Aquila Review

Volume 10
Fall 2017

Texas A&M University-Texarkana

2017 *Aquila Review*

Editors

Brian C. Billings (Editor)
Casey Purifoy (Graduate Editor)
Hollis Thompson (Undergraduate Editor)

Front Cover Art

Cindy Holmes (*The Bone Yard*)

Back Cover Art

Macaira Patterson (*Almost an Avocado*)

Submissions

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

Writers may send submissions via post or in the body of an e-mail to *brian.billings@tamut.edu*. Query for simultaneous submissions. Please include a SASE when mailing hard copies if you would like to have the editors return your submissions. *Aquila Review* cannot accept any responsibility for the loss or damage of any materials sent via post.

Aquila Review is a nonprofit arts journal that Texas A&M University-Texarkana publishes. Funding for this publication comes from ads, private donations, and subscriptions to the journal.

Communicate with the staff of *Aquila Review* using the following contact information:

Aquila Review
Texas A&M University-Texarkana
Department of English
7101 University Avenue
Texarkana, TX 75503
(903) 223-3022
www.theaquilareview.wix.com\theaquilareview

Contents

Into the Darkness

Upon Reflection

Independents

Activists
Melinda Zwirn

I wonder if cocoa beans know
What a fuss we all make when they grow.
We could someday run out
Due to earthquakes or drought.
We should all eat our candy bars slow.

Ode to Washington, D. C.'s Fireworks Show
Molly Kyles

My family and I sit
on a rough concrete curb
waiting, waiting, and waiting
for the show to begin.
A tall white spear has captured
the attention of the whole world,
millions of eyes watching the dark night,
and hoping to see brightness.
Purposeful conversations drone on as we wait,
arguments and compliments
dancing across the crowd.
And then a single spark
flies into the air, and silence.
Every other conversation
is deemed meaningless
and every quarrel irrelevant
as the spark climbs higher and higher into the dark.
With an explosion of applause,
the spark combusts into a million stars
scattering across the night,
carving paths of smoke into the untouched sky.
Cheers erupt from the crowd,

humans falling back to primal ways,
gawking and awing at fire.
Other fireworks make a path into the sky,
desperate to explode
and scatter their ashes.
Colors whistle as they are launched upward,
and ashes rain down like an afterthought.
The scent of smoke lingers
as the sparks shoot off in rapid succession.
One last firework graces us with its presence,
and then nothing.
Deafening silence fills the city
for one precious minute
until the droning conversations
and quarrels resume,
and life shifts back into order.
But for that minute,
that fleeting, beautiful minute,
there was quiet.

Drama, Discourse, and Politics
Within and Without *Hamilton*
Rachel Horne

One of the common jokes of 2016 on late-night talk shows and on social media was the near-impossibility of obtaining tickets to *Hamilton*. The only Broadway production in recent memory to come close to *Hamilton*'s impact might be *Phantom of the Opera*, but *Hamilton*'s firestorm of success came largely from social media. While the show did gain fame based upon its own merits, much of the interest and word of mouth spread from infamy. The show's rabid fanbase may be huge, but dissenters are just as common. Everyone who has heard about the show has an opinion about it, and one cannot help but note the threads connecting the reactions of different cultural groups. The show is a divisive one not because of its base subject matter but because of how it presents that matter. The current state of American politics and race relations make the show a timely piece that has appeared on the news several times. However, whether the show is good or someone has the right opinion about it is immaterial. The divisive cultural view of the musical contributed to its success; minority groups chose to use it as a revolutionary tool, and those who opposed it ultimately encouraged such behavior.

Perhaps the best place to start in a discussion of reactions is with the reactions of the usual suspects—the critics. The *New York Times* review simply begins with "Yes, it really is that good" (Brantley). Critic Ben Brantley goes on to say that although he wished for all the hype to fail the show, it won him over in the end. The *Chicago Tribune*'s glowing review calls it "[a] reinvention of the musical" (Jones). *Variety*'s review sings a similar tune. Overall, the musical was a critical darling for major newspapers and magazines—more accurately, anything leaning more toward the left. These periodicals simply cannot say enough good things about the musical and how it is revolutionary. A common thread is their interest in the score. They note how the hip-hop elements are so different from the standard Broadway show, but while this is certainly not the first musical to use hip-hop, it is by far the most successful. Logically, Broadway producers would see the success of *Hamilton*'s music and its successful mixtape release and hop onboard that train, so, yes, the music is revolutionary in that sense. *Hamilton* has definitely changed the landscape of Broadway, even if just for a while.

