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Friends and Family

Tyler Wortham
Allison Johnson

— for Tyler, who left us too soon —



"Reality leaves a lot to the
imagination"
— John Lennon

Happiness

Blake Moon



This is me and my dog Lady.

We're resting on her pillow,
and it's a warm summer morning,
the sun, though you can't see it,
transmogrifying everything it
touches into gold like King Midas.

My mother is taking the picture
here at our trailer home, the land
my family owned and where
she took us to live when she could
no longer afford our other home.

It's dirty, country, as she would call it,
but to me it was irrevocable, sacred.
I am barefoot, in my pajamas, and happy,
though you can't tell that from my smile.

Sometimes I smile and am not happy at all,
but I remember this happiness well.
Out of us three, I am the only one that still
exists, and the landscape has since changed.

But this moment is forever frozen in time here,
our happiness stored in a rectangular bottle
and preserved so I can see how happiness looks,
and remember it, should I ever forget.

Dadzilla

Casey Joe Allen

Getting married is one of the happiest times in a person's life. The wedding, however, is not always so much fun for the bride until each "I do!" is said and the party begins. Weddings can be stressful, but—luckily for me—I had Dadzilla.

I'm sure you've seen the *Bridezillas* shows that record encounters with frazzled brides being too picky about dresses, shoes, cakes, and miniscule details about which nobody cares. Tears roll and screams emit as the viewers at home wonder what marriage will be like for the poor saps who agreed to these unions. I tried to be on my best behavior during my own wedding last year, but many times I felt the pressure of putting on a grand party for everyone to enjoy. In the meantime, Dad was able to take over as the tense one . . . but I am forever grateful to him for it.

When I say that my father was Dadzilla, I mean it. He was a perfectionist for his eldest daughter's wedding. The wedding was to happen on a warm June Saturday after rain had fallen constantly for two whole weeks. Dad was worried that the cars would get stuck in the field where they were to park. He was worried that the house wouldn't be clean enough. He was worried that he wouldn't be able to build the giant cross that would decorate the valley where I was to marry my fiancé. He was just worried about everything. He was constantly asking me questions.

Dad was also giving advice. When my maid of honor decided that she wanted to live vicariously through my wedding and began taking liberties with how she was to dress while refusing to help us finish the house for the wedding—yes, my parents were putting the finishing touches on their log cabin at the time—my dad said things. He is not a quiet person by any means.

I said something like, "Oh, my gosh. I've asked Chelsea a hundred times to come help us move hay bales and help with the rock on the chimney, but she keeps saying she's busy. Then she sends me pictures of floral crowns for her to wear in the wedding because 'Maids of honor should look better than the other girls.' She's also requested a larger bouquet than the other girls. Who does she think she is?"

Dad replied with something like, "Tell her to shit or get off the pot. We ain't waiting around for her all day." This commentary came between his being a

carpenter for the larger-than-life cross, laying rock on the chimney, staining the porch, and mowing every inch of twenty acres so that scratchy weeds would not inconvenience guests. This commentary also came between phone calls during which he was able to set up friends with two giant smokers, arrange for a horse-drawn carriage, snag a DJ, and lobby for my wellbeing with the tent-rental people.

The tent-rental conversation, when the representatives showed up on Thursday during a downpour, went a little like this:

Dad: Y'all know that tent's going to be a mess getting up, right? It's pouring down rain.

Rental Guy: Yeah, but the schedule said today, so we came anyway.

Dad: Even after we called you and said to come out first thing tomorrow?

Rental Guy: Yeah. We were hoping it would dry out.

Dad: Ever hear of this thing called T.V.?

(The rain continues pouring down as the rental guys, who are meant to set up the tent, sit on our porch contemplating the best way to get back to their truck without drowning.)

Rental Guy: Yeah. We can't put the tent up in this weather. It'll get muddy, and the rain'll pull it down.

Dad: You don't say. Okay. Come back tomorrow first thing.

Rental Guy: Okay. We'll be here early. What time do you get up?

Dad: Five a.m. sound good to you?

(Rental Guy stares, blinks a few times, and runs to his truck. The guys proceed to get their truck stuck in the yard that Dad has just mowed and must sit there until Dad can pull them out of the muck with the tractor.)

Dadzilla made sure everything was perfect . . . and it was. The day of the wedding was beautiful. Music played in the background as we made the ride down the hill in the horse-drawn carriage to the cool valley below where the twelve-foot-tall cross stood, and we both cried when he gave me away.

The thing about this wedding was that Dad had been waiting for it for a long time as well. You see, when he was in an elevator crash at work three years ago, the doctors told him he would never walk. He promised me that he would walk me down the aisle someday. He fulfilled that promise and had every right to a beautiful wedding.

Ancestor of Mine

Brandi Burrow

Mary Lansdale Ahern,
no ancestor of mine!
Perched on the lady's chair,
topping out at four-foot-nine.
Layers of skirts,
tiny feet perched
on an upholstered footstool.
Greeting parlor guests
on the Lord's day of rest,
following the service
at St. Edward's.

Great-great Grandma Dawson,
cradleboard strapped to her back,
stands tall outside the two-room,
river-cane plaster shack.
Wrap skirt, poncho,
soft deer-hide shoes,
long hair and copper armbands—
she is preparing to harvest
the sweet corn blessed
with prayers, offerings
to the almighty Sun.

Amy Cuthbert Blaney
Valerie Shirley

My sisters and I often share memories of our grandmothers. To say we were blessed with strong matriarchal influences is an understatement. Sometimes, our memories tumble on top of one another. The story begins with “Remember when . . .” followed quickly by “Oh, yes! And remember the time . . .” and on and on. Other times, arguments take place. I will begin a memory or a precious story only to encounter a resolute interruption: “That’s not what happened! What happened was . . .” All of the memories are loved and true, but some have evolved and blended. They have become personalized and amalgamatized, which is not a word but a reality.

My memories of Amy Blaney, my spry, copper-headed maternal grandmother, are dear to me. My grandmother didn’t scale a mountain or receive a Pulitzer, but I think that she was more than capable. She was born in a time when women had fewer opportunities and options. She never met the limit of her intellectual abilities, but she was a miracle worker within the confines of her limited economy and her expected role as a woman. Sometimes, when I’m frazzled and I’ve bitten off more than I can chew, I think of all I saw her accomplish, and I’m certain that I, too, can prevail.

Grandma Blaney taught me the love of canning and bottling fruits and vegetables. She grew up during the Great Depression, and, as she used to say, “Don’t you forget it! Let nothing waste. Use things up! Be prepared for a disaster that might rob you of the ability to feed the ones you love.”

In this memory, we four girls sit in the back of a big blue car—powder blue, to be specific—and I’m certain it was a Chevy. Maybe it was a Ford. I can’t imagine my grandfather’s purchasing something other than an American-made car. No seatbelt laws existed, so I can see us clad in summer shorts with our eight, pasty-white legs lined up before us. We ride to a large peach orchard. I know that the time is later in the afternoon because Grandma would have wanted the arid desert heat of Utah to cool off a bit before venturing out.

When we arrive at the farmer’s orchard, he’s taken aback by the carload of females when we come tumbling out of the backseat. I can remember the concern in his face (or, possibly, the frustration). Suddenly, we’re up in the trees. I’m certain that we climbed into the fruit-laden limbs without waiting for ladders.

Grandma, with a colorful scarf tied over her head to protect her short red *bouffant*, is on a ladder. As she picks the ripe, reddish-orange fruit, she calls out orders: “Don’t pick anything that isn’t ripe!” and “Don’t pick anything that’s too ripe!” I can hear her loud whisper, “Don’t drop anything! That old bugger’ll make me pay for bruised-up fruit, and I won’t have it!”

We all think our grandmother is hilarious. We giggle at her instructions and frustrations. “Carolyn, you’re too high!” is followed with “Well, you’re up there now. Keep picking.” We are in the trees long enough to fill the wooden bushel baskets that Grandma recycled from year to year. Peals of laughter sound, peaches vault from one tree to another, and the farmer and Grandma holler firm instructions to us. At some point, Kristine, our youngest sister, is injured (physically or emotionally) and crying. Then we are all back in the car. Four hot, sticky girls, a trunk filled with fragrant peaches, and Grandma smiling proudly—we barrel down the dirt road and back onto the freeway. Our work has just begun.

My grandparents lived in a small, one-story home in Kearns, Utah. It wasn’t far from the historic Kennecott Copper Mine, where Grandpa worked for the majority of his adult life. The homes in the neighborhood originally housed the mine workers’ families and were nearly identical except for the exterior paint and the interior décor. Their home was a pale pink, and we loved that color. After they both died, my aunt repainted the house in beige so that it would sell. When I saw that beige house, I couldn’t believe it was the same dwelling. Grandma’s pink house had been one of the stabilizing forces in our lives as children.

In my memory, we drive to the pink house. Grandma has Grandpa help her heave the bushel baskets from the trunk. Once we’re inside, we work in shifts because of the kitchen’s small size. Grandma’s true intent is to empower each of us with the knowledge to prepare and can produce so that we can be of help to our mother and our adult selves in the future.

I remember standing shoulder to shoulder at the sink. Once we’ve scalded the peaches, the skins slip away easily from the golden flesh. Then we halve the peaches, pit them, and place them in cold water with a touch of lemon to prevent their browning. Grandma won’t tolerate any “tomfoolery.” We whine and fight. We giggle and carry on. Just over the counter, *Lawrence Welk* or *Hee Haw* blare away on the boxed-in TV. Grandpa tells silly jokes and tries to offer production suggestions or sneak away with a fresh peach. “Ed!” Grandma yells. “Get out to

the carport and bring me in a box of Mason jars. And stop getting the girls wound up!” More giggling.

We wash the jars, lids, and rings in hot, soapy water and line them up on the counter. On the gas stovetop, Grandma brews a huge stockpot filled with simple syrup. We place the peaches in the jars carefully. She wants the fruit to be pretty enough for us to feel some pride. The process is a form of art, really. The final product is a thing of beauty. Once all of the perfect peaches have made their way into the Mason jars, we can the remaining fruit. We slice the bruised or battered peaches. The really beat-up pieces we jam. We waste nothing.

The gentle rocking of steam from the huge stainless-steel pressure canner on the stove is a constant noise for hours while we work. The box fans whirl, and Grandma towels her face. “I’m too old for this,” she tells us, or “These damnable hot flashes!” When the timer sounds and she shuts off the flame under the canner, her eyes light up. Slowly, the final bursts of steam release. Then she removes the giant lid. “Stand back,” she says. “I don’t want anyone to get burned.” Then she removes the jars from the canner one at a time. As she places each one on a folded towel on the kitchen table, she cries out, “Oh! Just look at them! Beautiful! Absolutely beautiful!” And they are.

Back at our own home, we’d store the jars of fruit on shelves our father made. When the cool autumn months approached and fresh produce wasn’t readily available, our mother would call out from time to time, “Someone run downstairs and get me a bottle of peaches!” We kept the fruit shelved with other items Mom or Grandma had canned. Although she worked many hours each week, Mom had inherited the skill of canning and preserving from her mother. Pickled relish, stewed tomatoes, and chili sauce joined the ranks of pears, Bing cherries, apricots, and, of course, the peaches.

Peaches canned at home or pieces of buttered toast that we’d slathered with Grandma’s peach jam were staples for us. Each time I spooned a peach, I felt pride in having helped Grandma. I felt as though I were there in her kitchen once more.

The whole process of canning produce is second nature to me now. I often put up jams and stewed tomatoes in the summer months. Sadly, purchasing bushels of fruit for canning may be more expensive than buying fruit in cans from the grocery-store shelves. That sad reality makes my memories of Grandma’s little kitchen in her small, Pepto-Bismol-pink house so dear to me. These memories

document a time, a place, and a person whose talents and love nurtured me. These memories fill my heart, and I'm proud to say I am the granddaughter of Amy C. Blaney.

The Destroyer
Brooke Bates

Darkness fills the sky as a stillness
falls over each home. People cower
in fear and hold loved ones near and dear.
Strong winds pick up and heighten the
fear as the sirens sound, pleading for
others to seek safety.
It spirals 'round and
'round, destroying
everything in
its path.
I hold
my mom
so
tight
and
wait
for
it
to
pass.

Inconsequential
Alicia Walden

I have an older brother. That fact explains quite a lot about me, actually. He's eight years older than I am, which explains even more about me, and I was his favorite experiment. I'm lucky I escaped with my life when I consider my many run-ins with, first, the angry rooster inside the chicken-coop door that was unyielding under my brother's weight against the other side and, second, the inside of the washer (soaking wet) while he perched on top.

Eejit, stand over there. Let me throw this at you, he'd say as he lifted some object (usually a large and heavy one). Seriously, who gives a preteen a javelin? He resented no longer being the only child and was apparently trying to rectify the situation. Many times, I found myself standing in front of the dart board. (I'm not being metaphorical.)

I have a memory. It's an old one; I couldn't have been more than three years old. Our parents were still married, and we were all living in the small, uniform base housing at Ft. Hood, Texas. People tell me that I can't possibly remember anything since I was so young, but I could never have made up this memory: the day hell froze over and my brother developed a benevolent streak.

I remember sitting on the nondescript grey-beige carpet of the living room in front of the TV at midmorning. Aside from the television, the pale yellow glow of the morning sun, blooming behind the white mini-blinds mounted on the nearby window, provided the only light. The voices of animated creatures and characters mixed with the thinly veiled voices of our parents arguing in the other room—probably about one of the women.

As we watched TV, my brother rose, unaffected, poured himself a bowl of cereal, and reached elbow-deep into the cereal box. He produced a small, plastic trinket. He dusted it off, studied it, hesitated, and then—without a word of explanation—tossed it my way. Equally silent and afraid to question a miracle when I had witnessed it, I clutched the trinket to me.

It was a treasure, and, therefore, I stored it in my pale pink plastic treasure box. Actually, I held on to it much longer than was strictly necessary—years. I couldn't understand what had possessed him that day. Honestly, I wasn't sure . . . and I'm still not entirely convinced that kindness is in his repertoire. At any rate, that small bauble was precious to me for many years.

I suppose I was about ten years old when I came to the conclusion that perhaps he simply had no interest in a tiny Esmeralda figurine. I had never doubted his great sacrifice that morning. I'm almost certain she was sold among a mound of toys inside a pale pink treasure box marked \$1.00 in a garage sale one year once I finally came to this revelation. I suppose I never wanted her, either.

Bird

Monica McLelland

— to Josie Dean – never conceal your splendor —

Strutting her way proudly out of her room, she always
accessorizes
to the nines.

Today's focus—
Noah's Ark for
fashionistas. A flamingo wearing a disco-
ball-miniskirt or possibly a bejeweled, bedazzled Pepto-
Bismol bottle.

Turning heads, standing alone as a diva in her youth,
symbolizing elegance and grace among others.
Eccentric, confident, a cultural icon, she
is a feather of flame and royalty, untarnished
in her search for assurance.

Thank You for the Music
Christy Busby Worsham

Dear Turntable(s),

What a long, strange trip it's been. I still remember our first encounter. My mother carried a square, brown box with a black handle in one hand and me in the other. The two loves of her life, her turntable and her daughter, were meeting for the first time and becoming inexorably linked. The moment was exotic; it held an expectant mystery. Thinking a road trip beckoned, I looked forward to the adventure; but the trip required no vehicle. Mama placed me in a little rocking chair and you on the table. She opened your lid. I couldn't reach your handle—your arm—nor could I see your turntable—your spindle. From my vantage point, I saw an open lid, half the brass latch, and the woven, tweed-like fabric covering what I would soon learn was your voice: the speaker.

Mama carefully opened a smaller, latch-laden box and finessed her fingers over the items within. Carefully, she pulled out a paper sleeve, and from it she pulled a black, flat disc. She turned and smiled with the disc in her hand. A hole was in its center, and a green apple surrounded the hole. Who had eaten the apple in the middle? Was the black, round thing a plate? A saucer? Was it a toy? A Frisbee, perhaps? She placed it inside your open case, stretched her arm out to meet yours, and placed your arm on the disc.

A percussive, magical sound emanated from the open box as “Come Together” by The Beatles started playing. Upon the first beat of the song, I quit rocking, and rocking was one of my favorite activities. Transfixed and transformed, I realized my life would never be the same. With The Beatles singing, turntable and record had come together to cast a spell of musical madness over me.

I was at odds. I didn't know whether to dance as if paying homage to a divine god or sit in my rocker and sway to the rhythm. Either way, I would have been out of time with the music. I was overcome with curiosity. Instead, I climbed into the kitchen chair and peered down onto your platform. Oh, you moved like a wheel of a tricycle but made such glorious sounds far better than the meager, tinkling bell affixed to my three-wheeled ride. I loved carousels, and you reminded me of one as the dew-adorned, green apple spun in splendorous fashion.

A stale, cardboard scent filled my nostrils as I moved closer to inspect your movement and sounds. I could feel the faint warmth from a tube containing orange lights. I saw a black, bowl-shaped object in front of the carousel and could feel its thud as the music played. Soon, the record stopped spinning, and the sound ceased. My mother smiled, moved the arm, removed the disc, and placed another black disc on your carousel. I couldn't get enough. Each record brought new sensations, new sounds, new styles I learned how to change records by stacking them on the spindle and watching them drop one by one.

You took me places without either of us leaving the room. With every drop of a record on your carousel, a new, mini *Magical Mystery Tour* began. You rolled me through Kim Croce, Three Dog Night, and James Brown. You took me to Marty Robbins's "El Paso." You and Al Green introduced me to "L-O-V-E (Love)" and "Love and Happiness." You transported me to many different moods, moments, and memories. Albums were the long, musical road trips with one artist, and forty-fives were the short, sporadic detours with several artists. Your arm's guiding the needle on the rotating record thrilled me.

I was so consumed with music that Mama bought me my own turntable. It was blue with tall, green jungle-like foliage on its case; animals peered through the leaves. You offered more than entertainment; you offered education. I had a child's set of forty-fives with tunes like "Alley Cat" and "Do You Know the Muffin Man?" Mama purchased the read-along books with accompanying records. The narrator read, I followed along in the book, and a cheerful chime indicated when it was time to turn the page. I thought I was *big* stuff with my own record player and storybooks. However, the educational pursuits didn't stop me from building my own collection of tunes by Bread, Gallery, Elvis, and James Taylor (to name a few).

The late 1970s ushered in the glittering, decadent disco era. Stereos in wooden cabinets, electrifying and illuminating the scene, eclipsed portable turntables. Some of these cabinets had four panels. The two central panels were sliding doors covered in crushed, red velvet. They revealed or concealed the turntable, the eight-track player, and the radio. The two outside panels on the cabinet had multi-colored lights that flashed to the music. Give me the lights, precious lights. As I entered my double-digit years, you were getting bigger and bolder, and so was I.

