your job for you!

JOHN: My hand was bleeding, Sarah. A bullet skinned it.

MATTHEW: I'm proud of you, Sarah. You're one of the best female shooters I've ever seen. You shot out those coppers' tires and ran them into the ground.

SARAH: Well, my good aim today's due to one fact: Daddy handed me his shotgun when I was eight and told me to take my first round of shots. So I did, and I haven't ever stopped.

JOHN: That's one thing about you. You're a tough little woman that'll tear anybody's head off!

SARAH: I'll tear your head off if you don't get over there and start counting that money.

*(JOHN plops the duffel bag on the table.)*

JOHN: Feels like a half-million. Try to top that one, guys! Better than the last. Summer is the season of the wild children. And we are definitely that!

*(HE opens the bag and begins counting the money. SARAH removes MATTHEW's shirt to examine him better.)*

SARAH: Look, sweetie, your artificial arm got all shot up. It's holding two of the bullets. You're bleeding from a third bullet that scraped your upper shoulder, but it never entered. I'll stitch it up, and you'll be good as new.

*(SARAH cleanses his shoulder then pulls out a needle and thread and stitches up the wound. SHE removes the artificial limb in order to remove the bullets, and SHE gives him a clean flannel shirt to put back on. HE starts dressing.)*

MATTHEW: John, how much is it?

JOHN: Still counting brother, it'll take me awhile.

*(SARAH puts the kit away. SHE walks up to JOHN, smiles, and takes a seat.)*

SARAH: Here. I'll help you. Hand it over.

*(JOHN places a large stack of bills in her hand . . . and then HE gently slides his hand over her fingertips.)*

I told you'd I'd help you count what's yours. I'm not part of the yours.

*(HE quickly jerks his hand away, frustrated.)*

SARAH: How about the other bag John? The one that holds St. Edward's Crown. You know. The crown you stole and replaced with a fake.

*(SARAH gives him a smile with a slight sneer.)*

JOHN: What about it? I have it safely set aside to go to the Al Saud family. I'll be recompensated thirty-nine million. Set for life.

*(MATTHEW walks over to John.)*

MATTHEW: You mean *we'll* be set for life. After all, I did help you.

SARAH: Why you obnoxious son of a gun. We've given you money plenty of times. "Set for life." Who do you think helped you? Without us, you'd be nothing.

*(MATTHEW's cell phone gives off a beep alert. HE takes it out of his pocket and looks at the screen.)*

MATTHEW: We just made the news, guys, and they have a description of our car.

SARAH: Now what? Spill it out. Let's hear it.

MATTHEW: It reads, "Two men entered a bank, wearing masks, held innocent civilians by gunpoint, took everything in the vault, and escaped with a third accomplice. Men had a Southern accent, average height, normal build. Unable to identify race or hair color due to the fact that both men concealed their identities. Vehicle is a two-door black Porsche, license VYX-1431."

SARAH: The best part of having a Southern drawl is cultivating it. Guess you both scored good on that one. The newsman thinks you're from the South. Now just start using the words *folks* and *ya'll*, and you're sure to fit right in. Before long you'll sound like the Queen of the South, just like me . . . or should I say King?

JOHN: Do you hear that? Sirens!

*(HE looks out the window nervously.)*

They didn't see our driveway. They're still moving, going the opposite way.

MATTHEW: Good. Glad they passed us up. Now we'll need to repaint the car, change out the license plates, and replace the rims. John, what's that total? Hope it was worth our trouble today.

SARAH: Oh, don't bother repainting the car. I paid some of those coppers off. Sometimes you got to pay the piper.

MATTHEW: Was that really necessary?

SARAH: When conducting business, you got to take care of people, Matthew. They got to eat, too.

MATTHEW: Whatever you say, dear. What we got, Johnny boy?

JOHN: We have eight hundred and seventy-three thousand dollars. Not bad. Divide it up in three, that's two hundred and ninety-one thousand each.

MATTHEW: Could be better. I'll head outside and see if any more cop cars are lingering around. Damn bastards! Why don't they mind their own business? The car should still be repainted. A maroon color will do.

*(MATTHEW exits SR. Blackout.)*

## Scene 2

*(A warm evening glow colors the surroundings. Steve Perry's "When You Love a Woman" plays. SARAH and JOHN stand by the bookcase face to face. His arms are wrapped around her waist.)*

JOHN: How long will you deny me? I know you feel something for me.