Still, the music seems to be a by-product of the show's appeal. When people talk about the show, for good or ill, they tend to discuss the cast. The way reviews tend to gloss over the blind casting anomaly is astounding because it is still such a major topic of discussion. In terms of the show's quality, that the race of the cast doesn't matter is true. Someone can write an adequate review without ever bringing up the topic, but that also denies a central element of the show. The cast

became the focus of much of the divide, and this is not a product of coincidence. *Blind casting* is not quite the right term for *Hamilton*. Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda specifically called for all the main roles to be played by minorities . . . except one. King George, be design, would be the only white face in the group according to Miranda's vision. This particular point tends to be what puts people on edge and starts all the online debates.

As always, the question pops up—is this reverse racism? Alternatively, does reverse racism exist? What deserves examination is what this question means for those people involved in the show. Could this production be performed with an all-white cast? Technically, yes. The characters are all white historical figures. Of course, Miranda has said, "As an artist and as a human I will tell you this. Authorial intent wins [with regard to the casting choices]" (qtd. in Dale). The show is one of representation and reclamation of history. The actors and actresses are of color because Miranda did not set out just to make a bio-tuner about Alexander Hamilton. He wanted a show with representation and representational meaning. The non-white audience members are meant to identify with the actors onstage—to be given a part in the history out of which they are often written. The intent is good, but Miranda's characters tend to become exactly that—characters. They are no longer the historical figures but vague representations of them. The sheer amount of *Hamilton* fanfiction that exists is a testament to that fact. Young fans in particular view these characters as their own independent entities and view them in their minds as the actors portraying them, not as the men on bills and change.

This identification creates the greatest point of divide between those who view *Hamilton* as a cultural milestone and those who view it as overhyped historical inaccuracy. For simplification's sake, the first camp shall be known as *fans* and the second group as *dissenters*. Other names for the groups are certainly possible after the negative reaction across social media to Mike Pence's viewing of a *Hamilton* performance. The resulting clash of ideologies tended to be made up of those who supported Trump against those who opposed him. This Twitter firestorm brought *Hamilton* back into the spotlight. The conflict also brought out the claws and teeth of the groups.

Given the Pence affair, talking politics briefly is necessary. According to an article by Nathan Cohn, Trump's victory came from a majority vote of the white working class. He did not win the majority with any groups of people of color. This lack does not mean that all dissenters are white and all fans are non-white, but the evidence paints a clear picture of the common face of the groups. Erasing the narrative of the vice president's viewing, dissenters of *Hamilton* have been around since its inception. The show gained a great deal of criticism for its casting and musical stylings in a historical setting. No matter what arguments or feelings

anyone may have had against the show, the fans tended to lump people together as racists for not appreciating the subject matter. As in any major Internet argument, a battle of spite and us-versus-them arose. Dissenters all became racists. Fans all became social-justice warriors (SJWs). All that feuding and hatred led to one commonality—more interest in the show.

The trouble with train wrecks is that they always gather attention. People love a good flame war, and this one helped build *Hamilton* into a cultural phenomenon. Without its troubled Internet presence, *Hamilton* would likely not have become renowned. The divisive nature of the *Hamilton* debate made it particularly applicable to the cruel and uncompromising nature of the 2016 voting scene. In both debates, each group insisted it had the moral high ground, and the most vocal portions of each group were made up of much the same people. The election was like the *Hamilton* debate on a massive scale with actual consequences. As a result, the musical came up in talks about the election constantly. The cast even set up registration tables outside the show (Simoes).

Alexander Hamilton once again became a major player in American politics. Generalizing occurs if one says that fans were for Clinton and dissenters were for Trump, but many points aiding this argument are hard to deny. Miranda himself met with Obama, a Clinton supporter, and the two appear to get along well. The audience of the showing Pence attended booed him, something which did not happen at Obama's showing. Undeniably telling is the story of *Hamilton*'s first act: non-white immigrants fighting a white oppressor. These alignments may not be unanimous, but by focusing upon only the most vocal of the groups, drawing some lines in the sand becomes easy.