By the 1980s, Michael Jackson, INXS, and Journey traveled on those turntable platforms, but people had new ways of taking their music on the go. The suitcase-like turntable was sent packing in favor of boom-boxes and Walkmans, which played cassette tapes. Moonwalks and breakdancing were all the rage. A fire claimed our home, our extensive vinyl collection, and our turntables. We didn't replace those turntables when we began to rebuild our lives. Technology offered better options for playing music in our new home, and we went that route. You and I parted ways. At the end of the 1980s, CDs became the new way of playing music. Small, silver, shiny, and almost indestructible, I found a new musical love in these compact discs. Albums and forty-fives rolled out of relevance and gathered dust.

The way we listened to music didn't change much again until the advent of the Internet brought us MP3s and electronic versions of songs. We lost touch with our music, literally. We evolved (or devolved) into a culture that listens to, purchases, and keeps music on smartphones, tablets, or computers. We can store thousands of songs in the devices we hold or access tunes in the elusive, intangible cloud. It's easy and convenient, but something is missing. The thrill of seeing and holding album art and touching the record or CD before playing it became a lost concept. I was a tactile creature, and this trend saddened me. I needed a connection with physical media. I missed you, turntable, and I knew I had gone horribly astray in the digital age. I had lost my way.

Fast forward to the mid-2000s, and people wanted to turn back time by going retro with vinyl and portable turntables. Today's artists are releasing their work on vinyl. World Record Day takes place every April. The nostalgic nudge brought back your allure and attraction. I was smitten once more, so I purchased a turntable and scoured second-hand shops for the classic albums from my childhood. Turntable, you didn't miss a beat. I had silenced you, forgotten you, disowned you . . . but you, spinning your wheel and reeling in the years, returned without judgment. We've reconnected, rediscovered, and reminisced. I've loved every moment, measure, and beat of getting reacquainted. We are reunited, and it feels so good. Thank you for the music and the memories. I'm forever yours

Faithfully,

Christy Busby Worsham

Pigs

Casey Joe Allen

Some of my fondest memories are spent with pigs,
Trailing off across the green landscape with pigs.

But other memories are fed to us
As if we were slopped like pigs.

And there is grandmother sitting in her lies,
Rocking away remembrance of the pigs.

She rocks away the father's name of her first-born
Child who is, from birth, equated with the pigs.

And there is Grandpa, working in the fields complaining
How the Big Cats in D.C. have turned into greedy pigs.

And she's afraid, in that child-abusing rocker,
That we already know her secret love of the pigs.

She hides the words deep in her throat and
Vows she will never squeal like pigs.

Her son, not Grandpa's, is son only in name,
And he wonders how to get away from the pigs.

Oh, and Grandpa knew all along about the first son.
So the son, my father, is decorated in scars like the pigs.

So here I am, Child of the Pigs, among it all,
Until I choose not to follow the path of pigs.

Not-so Hospitable Hospitality

Leslie Abston

Someone close can give a person advice for years, but that person will never fully understand that advice until a certain moment or situation makes it count. My parents told me over and over for three years to re-evaluate my life goals. They warned me that a degree in hospitality management might not be as glamorous as I imagined it to be. One sentence from a complete stranger—a sentence offering me the summer job of my dreams—made me stop and prioritize. “Every night and weekend” sent me on a completely different career path and ultimately brought me closer to my friends, my family, and my community. I realized that my relationships with and obligations to those people who are close to me are more important than a flashy job in an exotic city.

Growing up in a small town with a teacher for a mother, I was certain of two things: I had to get out of east Texas, and I was not going to pursue a career in education. I wanted excitement, daily challenges, and exposure to as many different cultures and ways of life as possible. By my junior year in high school, I had my heart set on attending the University of North Texas and earning a degree in hospitality management. When people would ask about my choice, I’d have to explain, “You know, like planning, resorts, and convention centers.”

My mother assured me I was not going to like the hustle and stress that jobs in this field would bring, but she allowed me to choose my own path. She also warned me about the hours by saying, “You’ll be expected to work every night, weekend, and holiday. You’ll miss the seasonal events at our church, and you’ll never get to come home or see your friends.”

After two years of school, a field trip to Texas Motor Speedway, a Harley-Davidson convention at the Gaylord Texan Resort, and a beverage-survey class, I was still set in my ways. My mother provided me with an ultimatum: “Before I pay for your next semester of school, you’re going to get a job in the hospitality industry.”

I spent the next month applying to every country club, convention center, and hotel in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and all of the towns in the middle of that region. After countless interviews for hotel front-desk positions during the graveyard shift, I finally obtained an interview with a wedding venue outside of Denton. This job was my dream job . . . or so I thought. The interview went

surprisingly well. By the end of the next day, the manager called and offered me the job. We were discussing the details when he said, “We’re already booked every night and weekend until October, so I’m going to need you to be available during those times.”

My stomach dropped. I’d heard those words for the past three years, so they didn’t affect me, but now they were real. I looked at all of the moments I would be missing with my family and friends, and I declined the job the next day. I made an appointment with an academic advisor and changed my degree plan so that I could study social sciences and secondary education.

At that point in my life, I realized that planning weddings or hosting conventions may be the ideal career for some people, but it was not for me. The type of job a person goes to each day doesn’t define that person. Her character, her experiences, and her reactions to those experiences define her.

Choosing to pursue education so that I can teach something I love will provide me with the opportunity to make a difference in my school and my community. I know that a career in education will give me flexibility with my work schedule so that I can be available for important events in my life. I can help my parents on the farm; I can attend weddings, funerals, and family reunions; and I can be on hand to help my aging grandparents and watch my nephews grow.

That pivotal moment when I heard that I would be working every night and weekend opened my eyes to my true purpose and desire in life. The appeal of working at a resort, a convention center, or a hotel could never fill the void of what I would be missing back home. I had believed for so long that escaping a small town and working somewhere with constant excitement and adventure would help me achieve my happiness. To my surprise, I face challenges, excitement, and adventure almost every day in the classroom; and I’m a positive influence for hundreds of young adults. I know I’m where I’m supposed to be. I’ve found happiness with my family, my friends, and my community.

I'm from Home

Alicia Walden

I'm from piney woods and crimson river banks.

I'm from air so thick you can drink it.

I'm from sweet tea and fried chicken,

Bluebell, and pecan pie.

I'm from the back pew,

The preacher's-comin'-over-for-lunch-on-Sunday crew.

I'm from yes-ma'am's and no-sir's.

I'm from there's-a-proper-way-to-sit-talk-eat-and-be bunch.

Bless your heart; no one really says what they think.

It's a tough nut to crack.

Tempers and temperatures are hotter,

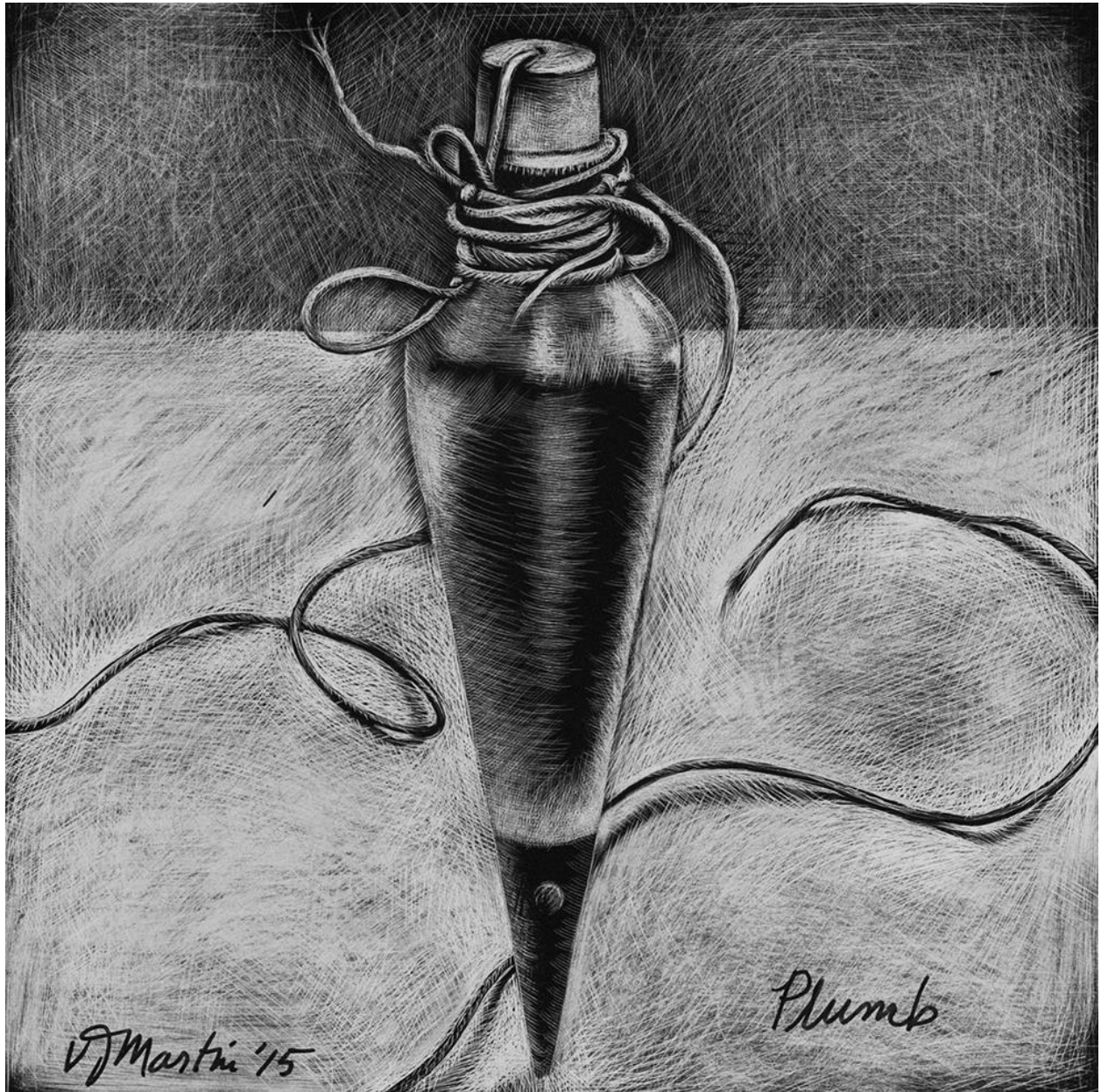
But blood is still thicker than water.

There's a strong pull to roam,

But this is always Home.

Change and Exchange

Plumb
Vikki Martin



Feather Signal
Neal Harrington



Purple Feathers*

Melinda Zwirn

Danielle kicked her legs under the hard, wooden chair and stared at the stone wall in front of her. The door to her right opened. The Reverend leaned half of his body out of the door. “Danielle, would you step in here, please?” He opened the door a little wider, and she could see her parents standing by the Reverend’s desk. She tried to decide if they were angry or not.

The door to her left flew open, making her jump, and the Professor stepped out.

“I have some questions for the young lady, too,” said the Professor.

“I don’t think so,” said the Reverend. “This is a village matter.”

“It is not only a village matter. This speaks directly to—”

“This is a village matter, and we’re going to sort it out very easily, Professor.”

The Professor took more steps out of his office, and the Reverend closed the distance.

“I don’t intend to interfere with anything you’re doing, Bill. You know that. But this is exactly what I need to see. This speaks directly to my purpose here. I just want to ask a few questions.”

Danielle frowned. Was the Professor calling the Reverend Bill?

The Reverend looked at the floor. “This is a village matter.”

“Please, Bill?” the Professor said.

Dani chewed on the inside of her own lips. She bit painfully into a canker sore that had just begun to heal.

“I have to insist that you do not interfere,” the Reverend’s voice rumbled past tightly closed lips.

“Of course.”

“All right. Come this way, Danielle.”

The Professor stepped sideways and smiled down at her through his thick, brown beard. How could he be happy when she was so afraid? Maybe that meant that the trouble wasn’t so bad.

* “Purple Feathers” won first place in the 2016 PLACE creative-writing contest.

The Reverend held his door while she stepped through into his office. Dani took the empty wooden chair before the Reverend's desk and glanced back at her parents, who now sat by the wall.

As she settled into her seat and tried to figure out what to do with her hands, her eyes fell on a pile on the Reverend's desk.

Purple feathers.

"Danielle, do you know why you're here?" the Reverend asked.

She stared at the pile of feathers and then slowly shook her head. Better not to guess.

"Did you trade purple feathers to Cassidy for a silver bracelet?"

She nodded while looking down at her grey pant-legs.

"The silver bracelet belonged to Cassidy," the Reverend said. "Why did you do that?"

"I wanted it for my mother," Dani replied.

"That's very strange to me," said the Reverend. "That bracelet belonged to Cassidy's mother and Cassidy's grandmother. It's a very precious thing. Why would she trade it to you for feathers?"

Danielle didn't quite know how to answer. "It was a trade," she said.

"Yes, I understand that," the Reverend continued. "But it is a trade that makes no sense. A beautiful silver bracelet for a pile of old feathers."

"But they're purple feathers," Danielle replied. He must not have noticed.

"I don't understand," said the Professor. "These are feathers from a chicken? Are purple feathers rare on chickens?"

"Lavender feathers are a recessive trait," the Reverend replied. "But they are in the gene pool. I don't think it's an important detail, really. What difference does it make what color the feathers are? They're chicken feathers. They're useless."

Dani winced at the Reverend's sharp tone, but the Professor grinned at him. Dani didn't know why the Professor would be happy. All she could think about were the feathers. They were special. Purple feathers were special. No one in the school had ever seen one when she brought the first one to class. She had found it on the ground in the new chicken's coop and thought how beautiful it was. She had taken it to school to show. None of them had chickens with purple feathers. Right away, they were clamoring for their own purple feathers to carry around on their bookbags or wear in their hair.

Danielle didn't want to be mean to the chicken. She had to gather the eggs from the coop every morning, and it was much harder work if the chickens were scared of her. Still, sometimes feathers fell out. She always checked for feathers when she was checking for eggs. She could make someone feel special by giving that person a purple feather. She could make someone feel left out, too, as people did to her sometimes.

Then she started trading them for things. A purple feather could buy a sweet cookie from a lunch bag or a special pencil or a turn to cut in the line for the swing set. Other kids had them now, and they traded them, too.

Then the chicken stopped laying, and Dani panicked. Her mother would take it to the Center and trade it for another. The chicken would be butchered, and there would be no more purple feathers. She went out to gather eggs from her coop, and the boy in the adjoining yard came out to gather eggs from his. This would be the third day with no egg.

"Any purple feathers today?" he asked, as he often did. Dani had already pawed over the ground in the hope of an egg from the special chicken. But she dug through it again in search of a purple feather.

"If I find one," she had said, "do you want me to give it to you?"

The boy had nodded eagerly.

"Will you give me an egg, if I do?" Dani had asked.

"Sure," the boy said. "We have lots."

"You won't get in trouble?" Danielle asked. "Your mom won't count?"

The boy hesitated. "My sister scrambles the eggs together," he said. "My mom won't know."

"But your sister will know," Danielle said. "Can you give her a purple feather, too?"

"Did you find two?" the boy asked.

The chicken looked up at Dani then, and Dani frowned back down at her. Before she could hesitate, she reached into the chicken's tail feathers and yanked two of its precious purple feathers out. "Two feathers," she said, handing them through the fence. The boy carefully passed her an egg, and she placed it in her basket.

As the boy ran for his own house, the two feathers in his hands, Dani looked down at the harrumphing chicken. "Then lay, if you don't like it," she scolded.

She knew it wouldn't, though. Danielle thought about blaming the shortage

on one of the other chickens. But then her mother would trade the non-producer in for another, and they would still be an egg short every morning.

Finally, in an act of desperation, Danielle had held the chicken down and pulled out all of its purple tailfeathers. She came away covered with tiny bleeding nips and the sound of the chicken's angry squawking in her ears, but she had a pocket full of purple feathers.

She told her mother that the chicken was no longer laying, and her mother told her to walk it down to the Center for another.

She had to take the chicken in a small box. It didn't want to cooperate with her; it was already angry at her for yanking so many of its feathers. When she arrived at the Center, she asked if she could choose the replacement chicken.

"We are grateful for what God sends to us and only for what God sends to us," the woman behind the counter had intoned. Still, she winked as she took the closed, squawking box to the back. Dani craned around her and tried to see into the yard. She couldn't make out purple feathers on any of the chickens she could see. There probably were no more. Hers had been the only one.

Looking at the Reverend's desk now, at the pile gathered there, Dani began to doubt. There were too many feathers in that pile. She tried to remember how many she had given Cassidy for the bracelet. Maybe twelve? She sat and concentrated on counting the stems; the fluff of the soft feathers obscured them. When she got to twenty-one, she realized that someone had asked her a question.

"Did you hear me, Danielle?" the Professor asked. "What do you use the feathers for? Do you wear them as decoration or make something out of them?"

"I give them for things. They're for trading," she said.

"Well, you gave Cassidy a lot of feathers," the Professor continued. "What do you think she is going to do with them? Keep them?"

"She'll trade them for other things," Dani replied. She didn't understand why she had to explain this to the Professor.

"Do you understand?" the Professor asked, turning to the Reverend. "It's currency! They've created currency in a vacuum."

The Reverend stood up. "Professor, may I remind you that this is not your laboratory. This is a religious community. This community was created for our own spiritual welfare, not for your research. You are here as a guest. Only an observing guest. And only as long as you don't interfere."

“I’m not interfering. I don’t have to interfere.” The Professor’s face lit up as he spoke. “It’s happening independently. You started this community with the idea that if you removed all fear of needs being met then avarice would disappear.”

“That’s right,” the Reverend agreed. “Like the Hebrews in the desert, if everything is given to us that we need, we can learn not to obsess about belongings and hoard and sin against each other just for material gain.”

Dani felt like she might be sick. She didn’t understand what had gone wrong. Trading was allowed. She had just traded. She also didn’t want to have to untrade. She had given all but six of her last feathers for that bracelet. There wouldn’t be any more purple feathers. The chicken was gone. She didn’t want to have to give the bracelet back and have nothing.

“But what has happened?” the Professor asked. “Currency in a vacuum! The children have assigned value to something worthless and used it in place of the valuable. Feathers don’t go bad. Feathers can be preserved, hoarded, stored for a later date, and then traded for things that are valuable. Feathers! Currency in a vacuum. Don’t you see that this proves that currency is in our nature?”

The Reverend frowned at the Professor. “Danielle,” he said softly, looking at her. “You are going to have to give that bracelet back. It was too special to Cassidy’s mother to let her give it to you.”