SARAH: It's not like that, John. Yes, I'm attracted to you, but I love Matthew.

*(HE pulls her in closer and tries to steal a kiss. SHE playfully pushes him away.)*

JOHN: Please, be mine. I love you. You know I'll treat you better than he does.

SARAH: You are the better-looking one, that's for sure.

JOHN: Just think of the life we could have. No more of this craziness. No more stealing. We could be normal and settle down. Start our own family. Say you will. Run away with me.

*(JOHN leans in for a kiss . . . and MATTHEW walks in SR. The music abruptly stops.)*

MATTHEW: Trying to steal what's not yours, brother? I'll cave in that face of yours!

*(He stomps over to where THEY stand. JOHN removes his arms from SARAH's waist. SHE runs over and gets in front of MATTHEW.)*

SARAH: Now, Matthew, don't do anything rash. Don't start a ruckus. After all, he's your brother!

MATTHEW: Get out of my way, Sarah!

*(MATTHEW steps around her and heads for JOHN, who stands there bewildered.)*

MATTHEW: I'm about to put the smack-down in that pretty little face of yours, John!

*(MATTHEW rears back and gives JOHN a good punch in the face. JOHN falls backwards but catches himself.)*

JOHN: That wasn't necessary, brother, but if that's what you want, I'll give you a fine scrap! Sarah's too good for you, and you know it.

*(HE squares his feet, makes a fist, and gets ready to swing.)*

MATTHEW: Oh, yeah? Well, she's definitely too good for you! You backstabbing little—! I'll beat the living tar out of you.

*(MATTHEW swings, but JOHN blocks the hit and swings with his other arm to punch his brother in the face. MATTHEW reels. SARAH runs over to him.)*

SARAH: You two stop fighting! Ya'll aren't about to ruckus up here!

*(SARAH helps MATTHEW find his feet. SHE steps away and comes back holding a small pistol in her right hand. SHE points it at the brothers.)*

SARAH (CONT.): I swear I'll shoot the both of you!

JOHN: She really means it!

MATTHEW: Fine. I'll deal with you later, John. Get St. Edward's Crown ready for delivery. The Al Saud family's expecting it. We leave on the flight to Saudi in a few days. You're coming, too, Sarah.

SARAH: What a hell of a trip this should be.

*(MATTHEW exits SR. JOHN follows him quickly. SARAH tucks her pistol into her bra. SHE looks around while wondering where JOHN concealed the crown.)*

If only I could find that crown. The Al Saud family's so dang rich. What do they need with it?

*(SHE begins creeping and poking around in search of the crown. Instead, SHE stumbles upon another artifact: an ancient scroll. SHE unrolls it carefully.)*

What's this? It's written in some ancient language. Aramaic, maybe. Wait. This looks like a Dead Sea Scroll. One of the missing ones. Why would John have this? I'll go to my room and try decipher it.

*(SHE exits SR. Blackout.)*

### Scene 3

*(Evening lights—warm amber bulbs—rise. The theme song from Narnia rises then fades. SARAH sits at the table alone with the scroll unrolled in front of her. SHE has deciphered its meaning. SHE begins to read aloud.)*

SARAH: The prophecy of the scroll says that behind a jewel of the crown lies the inscription of six points containing the longitude and latitude of the ancient map that leads to a tomb where lie buried the Commandments given to Moses by God. Once uncovered and returned to the holy site, King Solomon's Temple will then be rebuilt. A Messiah will come. Peace will reign . . . then war will break out. A red

SARAH (CONT.): moon will appear, and stars will burn blazes of fire. Oh, my! This is truly a treasure! Where the heck did John find this scroll, I wonder? Why's he keeping it secret? No telling. He's probably got all sorts of things buried throughout the house.

*(MATTHEW walks in SL and notes the scroll. HE approaches her.)*

MATTHEW: What's that in your hand? It looks old. The writing sure looks unusual. Let me see it.

*(SHE cautiously hands it to him. HE looks it over for a moment and then hands it back.)*

Looks like Aramaic. What does it say?