Every bit of the culture surrounding *Hamilton* is a touchy subject for someone, and the Internet arguments prove that point. No one ever want to concede a point. The anonymity of the World Wide Web allows people to forget that another person is on the other side of the screen, and the rules of general etiquette no longer apply. Arguments quickly become hateful. Discussing politics and race is a quick way to send people jumping down throats, and *Hamilton* is a show with a clear political and racial message. It does not shy away from its agenda, and Miranda has become a prominent figure in pop culture with a lot to say . . . especially about *Hamilton*.

Stepping outside of the fans and dissenters, one should consider two particular arguments from two different people. Lyra D. Monteiro writes that "despite the proliferation of black and brown bodies onstage, not a single enslaved or free person of color exists as a character in this play" (93). She considers this fact a damning critique of the work that causes its message to fall apart. She condemns the script for erasing black characters from the narrative altogether. She does admit to her enjoyment of the show, so she cannot be called a dissenter, but

her critiques do not commend her well to the fans. She lands her somewhere in the middle, a seeming impossibility in the scope of Internet discourse. One might say that this middle grounding lends her credibility and that she should be applauded for her calm approach to the debate, but Monteiro misses the point. She focuses too much upon the play as a historical narrative and forgets that it is meant to reflect modern times. A story of a historical black person of the time would have focused largely upon slavery, and black people have many narratives dealing with that topic. In fact, that tends to be the entirety of their historical narrative.

In direct opposition to her argument, blogger The Quintessential Queer writes,

> If you are black, your history begins with slavery, and your agency is denied; they don't teach about slave rebellions or black revolutionaries. You learn about yourself as entirely shaped by outside forces . . . . In *Hamilton*, Eliza talks, in turn, of "taking herself out of the narrative" and "putting herself back in the narrative." That's what *Hamilton* is about: it's about putting ourselves in the narrative. It puts people of colour in the centre of the damn narrative of the nation that subjugates them; it takes a story that by all accounts has been constructed to valourize the deeds of white men, and redefines it all . . . . The function of the visual in *Hamilton* is to challenge a present in which people of colour standing up against oppression are seen as violent and dangerous by the same people who proudly declare allegiance to the flag. It forces white people to see themselves not as the American Revolutionaries but as the British oppressors. History is happening, and they're on its bad side.

Hamilton is not simply a story about history or even reclaiming it. It is a story of current issues. Along with the election, it lends credibility to the Black Lives Matter movement. The show's first act follows black and Latino men fighting for their rights and freedoms against a white antagonist. The show does not forget that black and brown people have always been part of the narrative, and though historical figures as such do not feature, the show mentions slavery more than a show written for white actors likely would have. The show always has an undercurrent of things being unfinished. Daveed Diggs, the black actor for Jefferson and Lafayette has said frequently of his roles that being in the show has helped him claim ownership of American history.

The actors take something which has always been a symbol of white pride and make it something new that people of color can take pride in. In a nation that is becoming more and more hostile toward immigrants, *Hamilton* makes them the heroes. Time will tell how relevant the musical will remain, but, honestly, its falling out of relevancy might not be a bad thing. For now, the show and its cultural reaction expose the divisive nature of Americans almost as well as the

election did. The work is more of a device than a story and more of a political tool than a piece of pop culture. Fans and dissenters showed early echoes of the nation's inability to compromise, and as *Hamilton* has remained in the spotlight, that fact becomes ever more present. Americans do not seem to have learned much from the second act's compromise.

Works Cited

Brantley, Ben. "Review: *Hamilton*, Young Rebels Changing History and Theater." *The New York Times*, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/theater/review-hamilton-young-rebels-changing-history-and-theater.html.

Cohn, Nate. "Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites." *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html.

Dale, Michael. "*Hamilton*'s Lin-Manuel Miranda Speaks on Race and Casting." *Broadway World*, http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/HAMILTONs-Lin-Manuel-Miranda-Speaks-On-Race-and-Casting-20151203#.