Dani sank low in her seat. She reached into her pocket and slid the long silver chain out; she put it on the corner of the desk. “Can I have my feathers back?”

“Absolutely not,” said her father from behind her. Dani turned around and looked at him. “You don’t need those feathers. None of the kids do. We need to get rid of them.”

Dani’s mouth fell open, and she took a sharp breath. She choked on her own saliva and coughed. Tears came to her eyes as she fought the rasping liquid in her breath. She didn’t want her father to think that she was crying over the feathers, so she turned and faced the Reverend’s desk. She shook herself and tried to breathe, but the tears were hard to stop once they had started.

“You see that?” the Reverend said, pointing to her. “We need to put a stop to this now before it goes too far.”

“How are you going to do that?” The Professor was pacing the room now. “It was arbitrary! Are you going to ban chickens? Are you going to put to death any chicken that presents with lavender feathers? Try to breed the color out?”

“We will do whatever it takes to preserve this community,” the Reverend said.

“To what end, Bill? It will just happen again! They’ll just find something else.”

“What do you suggest we do, then?” the Reverend asked. “You’re the economics expert. What do we do to stop this from growing?”

The Professor sighed and looked down at Dani. “How old are you, Danielle?” Then he turned to her parents behind her. “How old was she when you moved here?”

They didn’t answer at first. Dani couldn’t see their faces, but she saw the Reverend give a small nod.

“She was two,” her mother said.

“So she’s too young to remember life out there. Everything she knows she has learned in here. I assume that you didn’t teach her about money. Why would you?”

Money! Her parents had taught her about money. She had heard the stories about money. Money was bad. Dani cleared her throat and started to talk. “I don’t use money! Money is the root of all evil! Money is the root of all evil!”

“First Timothy, chapter six, verse ten,” the Professor said.

“That’s right,” the Reverend agreed.

“The problem is that it is rooted in us. Until we understand that currency is in our nature, we can’t address it. How do you starve it out of an adult soul when the seeds of it exist in a child?”

Dani put her hands on her stomach and shrank back in her chair. There were seeds of money in her?

“You’re scaring her.”

Dani felt her mother’s arms sliding around her shoulders. She took a deep breath, and the tears came now, unstoppable. She stood and ran around her chair into her mother’s arms and buried her face in her mother’s neck.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Dani,” she cooed. “They’re not angry at you. They’re just interested in the choices you made.”

Dani looked in her mother’s face to see if she were lying. Then she turned to the Reverend, who was looking down at his desk.

“It’s in the charter,” Mom said. “Trades are not against the rules. The children decided that the feathers were valuable, and they traded with them. That’s

not against the rules, and you can't interfere with personal trades. If you want to step in and stop a trade, you're going to have to do it by the terms of the charter."

Dani couldn't believe her mother was talking to the Reverend this way. She expected him to yell at her.

"She's right, Bill," the Professor said. "Better to let it happen and then reinforce the reasons for the values you aspire to. Better to let them learn from it."

"We'll have to think about this," the Reverend said. "We'll have to talk about this some more. Thank you, Danielle, for your help. Please don't let it worry you too much right now. We'll talk again."

Mom gave Dani another squeeze and then released her; she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe Dani's eyes. Dani looked into her mother's face and then stole a look at the corner of the desk.

"Should I take my feathers?" she whispered.

Jeb the Custodian
Sam Tirrito

Jeb ambled down the bright tile floor of the hospital, pushing the dust mop in front of him with one hand while he pulled the grey trash barrel behind him with the other. The wheels under the trash barrel gave consistent squeaks as they spun madly about, chirping back and forth with the machines inside the rooms he passed. Nurses in the blue scrubs passed him quickly, and he tried to stay out of their path—not out of courtesy but simply because he didn’t need another complaint lodged against him.

He reached an alcove where two padded armchairs sat waiting for family or friends who had to step outside. It was empty, so he slid his mop out of the way and set it up against the wall. He checked the time on his phone: 10:14 p.m.

Had he really only been working for fourteen minutes? He wanted to collapse into one of those chairs, but they weren’t as comfy as they looked. Despite being on a diet for the past—six? seven?—years, Jeb had not shed what his wife referred to as his “love handles,” which loved to use the arm rests of such chairs and leave his arms to dangle uselessly at his sides. Jeb was slightly heftier tonight than normal . . . not that anyone would notice. Nobody liked to observe Jeb. Most were grateful if his pants held on all night or if his grey shirt held back the Biblical flood of sweat collecting behind it.

Jeb took a rag and bottle of Windex off of the trash barrel’s apron and earnestly pretended to clean the window behind the chairs. He watched the nurses buzz past in the reflection. He hated them. They all looked down on him, but it was Jeb (and some of the other custodians) who kept this place from falling apart. The nurses were always bitching about how they kept Dr. Stick-Up-My-Ass and Dr. My-Degree-Is-Bigger-Than-Yours from accidentally killing another patient today. They were just as blind as the doctors to the fact that it was someone under them who kept everything running smoothly. Jeb wondered when it would be his chance to be oblivious to the people under him.

Jeb *could* have gotten his doctorate . . . twenty or so years ago. He just never had the money. He got halfway to an associate’s degree before he dropped out of college when his parents could no longer afford his increasing tuition at the University of Texas. Jeb returned home and moved in with some friends who had stayed behind at community college . . . until they grew tired of his not pulling his

(even back then) considerable weight. Finally, he got his first job working as a custodian at Wal-Mart. He followed his boss to his current job at St. Galgani's. Jeb thought his boss valued his work and needed Jeb around for his aptitude at solving problems. In actuality, Jeb's boss thought Jeb was a downright shitty worker, but it's hard to find good custodians, and despite Jeb's many, many faults, missing work was not one of them.

Nobody else would notice, but Jeb knew he was sweating more than usual tonight. He fished in the pocket of the barrel apron, pulled out a relatively clean rag, and wiped his forehead. He checked his phone again and saw that he had burned a good six minutes off of his shift. *Dr. Cranfill should be long gone by now*, he thought nervously.

Jeb loathed Dr. Cranfill. He was an asshole. And he was smart. He was in shape, and the first time Jeb had cleaned his rather large office, he discovered that his wife looked much better than Jeb's wife. This discovery did not surprise Jeb; obviously, if Jeb were a doctor, he could have had a wife like Cranfill's (or one even hotter). The reality still annoyed him, though.

He wasn't afraid of Cranfill, but he was nervous because he knew the doctor's secret to success. Jeb stuck his dust mop inside the trash barrel and pushed it in front of him as he waddled down the corridor toward Cranfill's office. He normally didn't clean this way first, and he feared that someone might question his not sticking to the routine, but his fear was misplaced; no one paid him any mind. He unlocked the door to the office and slipped in with elephantine grace before letting the door close behind him. He reached back and bolted the door shut.

Jeb didn't turn on the light switch. He hoped no one had seen him enter; with luck, nobody would think that anyone was here at all. Besides, the moonlight from the window showed him the layout well enough so that he wouldn't run into the couches or chairs.

Dr. Cranfill's office was actually made up of two rooms. The one Jeb was currently in was merely a waiting room for patients (albeit one with fancier chairs and heavy leather couches). The receptionist's desk guarded the door to Cranfill's second room, where the doctor kept his own desk. *Mm*. That receptionist was better looking than Mrs. Cranfill. Jeb was willing to bet that Cranfill had recognized that as well.

It was Cranfill's fault that Jeb had discovered his secret. The doctor had told him—in a stern, unappreciative tone—that he only needed the waiting room cleaned; he said he would take care of any mess in his own office. The siren went off in Jeb's head. He knew the doctor was hiding something as soon as he said that. No man like Cranfill was going to empty his own trashcan when he didn't have to.

On his first expedition into Cranfill's office, Jeb had hoped to find something with which to blackmail the man. He'd had visions of an extra cell phone with some definitely-not-work-related texts from the secretary . . . maybe even a condom in the wastebasket. He would have been happy with anything, though. The office had whispered no secrets to him that night.

Jeb's gears had turned all night as his wife snored next to him. He hated her for the snoring; it was similar to the grinding of the maintenance elevator at work. He was thinking about how grimy those parts of the hospital were when an epiphany hit him: Cranfill's office was too damn clean! If there was one thing Jeb knew, it was cleaning, and someone—presumably the doctor—had expertly cleaned the entirety of that office. There was no dust—not even on the bookshelves that simply housed decorations.

Jeb's mind had skipped immediately to some wild orgy that would require intense sterilization afterwards, but he reluctantly decided that the scenario was unlikely. Maybe the guy was just some loony germ-freak. *That'd make for a good story*, he had chuckled to himself. Jeb had moved past the point of simple curiosity, though; he lusted to know what Cranfill was hiding behind his spotless desk. Jeb's sister-in-law had just bought a nanny-cam to spy on her kid's babysitter. He'd thought about sneaking the camera onto one of the bookshelves to see what Cranfill was up to. He saw the flaw by the beginning of his next shift: if Cranfill were really cleaning that meticulously, he would likely find the camera.

The solution came rather quickly, though. He would put the camera in the air vent instead. This idea was, perhaps, better. The vent was in the center of his office anyway, so it would provide a great vantage point.

Jeb waited a few days before he retrieved the video. He'd planned to wait a little longer, but he could contain himself no longer. He hadn't been so excited since back when he'd believed in Santa Claus and been unable to sleep on Christmas Eve in anticipation of the wonderful presents awaiting him in the morning. He feared that his sweat might ruin the electronics before he could get

the video home to watch it. Luckily, they survived. Jeb took his laptop into the bathroom and turned on the shower to get some privacy from his wife. His heart was pounding and his hands were shaking, but somewhere in the depths of his heart he was preparing himself to be disappointed. In the end, what Jeb saw on the video confirmed his suspicions and satisfied him. What was on the video left him simultaneously horrified and in awe.

Jeb swiped a credit card in the crack between the doorframe and Cranfill's office door. He'd learned about the trick with the card from another custodian . . . before the man got fired. Tonight was Thursday. Cranfill wouldn't be returning until Saturday. After the first tape, Jeb had spied on the doctor on a few more occasions before becoming as bold as he planned to be tonight.

He closed the door quickly behind him. The blinds were shut, and the room was in complete darkness. Jeb walked straight ahead to where he knew the large wooden desk was. He still smacked his boot into the corner. He didn't hurt his toe, but the heavy thud made him freeze for a moment. That anybody could hear anything in this room was unlikely, but the situation had put Jeb on edge.

Jeb felt his way around the desk until he found the top drawer; it was unlocked. He fumbled inside the drawer until he found the matchbook. Following what he had watched on the video so many times, he turned away from the desk and felt his way toward the bookshelf. He finally pulled out his phone to shine some light around the room. He spied the old kerosene lantern in the dim light. Once lit, the lantern provided enough light to make out the silhouettes of everything in the room. The throbbing light made the room seem alive with jumping shadows. Were his legs shaking with nervousness or excitement?

He went back to the desk and stood in thought. Was he really going to do this? Well, of course he was. He'd already come this far. He pushed the desk toward the wall and then unpinned the rug that occupied the middle of the room. Jeb unbuttoned his shirt and reached inside to pull out a bag of blood he had stolen from downstairs. He laid it down on the desk. He bent over—no small feat—and rolled the rug, which went easily. (It was used to the routine.) Where the rug had been, drawn in what Jeb had hoped was red sharpie, was a star drawn so that its center was a pentagram.

He had rehearsed everything, so Jeb went on autopilot as he moved about the room. He thought about how things might be different for him tomorrow morning, and the idea of a new life spurred him on. A glass bowl on another shelf

held fake fruit. Jeb dumped out the fruit and placed the bowl in the middle of the star. Next, he went for the glass box on top of the same shelf. In the box was a skull.

From a distance, the skull looked like a model, but when Jeb removed it from the display case, it felt like a dumbbell. His hand tingled, and he thought the bone was vibrating, but when he set it in the bowl, it remained dead. Jeb walked over to the desk once more, and, using the box cutter he kept with him, he sliced the bag and let the blood inside drip out onto his hand. Quickly, he stamped his hand on each of the star's points. Then he poured the rest of the blood into the bowl and over the skull. The blood streamed down the ivory head and pooled around it up to the nasal cavity. The lamplight seemed to weaken. Jeb waited in silence; he knew what should happen, but, perhaps, he hoped it wouldn't. A series of bubbling noises erupted from the bowl; they were the kind of noises you could make if you blew your nose underwater. The skull spun around in frustration. Jeb hadn't seen this before . . . What was wrong?

Then it hit him. He'd forgotten the jawbone! He nearly tripped over himself as he went to a different shelf to retrieve it; he didn't know why Cranfill kept these pieces apart. He probably didn't want to know.

The skull was swimming about in a circle. Jeb let the jawbone slide into the side of the bowl; he didn't want to touch the skull.

After a moment of gargling, a voice called out, "Lord Cranfill, you imbecile!"

The blood latched onto the skull as the bone rose out of the bowl. The shadows in the sockets paralyzed Jeb with their unearthly darkness. "You are *not* Cranfill," the skull said knowingly. "And yet this is his office. Who are you, human?"

Jeb didn't show the fear or sickness he was feeling . . . at least, he hoped he didn't. "I'm Jeb. Who're you?"

"Mortal, I am Sulc!" the voice boomed. "Why have you called me here? I am assigned to Lord Cranfill's affairs."

Jeb raised an incredulous eyebrow. "*Lord* Cranfill? You call him 'Lord'? I have to work for the guy, and I've never called the S.O.B. 'Lord.'"

The skull looked down in what might have passed for embarrassment. "I know," Sulc grumbled. "I don't like it, but it was part of his agreement."

"What agreement?"

“Oh, the usual mostly. Wealth, power, long life . . . the ‘Lord’ thing.”

“And you get his soul?”

“Yep, and only a year into medical school,” Sulc answered proudly. “Some take longer to break. Hey,” the skull tilted questioningly, “whose blood is this?”

“Don’t know,” Jeb answered. “I stole a transfusion bag from downstairs.”

“Oh, well, that’s a shame. I don’t think this person is dead yet. I wouldn’t have shown up if I had known Lord Cranfill were not the one calling.”

“Well, since you *are* here, can we talk about my deal?”

“Your deal?”

“Well, yeah. I want wealth and health, too.”

“In exchange for your soul?” Sulc crooned. “It’s not in the best shape, anyway.”

“Well, I was hoping I could keep my soul and maybe do something else.”

Sulc’s teeth chattered in what must have been laughter. “That’s not how this works, Jeb. You’re making a deal with my master. The price is always your soul, even if you don’t say it is.”

“Well, do I have to kill anyone?”

The skull nodded. “Most do.”

“Did Cranfill?”

Sulc grew quiet. “I shall not incriminate those I serve,” he said mechanically.

“That’s too bad.” Jeb shrugged. “I just want some dirt on him. I mean,” he stretched his arms out to the room, “all of this is bad enough, but something a little more . . . believable is what I need.”

“Nothing doing.”

“Even if I got him to rescind the whole ‘Lord’ thing for you?”

“Lord Cranfill is an asshole, by human standards of course, but he works well for us. We are pleased he is on *our* side. You lack the same potential.”

“I have potential,” Jeb pleaded. “I just need *my* chance.”

Sulc adopted an unusually high voice. “I’m Jeb, and I have more potential than I do rolls, and all I need is someone to just *give* me a chance. Boo-hoo. You sound like my brother. Pathetic.”

“Demons have brothers?”

“I do, unfortunately. He’s a lot like you. Never happy. Always whining. You move up in the world by hard work, Jeb. By doing hard things. Things others don’t want to do.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean doing anything,” Jeb countered.

Sulc couldn’t roll his eyes, so he spun his head slowly in a 360. “Grime, is that you? Are you impersonating a human again?”

“That’s your brother?” Jeb didn’t wait for an answer. “Are you happy with your life, Sulc?”

“Human, I am a demon. Happiness is not what I am about.”

“Well, I mean, are you second in command under . . . you know?”

“No.” Sulc was grumbling again. “I have at least three thousand of the Legion ahead of me for that honor. I answer to Groll.”

“Groll sounds like an asshole,” Jeb supplied.

“The worst I know. Always taking credit for souls he didn’t earn. He’s never even gotten a man to kill.”

Jeb perked up. “Hey! How’s Groll getting to be your boss if he hasn’t even done that?”

“He’s incompetent—” Sulc paused. He’d given himself away.

Jeb was incredulous. “Dr. Cranfill hasn’t killed anyone.”

Sulc was defensive. “Well, I’m working on it. If I’m ever getting out from under Groll’s four thumbs, I’m going to have to make a man into a mass murderer. Temptation ain’t easy, Jeb.”

“Well, it seems like a back-scratching scenario to me,” Jeb responded.

“That would be against all sorts of rules. I’ve already said too much.”

“Then you’ve already started, friend. You aren’t going to tell me a *demon* is afraid of bending a few rules?”

The skull tilted this way and that with infernal thinking.

Jeb crossed his arms and puffed out his chest. His mind was racing with new possibilities.

“Okay,” Sulc finally growled. “Okay.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Where? Oh,” Sulc said, “never mind.”

“Let’s try talking deals again,” Jeb said, finally smiling.

The skull nodded.

“I’m listening.”

“This chick is TOAST!”:

On *Ghostbusters*, Sexism, Nostalgia, and Reboots

Drew Morton

The Internet has been ablaze for months over the female-led reboot of the cult classic comedy-horror film *Ghostbusters*. Two camps have largely defined the outcry: Conservative Meninists who decry the film as “raping their childhood” by “ruining the original film” and Progressives who view the Feminist gender swap as a welcome influx of diversity. By and large, the former camp has dominated the cultural conversation. The film’s trailer became one the most disliked trailers in the history of YouTube, and, prior to the film’s release, several movie-review aggregates overflowed with negative ratings and reviews from users who had yet to see the film. More concerning was the treatment of one of the film’s stars—African-American actress Leslie Jones—whom *Brietbart* news editor Milos Yiannopoulos harassed on the social-networking site Twitter. As a result, Jones received a flood of racist and sexist insults, and Twitter permanently banned Yiannopoulos from using the platform. Despite the social-media setback, the film’s lukewarm box office (\$75,000,000.00 worldwide in one week of release against a budget of \$144,000,000.00 plus approximately \$70,000,000.00 in marketing) and critical performance (73% on *Rotten Tomatoes* and 60% on *Metacritic*) has social conservatives claiming victory.