SARAH: It's a Dead Sea Scroll mapping out the location of the Ten Commandments. Do you realize how much this could be worth? I found it hidden away. John was keeping it a secret. I think it has a connection to St. Edward's Crown.

*(Whistling sounds offstage. JOHN is heading inside. MATTHEW pops open a compartment in his arm.)*

MATTHEW: I'll hide it in my fake arm for now. Maybe I can figure out his motive later. Sh. Not a word!

*(HE hides the scroll in his arm. Music fades out just as JOHN walks in SR.)*

JOHN: Car is repainted. I helped polish it off. It's hidden away drying in the old barn. I've prepared the crown jewel nicely for the Al Saud family. We'll hide it in a hidden compartment in my luggage covered with clothes.

MATTHEW: That sounds fine, John. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some things to review in my study.

*(MATTHEW exits SR.)*

JOHN: After this is all over—our affairs with the Al Saud family—come with me, Sarah. You'll never have to steal again. We'll be set for life. I promise.

SARAH: Let's suppose I did come with you. What about Matthew?

JOHN: What about him?

SARAH: How would he feel? You know it would break his heart.

JOHN: Yeah? And so what? He'll eventually get over it. I love you more.

*(SARAH senses an opportunity to get what she wants. SHE walks up to JOHN, wraps her arms around his neck, and gives him a gentle kiss on the cheek.)*

SARAH: If you love me more, than tell me where the crown jewel is. Why should you and Matthew keep it hidden from me? Am I not a jewel worth more?

*(JOHN leans in and kisses her deeply.)*

JOHN: For you I will tell all . . . but not until after tonight.

*(SARAH takes his head in her hands and kisses him once more. When HE moves his head, the hand cradling his neck can be seen holding a syringe filled with poison. SARAH shuffles the syringe from one hand to another and gently tucks the syringe away in her pocket. Blackout.)*

#### Scene 4

*(Ambient light rises. MATTHEW sits in a chair near the grand old mirror while HE examines the scroll. HE is alone. Warm lights near the chair's crown bathe his face. HE speaks to himself.)*

MATTHEW: This particular scroll had to be found in one of the eleven Qumran caves that the Essenes left while fleeing from the Romans. But how did John come upon this one? I wonder if he even knows what it means. Wait. The night I helped him steal the crown, I remember seeing John slip something into his pocket, but I never questioned or wondered what it was. This scroll must have been attached to the crown somehow.

*(MATTHEW puts the scroll back into his arm. JOHN enters SL. HE walks over to the table, pulls out a chair, and sits down.)*

JOHN: It's getting late, brother. What do you want me to cook for dinner?

*(A loud knock is heard at the door.)*

MATTHEW: Quiet! Quick! Turn off all the lights!

*(JOHN turns off the lights. MATTHEW peers out the window. Red lights flash. HE whispers.)*

Don't say a word. If Sarah walks in, motion for her to be quiet. No one knows we live here. Give it time. They'll leave.

*(More loud knocking occurs.)*

JOHN: What should we do?

MATTHEW: Sh! Shut your mouth.

*(JOHN mutters to himself.)*

Shut your mouth, or I'll shut it for you.

*(Footsteps walk away from the door . . . then silence.)*

JOHN: I think they're gone. Whoa! That was a close one. Maybe they were just asking around the neighborhood. I mean, come on. If they thought it was us, the coppers wouldn't have politely knocked.

MATTHEW: Yeah. I suppose your right. What's the plan for our meeting with the Al Saud family? We leave in a few days.

JOHN: We'll fly out to Saudi. They'll pick us up from the airport. We'll be driven to one of their palaces. There we'll be escorted to our living quarters, get refreshed, and meet with the grand old father for the evening meal. We'll wine and dine, and then we'll conduct business. They'll show us the thirty-nine million online ready to transfer to our bank in Sweden, and I'll show them St. Edward's Crown. Exchanges will be made. Then we all go home happy.

MATTHEW: You *fool!* You think it's that easy? How do you know they won't kill us right then and there?

JOHN: Because I have one more piece of the clue they need. But they won't get it until we've returned home safely with the thirty-nine million sitting in our account.

MATTHEW: Oh, yeah? What's that?

JOHN: A little piece of historical evidence that's very important to their way of life. It's a holy text to them. The Commandments given to Moses by God. All three religious strains are actually one religion. They just don't see it yet.