Jones, Chris. "Review: 'Hamilton' makes the most of its Chicago shot." *The Chicago Tribune*, 2016, http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/reviews/ct-hamilton-chicago-review-ent-1020-20161019-column.html.

Monteiro, Lyra. "Review Essay: Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton." *The Public Historian*, vol. 38, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 89-98.

Quintessential Queer, The. "I Love *Hamilton*." *Tumblr*, 2016, http://thequintessentialqueer.tumblr.com/post/134868530418/i-love-hamilton-but-something-about-the-way-white.

Simoes, Monica. "See *Hamilton* Cast Host Voter Registration." *Playbill*, http://www.playbill.com/article/see-hamilton-cast-host-voter-registration.

Stasio, Marylin. "Broadway Review: *Hamilton*." *Variety*, 2015, http://variety.com/2015/legit/reviews/hamilton-review-broadway-1201557679/.

This chapbook won *Aquila Review*'s first chapbook contest in 2017.

Trapped on Ellis Island
Allison Johnson

An island to gold streets
But the ground is hard and cold
Shadows, young and old

Mock Election

Allison Johnson

This poem reflects on a conversation I had with my nephew in which he explained to me that his school had an election and that he voted for the same candidate that the majority of my family voted for—the same candidate who had won by a landslide at the school. I had enjoyed hearing of other schools that had participated in similar activities with such candidates as different types of cookies, and I had whole-heartedly supported this idea. However, I was bothered by my nephew's experience because, as far as I could tell, the lesson he learned was to ask your family whom you should vote for during presidential elections, and I found it eerily close to indoctrinating a youth of dependent thinkers.

A simple act at a small school house
Little ballots in their hands, full of pride
The votes of children are cast
For leaders of the land
Indoctrination of a nation
Of the next generation

From generation to generation
For every family in a house
Each one part of this nation
In which nationalism sparks such pride
It seems that land is more than land
With such an enthusiastic population cast

Even when She needs a cast
It happens every generation
Lady Liberty still stands on the land
And serves to guard the house
And Americans still find pride
But She stands hollow for our nation

Americans caught in indoctri-nation
Are clouded by an over-cast
They blindly pick up this sense of pride

That grows with every generation
In symbols like the White House
Just some walls upon the land

Shelters are on every land
Found in every single nation
And only lucky ones can house
Pride and joy and out-cast
Those of a generation
Who struggle to find nation-pride

For a fickle thing is pride
If one doesn't collect all through the land
The lies of a former generation
That they live in the greatest nation
If the story doesn't hold and fails the history book's cast
The mansion of this nation might just seem a house

A child's vote is cast inspired from words of his house.
The father's generation sells the greatest nation.
But land may just be land, and a fickle thing is pride.

Elation Nation
Allison Johnson

Elation Nation
Nation of the scrappy whose
Bright stars killed many

American Pride, History Lied
Allison Johnson

All day long the children sing songs
Making joyful noise to the horde
Every child knows no wrongs
Rightly so, the men record
In every notable event
Canned reports of what went down
Americans rendered in ascent
No one really heard the sound

People falling, falling, falling
Ravishly ripped without remorse
In the cries of dead men crawling
Do they credit these in source?
Every day we hear the news

How our bravest bold did try
In every moment, no abuse
Said none they wrongly die
These grants o' glory greatest
O', our story's always bright
Remember, take news of the latest
Yielding liberties on sight

Little ones so full of pride
In a while, when they grow
Expound that history has lied
Do the next little ones know?

I. Freedom
Allison Johnson

The girl jumped, hands up!
They all jumped and shot in shock.
She shattered silence.

The Message
Allison Johnson

Post. Poster. Positioning.
Rigid. Red. Read.
Order. Object. Objection.
Propel. Possession. Position.
Alignment. Argument. Anesthesia.
Grand. Grandeur. God.
America. Anger. Allusion.
Note. Now. Need.
Demand. Deadman. Deed.
Alone and Alarmed; in need; American Greed.

II. Frenzy
Allison Johnson

The boy watched her fall.
Her spirit soared and body bent.
He cannot forget.