Before I begin to unpack briefly this complicated cultural maelstrom, allow me to begin with a personal disclaimer. I like the original *Ghostbusters* (1984) well enough. I grew up with it. I had the toys and my own trademarked jumpsuit. I’m also glad to hear that Ecto Cooler is back (although I have yet to find it!). That being said, my admiration and nostalgia for the original film does not blind me to its deficiencies. For instance, as Kevin B. Lee has illustrated in a recent videographic essay for *Fandor*, the gender dynamics of the original film are incredibly problematic. Admittedly, most older Hollywood films have ideological meanings that would make contemporary audiences cringe (from *Gone with the Wind* and *The Philadelphia Story* to *Rambo* and *Forrest Gump*).

On the other side, while students familiar with my work in the classroom will be quick to note that my critical lens for popular culture tends to taste of Progressivism, I’m also not an uncritical booster of the reboot. It is a deeply flawed film with long stretches of unimaginative action and a tone-deaf caricature

of an African-American woman . . . yet it contains a top-notch, star-making comedic performance by Kate McKinnon as a bisexual Ghostbuster. As critic and theorist Robin Wood once advocated, good critics are in touch with “the opposing pulls, the tensions, of one’s world.” In other words, people are allowed to have conflicted opinions about popular culture—just as we can have conflicted options about politics!

Now that I have gotten that out of the way, let me start with a bit of context. As social activists and critics within the #OscarsSoWhite movement have noted, Hollywood has a diversity problem on both sides of the camera. A 2016 UCLA report revealed that while 51% of the United States population is female, only 25% of films feature a female lead character. To make matters worse, only 9.2% of screenwriters and 4.3% of directors are female. A disparity in representation exists, and the irony is that films with diverse casts have exhibited higher median global box-office receipts and a higher return on investment than white male-dominated films. This reality is the main reason why the *Ghostbusters* reboot has become such a cultural minefield—so few films featuring both female creators and performers exist that *Ghostbusters* has become a poster-child for Progressive diversity.

The second main ingredient in this potent cocktail involves nostalgia and creative bankruptcy—the idea that the existence of a remake or reboot somehow diminishes the cultural value of the original and your memories and experiences with it. As Don Draper once said on *Mad Men*, “Nostalgia. It’s delicate but potent . . . it takes us to a place where we ache to go again It lets us travel the way a child travels—around and around and back home again to a place where we know we are loved.” Draper is right. Who doesn’t feel goosebumps when hearing the opening music to *Star Wars* or when digging up old photos and keepsakes from childhood? Nostalgia is emotionally potent, and it is delicate because of that potency. We want to protect those memories . . . yet to argue that the reboot of *Ghostbusters* jeopardizes your nostalgia for the original is not a particularly valid sentiment for several reasons.

First, critics widely ravaged *Ghostbusters II* (1989) upon its release (50% on *Rotten Tomatoes* and 56% on *Metacritic*), and the film has a lukewarm reputation with general viewers. (It has a 65% user rating on the *Internet Movie Database*; the original has a 78% user rating. *Ghostbusters II* also made \$215,000,000.00 while the original made \$300,000,000.00). If *Ghostbusters* had been such a holy

object in the first place, why didn't the mediocre *Ghostbusters II* dispel the nostalgic aura of the original? Second, 2016 also saw the release of a sequel to another cult classic Ivan Reitman film—*Kindergarten Cop*. Despite receiving horrible reviews and carrying the stigma of being a direct-to-video release, I was unable to find any reports that the Dolph Lundgren-led *Kindergarten Cop 2* sullied any childhood memories of Arnold Schwarzenegger's yelling, "It's not a tumah!"

As you have probably inferred, I'm questioning the validity of the nostalgia defense. Given the reception of *Ghostbusters II* and *Kindergarten Cop 2*, a double standard seems to exist that reveals a stacked deck against the *Ghostbusters* reboot because of its gender diversity. If the nostalgia defense had enjoyed mobilization in a genuine way, I think it would appear each and every time a new *Transformers* or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* film arises. However, since the nostalgia defense only seems to pop up when a non-white male takes a lead role in an established franchise like *Spider-Man* (see the Donald Glover casting controversy), *Star Wars* (see the many controversies surrounding Rey—from the Mary Sue critique to various merchandising failures), or *Ghostbusters*, it rings as being fundamentally disingenuous.

To be fair, the rhetoric around the *Ghostbusters* reboot does mirror that of adaptations more generally. Whenever a filmmaker decides to adapt a book, a television show, a comic book, or a video game into a film, critics cannot help but compare the latest iteration to the original source material. The fidelity argument is the Old Testament of adaptation studies . . . yet how can a director be completely faithful to a book? A director must consider issues of scope (books can take hours to read while films range from ninety minutes to two hours) and budget (the word *explosion* only costs me ink, but filming one costs thousands of dollars!). One must also consider the paradox of expectation—viewers tend to want an adaptation that is faithful to the original but then brand adaptations uncreative when they match the source material. As adaptation theorist Bob Stam writes, "The adapter, it seems, can never win."

This argument has more widely manifested itself as a cultural prejudice against sequels, remakes, and reboots that does not inherently walk hand in hand with the issue of diversity (although, considering the controversy of casting Rue in *The Hunger Games*, it certainly can). Viewers think of such texts as being uncreative and existing solely to capitalize upon the success of culturally pre-established franchises. For instance, how many of your friends criticized *Star*

Wars: The Force Awakens (2015) for being “too much like a remake” of the original? The *Star Wars* example is illuminating, as the original 1977 film was never *that* original. George Lucas openly borrowed from Akira Kurosawa’s *The Hidden Fortress*, *Flash Gordon* comics, Westerns, and Joseph Campbell’s work on the Monomyth (to name but a few obvious sources of inspiration!). Moreover, some of our most beloved films are adaptations (*Casablanca*, *The Godfather*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Wizard of Oz*), remakes (*The Maltese Falcon*, *Scarface*, *The Thing*, *The Fly*, and *The Departed*), and reboots (the Christopher Nolan Batman films and the new *Planet of the Apes* franchise). My favorite example? Akira Kurosawa’s beloved Samurai film *Yojimbo* (1961) is an adaptation of Dashiell Hammett’s film-noir novels, and Sergio Leone eventually remade the film as the classic Spaghetti Western *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) with Clint Eastwood.

By way of a conclusion, this illogical cultural prejudice brings me back to the idea that re-interpretations ruin the original. How many re-interpretations on stage and screen of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* have existed over the past four hundred years? I’m sure some of those versions were great and many of them were horrible, yet we still hold the Bard’s play in high esteem. As the great pulp novelist James M. Cain (*Double Indemnity* and *Mildred Pierce*) once said when he was told that Hollywood had ruined his books: “They haven’t done anything to my books. They’re still on the shelf. They paid me, and that’s the end of it.” My piece of advice to the Meninists who find a new, all-female interpretation of *Ghostbusters* threatening is to go to your bookshelf, open up *Ghostbusters*, and see if the movie is still in there. Unless you have an apparition of your own, I have a feeling that your version of *Ghostbusters* is just fine.

Sir Millican's Quest for Clarity

Carter Jones

The oaken mansion loomed around Sir Millican, ancient decadence festooned with the faded red and gold of a bygone empire. St. Robert's Hill was an old estate tucked away in the rolling countryside of the Westmarch, far away from the grand cities where the Thanes, Sir Millican's noble peers, had once ruled with impunity. The authority of the nobility had eroded with the centuries, and the last remains of them were exiled to luxurious, living coffins, the ruins of their once-resplendent bourgeois lifestyle.

Sir Millican scowled over his nephew, who was rolling around on the floor.

"The lad has taken too much of the stuff, I see," he said, fidgeting with the rose in his vest pocket. He kicked his nephew gently in the ribs and looked out the nearby window. The sun was beginning to set. A single cloud scudded across the dizzying watercolor sky.

The young man began muttering incoherently about a foreign actress, seemingly narrating some overwhelmingly vivid interior experience. Sir Millican gripped his cane. The young man seemed disconcerted, frantic in his muttering.

"Give in to it, boy. Don't fight it. You'll have a bad trip. Nobody likes those." Sir Millican rapped his nephew on the buttocks with his cane. The young man arched his back at the shock of the blow.

"Oh, Audrey, you bad girl . . ." the nephew said.

Sir Millican shook his head. *Tsk*, he thought, *what a lightweight*.

His nephew was the son of his sister, who had married into a family of wealthy merchants. Sir Millican had no respect for merchants, wealthy or otherwise, because they made their living selling the sweat off of the backs of others—and to further insult, the merchants had been of common stock. Imagine, commoners ascending to be peers at table with the pure and noble blood of the Millicans. The absurdity of it drove Sir Millican to the use of drink and . . . other substances. His nephew had found those other substances.

Sir Millican retired to his study and arranged some things on his desk. Finding an inkwell and some paper, he scratched a letter out. The sounds of the pen on the page sailed through the fallow air to pierce the long silence of the underpopulated manse. Satisfied with the letter, which contained not an iota of apology or remorse, Sir Millican stretched out his hand to retrieve the nearest flask

for a dram of whiskey. As the warmth spread throughout his body and the cares and disappointments of the evening (and of all evenings) fled away with alarming speed, Sir Millican realized that the thrashing in the passage outside the study had stopped.

Silence crushed itself against his eardrums.

“Nephew! Have you survived?”

“Uncle Sir? Is that you? Are you real?”

Sir Millican cleared his throat and tried to clear the floaters out of his vision.

“Indeed, I am real, boy. Did you have a good trip?”

The boy hiccupped from the hallway. “It was nice . . . I think.”

Sir Millican rose from his chair (or maybe the chair fell away from his posterior—he wasn’t quite sure) and ambled toward the threshold. There he leaned heavily on a rather precarious stuffed moose.

“Get up off the floor, boy, and go draw yourself a bath. It’s been a long day for the both of us. Frankly, I thought that you would die.” Sir Millican sniffed.

“Die? Could I have died?”

“You always could have died. Death is a rather sorry old chap skulking about, ready to haul you off to his ghastly condominium at any moment. It’s a rather dreary place, really, his condo, but he has assured me that it is at least pleasant in the summer. More pleasant than New Orleans in the summer, anyway; that place is dreadfully sticky.”

Sir Millican’s nephew propped himself up on an elbow. “That’s a strange metaphor for death, you know.”

“Metaphor? Pah! Met Death once in a back alley. He’s not as pale as you would think. I suspect him to be a lecher and, worse, a fan of that wretched American film, *Twilight*. They just ruined the book. That’s not at all how I pictured Bella.” Sir Millican stomped indignantly. “Now I’m all pissed. It is a shame to be pissed while one is pissed. Go take your bath. A cold one. You’ll feel right as rain afterwards. I’ll call the butler.”

Sir Millican shouted down the hallway. The cry echoed through the corridors, “Wilfred” calling out to “Wilfred” from cobwebbed corners.

“Uncle Sir, you haven’t a butler. He died five years ago, and you never hired a replacement.”

“Shut your mouth! Wilfred is the finest man I know, even if he is a serf.” Tears welled up in Sir Millican’s eyes. “You can’t take Wilfred away from me. You cannot. That *Twilight*-liking bastard stole him from me.”

Wilfred had been fired by Sir Millican about six years ago. He died, content but quite homeless, under a bridge, where he had taken to aggressively subjecting attempted crossers to riddles and forcibly depositing those who failed to answer correctly into the river below. Law-enforcement officers had tried to stop him on a number of occasions, but Wilfred had thrown them into the river, too.

Sir Millican’s nephew rested a hand on his uncle’s shoulder. “Uncle Sir, are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?”

Heat flashed from Sir Millican’s core; it traveled up his spine and through his eyes and voice. “Go take a damn bath and get Wilfred to draw it for you. Dead or not, it’s still his job, and I’ll have none of this ‘he’s not here anymore’ business. Are we clear?”

The young man gulped. Wilfred, now rather reduced to bones, indicated to Sir Millican’s nephew that he should proceed down the hall. The skeletal point of his finger had the effect of an otherworldly signpost: “Bath this way, sir.”

I shall never do drugs again, the lad mentally noted.

The young man shuffled down the hall; his spectral attendant trailed him. Sir Millican sighed and returned to his study. The letter that he had written perched itself upon his desk, coiled like a serpent ready to sink daggers into the desiccated flesh of his hands. Sir Millican stared at it and puzzled over what he had written. He had quite forgotten.

Dear Sister,

Greetings. But only to you, and not to that filthy thing you call a husband that is the father of my nephew. I must tell you that he (my nephew, lamentably not your husband) has taken some part of my cache of hallucinogens and consumed it and may soon be on the verge of death. It is his own fault, and, more specifically, it is your husband’s fault. If it were not for his idiot peasant blood coursing through the veins of your otherwise pure son, this would not have happened. I hereby absolve myself of all responsibility,

which should rightly be placed squarely on the oafish shoulders of your greedy usurping husband. That is all.

*With love and affection, your brother,
Sir Walter Millican III*

“That’s a bloody good letter,” Sir Millican said, to nobody in particular, but the boy hadn’t died, so it was moot. A pity though it was, Sir Millican tossed the letter into the fireplace and set a flame to it. No incriminating evidence in this household. No, sir.

A clock chimed its doleful song, the dirge that announced the nightly date that Sir Millican had with Death’s fairer sister, Sleep. The signal lustily stabbed through the murk that filled Sir Millican’s mind. The world was filled with this sound, but the world didn’t listen to the clarion call of the past. Sir Millican sank into his chair and laid his head upon his desk. A skeletal hand rested on his shoulder.

“Wilfred,” he said into the desk, “why did the Revolution take it away? Living as an exile in my own land . . . it’s pathetic.”

Wilfred rattled in consolation.

“I feel so hollow, empty. Everything is so different. It doesn’t make sense.” Whiskey seared its way down Sir Millican’s throat. Wilfred patted his back. A belch roared up from his gullet.

“Do the other Thaness even still remember me, remember the party we were having that evening so long ago, right here on St. Robert’s Hill? That dreadful, stupid evening.”

Wilfred shrugged, his clavicles clattering against themselves.

Night engulfed the mansion on St. Robert’s Hill, an imperious structure that had housed the Millican family for nigh fifteen generations. The wind rose out of the north, and the oaken beams groaned, as if mourning their own faded splendor. An old man with a rose in his vest pocket sat alone in his study, and, elsewhere in the world, wealthy merchants feasted in the idylls of their freedom as their fortunes came and went. The stars whirled overhead and cast their pale light over the whole earth. A young man admired them from a window as he enjoyed a cold bath, and Death admired the young man from the selfsame window. It was almost time for the lad to take a long vacation, and Death could share with him the latest exploits of those curious, glittering vampires.

A Baptism

Sam Tirrito

His fingers stretched over the face like roots over a rock.
He felt the coarse tangle of the man's beard brush over his skin like a clump of seaweed.
The hands clawed and pried with animalistic desperation.
The drowning man recognized his old partners, always non-judgmental and reliable,
But now Surprise had turned on him,
and Time was slowly
wrapping around his chest like
a ravenous snake,
sliding smoothly
through his lungs,
chasing the
last air
out.

Ice

Sherry Michael

Ice. The feel of ice was everywhere. Ice was crystallizing in her hair and on her face; it was running track marks on the exposed skin of her arms and legs. Ice was on the ground under her bare hands; the cold was seeping into her back. Ice was stabbing into her lungs with every shaky, inhaled breath.

She lifted her head from the ground to look around at where she had fallen. Everything seemed all wrong, disjointed, angular. Blinking back tears of fear—worried the water would freeze on her face—she realized she was alone in the dark and nowhere recognizable.

She pushed her hands out from her sides to feel what she could not see. Small rocks, sharp and icy (almost like broken glass) pricked into her skin, but the smell of disturbed dirt wafted to her nose. She must be outside somewhere . . . but where?

She struggled with her body and forced it to move into an upright position. She worried over how cold and stiff she had become.

How long had she lain there?

It couldn't have been more than half an hour; otherwise, she knew she wouldn't have woken up at all. She slowly stretched out each numb leg and bit her lip to keep from moaning as the pins of feeling began to attack her. Soon, she felt able to move into a kneeling position.

Her eyes, their pupils enlarged by fear and the dark, showed her vague images of her surroundings. She could see what she had already surmised: she was outside under a desolate night sky. She felt she was higher up on the ground, elevated somewhat above the rest of her surroundings; perhaps she was on a hill looking down into a darker valley or crevice below. This thought brought an anxious worry to mind as to how close was the edge.

She crept forward on her hands and knees while pushing her right hand out on the ground in front of her toward the view of what she thought might be a valley. The ground angled down hard away from her hand and proved that her anxiety was well founded.

The weird drop in the angle of the ground confused her senses. Ground sloped; it didn't drop away at perfect angles. She was lost by this realization and terribly concerned. Where was she?

A slight wind blew past her, barely ruffling her; it caused the hair on her arms to stiffen more and the skin on her neck to burn. The wind harshly reminded her that she had no coat or covering of any sort; she looked down at the airy turquoise gown with spaghetti straps she had so carefully chosen earlier that evening. She tugged at the mid-thigh hemline and willed it to descend an inch or

two to protect her from the cold. Sitting back on her legs to try to warm them, she realized her heels were gone. She twisted and turned while patting the ground in a circle around her in search of her shoes.

Those were her favorite heels.

A brief scuttling or scooting noise broke the void of the dark. She glanced around; she turned her head in each direction while trying to locate the source of the sound.

Another soft scuttling joined by a slight clicking noise appeared; the noise sounded like someone in heels trying not to slide across a highly polished floor. She strained her eyes and willed herself to see in the dark, but she couldn't make out anything that could be responsible for the sound.

"Hello? Is someone out there?" Even as the words trembled from her lips, she realized how trite they sounded. Alone and half dressed in a strange place was not the moment to draw attention to herself, but she was slowly freezing to death.

Decided, she called again. "Hello?" The words, breathless but hopeful in a way only a near panic of survival can cause, fell like a wave into the scuttling.

The noise amplified in the dark. The scuttling became urgent, frantic. Her heart spasmed and her body jerked as realization dawned on her; the sounds were not human. They were animal sounds coming out of the deep shadows.

She craned her neck and hoped desperately that a new angle would allow her to see what was scurrying around in an obvious search for her. Tentatively, she stood; she drew her arms in close while her fingers clenched together. She was afraid of what was in the dark but too terrified to take a step forward for fear of plunging out into an emptiness.

The scuttling noises multiplied as if several creatures were roaming the grounds in a hunt. The noise sounded large and bloated; heavy bodies were swishing around in the liquid black. Some hidden sense inside of her seemed to point out that the things must be in front of her but wouldn't provide any more certainty than that.

Unable to withstand the agony of the oncoming unknown, she swiftly turned her back. She tried to focus her attention and calm the fear in her mind; she willed her heartbeat and gasping breaths to slow. She needed to focus; the sound of whatever was out there was unnerving. Each scratch across the ground sounded like a fingernail scratching across a chalkboard.