MATTHEW: And why would they want this?

JOHN: The road that leads to Mecca. The crown jewel, the prophecy, the Ten Commandments . . . all of it leads to the final hour, the end of time—according to their religion—and the return of a Messiah.

MATTHEW: Must be worth more than just thirty-nine million. Don't settle just yet, brother. We might be able to squeeze more out of this than you think or find a higher-paying buyer.

JOHN: Yes. You could be right. Behind the crown lies a jewel pinpointing the exact location of the Ten Commandments. If the Al Saud family gets this into their possession, they can locate the original text written by the hand of God himself. This would be of great value to them, but do you know who it would be even more valuable for? The Jews in Israel. And they'll probably pay a price much higher than the Al Sauds.

MATTHEW: Just as I said. We need a better buyer, and the Israelis would make the perfect one.

JOHN: Further down the scroll are more prophetic statements, although somewhat faded. Here. I'll show you.

*(JOHN walks over to the bookcase to retrieve the hidden scroll. HE searches, but the scroll is gone.)*

It was just here, and now it's gone!

*(MATTHEW takes off his fake arm and pulls out the scroll.)*

MATTHEW: Is this what you're looking for?

JOHN: Yes! That's exactly it! Thief! Give it back!

MATTHEW: Now, John, we're brothers. What's yours is mine, and what's mine is yours. You can trust me.

JOHN: Very well then. It *has* been hard keeping everything a secret.

*(SARAH enters SL while the brothers are distracted. SHE hides near the bookcase and listens to their conversation.)*

Now hand me the scroll, and I will show you the other prophecy.

*(MATTHEW hands him the scroll.)*

Farther down, about here, it reads that once the Commandments have returned to the Holy Site, King Solomon's temple will be rebuilt. Then the Messiah will come. The rest is faded and hard to decipher.

MATTHEW: This could be worth billions. It makes that small sack we stole the other day look like a crumb of bread.

JOHN: Exactly! Why have the crumbs when you can have the whole meal?

*(SARAH reveals herself but pretends that SHE has just entered.)*

SARAH: Oh! Talking amongst yourselves, you two? I'll prepare dinner tonight, so ya'll just relax and pour yourselves some drinks.

*(SHE exits SL. Blackout.)*

## Scene 5

*(Warm lights rise to reveal MATTHEW and JOHN seated at the dining table. Fine china adorns the table along with silverware and wine glasses. Uncorked wine waits to be poured. SARAH walks in SL carrying food SHE has prepared.)*

SARAH: Here my Southern gentlemen. Hope you enjoy! Everything has been prepared with good down-home cooking.

*(SARAH sets the food down, smiles, and then seats herself. JOHN pours her a glass of red wine.)*

SARAH (CONT.): A toast. To a set life—the good life—forever more!

*(THEY toast and then drink.)*

JOHN: Yes! A crown for a jewel and a jewel for a crown!

*(SARAH rises and pours more wine into the glasses.)*

SARAH: And now another toast. This wine's from the year 1947. Quite fitting for the occasion, wouldn't you say? To Eternity, a humbleness sitting upon our backs.

*(THEY drink, but SARAH takes only a sip. SHE begins to hum a random tune while JOHN and MATTHEW dig into their meal.)*

SARAH: How's the dinner, boys? Everything good?

*(Both men nod in agreement.)*

MATTHEW: Everything is delicious, my love.

JOHN: Yes. It's all good.

*(JOHN stares suggestively at SARAH as HE takes a sip of his wine.)*

SARAH: All my things are packed and ready for our little trip.

MATTHEW: Maybe you'd better stay here. Things could go sour, and the possibility of killing, torture, or worse might happen. It seems to be a dangerous trip, and we won't know the outcome until we've returned home.

SARAH: Why change it now? What are you two really up to? I know how to handle myself!

*(SARAH slams down her drink and exits SL to get dessert.)*

JOHN: Do you think we made her mad?

MATTHEW: It's for her own good. I don't want her coming back dead, you know.

JOHN: Yes. That's true.

*(SARAH reenters from SL carrying a chocolate cake.)*

SARAH: Here, boys. I made this especially for you both! Enjoy!