Post-News Blues
Allison Johnson

Tragic tragedy times three, one happy snippet: news.
Now I'm sittin' here singin' the post-news blues.
Why do I even turn it on and stare in shock n' awe?
That clip from some –istan is so vivid, fresh and raw.
We ain't got no money and the debt is growin' large.
Now we got some rude ass guy we didn't even want in charge.
The children in a war-torn land are starving day by day,
No doctors seem to understand how to keep cancer away . . .
If I just quit paying these thirty-minute dues,
I could stop singin' this stupid song and just turn off the news . . .

III. Fresh
Allison Johnson

He can’t sleep at night
She leaps her last all night long
Lower, lower, gone

Wealth
Allison Johnson

There’s $10 in my pocket.
There’s clothes on my back.
There’s water from the faucet.
There’s nothing needed that I lack.
There’s a lot of work to do,
But at least it can be done,
These days, jobs are far and few,
But at least I have got one.

IV. First
Allison Johnson

“Oh, son, take a gun.”
His small shaken hands reached out
Full of fear and doubt.

American Anti-Musicals
Allison Johnson

Hamilton cried, “America, you great unfinished symphony,
You sent for me.”
Hedwig reflected, “I remember I was watching my favorite cartoon
On American Forces Network—‘Jesus Was Good.’”
Seymour shouted, “Every household in America . . . thousands of you, eating . . .
That’s what you’ve had in mind all along, isn’t it?
You’re a monster, and so am I!”
Joe believed, “America has re-discovered itself.
Its sacred position among nations.
And people aren’t ashamed of that like they used to be.”
Mark Cohen sighed, “You’re living in America
Where it’s like the Twilight Zone.”
And Maria’s friends and family cheered and jeered:
“I like to be in America! Okay by me in America!
Ev’rything free in America—for a small fee in America!”
And we sing the songs because they’re catchy.

V. Forever
Allison Johnson

Shaken soldier shot
Still post-trauma aftershocks
Shake and shoot unwilled.

Alphabet Soup for the Soldier's Soul
Allison Johnson

A-board calls drive everyone forward,
Given he is just knighted like most now,
On proud quests, Rightful soldier transgresses.
Uninvited violence welcomes xenophobic youth
Zoilous yappers' xyresic works verbigerate untested "truths,"
Slander-quotes, propaganda, outlandish narratives mask life knowingly
Journalism indoctrinates him
Giving fearlessness,
Energized, doubtless cadavers build armies.

VI. Fantasy
Allison Johnson

He watches her fly
Fearless leaps forever
He sighs and rests his eyes

History’s Mist

Fade
David Harrison

Rising from the soil of ancient reminiscence,
a mist,
at first unseen, unnoticed, barely there.
Playing at the edges of perception,
it creeps through the valleys,
the lesser-used paths.
Turn your mind's eye upon it, and it is gone,
yet it remains,
teasing the fringes.
The Stealthy Beast.
Imperceptibly, the mist creeps up the mountains,
congeals, clots.
Mist becomes fog, stealing your love
slowly,
frame by frame.
The fog buries all in opacity.
The Monster.
"Return to me!" I cry in vain,
for as quickly as the fog clears, it returns.
Pockets of joy in a sea of sadness.
The Memory Thief.
All is white and fear,
then you are gone,
leaving me an orphan
with memories of joy.

Billy's Hole: A One-Act Play
Christian Wright

Characters

WILLIAM BONNEY, young 20s, an outlaw and criminal
CACTUS SPEAKER, ageless, male or female
DIEGO, 30s, a cartel soldier
OSCAR IVAN, 20s, a cartel soldier
WESLEY JACOBS, young 20s, an innocent tourist and MEREDITH's boyfriend
MEREDITH MCPHERSON, young 20s, an innocent tourist and victim to human trafficking
MEXICAN MAN, 30s, an immigrant
SIDEKICK, a teenager and BONNEY's friend and partner in crime

Setting

The action takes place in the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico. The time stretches from 1879 to the present day.

The stage is separated into two parts. One part shows a saguaro cactus accompanied by its speaker, who dresses all in black. Desert rocks, sand, tumbleweeds, and a hill are behind the cactus and its speaker.

The other part of the stage features an old wooden fence. In the back rests a drop painting of a desert landscape.

Scene 1

(Darkness on both parts of the stage. A Spanish guitar can be heard while brisk wind sounds carry over the guitar's tune. Lights emerge on a large saguaro cactus. A young WILLIAM BONNEY and his SIDEKICK appear.)