She gazed forward into the dark and located her focus. An orange light, just out there in the distance, quickly drew her attention. She narrowed her eyes on the flickering light and steadied herself—one breath, two breaths, three breaths. She calmed her mind and controlled her fear. She stared at the orange color dancing to the beat of the gentle breeze with curiosity. It seemed to sway in a back-and-forth rhythm with itself before bouncing upwards only to resume its sway once more.

The strange orange dance continued its pattern again and again. Right sway, left sway, bounce. Right sway, left sway, bounce.

Her passing curiosity transformed swiftly into hope-filled relief.

A fire. A fire had to mean people, and people meant salvation. It hadn't been there earlier. She was sure of that. The longer she stared at the dancing flame, the larger it became . . . and it was moving toward her at a swift pace.

Don't Separate Hands *
Casey Purifoy

The job sounds like an easy concept.
“Split the stacks of bad rubber from good.
Use the forklift to move it to a space for inspection.
But watch your hands. Don't let the machine separate them.
It will do that real quick.”
The simplicity of the concept
breaks under reality's grip.
A forklift to start work?
Takes three hours to steal one.
Where do I find the pallets?
“Steal some from the mill-room guys!”
Yes! At last! I've done one batch!
Now where do I place this one?
The cluttered factory floor responds,
“Nowhere do you place this one.”
This repeated
as daily as the sunrise met
my bloodshot eyes stuck
on thirty-degree drives.
The warm AC kicks on
two minutes before shift.
When I met the last day of separating, I walked
on air, still filled with carbon black
that dripped from my nose and smeared my eyes.
But I took the white-chalk judge
that marks good rubber and bad
and marked the separator instead:
“Don't separate hands.”
It's a hazard notice,
a prayer,
and an observation:
Machines wring people like rubber
until they sigh steam,
separating hope from life
in stacks of green.

* This poem's chapbook won second place in the 2016 PLACE creative-writing contest.

Beating around the Bush

Doris Davis

“A penny for your thoughts,” she queried.

“Just that actions speak louder than words,” he replied.

“Yes, and may add insult to injury,” she argued.

“And often at the drop of a hat,” he sighed.

“But one can’t cry over spilled milk,” she mused.

“Though it may cost an arm and a leg,” he cried.

“Well, it takes two to tango,” she asserted.

“Yes, but one might just let sleeping dogs lie,” he replied.

“It may be a blessing in disguise,” she vied.

“Well, every cloud has a silver lining,” he sighed.

“You’ve just hit the nail on the head,” she lied.

“But don’t steal my thunder!” he cried.

“Wouldn’t be caught dead at that,” she assured.

“Straight from the horse’s mouth,” he purred.

*The Children Market**
Hollis Thompson

Characters

JACOB, early teens, an intelligent, brave son

JOAN, 20, Jacob's older sister

MOTHER, late 30s, mother to Jacob and Joan, an unfortunate person in a tragic condition

GOBLIN, eternal, a mysterious creature who can take many forms

Setting

The action takes place in Jacob and Joan's home, the woods surrounding it, and Goblin's corporate headquarters.

Scene 1

(Lights rise on the living room of the house. MOTHER paces the floor. She is troubled—hurt in her soul, yet determined. A knock sounds offstage, and GOBLIN calls out.)

GOBLIN: May I come in?

MOTHER: Yes. Please come in.

(GOBLIN enters the room in the form of a middle-aged man. He appears kind and understanding, but he also has a certain authority to him.)

GOBLIN: You called me?

MOTHER: Yes. I have a problem . . . only you can take care of.

GOBLIN: I thought as much. People often come to me for help with sticky situations. Don't worry. There's no shame in it.

(JACOB runs into the room. GOBLIN examines him with just the faintest hint of hunger in his eyes.)

* *The Children Market* won third place in the 2016 PLACE creative-writing contest.

JACOB: Mom! Joan broke our last light bulb!

MOTHER: Jacob! How dare you speak evil of your sister?!

JACOB: Because she's stupid?

MOTHER: Jacob!

GOBLIN: It's okay. I believe that I can fix it.

(GOBLIN exits to another room.)

JACOB: I don't know how she'd ever survive on her own in the real world. Without me to do everything for her, she couldn't even make a sandwich.

MOTHER: You'd better listen to me, you snotty little brat! I'm your mother. I brought you into this world. That means you owe me, and you have to do what I say. And I say you never talk about Joan like that!

JACOB: I'm only saying the truth.

MOTHER: I don't care!

(JOAN walks into the room.)

JOAN: Mom, whatever Jacob's saying isn't true.

MOTHER: I know, Joan. I'm handling him.

(A loud crash comes from offstage. GOBLIN calls out from that direction.)

GOBLIN: I believe I found the breaker.

MOTHER: Oh, my!

(MOTHER rushes offstage. JACOB turns to JOAN.)

JACOB: Why are you such an idiot?!

JOAN: I'm the idiot? Have you done any introspection lately?

JACOB: I do plenty of introspection. I think about all kinds of things . . . like how I got stuck in this dead-end life with no money, no computer, and a no-good, dummy sister who can't even change a light bulb!

JOAN: I told you. It broke.

JACOB: Yeah, when you banged it against the wall!

JOAN: There was a spider! It was going to get on my new outfit. It cost, like, fifty bucks!

JACOB: It was two feet away! Do you know how many more light bulbs we have in the house? Hm? Zero! Zilch! None!

JOAN: So what? We're not *that* broke.

JACOB: So what? "So what?" she says. *So . . .* someone's going to have to bike all the way to the store to buy a new one. And since you're Mom's favorite, that means I'll be forced to miss going over to Pete's and seeing his new tablet. Sometimes, I wonder why I don't report you both for child abuse.

JOAN: And you call *me* a moron. Pete's not your friend. He just feels better about how much allowance he has when he brags about his stuff to you.

JACOB: Shut your mouth!

(MOTHER enters.)

MOTHER: Hey! Jacob! What did I just tell you? Stop yelling at Joan!

(She walks up to JOAN and puts her hand on her shoulder. GOBLIN enters. MOTHER turns to JACOB.)

MOTHER: Why are you always doing that? You never listen to me. I could just—

GOBLIN: Now, now. Don't do something you'll regret in front of Joan.

(MOTHER takes a deep breath.)

MOTHER: Fine. Jacob, I want you to go have a word with this gentleman. He's going to help us out with some of our . . . issues as a family.

JACOB: Like a shrink?

GOBLIN: Something like that. I shrink people's problems. Let's give them some room.

(JACOB hesitates.)

MOTHER: Now!

(JACOB and GOBLIN walk toward the door. Just before they exit, GOBLIN tries to throw JACOB into a sack. JACOB hits back, and they fall offstage together.)

JOAN: Jacob's such a jerk. It's no wonder he doesn't have any friends.

(MOTHER stares off vacantly.)

MOTHER: Hey, you know I love you, right? I'd do anything for you, and I'll always do what's best for you.

JOAN: Yeah, Mom. I know. I love you, too.

(She hugs her.)

JOAN: Well, I'm gonna go sweep up what's left of that light bulb.

MOTHER: Thanks, dear. You're so helpful.

(JOAN exits. GOBLIN enters. His clothes are a little ruffled from the struggle with JACOB.)

GOBLIN: I can see why you have problems with that one. He's a real ankle-biter.

(He limps over to her.)

MOTHER: Yeah. It's just . . . when I had Joan, I knew that it was my fault and that I should tough it out and take care of her. She was such a beautiful baby, after all. And . . . you know, I even felt happy with her. But the second one. I didn't plan him. I never wanted another one, and his good-for-nothing father . . .

(She starts breaking down. GOBLIN puts a hand on her shoulder.)

GOBLIN: It's okay. Sometimes, bad things happen to good people. It's not your fault.

MOTHER: I tried. I really tried. But now that I've lost my second job, I just can't make enough to support them both. And I want my Joan to be safe. I *need* her to be safe.

GOBLIN: You're a good mother for one child. That's all anyone can ask you to be. I'll make sure you and your daughter don't have to be trapped in a dead-end situation. Let me take the boy.

(She looks down and nods.)

MOTHER: I wish there were some other way. I really do.

GOBLIN: But there's not. You have to face reality. Real life is not a fairy tale, after all.

(GOBLIN pats her shoulder.)

MOTHER: I just wish they could have been born at another time. There's just no way I can find enough money to support everyone. No one's ever hiring in this town . . . not outside of Albertson's.

GOBLIN: That's why I'm here. Someone has to do *something* to help out those hardworking people whom the world keeps pushing down. When the chips are down, you can always count on me to help.

MOTHER: Thank you so much! We need it.

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise on the forest. GOBLIN, still in the form of a man, pulls a sack containing JACOB toward an unknown destination. JACOB struggles. He manages to knock GOBLIN over and free himself from the sack.)

JACOB: Who are you? What are you doing to me?

(GOBLIN melts into the forest. He speaks to JACOB from the shadows. His voice echoes.)

GOBLIN: So, you want the rundown? Your mommy doesn't want you anymore. She lost a job, and it's not a very happy world for the poor, little old mother who had so many children that she didn't know what to do. Except now she does.

JACOB: What are you talking about?

GOBLIN: Your mother, boy. She was desperate and needed a way out of a mistake—namely you. I'm the only one who can help with that.

(GOBLIN emerges from the shadows in his true, gruesome form.)

You see, they think I'm a charity out there for the sole purpose of helping poor women who are down on their luck and *oh-so* emotionally unstable . . . like your mother. But the delicious little truth that I share only to the dead or dying is that I have only ever been the owner and operator of the world's most lucrative business. You see, we goblins have come a long way. We started out selling fruit, of all things; then we moved on to bombs once we figured out how to turn the nations' little bickering sessions into wars. But after that, we found the truly marketable resource.

(He tries to grab JACOB, who dodges.)

JACOB: I'm guessing it's not computers.

GOBLIN: No, son. It's you—the unwanted children. Nice guess, though. But, seriously, who could dream of a better business model? We take things that people are *desperate* to get rid of, so we don't have to pay for them at all. Our total costs are zero. *Zero!* Profits have been incredible. The margin's increased by 300% since the nineties!

JACOB: I'm a person, not a thing.

GOBLIN: Wrong again, boy. Everything is relative. You're only what others think of you; you're only valued by how others value you. Your mother threw you away, so she doesn't think you're a person. I say you're a thing—raw material, a commodity to be sold. And since I'm the only one around, that's what you are.

JACOB: You're wrong. Someone cares about me.

(GOBLIN finally grabs him.)

GOBLIN: Believe me, I'm the only one who cares about you. You're worth a fortune on the world market. So many witches are willing to pay through the nose to get live children.

JACOB: You're a monster!

GOBLIN: Am I? Do you know how many heroes and princes go to those witches in order to save princesses and slay dragons? Do you think the things I sell to them have nothing to do with that? Face it, kid. I'm necessary for mothers and sisters like yours to milk out any sort of living. You are, too. How can you say you should keep living when your future use will benefit so many others?

(JACOB is silent.)

GOBLIN: That's what I thought. Now come on.

(GOBLIN shoves him back in the sack and drags him offstage. Lights fade to black.)

Scene 3

(Lights rise on a living room. MOTHER is minding her own business when JOAN enters.)

JOAN: Mom, do you know where Jacob is? I haven't seen him in a really long time.

MOTHER: Who?

JOAN: Mom, stop messing around. Jacob. My brother.

MOTHER: You don't have a brother. Not anymore.

JOAN: What are you talking about?

MOTHER: Look . . . just forget about him. He was a mistake. I never meant to have him, and, even worse, he was a huge expense!

(She faces JOAN and touches her face.)

You are my daughter, the only child I need.

(JOAN pulls away.)

JOAN: How can you say that? He's your son!

MOTHER: No. He's not my son. He's the son of that animal who bred him. Which reminds me, you need to stay away from boys.

JOAN: What did you do with him?

MOTHER: I took care of him, all right. That's all you need to know.

JOAN: I can't believe I'm hearing this. Mom, what have you done?

(MOTHER hugs her.)

MOTHER: It's okay. There wasn't enough money to feed all of us. I was at the end of my rope. I had to choose between him and you. So I'm providing for you. I'm making sure you can have some kind of future.

(JOAN pushes her away.)

JOAN: No! *No!* You can't sacrifice him for me! How could you even think that?

MOTHER: It's a vicious world, Joan. Sometimes, you have to make vicious choices to save what you want.

JOAN: What did you do to him?

MOTHER: You've heard of the Goblin who takes away the unwanted children?

JOAN: I thought that was a fairy tale.

MOTHER: Fairy tales are what grown-ups use to hide the truths that are too horrible for our children to know.

JOAN: Tell me where to find him.

MOTHER: Why would I do that? So that he can keep burning through money with his food and making you miserable every day? You can't tell me you don't like the thought of never having him call you a jerk-face again.

JOAN: Look, I know that he's an annoying little scamp, and I hate his attitude most of the time . . . but he's still my brother! He's kinda supposed to do that stuff, and I still love him. But, apparently, you can't see that. You're going to tell me where he is because if you don't, I'll leave you alone. You'll never get to see your beautiful girl that you've done so much for ever again.

(Lights fade to black.)

Scene 4

(Lights rise on GOBLIN's lair. JACOB is lying on the ground. He's trapped in a light circle and unable to move. JOAN enters and runs to him.)

JOAN: Jacob! Jacob! Oh, Jacob, I found you!

JACOB: Joan? Why are you here?

JOAN: I'm here to get you out! Now come on!

JACOB: Joan, I can't move. The Goblin put me in something I can't ever get out of.

JOAN: What?

JACOB: He called it the Cage of Un-Love or something like that. You can't get out unless someone loves you.

JOAN: Jacob, someone does love you.

JACOB: I always had this feeling—down in my chest—that she didn't want me. I guess that's the real reason I picked on you so much. I just . . . wanted Mom to love me. Guess that'll never happen.

JOAN: You idiot! I care about you! And it doesn't matter what other people think of you. You're smart and funny, and there's never been anyone like you; and there will never be anyone like you ever again.

(Beat.)

JACOB: Wow. I never thought you could make a speech like that.

JOAN: I guess I'm just full of surprises. Now come on. Walk out of that circle.

(She looks around.)

JACOB: Wait. We might be able to put this Goblin out of business.

(They whisper together. All light but that of the circle goes out. Lights rise after a beat. JACOB is still in the circle, but JOAN is gone. GOBLIN enters.)

GOBLIN: Well, it's time, son. But I have to hand it to you. You've been a much better sport than some of the others.

JACOB: Well, I can only be what everyone wants me to be.

GOBLIN: Well said. Of course, if you're the one who provides a certain service that keeps society together, you become the one who tells everyone what everything is. Someone like me, for instance.

JACOB: Of course, it'd be a shame if one of those objects just wasn't what you said it was and decided it didn't like you calling it something else. It might actually decide to fight back.

GOBLIN: Well, that would be too bad for that unfortunate something. Let me clarify. I've been around for a really long time . . . and not just for one lifetime. I'd hate to die twice. It's so boring. I might just have to competently obliterate said cause of my boredom from existence . . . make it a non-something, if you will.

JACOB: Well, never underestimate those somethings. One of them might be smarter than you are.

(JOAN jumps onto the stage. JACOB grabs GOBLIN and pushes him into the circle as JACOB jumps out of it.)

JACOB: How do you like being in a sack?

JOAN: Got ya!

GOBLIN: What? How!

JACOB: You spent so much time telling me no one loved me that you forgot it wasn't true. But guess who no one loves?

JOAN: Dirt bag.

GOBLIN: You piece of waste!

JACOB: There you go with the labeling again.

GOBLIN: No matter what you say, you'll always be the child your mother didn't want; and she can't take care of you! That makes you *mine*: my property, my unit of input. You will *never* be anything else.

JACOB: Maybe . . . or maybe I'll be the one to stop you. We'll just have to see.

(JACOB steps into the circle.)

JOAN: Jacob, what are you doing?

(She runs to the circle, but she can't step through the light.)

GOBLIN: Fool!

(JACOB and GOBLIN start fighting.)

GOBLIN: I am the one whom parents spare children knowledge of. I am the terror that grips the accident's new heart. I am the dark power over you!

(They continue to fight. JACOB eventually defeats him.)

JACOB: Jerk-face.

(JACOB pushes GOBLIN out of the circle. He spins around dizzily. JOAN hits him; he falls offstage yelling and dies. JACOB steps out of the circle.)

JACOB: Well, so much for boredom.

(Beat.)

So what do we do now?

JOAN: I don't know, but with a big brain like yours, I'm sure we'll figure it out. It might be harder, and we might fall down and have to get help; but I'll never let anyone sacrifice you for me or anyone else.

JACOB: Well, I always did want to work on my own.

JOAN: But you won't be on your own.

JACOB: Right. And thanks for what you said.

JOAN: You don't have to thank me for telling the truth.

JACOB: Yes, I do. The Goblin told me a lot of lies that sounded really true, but you brought me out of it.

JOAN: Well, you're welcome. Someone has to knock some sense into you.

(They start to walk off.)

JACOB: Oh, and Joan?

JOAN: Yeah?