*(SARAH cuts everyone a piece, but then SHE sits down and fiddles with her piece.)*

So if I'm not going, then what should I do? While the cats are away, the mice do play.

*(MATTHEW and JOHN begin eating their cake.)*

MATTHEW: I don't know, dear. Go shopping? I guess you could have all of that eight hundred and seventy-three thousand dollars. That should keep you busy until we return.

*(SARAH laughs.)*

SARAH: Now you listen to me. I'll take the crown. You boys can flip over the eight hundred and seventy-three thousand! And I'll meet with the Al Saud family myself while you play cat and mouse at the house.

*(SHE pulls out her little pistol from her bra and points it at both of them. "A Fistful of Dollars" begins playing at low volume.)*

JOHN: Now, Sarah, don't do anything foolish. I love you. Remember what we talked about.

*(MATTHEW starts to cough and gag. HE rolls onto the floor.)*

JOHN: Matthew!

*(JOHN runs over to MATTHEW. HE sees chocolate dribbling from the side of his mouth.)*

The cake! You put something in the cake!

*(JOHN starts to cough. HE can't seem to take a breath. Soon, HE falls over and lies next to his brother.)*

SARAH: What's wrong, my loves? Isn't this the dream you planned?

*(SARAH reclines at the table and begins to laugh.)*

And you men thought women were stupid. Ha! Look at ya'll now.

*(SARAH takes a sip of wine and a bite of the meal. SHE stretches hers arms up and then brings them back down.)*

I'll be thirty-nine million richer tomorrow—scroll, crown jewel, and all.

*(MATTHEW slowly begins to rise.)*

MATTHEW: You thought you'd kill me, huh? Why you little—

*(HE heads towards SARAH with his arms and hands extended.)*

SARAH: Oh, my love. I would never do that.

*(SARAH draws a bead on him and prepares to fire her pistol, but MATTHEW jumps on her and grabs the gun.)*

MATTHEW: I loved you. All I ever wanted was you. I did all of this for you, and you betrayed me. How could you?

*(Shots fire. MATTHEW freezes. Then HE drops the gun and falls face forward dead. SARAH turns to see JOHN propped up on his side with a smoking gun in his hand. HE has shot his own brother.)*

JOHN: Sarah, I told you I loved you. Come with me and you'll be set for life.

*(SARAH picks up her gun and walks over to JOHN. SHE smiles at him.)*

SARAH: Oh, John, I do love you both. But neither one of you is a crown, now are you?

*(SHE bends down for a kiss . . . and shoots him in his side. HE collapses to the ground. SARAH starts to walk away. Suddenly, JOHN gathers his strength and shoots her in the back. SHE falls down and doesn't move.)*

JOHN: Summer is the season of wild children, my love. The purging of all evil. God forgive me.

*(HE breathes his last breath. The music fades out. Blackout.)*

## **Snooze Button**

*Jeff Brainard*

While Khrushchev and Kennedy reckoned warheads  
and risk, we sprawled exhausted on the grass and benches  
outside the classroom, the radio now silent, nobody talking,

even professors in our midst, erstwhile guardians  
and judges, unable to muster one happy word.  
It was hours before we drifted back to studies.

Even then, talk was light, mechanical, desultory.  
It took amnesia to start again. What would tomorrow bring?  
Even the President's peacemakers dealt with the dark.

The Doomsday Clock, meanwhile, moved from a comfortable 7  
in 1960 (pledges to avoid massive retaliation) to a soporific 12  
in 1963 (partial test ban treaty). Who *doesn't* use the SNOOZE button?

So Cuba remains the chilling augury of Armageddon.  
The two lowest settings—2 in '53 and 2 in '18—still in  
effect—don't terrify. Pictures of mushroom clouds

couldn't really render two titans flexing  
their muscle. The silliness of building shelters for  
150 million people was self-evident, as were jokes

about shutting out and locking the door on your neighbor.  
Schoolchildren, of course, are innocent. Ducking  
under your desk for air-raid alarms was frivolous.

Is 2018 another matter? The recent fall has been  
precipitous, no doubt. Others have joined the Club;  
others threaten to join. Always, now, we fret

our guardians will detect and quash a cabal  
slipping through chinks with WMD in a suitcase.  
Add now the planet snuffing out, however slowly,

in a few agonizing centuries . . . . Is it? One nation  
after another spawning madmen in charge?  
Including one with a trigger in his pocket

that moved us one half-minute closer to midnight?  
The clock is a fiction of course. Our Cassandras  
could have given us, say, another hour or two.