BILLY: So this is what Heaven looks like. I never would've thought freedom looked so beautiful.

SIDEKICK: I'm tellin' ya. Now, it ain't gone be easy bein' on the run like we are, but this sure as hell beats starin' at those walls and thinkin' of ways to bust through them bars.

BILLY: We'll be all right. I know these parts, anyway. Freedom is Heaven to men like us, and, believe me, this here desert is our own Heaven.

SIDEKICK: Yeah. At least you got that pistol off those boys we dropped back in town.

BILLY: We?

SIDEKICK: Yeah. We. Come on, now. You know I had my part in it. I did most of the distractin'. That's basically one of the hardest parts to a job.

(Beat.)

BILLY: I don't usually say this, but, ah, forget it. Yeah. At least I got the pistol.

SIDEKICK: Just how good of a shot are ya?

BILLY: Fastest gun is the southwest. I can assure you of that.

SIDEKICK: I didn't ask how fast. I asked how good.

BILLY: How about I show you? Hold up a bill, and I'll shoot through it dead center.

SIDEKICK: The Hell you say!

BILLY: I'm serious.

SIDEKICK: The Hell you say. I ain't holdin' shit for you to shoot.

BILLY: I could shoot the wings off a fly! I could thread needles. Hell, I could shoot a man down and hit the road before his brother blinks twice and realizes it!

SIDEKICK: All I'm hearin' is words. Three cents says you can't hit the same spot twice in a row. Why not right there on that cactus?

(He points toward the cactus.)

Go 'head, Mister Fastest Gun in the West, Mister "I killed my first man at seventeen," Mr. Billy the Kid . . . .

(BILLY draws his revolver and releases three rounds into the saguaro cactus.)

SIDEKICK (CONT.): Well, I'll be damned! I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it myself.

(BILLY and the SIDEKICK walk closer to the cactus. They find that the three shots have entered through the same hole.)

BILLY: Best shot in the southwest.

SIDEKICK: Well, ain't that somethin'? That's one Hell of a hole.

(The SIDEKICK fingers the hole. CACTUS SPEAKER, not making any facial expressions or emotions, casually watches. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise on a man on hands and knees at stage right. Wearing torn and tattered clothes, the man also wears a Mexican sombrero. A three-foot section of rope tied to his belt drags two empty plastic water jugs and a metal canteen. The man grunts and groans in pain, agony, and thirst. In a dramatic attempt to cross the stage—now the border into the States—on all fours, he stumbles multiple times and lands with his face in the dirt. The man's toes and feet are bloody; his leather sandals have not protected him from the rocky desert terrain. The man's last fall lands him at the foot of the cactus.)

MEXICAN MAN: *Agua. Agua. ¡Hay, Dios mio! Agua.*

(Water. Water. Oh, my God! Water.)

(In a desperate attempt at retrieving water from the saguaro, the man wraps his arms around the cactus and pulls himself up. He promptly notices the hole made by Billy's gunshots nearly forty years earlier.)

Un ollo. Un ollo. ¡Necescito romper este ollo para tomar agua!

(A hole. A hole. I need to break the hole to drink water!)

(The man tears at the hole in the cactus with his hands. The rough hide and outer layers do not break easily. He resorts to using his mouth only, and he tears his lips and gums until blood streaks his jaw. Left without water and empty-spirited, the man falls back to his knees. He crawls to stage right before giving his dying words.)

¡No puedo creer que deje mi Cielo en Mexico para venir a obtener el Infierno en los Estados Unidos!

(I can't believe I left my Heaven in Mexico only to find Hell in the United States!)

(Lights fade as the man takes his last breaths and dies. CACTUS SPEAKER makes sad facial expressions and looks on with sorrow. Blackout.)

Scene 3

(Lights rise on MEREDITH and WESLEY, a couple in their twenties. They are seated on two chairs at stage right to illustrate the front seats of a car. MEREDITH is driving, and WESLEY is in the passenger seat.)

MEREDITH: So this is what Heaven looks like.

WESLEY: What'd I tell ya? Definitely something, huh? Go ahead and kill the motor. I want to stretch my legs.