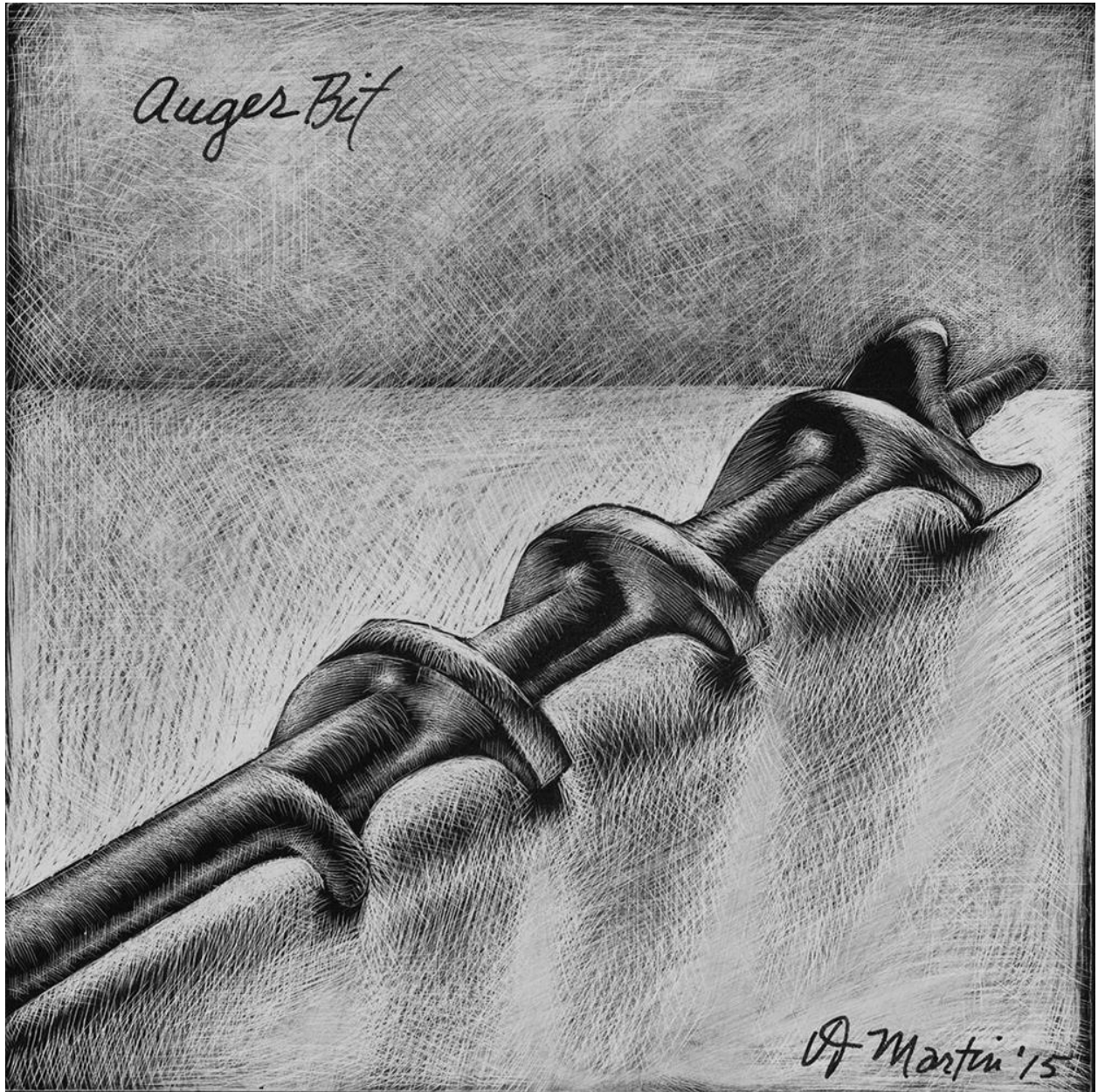
JACOB: I forgive you for breaking that light bulb.

JOAN: You idiot.

(She scruffs up his hair and then suddenly hugs him. Blackout.)

Education

Auger Bit
Vikki Martin



Daily Grumblings

Brandi Burrow

Admin wants teachers to make blessing bags;
Guess the homeless are out of soap . . . again.

Never mind that our students are drowning
In a sea of meth-infused poverty.

Hallway lights cut out at three p.m. sharp;
God forbid anyone work after hours.

Classroom evaluation was postponed;
Baseball field prep work took priority.

In case someone finds this tear-stained tirade
On the floor of the faculty restroom,
Please overlook the daily grumblings of
Miss B., Jaded Philosopher Teacher.

It's Good to Know

Doris Davis

Yes, I've done it again. I've gone to another estate sale and found a gem that one can't buy at a Barnes and Noble—several volumes of *Reader's Digest* from 1937 and '38. The topics vary greatly, with some, as one might expect, focusing upon European unrest and bearing such titles as “Can Hitler Be Trusted?” Others consider economic matters. One in particular focuses upon whether a college education is worth its cost. It's a query many are currently posing since the average cost of tuition and fees is \$9,400.00 per year, and the typical college graduate owes \$30,000.00 in student loans. The article—“A College for One” by Philip Curtiss and originally published in *Harper's Magazine*—opens, “How can a boy who cannot afford college get the equivalent of a college education?”

I'm drawn to his essay because he is considering not how a college education will translate directly into a job but how a college education changes an individual into a reflective adult, one who thinks critically and weighs issues of the contemporary world through the collective wisdom of the past. While his ideas would not secure a position tied to a college degree, they would result in an educated individual. If you haven't already guessed, Curtiss suggests an ambitious reading schedule. His approach requires four hours of intense reading daily and permits part-time employment for individuals who want or need work.

Among those texts suggested for this disciplined reading appear Macaulay's *Essays*, *Huckleberry Finn*, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Schiller's and Emerson's *Essays*. Various works by Cicero, Smollett, Carlyle, Spencer, and Andre Maurois also appear. Easy-reading selections do not appear, as the author speculates that individuals would probably read these works on their own time. While contemporary taste would modify this list, the point of the article rings true . . . although perhaps in a way different today than in 1938. Today, a college degree does not ensure that you are a well-read individual nor ensure employment upon graduation (although universities promulgate the latter). Instead, you can graduate today knowing almost nothing about the world, fail to secure employment in the area you pursued, and fall into debt for thousands of dollars.

My comments may strike some as being contradictory to my own lifetime spent teaching in higher education. I don't mean to suggest that going to college is a waste of time. On the contrary, I'm suggesting that many important and lucrative

positions exist in the workforce that one might acquire through trade school, and—if one truly wishes to be an informed person in the traditional sense—a public library is readily available. For those people who have the academic temperament to focus for several years upon an endeavor and accept the burden of its current cost, college is the place for them. Young people, however, need to receive information about the difference before they begin college, as far too many of them pursue the most expensive degree of all—the one that is unfinished but results in a person's being thousands of dollars in debt.

Small-Town College: Six Haiku Stories.*
Casey Purifoy

Degree—an escape
from your grease-stained dad and mom
covered in oil slick.

Here is your Pell Grant.
You spent it? We gave too much.
Pay . . . or no degree.

Nurse, teacher, banker,
engineer: your destinies.
Another? Which loan?

“Teaching ain’t hard work.
It’s air conditioning and
summer vacation.”

His camouflage hat
shows a mind’s lifeless forest
where professors died.

Graduation’s here,
the town’s only theatre.
Parents think, “Nice play.”

* This poem’s chapbook won second place in the 2016 PLACE creative-writing contest.

Summer-Break Affair

Valerie Shirley

I'm wearing sweat pants,
a green scarf, and a polka-dotted robe.
My feet are nesting in fuzzy slippers,
and I'm on my second mug of hot cider.

I have been setting time limits
that I never intended to honor.
“Fifteen minutes more!” I declare—
just to the end of this chapter.

But I cannot stop myself,
for the words have captured me.
Ever the willing hostage, I acknowledge
that now I am nearly at the end.

On mug number three,
I close the final page, then the back cover.
It is finished. The end.
I rub my hands over its cover and spine.

I exhale because now I am bereft.
How can I go on without
the people I have come to know so well—
their lives, their problems, their successes?

In consolation, I must allow myself
the privilege of selecting my next paperback.
I will not begin it now. Of course not.
It's noon! Or is it one?

Suddenly, I hear a car
roar into the driveway.

At breakneck speed,
the slippers, scarf, and robe disappear.

I grab a mop that is staged
for such emergencies.
Now I'm sloshing it around
haphazardly. Brows furrowed,

I am hard at work.
My face carries exertion
because I have not been lolling
about, cradled in the arms of an author.
I have been contributing to the common
goodwill of the home!
For good measure,
I throw open a recipe book on the counter.

Then, nothing.
No intruder. No car at all. I exhale.
I reclaim my scarf, robe, slippers . . .
and warm my fourth cup of cider.

I nestle into the crook
of the chair in the sun
and then take a quick look at the beginning
of my next book.

Didacticism
Will Chesher

— *with apologies to Sherman Alexie and teachers everywhere* —

I have been teaching for
A little over two-and-a-half
Years. That's over one thousand

Cups of coffee, four thousand used
Paperclips, eighteen paper cuts
And more trips to the copier

Than I should ever want to count.
If I had a fit-bit, I'm sure
It would tell me to stop.

I didn't know that I wanted to
Be a teacher until I was well
Into my junior year of college

But didn't want to start a
Four-year degree after already
Completing a three-year sprint

Through an academic catalogue
And attempting to create my
Own major. (It didn't work).

So in March of my junior year I
Stumbled upon a group of people
Who wanted to help the poor

Undergraduates that wanted to
Teach but didn't want to go through
The traditional teaching channels:

The Arkansas Teacher Corps.
At the beginning it was just
A dream; a simple brainchild

Of a few academics at the U of A who
Thought it would be a good idea
Not simply to serve the constituents

Of NWA (not the rap group)
Since they are a “land-grant institution.”
(I’m still not sure what that means.)

But—lo and behold—the next
Year I got an e-mail that says ATC was
No longer a pipedream—it was going to happen.

I finally convinced my wife that
She, too, wanted to become a
Teacher after spending four years

Getting a degree that then turned
Into managing a Hibbett Sports
(She never played sports) and

Working at a small coffee shop
That sold records and trips to
The bathroom for \$3.00 a pop.

We both submitted applications
And were a bit surprised when
They called us and told us we

Had made the first cut. But when
ATC asked me why I wanted, or even
Why I considered myself qualified

To enter their nontraditional program
To become a licensed educator in the
State of Arkansas, I had to think.

I had taken three education classes
In my undergraduate career (I’m still not
Sure how I swung that since I wasn’t

One of the elite education majors),
And my great-grandmother, grand-
Mother, and mother were all in

The field of education (librarian,
Fifth-grade teacher, and second-grade
Teacher respectively). So I figured

I had enough of their DNA floating
In my West Texas genes that I could
Fake my way through being a teacher

Just as I had faked my way through
Being a student with big words and smiling.
But as I considered the question

With more depth, I realized that outside
Of coming from a line of female educators
(And what's in a gender anyway?),

I had spent the first twenty-two
Years of my life preparing for this
Job. Please note the similarities:

1. My first real paying job was teaching kids how to piss off their parents.
And by that I mean that I was their drum-teacher. Convincing eleven-year-olds that pummeling a drumhead was cooler than being pummeled by a sweaty two-hundred-pound eighth-grader for the sake of a lemon-shaped football in Central Oklahoma is harder than a person can imagine. But I spent half an hour with kids, whoring my sticks out to various homes and practice rooms (one kid's mom was smart and had the drums out in a shed a hundred yards behind the house). I charged them a bit of money and convinced other little kids that drums, not drugs or organized sports, were cool (even though I'm sure they thought I was on something, and I also played soccer). I was used to noise and used to dealing with assholes children.
2. My first real paying job that involved me getting a paycheck I had to declare on my taxes (which to a sixteen-year-old is a tragedy) involved me being an indentured servant (read: garage attendant) at a business of my dad's buddy.

I did whatever I was told. I washed cars, inventoried everything, drove clients out to lunch and oil rigs, washed cars, made trips to Purcell, rewashed the cars after my trips to Purcell, and whatever else was on the docket. I was a jack-of-all-trades and was used to being told not to ask any questions. I had to learn on the job because my high school had never taught me how to scrub horse shit out of a generator as I was changing the oil or wash a car so flawlessly that a person could see God in the sheen. I attempted to talk to my coworkers about all the latest books I had been reading, but the last thing they cared about was literature that didn't involve an opaque shield at the gas station, so I talked to the horse shit about my books, which, coincidentally, was more attentive than some of my current students.

3. Two summers during college I volunteered at summer camps—one in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and one in Jackson, Mississippi. This traipsing taught me how to sleep in my car and made clear that needing to go to the bathroom is not a valid excuse for taking a twenty-minute walk to the corner store to get a hoagie. (After three weeks of eating peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches, I gladly took the slap on the wrist.) From these camps, I also learned how to ignore the chaos and focus on the important things: “Charlicia should not have that in her mouth . . . wait, is that a lizard? Eh, I guess it can't hurt her too bad. On to arts and crafts everyone!” *Mr. Will, I need to go to the bathroom.* “No, no, Charlicia. Take your lizard-breathing excuse and get away from me. I'm tired of pb&j's, too.”
4. I.B.C.D. (The Institute for Biblical Community Development—a training farm run by Korean missionaries where other missionaries go to learn appropriate technology and community development skills in northeastern Oklahoma. It exists. Look it up.) I'm not going to get into the particulars, but the last job I had before becoming a teacher (besides playing music for kitchen scraps) was working on a farm. I had no business working on a farm, but the owners liked me; and I got the job. It was like working at Job Number Two, but with Korean men and women who were concerned that I was getting married a bit too young (twenty-one) and were polite enough not to say it more than twice.

So my résumé was solid
For becoming a teacher.
Each of my previous employments

Demonstrated that I was exactly
What this fledgling enterprise
Needed to become the next publicity

Campaign like Teach for America!
So I explained myself and even
Taught a mini-lesson about setting

And how setting can drastically
Increase tension and produce
Different connotative meanings for

Words in a simple script. I wasn't
Sure I was what the organization was
Looking for, but I attempted to

Woo them with my big words and
Big smile. And woo them I did.
I found myself in a little town

That boasts a president and a
Man who refuses to be denied the
Presidency (Mike, let's face it—

You never going to win) and was
Hired to teach English. (Don't worry, I
Passed the tests—I can see all the old

Hoary English teachers having heart
Attacks at a non-English Major
Teaching their beloved subject).

I entered the classroom teaching
Students five years my junior
But fooled the parents by growing out

My beard, using big words, and smiling
A lot.
I have been teaching for over

Two-and-a-half years. That's
Twenty-three bottles of bourbon
And fourteen bottles of vodka (see fig. 1)

Soaked into the bloodstream
Of an overbeaten workhorse
That is expected not only to

Win the Kentucky Derby but
Do so while dragging the rest
Of the horses with it. Proletariat

Had it rough. (Or was it Secretariat?
Whatever. It's option C on the test.)
But I keep doing it. Teachers love to

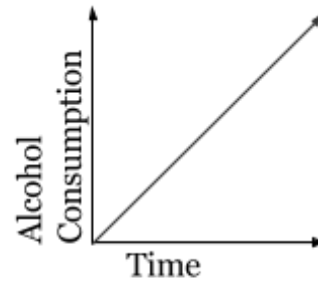
Bitch about how tough they have it.
Even I'm guilty of using five pages to
Paint a portrait of a teacher as a crazed

Young professional, but I mean well.
I don't want to get too sentimental, but
I have a good job. Sure, the boss may suck,

And I will have to invest in years of
Therapy to prove that my Freudian ticks
Are a result of seeing dicks drawn on desks,

But I wouldn't trade it for the world.
(This is starting to sound a lot like *Stand
And Deliver*. Damn it.) I enjoy being able to

Explore *The Crucible* with kiddos
And create lasting impression on lives,
Or maybe that's just the vodka talking.



*figure 1: Will's teaching
career and what that will
eventually mean for his liver.*

Storytelling

The Examiner
Win Bruhl



An Irishman's Library

Carter Jones

How many nights were spent in your library,
Long, fretful, cold,
Puzzling out the mysteries of life and faith?
How many nights were spent in your library,
Long, happy, warm,
Your children crowded 'round you as you read?

An Irishman, indeed, who had the love of letters
That runs so deep in Irish blood.
Even before letters were born,
Stories flowed like wine from the lips of bards.
How many stories repose on your many shelves,
Pages worn with loving attention and time?

How many nights, Irishman, did you sit here,
Lost in a labyrinth of words?
How many nights, Irishman, did you sit here,
Looking at your reflection in text?
What did you see?
What did you see?

You stare at me from the mantle.
Long departed and yet you remain,
Imperious, the king of your library castle.
I look at the assembled books, one by one,
And I can see a soul laid bare
Here in an Irishman's library.

“And that’s my story.”—
King’s Quest and the Role of Narratives
Hollis Thompson

In a 1947 essay titled “On Stories,” C. S. Lewis lamented that “[i]t is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story considered in itself” (3). Modern video-game critics could easily find themselves in a similar state. As the gaming industry has raced toward ever-more-realistic CGI and immersive virtual-reality experiences, the video game’s enormous narrative potential has begun to wither due to lack of attention.

Fortunately, Sierra Entertainment’s reboot of its classic *King’s Quest* franchise emphasizes story above all else. The creative team—The Fairly Odd Gentlemen—demonstrates commitment to storytelling with a message that appears before the game’s would-be player may begin the game: “*King’s Quest* is a narrative-driven game and is intended to be played in order. Skipping ahead to a new chapter is not recommended” (*King’s Quest: Adventures of Graham*). As a point-and-click game, *King’s Quest: Adventures of Graham* spurns gaming enthusiasts who are most interested in complex gameplay; the game emphasizes the narrative journey upon which it takes its player. Through its frame story, game-play, and use of archetypes, the game invites players to consider how stories transfer wisdom to their listeners’ lives.

A coming-of-age theme pervades the game’s narrative in the form of the Hero’s Journey. The game follows this mythological pattern through its use of narratives and frame stories. It presents as playable chapters the stories that the familiar protagonist King Graham—now old and ailing—recounts to his granddaughter, Gwendolyn. As a rambunctious and dragon-loving child, Gwendolyn reflects Graham’s younger self—an eccentric, adventure-loving youth. The elder Graham’s narration (with Gwendolyn’s frequent interruptions) constantly plays over the game’s action.

Cutscenes that reveal how Gwendolyn applies lessons from Graham’s stories to her daily life occur at different points, and the game often cross-cuts the climaxes of her struggles and Graham’s. This cross-cutting does not merely show character parallels, however. These elements constantly reinforce the game’s role as a didactically powerful narrative; Gwendolyn matures by consciously growing into the same heroic archetype that her grandfather represents.

The game holds that this archetypal center for the stories is more important than their factual accuracy. The game undermines the truthfulness of Graham’s stories in several ways. The player can, at times, ignore the action Graham narrates or perform an opposite action. The narrator will either voice vexation with the player or change the narration to match the action and count the discrepancy as a slip of his memory.

The more profound choices that the player makes at certain moments in the game also affect the story. In the second chapter, for example, the elderly Graham remarks that he has changed some of the details and left out events of which he is ashamed (i.e., certain player choices). The point seems to be that Graham's stories contain practical wisdom that Gwendolyn can use in her life; the stories' lessons supersede complete honesty. When Graham concludes that "it's best to enjoy stories for what they are and not what you'd hoped they'd be," he exposes the foolishness of valuing only true stories and argues that the only way to enjoy and understand stories is to approach them without bias (*King's Quest: Adventures of Graham*).

The game's first chapter, *King's Quest: A Knight to Remember*, is an imaginative exploration of events set before the original *King's Quest: Quest for the Crown*. The chapter explains how Graham became a knight of Daventry. The story follows the standard coming-of-age cycle and makes use of a contest motif. (Graham must compete in a competition to win his position.) The number three—a strong presence in traditional literature—also plays a prominent part in the game's structure. Graham must face three opponents, each of whom embodies a specific quality: brute strength, incredible speed, or cunning intelligence. Furthermore, Graham befriends three villagers who represent both three standard fantasy trades—blacksmithing, baking, and spellcrafting—and three virtues—boldness, compassion, and wisdom.