We have only the past to go by. We know that two  
hotheads blinked. Warhead inventories have shrunk.  
POTUS has a hotline. The stakes couldn't be greater.

*Buzzcut Season:  
Poetry Recollecting a Queer Southern Experience*

by

**Grey Powell**

## **The Trickster**

I am the crow's marionette.  
Hordes of string tangled, connecting  
his Stygian claws and my heavy limbs.

Keeping me in a tenebrous,  
unbaptized existence until he needs me  
to collect his treasures.

Candlelight lifts the forest fog,  
the highest treetops guests to the show.  
He pulls my hair taunt, forcing my mouth  
to feel joy that is only a part of the exposition.

The harsh cawing rises to a cacophony  
making eyes water and ears bleed.

My cardinal sin pours out in the form  
of my ethereal ichor, the gods mourning the  
loss of innocent immortality.

The curtain falls with a feathery bow and  
I am once again a puppet handcuffed,  
left without hope and  
laid to rest in abandoned plumage.

## **Isaiah 58:10**

Keep your holy servings  
away from my plate.  
The pains of hunger  
will never be enough  
to kiss your feet for scraps  
of your grand feast.

I would rather eat my own bones,  
nibbling away at the flesh  
that clings to my old frame.

The missing boards and  
peeling wallpaper of my dwelling  
will always be more than your kingdom  
filled with pearls and people.

They use your glory  
to feed their starving souls  
forgetting that you are  
the reason for famine.

## **Hometown**

I'm a ghost story here,  
A soldier of hell  
Poised and ready  
to make the kill.  
Stare with rancor.  
Whisper your pleas.  
Spit at my feet.  
You can't threaten me  
with the Devil.  
What can he do  
that hasn't already  
been done to me?

## **A Note to My Heart**

What a beautiful thing a heart is.  
How it continues to beat  
no matter how many times  
its person breaks.

Thump. Thump. Thump.  
Such a simple sound.  
Such a simple action.

A constant blooming of red  
unafraid of outer scars  
full of inner magic.

The heart is fragile  
but, like its person,  
so incredibly strong.

## **Endurance**

You are a simple animal  
with raw softness overflowing.  
There is zero reason to crawl  
through shattered stained glass  
to repent for allowing love  
to hug your every organ  
and fill your soul with freedom.  
You are a creature of power,  
and the gods smile  
at their proudest creation.

## **Choke**

I once was drowning  
in the sea of faith.  
It was a slow,  
beautiful death,  
an amazing grace.

Creatures that lurked  
far below the surface  
dragged me down,  
proclaiming the  
good news all  
while killing me.

The roar of the wave,  
The spray of the Son,  
Thrashing about  
as angels sang  
songs of eternal rest  
while I couldn't breathe.

Head above water,  
the sky so blue,  
hope for something  
better and new.

Swim to the shoreline  
gasping for air.  
The sand is warm,  
and a new start appears.

## Grace

Perhaps in another life  
your lips would be on my neck,  
Our fingertips pressed together  
as the cicadas scream to the trees.

Perhaps our lungs would burn  
as hot as this Southern evening  
between quick breaths  
and water-colored afternoon skies.

Perhaps it is wishful thinking  
and needless hoping on my part  
because you're currently in his arms,  
and I am alone watching.

## **Memorial**

You haunt my veins  
as ghosts do cemeteries.  
Your hands press marks  
of the moon into my skin.  
Our foreheads bead  
with the same dew that kisses  
early morning gravestones.  
Blood claws its way  
to our flushed cheeks  
as the spirits of those gone  
rejoice in our holy union.

## Prose for Poetry

I grew up in a war zone,  
population 6,469,  
and to tell the truth,  
battling to find myself  
almost felt worse  
than a slow death.

Am I a villain?  
I'm not entirely sure.  
Am I a gun,  
a trigger from the kill?

Or am I a victim?  
Trained to submit,  
Pick a side.  
Devil on one shoulder,  
Angel on the other.

No matter how much you try  
to show your good,  
you will always be  
evil to someone.