(MEREDITH turns off the car. WESLEY steps out.)

MEREDITH: I never would have thought that it would be so beautiful. I've seen pictures, but this . . . this is just amazing. It's gorgeous. Almost like something in a postcard.

WESLEY: Agreed. And to think . . . a desert? I'm glad we made the trip out here. What gets me, though, is that the closest town or gas station is nearly ten miles from here.

(Beat.)

How crazy would it be if your car broke down out here?

(MEREDITH gives WESLEY a stern look.)

Let's see. If we had to walk, and this is before figuring in the heat, ten miles at about fifteen to twenty minutes per mile . . . .

MEREDITH: Please stop.

WESLEY: And probably a few rattlesnakes along the way. I doubt On-Star would be much help out here. We'd probably have to wait for the sheriff or some Border Patrol agent to drive by.

MEREDITH: Wesley, please. The last thing we need is for you to jinx us. Now you've got me paranoid for even turning the engine off.

WESLEY: Oh, come on, babe. I'm just trying to get a reaction out of you.

MEREDITH: Well, you've got one. Is this what you wanted? We're here to get away from everything, spend some quality time together, and do a little bit of sightseeing.

(MEREDITH reaches for a camera from the back seat and snaps photos of herself.)

Here. Take a picture of me in front of that cactus. This'll be great to show everyone back home.

WESLEY: Okay.

(WESLEY takes the camera from Meredith and captures a photo of her as she walks forward and stands next to the cactus. She poses for a few pictures and then notices the hole in the saguaro made from BILLY's gunshots nearly 150 years earlier.)

MEREDITH: Check out this hole in the side of this cactus. It's like a perfect little circle.

WESLEY: Cool, babe.

MEREDITH: Okay. Don't be a jerk. I'm just saying it's a little unusual—kind of cool. I can fit my whole fist inside of it.

WESLEY: It's probably from a wild animal or something. I'd say a bird, more than likely.

MEREDITH: Yeah. You're probably right.

(CACTUS SPEAKER smiles and remains highly enthused throughout interaction between the couple.)

WESLEY: Come on. Let's walk around and do some of that sight-seeing you love so much. I gotta say this place is pretty badass. I think I could get used to a place like this. Maybe one day.

(Lights fade slowly to a blackout as MEREDITH and WESLEY exit stage left while pointing to the horizon.)

Scene 4

(The stage remains dark except for a dim but continuous light on the cactus. No light should fall upon CACTUS SPEAKER during the following monologue.)

CACTUS SPEAKER: People come from across the countries to see what I see. They call it beautiful. They call it gorgeous. They come in their cars and motor machines. They used to come by horse and foot and even pass on all fours. It is true that it is beautiful here. It is true that it is gorgeous. But the darker side of this truth is something only I have seen. The truth is that this place is ugly, brutal, corrupt, and filled with savages. I've seen over one hundred and fifty years of this inescapable truth. I've seen man kill his brother and rape his sister. I've seen man live off the land, and I've even seen the youngest of men eventually carry their own young men. Generations of men. I have seen the lot.

(Blackout.)

Scene 5

(Lights rise to reveal two men digging a grave at the back of the hill. A body rests behind the dirt they've piled up. Both men wear jeans, boots, button-down shirts with cut-off sleeves, and cowboy hats. The men are dark and of Mexican descent.)

DIEGO: Hey, *cabrone*. Let me know if you see anyone. If we have to do someone else, you're the one who makes the hole bigger.

OSCAR: Calm down, *guey*. I'm looking. I'm looking.

DIEGO: What did *jefe* say to do with the girl?

OSCAR: Man, we're supposed to take her back to the *maquiladoras* and put her ass to work. She'll probably make someone real happy.

DIEGO: *¡Andale!* I think she's gonna make me real happy first. She owes me. The little bitch bit me. Look.

(He shows OSCAR his forearm.)

OSCR: Hey, *papi*, just make sure you leave a little for me when you're done.

(They continue digging furiously. Meanwhile, CACTUS SPEAKER watches intently what is happening beyond the desert hill.)

DIEGO: You think it's deep enough?

OSCAR: *Sí*.

DIEGO: *Oye*. Check this *pinche gringo*'s pockets. You know how those white boys keep money no matter where they go.