Mythical creatures also make their presence known. Huge bridge trolls—who carry their bridges on their backs in one of the game's best visual puns—occupy an important role in Daventry as the keepers of all bridges and, therefore, the rulers of transportation. They are on strike at the beginning of the game, and Graham eventually brokers a compromise with the creatures that demonstrates his ability to act as a bridge between natural and supernatural forces; such ability to balance fantastic and mundane concerns is essential for a fantasy king. However, goblins on the outskirts of the kingdom and the dragon that inhabits the cave under the city's old wishing well show that a darker side to Faerie exists with which Graham cannot yet negotiate effectively. The dragon, in particular, is the game's greatest symbol of terror (as shown by its killing of Graham's friend and ally, Achaka).

The most dangerous foe of all, however, turns out to be one who uses intelligence, not brute strength. Manny, a diminutive competitor who initially befriends Graham, eventually turns on him during the contest for knighthood and then continually plots to overthrow him in subsequent chapters. This character is a foil for the fears and difficulties that Graham experiences while navigating the complex and often absurd politics of Daventry.

While Graham questions whether he has the intelligence to aid the king successfully, Manny never doubts his intellectual prowess. Graham partially overcomes his insecurity by defeating Manny in a *Princess Bride*-like contest of wits at the end of the first chapter. Gwendolyn overcomes her own insecurities about a dueling contest with her cousin by applying the lessons from Graham's tale to herself. By following Graham's example, she is able to overcome her haughty relative.

The game's second chapter, *King's Quest: Rubble without a Cause*, expands upon the first chapter's themes. Now comfortably ensconced as Daventry's king after King Edward's death, Graham struggles to find his kingly identity. His insecurity grants the dark, unconquered side of Faerie—here the goblins—an opportunity to strike. The goblins kidnap Graham and his villager friends and lock them in the caverns hidden beneath the wishing well. Graham's experiences in these caverns include his learning how to care for others who rely upon him and learning how to understand the goblins instead of fearing them. These lessons allow him to grow into his kingship.

The fairy-tale archetypes become much more prominent in this chapter. Graham's experience with goblin culture reveals that these creatures are obsessed with traditional fairy tales and constantly try to recreate them in goblin form. This obsession provides an interesting commentary upon the main theme that the game has been building. Graham observes that the goblins' decision to base their lives upon fairy tales is unwise and unhealthy.

This insight initially seems counter-intuitive to the game's main theme because Gwendolyn is apparently behaving similarly with her grandfather's stories; she patterns dealing with her own struggles after her grandfather's adventures. During this chapter, for example, cross-cutting of scenes allows her to face a swarm of rats in her room—symbolizing her fear—while Graham confronts the goblin king in a story. She pulls down her hood in the same way that Graham dons his old adventuring hat in the story.

Graham's taking to task the goblins for their story mania, however, is not hypocritical. The chapter takes care to point to the importance of stories that stand apart from their factual details. The goblins try to recreate the literal details of classic fairy tales. In one instance, they create a bar-room show in which they kiss a frog in hopes of finding a king; and, in another case, they strive to find a maid whose foot fits into a glass slipper. The goblins are not applying the archetypes to their own lives; they are trying to recreate magical moments.

This practice is fundamentally alien to the philosophy of Joseph Campbell's Monomyth, which holds that every story shares a fundamental center (like the coming-of-age motif, which both Graham and Gwendolyn experience) but varies in external details (like the fairy-tale moments that the goblins try to copy). Gwendolyn copies ideas; the goblins copy details. They never learn lessons about personal growth because they are too busy chasing their own metaphysical tails.

King's Quest: Once upon a Climb continues Graham's development in both the main story and the frame narrative. In the frame, Graham still yearns for adventure. He begs his magic mirror to show him news that will spark one more quest. This moment introduces another important aspect of the storytelling process: the teller-listener dynamic. Storytelling is not a simple one-way transfer of knowledge. The story benefits the teller as well as the listener.

Graham seeks relief from his woes by sharing tales of his glory days with his granddaughter; his stories are the only remedy he can find for his bed-ridden condition . . . but a problem is present. Good stories always awaken desire. Both a hearer and a teller find some of their own characteristics in a story and long to shape the story to their own lives; they wish to walk the path of the Monomyth. Gwendolyn is in the ideal position to fulfill this desire because of her youth, but Graham cannot fulfill the longing that telling these stories awakens in him; his storytelling leads him to the sorrow of the unfulfilled teller.

The story Graham tells this time connects Gwendolyn to her grandmother by revealing how Graham met and fell in love with Princess Valanice. This chapter is a reboot of the second game—*King's Quest II: Romancing the Throne*—but with a more complicated plot. Graham comments upon this complexity when he states that fairy tales tend to simplify love into a triviality while real stories are much more complex and rewarding. In this way, the chapter's narrative breaks from the fairy-tale tradition to portray more modern or truthful views about romantic love.

This chapter is the only one in the series so far during which Gwendolyn is unable to apply story lessons physically to her own life. Instead, the narrative teaches her more about her grandmother, and Gwendolyn uses this information to find the perfect birthday gift for Valanice. Gwendolyn is still a young girl, so this story likely chooses to promote another archetype: the sleeping figure. Although Gwendolyn cannot apply this chapter's lessons—proper courtship behavior—to her life immediately, she will store the knowledge and use it when she grows to the appropriate point of maturity—when she awakens as a young maiden.

Throughout the game, Gwendolyn becomes an archetype herself. She is the archetypal audience, the stand-in for everyone who has ever listened to a story. She is the quintessential wide-eyed, adventure-loving youth. By presenting Graham's archetypal quest alongside Gwendolyn's ability to apply that quest to her own, much tamer circumstances, the game invites its audience to ponder the significance of these stories and the possibilities for their application.

Stories are not just a series of steps to follow—as the goblins believe—but a set of guidelines engraved upon the hearts of all human beings. Though modern men and women might not face dragons, *King's Quest* invites people to consider whether they can, in their own way, follow the Hero's Journey. The concept is not a new one, but the adventure-game medium, with its insistence upon role-playing, is a powerful, new way of expressing this idea. With two more chapters in the making, *King's Quest* will hopefully continue displaying great innovation and dedication to exploring the significance of storytelling.

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Shadows Who Have Shadows:

The Use of Color in *Batman: The Long Halloween*

Hollis Thompson

Scott McCloud, famous comics practitioner and theorist, says that “[t]he differences between black-and-white and color comics are **vast and profound**, affecting **every level** of the reading experience” (192, bolding in original). Detective Comics (DC) apparently took his idea to heart when it republished some of the most famous Batman stories in black-and-white coloring. DC branded these editions as *Batman Noir* to attract the attention of artistically minded connoisseurs. When comparing the two versions of *The Long Halloween*, however, one finds that while the *Batman Noir* edition features some moments of merit and raises interesting questions about the role of closure in creating color, the black-and-white edition actually loses most of the iconic and *noir* qualities that drive the original color version.

Before analyzing the use of color in the work, one should first consider the wider questions about color that this edition and other black-and-white editions (such as Marvel’s older and more popular Essential line) raise. How do black-and-white comics function? McCloud claims that “[i]n black and white, the ideas **behind** the art are communicated more **directly**. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language” (192, bolding in original). But *how* does black-and-white rendering direct readers towards ideas? The answer might lie in the closure concept. Two of this writer’s colleagues, when given samples of the aforementioned color and black-and-white editions, preferred the black-and-white edition over the original format. These viewers (both standard comics readers and not comics critics) explained that the black-and-white version granted them the freedom to imagine the colors themselves; they could fill the color gap mentally.

Black-and-white comics can cause the reader to employ another level of closure in creating the color of the story. This color creation explains why the style lends itself more to ideas than color does; the open palette leads some readers to construct imagery from the work other than what the medium of comics already requires. *The Long Halloween*, which appeared in an earlier color version and features superheroes and villains with widely known color schemes, particularly lends itself to such closure. This phenomenon seems absent from black-and-white

film, which viewers commonly take at face value. The difference likely stems from the mostly voluntary closure of comics opposed to the involuntary closure of film. Because comics provide a reader with the task of filling in the gaps between panels, filling in the color is a logical extension of obligation. Film, the closure of which is almost completely involuntary, focuses the viewer's attention upon what plays out on the screen and leaves little room for imaginary involvement.

Of course, not all readers engage in this color closure. Other readers simply engage in black-and-white imagery at face value. Unlike closing gaps between panels, color closure is not a universal function of the mind. One can still analyze black-and-white as an aesthetic in comics. McCloud claims that color brings attention to the forms of the comic; the world of the art becomes more important than the ideas (192). Even in black-and-white comics, however, the reader must engage with the imagery if he or she wishes to experience the comic at all. What are the ramifications of removing the color from a comic that uses color both to build its world and communicate ideas?

The Long Halloween relies upon color for several essential functions. The first function is the iconic function. McCloud observes that "because costume colors remained exactly the same, panel after panel [in traditional comics], they came to **symbolize** characters in the mind of the reader" (188, bolding in original). The blacks, grays, and blues of Batman's costume, for example, symbolize him as much as the Bat-signal. The same concept is true for Batman's colorful rouge's gallery. Without color, the art loses a level of iconic power. This idea is especially true for characters like the Joker, who seems more synchronized with the world around him without his bright green hair and purple suit.

The second function color plays lies in creating atmosphere (*noir* atmosphere in the case of *The Long Halloween*). The author of *The Long Halloween*, Jeph Loeb, set out to write a *noir* story from the beginning: ". . . I was stuck with this black-and-white dream of a Gotham City that was controlled by Guys with guns, Dolls with lipstick, and Shadows who had shadows" (6). Though Loeb speaks of a black-and-white Gotham, Gregory Wright's colors, particularly his shading, primarily create the artwork's *noir* feeling. The scenes in Jim Gordon's lamp-lit office create a neo-*noir* look through the use of Venetian blinds and different levels of lighting—from the intense orange glow of Gordon's desk lamp to the cooler, fainter light from outside the window. The fateful scene on the

roof of police headquarters (where the three main characters vow to bring the crime lord Falcone to justice) also provides a classic *noir* look through its contrasting of shadows and a single massive light source: the Bat-signal.

At important moments the color in *The Long Halloween* becomes just as expressionistic as Tim Sale's art style. During Mickey's flashback sequence in issue two, the palette becomes predominately blue . . . like a filter in film. Colors symbolic of holidays are also important in building the mood of each issue. The last full-page spread of the first issue, where Harvey Dent's house explodes, uses purple, orange, and green to reinforce that the event happens on Halloween. Even more importantly, the artists remove color whenever the Holiday Killer claims another victim. The black-and-white rendering makes the scenes feel as though they happen in slow motion to emphasize their importance. Often only blood or the holiday-related object that the Holiday Killer leaves behind retains color to reinforce both thematic importance and the moment's horror.

Color plays just as much of a part in the storytelling as the script and the artwork, so what remains when the color is lost? The black-and-white rendering destroys every scene that features a dramatic lighting effect. In the third issue, for example, Harvey Dent shows his wife their new house only to find the Joker waiting for him; the Clown Prince of Crime receives illumination in the dark living room only from the lights of the Christmas tree. Without the color, this lighting effect does not exist, and the Joker's appearance is much less startling. The work also loses all expressionistic touches and holiday associations. The killings lack their special emphasis; when everything is black-and-white, no element enjoys uniqueness.

The greatest flaw in *The Long Halloween's* newer edition is its failure to live up its own supposed aesthetic. Although the black-and-white version claims to be the *Batman Noir* edition, it actually destroys much of the *noir* atmosphere. Without the use of color shading, many scenes look too bright. The aforementioned Bat-signal scene now plays across a white sky; this background destroys the powerful lighting from the signal beam. Scenes that take place in total darkness—like Batman and Dent's breaking into Falcone's vault—now feature white backgrounds that are indistinguishable from day-time scenes. The only times that the *noir* aesthetic enjoys showcasing occur in silhouette scenes. During these moments, the black figures stand out against white or horizontally striped

backgrounds in perfect homage to black-and-white film; but for the rest of the book, all of the finer shades and beams are absent. The shadows are darker, but they no longer have shadows of their own.

Taken as a whole, the Batman *Noir* version of *The Long Halloween* is only somewhat adequate in creating an atmosphere comparable to that of its predecessor. Silhouette scenes offer interesting visuals that achieve a *noir* aesthetic, but, for the most part, the color version is far more successful in creating a neo-*noir* homage. The black-and-white version also fails to offer any sort of replacement for the expressionistic and iconic functions of color in the original book. The Batman *Noir* version does present an exciting new experience for the readers who use closure to create their own color, but, for those people who examine the black-and-white for its own sake, the color version will always be the definitive version.

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My Reclaimed Horoscope

Allison Stanley

*“The high rise lights read your rights
And a downtown storm with Aries rising
 Couldn’t change ya, oh, oh,
Couldn’t ever try to make you see, no.”
— Brendon Urie, LA Devotee*

I am a fire sign who is enthralled by ice.
I am told that Mars defines me
as anger rising and impatience flaring.

God of war, incinerating anything in my path.
A shrine maiden, fighting crime in stunning red heels.
Dangling on the cusp,
so delicately between a raging ram and a peculiar pair of fish.
Two powerfully opposing forces who reside in never-ending pressure and heat.

(My fate is beckoning.)

Aries: the stars demanding, expecting me to rise, to rule (them).
A Jupiter Jones,
come to claim my hellfire throne.

And I will find my own way,
and I will go my own distance;
but not to right where astrology tells me to belong.

Starfall

Carter Jones

Staring at the screen

I saw the words flicker

flash

crawl across

And come to a distant conclusion

About the stars in the night sky,

About how the world was ending and

There was nothing we could do about it.

Hope

Was in a short supply in those days,

As the stars began to fall

to crash

to plunge

Into the oceans and onto the earth and

Cause all sorts of commotion

As we scrambled to bury our dead and

Eventually just gave up.

Why the screen still worked I don't know

Because it seemed like the food had run out

been exhausted;

we starved

But still somehow had this screen before us.

It was important, so important that we had it

Ever before us and somewhere in surviving had

Forgotten

How

To

Live.

Whistle,

roar,

scream!

Ashes floated down as ambassadors of another

World or worlds came and visited us,
Teaching us how to die without dignity
As we lay entranced by our tiny screens,
Big screens,
Ubiquitous entertainment, and fear—
A carnival of information about things
We could never change,
Captivated by that inevitable fate:
That now we must
 face
 one another.

A Deserved Finale

Doris Davis

Myths from around the world often celebrate trickster characters. One of my favorites originates from African sources: the sly but ineffective Anansi, sometimes spider, sometimes man, but always a bit of a rogue. He is a foolish rogue, for usually, as his smarter wife Aso points out, instead of hoodwinking others, he ends up the bamboozled one. He's the trickster tricked.

I should know based upon my own shenanigans as a kid. I loved games and jokes . . . often practical jokes. Leaving rubber snakes in my mother's laundry basket and planting plastic spiders in her empty coffee cup seemed like fun . . . well, they were fun.

One time, I remember I was especially pleased to function as a deceiver. I had made a pot of pretend coffee out of water and some dirt for Mr. Ashmore, a neighbor who visited often. I must have been about five, and I planned that, at the last moment—right before he drank the substance, if, indeed, he were that stupid—I'd tell him to stop. But I was too late. Just at the moment when I would have yelled, "Don't!", he gulped down the entire cup, which he followed with a gigantic belch! I remember being horrified. "Oh, no," I said. "Quite good," he assured.

And then he said, "By the way, I found these eggs in the yard." He pulled two eggs out of his pocket; they were two small, brown spheres, perfectly shaped. "I saw your ducks laying them earlier today." I was amazed. A man could drink mud—my ducks—who had not done so previously—had laid eggs? I was speechless for the rest of his visit. I eyed him as a peculiar figure.

Only some time quite later did my mother reveal that he had actually poured out the supposed coffee and that the duck eggs were chicken eggs he'd stashed in his pockets. It was a classic trickster-tricked tale, and the adult humor was at my own expense.

Epiphany

Angle Finder
Vikki Martin



Where's the Poetry?

Alicia Walden

What if Shakespeare walked
Into a bookstore today?
He'd waste no time and ask,
"Where's the poetry?"
"In the back near the restrooms."
He'd find it strange—
The lavatory indoors.
But Shakespeare, being a literate man,
Would find the large sign on the wall:
Restrooms.
"A man of letters," they'd called him.
How silly! How pedantic!
He was a man of money—
Not that he had all that much, but
He wanted it.
So he wrote, and he got it.
He wrote what people liked.
They went to his plays,
And he got paid.
(If the local clergy hadn't
Shut down the Rose,
Banning his "smut!")
Simple.

Perusing the short aisles of poetry
In the back near the restrooms,
He would wince—
The Complete Collected Works of
William Shakespeare
(37 plays, 106 sonnets, and 5 poetry books).
"Moving right along."
Irrked, he'd reach for the voluminous

Manuscript just to the right.
He'd pull it out.
No Fear Shakespeare.
“Where, indeed, is the poetry?
The depth and breadth of
Human emotion?”
He'd mumble, disconcerted,
Indignant.
“Hey, that's pretty good!”
He'd say to no one.
Repeating, “The depth and breadth of
Human emotion”
Revising, “Human experience . . .
Human condition?”
From his vest pocket,
He'd pull a quill (because he's Shakespeare),
Disdainfully glance at
The Complete Collected Works . . .,
No Fear Shakespeare,
And retire his pen,
Thinking better of it.

Confession: A Dedication to Sylvia Plath

Blake Moon

When I look in the mirror,
I see more than myself—
I see my life and where I
came from—where I began.

The woman who stares back
at me lies flat, as if on an
operating table, heartless doctors
dissecting her mind.

She feels alone, trapped in a
fairy-tale world full of fictional
characters, drowning in an oval
pool of her own tears.

She is isolated by the regime that
enjoys plucking at her consciousness,
the one thing that leaves her
feeling alive.

Pain is crafted in an ornate
design of the finest materials,
but it is frigid, stagnant,
and lethal.

A mirror is a harbinger of death.

In the Pines
Neal Harrington



Perhaps

Sam Tirrito

Perhaps some luck was needed for things to work.
A rabbit's foot, some tangible talisman . . .
But the only rabbits ever here were dust bunnies
Mating in the shadows like married women with new lovers,
Overpopulating bookshelves and under beds.
With no fear of a predator returning, they made new territory
On broken picture frames
And in piles of clothes launched hastily downstairs
That never reached the suitcase,
Which never reached the door.
Left behind
With memories they couldn't afford
Or wouldn't pay for.