It begs the question—  
Can I remember who  
I was before  
the world  
told me who to be?

## **Rebirth**

Lover, come near.  
I long to teach you  
the ways of the agrestal.

Let my hands become  
raw with primal desire  
disguised as tenderness.

Allow me to be reborn,  
our palms caked in mud  
our souls belly to belly.

## **A Realization**

We are a double-edged sword,  
A sharp blade dripping with passion.  
You press your razor-sharp lips  
against my throat  
and cut me with your words.  
You twist the hilt;  
I hold on tight.  
For you, I always seem to be  
willing to bleed.

## **American Dream**

My ribs frame your butterflies  
and make me into living art.  
I crafted God from your smile,  
the private one meant only for us,  
and found the holy land in your bed  
staring up at plastic stars.  
You're an all-American dream  
full of white picket fences  
and apple-pie weekends.  
I don't always have faith in religion,  
but there must be some higher power  
for something as incredible as you to exist.

## June for Lovers

Deep in the woods,  
a deer sucks the sap out of a tree,  
hungry for its sweetness  
as you once were for your lover's lips.

Remnants of alcohol spark on your tongues—  
a distinct taste that  
could only come from  
the Captain himself.

The climax of a love  
like the crumbling stairway to heaven,  
more painful than the golden arrow  
that kissed Apollo's heart.

The high of your closeness  
would fall with the morning sky.  
It would only be the start of the descent  
into your hearts being strangers.

The New Year would ring in with love—  
though it wouldn't matter in the end because  
June may be for lovers,  
but January is for sleeping alone.

## **The First Son**

Crow feathers collecting on your head,  
Miles of smooth white marble made of flesh.  
A smirk and blush to complement  
what my fingers ache to caress.

Soft fingertips map out my soul,  
The very same one that intertwines with yours.  
Angels whisper about the gods' greatest  
creation: the boy with the smile.

Miles of forest between our hands,  
The whispering pines begging us to touch.  
Your voice speaks clearly through the receiver:  
a reminder heaven truly is a place on earth.

## **Faith**

The cathedral once  
tall and handsome  
is now crumbling  
under your gross  
lack of belief.

Its proud glass  
shatters,  
Mary's tears now  
sharp shards of  
melancholy.

When you stepped  
out of that heavy  
oak door, your  
abandoned holiness  
ignited the ruin.

Your back burned hot  
as God slipped quietly  
out an empty vessel  
who felt relief as  
the past burned.

## About the Contributors

**Jeff Brainard** earned an MA in creative writing at San Francisco State University, but he became, and retired as, an architect. He did have a short academic career teaching composition and poetry at the same place where he studied architecture: California State Polytechnic University. In 2010, he moved to Shreveport from the Bay Area in California to be near his oldest son and his family. At long last, he has time to read and write.

**Carolyn Breedlove** edited and annotated the antebellum journal, *A Glorious Day: The Journal of a Central Louisiana Governess, 1853-1854*. Finishing Line Press published a chapbook of her poems, *Just Following the River*. Her poems have appeared in such publications as *Comstock Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *The Bastille*, *New Millennium Writings*, and *Maple Leaf Rag*. Before returning to her native Louisiana, she lived for many years in southern California. She is presently seeking a publisher for a novel set in 1970s Los Angeles, an excerpt of which was awarded “Best in Show: Literary” in the Shreveport Regional Arts Council’s Critical Mass 7 competition by critic and author David Ulin.

**Daniela Campos** is a full-time college student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, where she is studying early childhood bilingual education. She grew up in Linden, Texas, a small town where she graduated from high school. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends.

**Jason Clayton** grew up in Bowie County, Texas, looking for inciting incidents in the woods with his friends. His greatest writing teachers were Stephen King and Flannery O’Connor, and he enjoys writing about the wonders—and horrors—hidden under the banality of daily life. “Hunting” is his first work to be published anywhere ever. When he isn’t writing, Jason enjoys traveling and trying not to succumb to general existential angst.

**Hadlee Coleman** is a twenty-year-old student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is currently working towards her generalist teaching degree. She is excited about becoming a teacher because she wants to make a difference in

children's lives. In her free time, she likes to spend time reading books and taking naps with her dogs.