Lessons Learned about Lawnmowers

Leslie Abston

I have a knack for getting into predicaments. A cloud of mishaps seems to follow me throughout my life; I am never shy of a story. Most of these stories make for great entertainment; save for the stress they cause me, they are hilarious for my friends or me to tell. In the third grade, I was home alone and accidentally locked myself out of the house wearing nothing but my underwear. While in college, I had my leg shut in the door of a public-transportation vehicle. The driver proceeded about one hundred yards with my leg hanging out of the bus until she stopped, opened the door to release my leg, scowled, and said, “You okay?” The only reply I could offer was, “You shut my leg in the door!” My friends love to have me tell the story of my waking up to find an African man standing in my room. My careless roommate had forgotten to lock the door, and the man had wandered inside; he was naturally confused and frustrated due to the language barrier.

During the past couple of years, I had believed that my cloud of mishaps had, perhaps, dispersed. I will admit that a lot of these awkward situations have been byproducts of my own poor judgment; I thought that maybe I had outgrown that tendency. However, just like the tide, the economy, and fashion trends, everything has an ebb and flow. After recent events, the cloud has, indeed, returned; I may be coming out of my dry spell.

One afternoon, I was checking my mail when a man on a bicycle approached me in my yard. With disheveled clothes and unkempt hair, the man—in his forties—smelled of dirt, sweat, and the absence of a shower for the past week.

He said, “Can I please mow your lawn?” My hesitation to answer prompted him to continue. “I used to be a truck driver, but I lost my job; and I’m living day to day; and I just need some money for a hotel room so I can sleep indoors tonight.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay. I have a routine lawn service, but they’re behind. You can cut my grass this one time.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” he said. “Do you have a lawnmower?”

“No. I don’t need a lawnmower. I have a routine service.”

“That’s okay. Could you drive me to my lawnmower? It’s just down a few blocks.”

My stomach dropped. At this point, I knew I was getting into potential trouble, but I’d already started down that path. My parents had taught me better. I *knew* better . . . but here we were. We got into my car against my better judgment, and I drove him to his house. While he was knocking on the door to the house, I texted my friend and told her that she needed to look for my body on the Arkansas side of town if she didn’t hear from me in thirty minutes. The worst-case scenarios sped through my mind: I could be the victim of an elaborate crime or I could be knocked senseless and have my organs removed and sold on the black market. The man returned with no lawnmower and some excuse as to why he was empty handed.

This house was the first of four houses to which I drove this man in search of a lawnmower. Each house was more unsettling than the last one. The last house landed us on the sketchy side of town. Pit bulls were barking at the chain-link fence, cars were on cinder blocks, I saw plenty of “Private Property: No Trespassing!” signs, and I witnessed his being cussed and chased out of the yard. Fearing for our lives, I sped away. When we were out of the area, I dropped him off on the side of the road.

“That’s it!” I said. “It’s late. I have things to do, and I’m not driving you around town looking for a lawnmower.” I was frustrated.

“I’ll find a lawnmower, and I’ll mow your lawn!” he said. “I’m so sorry! I’m positive this last place has one I can borrow!”

Unsure of the severity of my situation, I didn’t go home. (I live alone with two declawed cats for protection.) I went to my friend’s house and waited. One of my friends drove by my house to check it out and reported that the man had found a lawnmower and was currently mowing my lawn. The good part was that he’d probably be too tired from mowing my lawn to murder me. The bad part was that it was already eight o’clock at night. I’d wasted the entire evening with this nonsense.

I went home and paid the man when he was finished. Still shaken up by the whole ordeal, I summoned as stern a voice as I could muster and said, “Thank you, but this is it. Remember, I have routine lawn maintenance. I will *not* need your services again.” The man thanked me for the work and left.

I survived to tell another story for the entertainment of my friends at dinner. The joke was on me. I'd spent all evening driving a man around town so he could borrow a lawnmower so that he could mow my lawn—a lawn that a professional service was already maintaining. I can claim no long-term or life lessons from this experience other than the fact that I will never let a stranger mow my lawn. He did a terrible job. If I'd just paid the man to go away, it would have been money well spent.

Tears, Like Rain, Prefer Lakes

Casey Joe Allen

I wrote it on a blue sticky note—
“Be back soon!” scribbled in
my best cursive-meets-print.
Plastered to the stainless steel,
it didn’t say where I planned
to go or why or when I’d return—
only that it would be “soon.”
“Soon” may not be the same
measure for the both of us.
Actually, many of our measures
don’t seem to match up.

I
drove to
the lake. Just to
watch the rain fall. The weather
forecast said there’d be rain today, and
I couldn’t help thinking it would be a shame
to miss it. I’ve always loved the lake and thought
its sunsets and silver shining skin were testaments to
God’s beauty. But when the water is silent and black
and when raindrops pitter-patter insignificantly into the
depths, it’s as if the single droplets are no longer
lonely. They are done free-falling into thin air.
They are reunited. Isn’t it a shame that our rain-
drops fall onto hard, grimy sidewalks?
When the placid gray swells refused to abandon their indifference
and let the droplets free, I drove home and met you at the door
with a smile we did not share. Tears, like rain, prefer lakes.

On a Yard-Sale Table*
Casey Purifoy

This sticky morning wears
people like flypaper as they search
the closet's belongings that exhale
age in dust cologne
on the white concrete before her pale trailer.
Only she knows the items' histories.
Those ballet shoes? A gift from Grandma.
This empty photo album? Meant for a newborn.
That stained Polo shirt? A drunk son.
But between the still-life of
her china plates and the engraved cutlery sits
the burgundy pot with its sand
and sculpted mushrooms.
She remembers the pink scuffs
on its sides, the windowsill's paint.
That was when she tried bringing *Feng Shui*
to her husband's hospital ward.
When she brought it back
home and, with a breakable thud, slid
it on the top shelf of the closet, it spilled
sand like a finished hourglass.
Fifteen years and all the smells
of trailer-park Texas later,
it's on this shaky table.
The screen door's crestfallen glance looms
behind a cash box in front of her vaping plumes.
She looks again to the people digging,
sees the burgundy vase, and remembers
his speech like the silence of mountains,
like the pause of his breath.
She doesn't remember the words
but knows the pottery is worth ten dollars now.

* This poem's chapbook won second place in the 2016 PLACE creative-writing contest.

Motus Necessarium

Doris Davis

The smooth, pristine arm
before the dragon's swirling
tail. The night's mellifluous
silence, then the siren's
ugly wail. The circling
shady lane before the
highway's indifferent slab.
The music in the hall,
then the crowd's incessant blab.
The pines' majestic sway . . . but
the builders have their way.
Childhood's happy dawn
before noon's sobering day.

Progress*
Casey Purifoy

She showed me the beautiful
way of looking at alleys
or barn doors with wilting nails,
but each weekend is Dallas
for the tires on her desire.
What a way to stay but run
with those photos inside her phone holding
what this town hides. Beauty stuck between
“Great Value” items and how
loudly one shouts down tolerance.
But she showed her secret to me.
She let me see and hear the wind and
the grass drum upon themselves.
Now, a sign interrupts the sunset, declaring
“Coming Soon! New plaza!”
The company promises to fix the excess of emptiness
with the emptiness of excess. And jobs.
Months later, I’ll hear and remember
the breeze. I’ll turn to it
like a spinning buggy wheel
and see a spinning buggy wheel.

* This poem’s chapbook won second place in the 2016 PLACE creative-writing contest.

An Afternoon Ride

Casey Joe Allen

Hazy heat rising from graying asphalt,
leather protection on my skin,
layering with jeans that seem very thin.
Longing for open roadway to a fault.
Glistening sweat dripping down full of salt
as the engine hums, looking for sweet sin
that will satiate my soul at the bend
and allow my heart to be free at last.
A gentle wave to those I pass too fast,
knees almost tickling the wanting concrete
below. Watching as my shadows run past.
Today there is me and only defeat
As I slow for a funeral parade—
Fallen rider—I'm no longer complete.

Texar-can't-a, or The Bridges Over I-30*
Casey Purifoy

Don't mind the town's history.
It's history, more or less.
The state line is between states
of wealth and every-man-for-himself.
They put the heart of the town
where cash changes hands,
buying gas and a bathroom break.
The burg's a haven for fast food
and slow desires caught on barbed wire.
The kids pull it free decades later.
Red necks wear iron collars, paint them blue,
and search for a matching leash.
The town is a prolonged lease. It's a motel
kids attempt to leave every twenty years.
They turn in diploma-sized keys.
Pack the wagon, no turning back
or you'll find yourself stuck,
cleaning salt off honky-tonk tables, thinking,
"Maybe in another year, if I save for twenty months"
But you lose the thought as the song changes,
and a future spouse spills the beer.

* This poem's chapbook won second place in the 2016 PLACE creative-writing competition.

Alpaca Life

Carter Jones

Alpaca life is like intense. Who would And what does it (noun) a quadruped America, but not the Don't equivocate them, but they don't because it makes frizzier than it Alpacas are closely immediately but unlike the llama more wool—alpacas short as sheep with cats and rats, are one of the only aggressive if

separated from their mothers and bottle-fed. In llamas and alpacas, this is much more dramatic than in any other species. The alpaca or llama will be prone to bouts of rage in which it will kill every living thing around it up to and including humans.

thug life but more choose such a life? mean? Alpaca: native to South American South. me, we do have like the humidity their wool even normally would be. related to the more recognizable llama, have considerably can be described in llamas. Together alpacas and llamas animals to become prematurely

This is known as

Berserk Llama Syndrome.

This is a real thing. Look it up. A veterinarian told me once by way of letting me know that I was lucky that it was only my cat who was attacking my arm. The alpaca is not bothered by cacti; it is immune, impervious, turning the world upside down, and I'm lucky it's a cat and not one of those alpacas that is mauling me, ripping my skin, and putting my bones out of joint and crushing my life.

Right?

Don't get me wrong.

Don't equivocate me.

Don't call me unfair if you don't think alpacas are all that.

But have you felt their wool?

It's luxuriant. It's soft. It's smooth. It's warm. It's gracious. It's rich. It's fun.
It's plush. It's posh.

...

But I shouldn't wax poetic about
an alpaca's wool.

How crass.

When I was a young man—in high school, even—I once had a dream of being an alpaca herder. Nomadic. In Mongolia. I even invited people to join my cause because if we don't herd alpacas, huge fiery tornadoes will singe off all their precious wool; and the steppes of Mongolia will be barren again; and— Oh, my goodness! Won't you look at the time? I got all nostalgic, and here I am.

This is, in short, why alpacas excite me, those quaintly rustic, vaguely exotic, Andean camel sheep.

Spit on the alpaca; the alpaca spits back.

ALPACA LIFE

About the Contributors

Leslie Abston is a Douglassville, Texas, native currently living in Texarkana. She teaches world history and economics at Pleasant Grove High School and also coaches the school's UIL academic and debate teams. She is currently pursuing her graduate degree at Texas A&M University-Texarkana in interdisciplinary studies.

Casey Joe Allen graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Language-Arts Education from the University of Oklahoma in 2014. After graduating, she moved to northeast Texas and began teaching sophomore-level English Language Arts and practical writing. She is currently in her second year of teaching, and she is working on a master's degree in English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana with a composition emphasis. She loves writing and hopes to be a model for students who have more talent than she can ever possibly possess.

Brooke Bates currently works as a paraprofessional in New Boston, Texas. She is earning her teaching degree at Texas A&M University-Texarkana so that she may become a special-education teacher for kindergarten through second grade.

Win Bruhl is a studio artist and retired art administrator who taught for various universities during a forty-three year career following the completion of the Master of Fine Arts degree in printmaking and sculpture at Montana State University. An interest in pre-conquest cultures of Mesoamerica resulted in Bruhl's taking numerous study trips with students to ancient cultural sites and contemporary artisan centers in Mexico. Bruhl's art has appeared in more than two hundred professional exhibitions in the United States; in addition, multiple fine-art prints and drawings of Bruhl's have appeared in Germany, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Mexico, and the former Soviet Union. The artist lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he continues to work in his studio, Southern Flyer Press.

Brandi Burrow has taught secondary English in the Arkansas and Texas public schools for sixteen years. She currently lives in Texarkana with her husband, Brandon, and two children, Mason and Libby.

Will Chesher is a bit of an amalgamation. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Intercultural Studies from John Brown University, taught high-school English in southwest Arkansas for three years, completed a Master's Certificate in Writing from Texas A&M University-Texarkana, and currently lives in Oregon with his wife, Brittney. He plans to pursue graduate and, possibly, doctoral degrees in rhetoric and composition when he grows up.

Doris Davis is an English professor at Texas A&M University-Texarkana and the director of the East Texas Writing Project. She enjoys playing the piano and spending time with her grandchildren.

Carol Flori is a textbook-portrait Baby Boomer. A worker bee all of her life, she is a retired RN who worked with sick newborns and premies for over forty-five years. She raised three children and maintained a home while working full time. Art was always around, but it was only after a trip to Watermedia 2000 in Houston that her obsession with watercolor blossomed. She is self-taught and works from her own photos and still-life set ups. Illness has slowed her somewhat, but she still has goals and always enjoys producing paintings. She believes in appreciating the world that is right in our own backyard. She will never get to Paris, but Arkansas is a fabulous state for painters.

Neal Harrington was born in Rapid City, South Dakota, in 1973. He graduated from the University of South Dakota with a BFA (emphasis in painting) in 1998. Mr. Harrington—then recently married to Tammy (Yu)—followed his wife to graduate school in Wichita, Kansas. He graduated in 2001 with a MFA (in printmaking) from Wichita State University. Currently, Neal, Tammy, and his two children (Jake and Olive) live in Russellville, Arkansas.

Cindy Holmes was born in Los Angeles, California. Her family moved to Starkville, Mississippi, where she grew up and attended Mississippi State University. She graduated with a degree in social work. After a number of moves with her husband, she now resides in Texarkana, Texas. In mid-life, after marriage and children, she became interested in art and honed her painting skills in a colorful impressionistic manner. She found successes with entries into national oil and pastel exhibitions and an award-winning work in the *Pastel Journal*.

Currently, her medium has changed to acrylic. Individuals throughout the United States have collected her paintings, and recently a large corporation has optioned her art. She is once again being accepted into national shows. The challenge of expressing her artistic viewpoint has made her even more determined to see where her works take her.

Allison Johnson is currently a student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is pursuing a double BA in History and English and participating in the school's honors program. She received her associate's degrees in history and general studies from Texarkana College, where she was an officer of Earth Club and a member of Phi Theta Kappa. She is now a Texarkana College tutor in biology and English. She spends her free time writing creatively, drawing, and painting.

Carter Jones holds a BA in Spanish from Southern Arkansas University and is working toward a MA in English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. When he's not writing or studying, he manages a small family-owned hardware store. Carter lives in Lewisville, Arkansas, with his wife Katie and their cat Tobias. He is a member of St. Nicholas Orthodox Christian Church in Shreveport, Louisiana.

Vikki J. Martin is an artist working and teaching in Dallas, Texas, at the Episcopal School of Dallas, where she has been a valued faculty member for more than thirty years. She attended the University of Tulsa and the University of Texas at Austin, where she received degrees in painting and drawing. She continues to practice her professional art life and has shown her work both regionally and nationally. Her work has been shown in one-person shows at the Texarkana Regional Arts and Humanities Center, the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, and Vanderbilt University.

Monica McLelland, an overworked high-school teacher from Texarkana, Texas, enjoys writing creatively in sprinkled clusters of time away from her busy life. In these minutes, she frequently writes about her haywire picket-fence dreams; her writing gives her the ability to pause and annotate her idealism on any situation. Acting as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a teacher, a friend, and more grants her many visions of absurdity to present to the world.

Sherry Michael is a high-school English teacher and one-act-play coordinator. She is currently completing her master's degree in English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

Blake Moon graduated from Texas A&M University-Texarkana in the spring of 2015 with a BA in English. He has remained at A&M-Texarkana, where he is making strides toward earning his master's degree in English. He received the 2014-2015 Undergraduate Student of the Year award in English. He is a member of both Sigma Tau Delta and the A&M-Texarkana English Club. His undergraduate capstone paper, "Sexual Politics and the Femme Fatale in Su Tong's *Raise the Red Lantern*," appeared in the 2016 edition of *The Sigma Tau Delta Review*, an international journal for members of the society. His academic interests include poetry and American literature.

Drew Morton is an assistant professor of mass communication at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. He is the author of *Panel to the Screen: Style, American Film, and Comic Books during the Blockbuster Era* (University Press of Mississippi, 2016). His publications have appeared in *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *Cinema Journal*, *[in]Transition*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *Studies in Comics*. He is the co-founder and co-editor of *[in]Transition*, the award-winning journal devoted to videographic criticism.

Casey Purifoy is a graduate student pursuing an MA in English at Texas A&M-Texarkana. He is an essayist, a poet, a short-story writer, and a budding dramatist.

Valerie Shirley is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Texarkana with a master's degree in English. She is a full-time teacher of high school who specializes in dual-credit English-Language Arts at Pleasant Grove Independent School District. Valerie is a huge advocate for the East Texas Writing Project. She loves working with other authors to practice, share, and refine the craft of writing. She lives in Texarkana with her husband, Mark, and two enthusiastic cats.

Allison Stanley is a twenty-four-year-old student in the English master's-degree program at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. Creative writing is a joyous popular-culture outlet for her; it is a safe zone where she can present and play with

her passions. Her recent experiences with the East Texas Writing Project spawned some interesting opportunities for strengthening her writing and trying out new exercises.

Hollis Thompson is currently a student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, where he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in English. He has been involved in several local play festivals as a writer and a performer and has written three different stage productions for the Silvermoon Children's Theatre: *Cryin' Wolf*, an introduction to Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and *Once upon a Palooza*, which included an adaption of his story "Fiary." He currently works as an English tutor at the A&M-Texarkana Success Center and at the University of Arkansas Community College at Hope. He frequently pursues his interests in drama, medieval literature, fairy tales, film, and superheroes.

Sam Tirrito earned his bachelor's degree in English from Texas Tech University. He is currently working on earning a master's degree in English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana while teaching tenth-grade English at Texas High School. He has a loving wife, Daniela, and family members who strongly support his attempts at writing.

Alicia Walden is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She graduated in May of 2016 with her BS degree in English, language arts, and reading for grades seven through eight and was a participant in the 2016 East Texas Writing Project. She will begin teaching ninth-grade English soon at Monahans Texas High School.

Christy Busby Worsham works at the *Texarkana Gazette* as the city editor and a columnist. She is pursuing a Master of Arts in English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, writing, and spending time with family and friends.

Melinda Zwirn is an undergraduate English major at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. Her interests include fantasy literature, Shakespeare, and costuming for the theatre.