**Samantha C. Gallegos** is a senior double major in English and History at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. Her current aspirations are to pursue graduate school and write a plethora of novels, short stories, and other wonderful works of art to her heart's content. Fun facts: she likes to write love letters and is considered to be a natural source of chaos.

**Rachel Green** is a junior at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She enjoys writing, sketching, and being outdoors. She resides in Atlanta, Texas, with her husband and three children and four crazy cats.

**Carter Jones** holds a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and a Master of Science in computer science from Southern Arkansas University; he also holds a Master of Arts in English from Texas A&M University-Texarkana. Carter works as a software developer for a public-sector technology company. He is currently in the process of writing at least one novel and half a dozen short stories . . . as usual. Carter lives in Lewisville, Arkansas, with his wife, Katie, and their cats, George and Myshka.

**Dorie LaRue** is the author of two novels, *Resurrecting Virgil* (from Backwaters Imprint of the University of Nebraska Press) and *The Trouble With Student Affairs* (from Artemis Press); three chapbooks of poetry: *Seeking the Monsters* (from New Spirit Press), *The Private Frenzy* (from Jazzbones Press), *In God's Due Time* (from Parousias Press); a full length collection of poetry, *Mad Rains* (from Kelsay Press); and a full length collection of poems, *An Enemy in Their Mouths* (forthcoming from Finishing Line Press). Her fiction and poetry and book reviews have appeared in a variety of journals including *The Southern Review*, *The Maryland Poetry Review*, and *The American Poetry Review*. She obtained her PhD. in creative writing at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She lives in Shreveport, Louisiana, and teaches writing and literature at LSUS.

**Grace Olvera** is a native of Texarkana who is a wife, stay-at-home mother to three children, and a full-time student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is

pursuing a BS degree in English with a certification to teach seventh through twelfth grade. She is an avid reader who also enjoys writing, archery, and many other activities in the great outdoors.

**Amanda Pirkey** is currently attending Texas A&M University-Texarkana in pursuit of a bachelor's degree in EC-6 education with a concentration in special education. She loves working with children and watching them grow and learn each year. She has been married for twenty-one years and has two amazing children who are her whole world.

**Grey Powell** is pursuing a master's degree in English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana after graduating from that university in the spring of 2020 with a BS in English. When not writing poetry, they research Vietnam War literature and its resulting psychological effects on war rhetoric. As of now, Grey has written three poetry collections: *Flowers for Eyes*, *Bloom*, and *Buzzcut Season*, which won first place in the 2021 PLACE Writing Contest.

**Te'yana Pugh** was born in Los Angeles, California. She is a student, a wordsmith, a literary enthusiast, a creative, and a humanist who pursues life optimistically.

**Kenneth Robbins** is the winner of the AWP Novel Award and the Toni Morrison Prize for Fiction as well as the Charles Getchell New Play Award (SETC) and the Festival of Southern Theatre Award (Ole Miss). He has six published novels to his credit along with thirty-one published plays, four literary collections (as co-editor with his wife), and numerous stories, poems, memoirs, and reviews. As Professor Emeritus of Theatre at Louisiana Tech University, he teaches within the University Honors Program.

**Morgan Elizabeth Sanders** is a twenty-two-year-old senior and criminal-justice major at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. After earning her degree, she plans to pursue a career as an attorney. "St. George Island" is about the childhood vacation spot where she spent time with her family: a small island in Florida called St. George.

***Bennett Sewell*** is a retired physician, lacking four days of being ten months old when Roosevelt was inaugurated for the first time. He grew up in Boyce, Louisiana, where he worked on his family's farm. He completed his studies in pathology at Tulane University, and he later founded an independent pathology lab in Austin, Texas, where he worked for many years until retiring to Shreveport, Louisiana. He is still looking and listening and walking and talking.

***Heather Vaughan*** is an undergraduate student majoring in psychology at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

***Daniel Vines*** is an English instructor at Bossier Parish Community College. A native of Shreveport, Louisiana, he received his BA in Music at the University of New Orleans and his MA in English from Emporia State University. For his thesis, Vines transcribed his songs to the page as poems, and he has been reconciling his tongue with his pen ever since. Vines's work has appeared in *Flint Hills Review*, *Aquila Review's* Web series *Poem by Poet*, and the UNO newspaper, *Driftwood*.