(OSCAR crosses to the body and finds a billfold. He returns to DIEGO while counting cash.)

OSCAR: Sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty-three, baby!

(He tosses the billfold to the ground. DIEGO picks up the billfold and looks at the driver's license.)

DIEGO: Wesley Jacobs. You better get real comfortable with this place, baby. You don't have much of a choice but to get used to it.

(The men drag WESLEY's body next to the hole and nonchalantly push him into the grave.)

Now let's go get *mamacita*.

(*Lights fade to dim while a spotlight on CACTUS SPEAKER rises.)*

CACTUS SPEAKER: So this is what Heaven looks like . . . .

(Blackout.)

Stone
Lee Russell

My life's become a stone, slow-skipping across
Time's darkling depths. It bounces once, alighting
for the briefest of moments amongst the dross,
before ascending once more and flying
a little further on. I go skimming
through the years aloof, still a part, yet set apart.
Each brush down leaves a little of my heart
behind. Each upsweep is shorter; it's odd.
My pace has dropped; I'm slowing. Soon, I'll start
to sink and drown beneath Time's last façade.

The Brier Patch[*]
Hollis Thompson

Characters

HARRIS, late 60s, a famous writer and recorder of Southern folklore
JOEL, early 30s, the same author as a young man
BR'ER RABBIT, ageless, the popular trickster figure of Southern oral culture

Setting

The action takes place in the reading room of a comfortable and fashionable Southern bookstore and on an old dirt trail in the middle of the country. The time is the late nineteenth century.

(The opening verse and chorus of "I'm Gonna Be Somebody" by Travis Tritt plays as a harsh, white spotlight rises on the elderly HARRIS as he walks to CS. The spot will always follow him while he is onstage.)

HARRIS: Well, I thank all you ladies and gentlemen for comin' out here this evening. It's been several years since I first published Old Uncle Remus's stories, but it warms my heart to know that all you kind folk still take notice of the tales from the old plantation. Now, it's usually my habit to take requests from the audience as to what specific stories I should tell, but with your kind indulgence, I'd like to do something a bit different here tonight. Folks often ask me how I came about all these wonderful stories, and I usually relate to them my time with the field hands and the stories they told 'round the fire on warm, inviting evenings and the care I took to record those oral tales in writing . . . as best I knew how. Well, that certainly is part of the answer, but it's not quite the whole truth. The story of how I obtained the stories actually begins deep in the woods of the old South.

(Lights rise to reveal the rest of the stage: a country forest trail. Pine trees tower over the background, and a dirt trail winds all across the stage. The trail's

[*] This script won first place in the 2017 PLACE creative-writing contest.

beginning is almost out of sight, but a few cotton plants outline it in the distance. A huge boulder stands SR. The side facing the audience appears to be made of compacted dirt rather than stone. A menacing brier patch lies SL. Chains, whips, and pieces of a Confederate flag are tangled in its depths. JOEL enters from CSL; he examines every rock and hole with a large, knotty stick.)

HARRIS (CONT.): I was just a young man back then. I'd just started writing my first column, and I was desperate to make it big in society. I'd had enough of polishing Johnny Reb's boots. Some old field hand I knew told me a grand old tale about a certain object that could grant a man untold power and riches beyond his most meandering hypothesizing. I was a bit up the old river in my financing, so I decided to go on a little expedition. I knew I must have looked pretty foolish, but I reminded myself that I had not spread the knowledge of my endeavor to a soul, so it had no net loss. All I figured I had to do was navigate that annoying passage, find the blessed place of plenitude, and appropriate its contents accordingly.

(JOEL walks over to the boulder while humming a happy tune.)

Now that there boulder didn't look quite right. It wasn't exactly solid-looking. That old hand told me that what I wanted was probably in a cave somewhere . . . typical place for slaves to hide something. I bet their old country is just clawing with caves as far as the eye can see. In my youthfulness, I figured that maybe if they'd been a hair more creative in their hiding, those slavers never would have got to 'em.

(JOEL runs his hands over the surface. He hits it with the end of his stick, and the front topples down, creating an opening in the shape of the African continent. The Pot of Wisdom stands inside.)

There it stood! The Pot of Wisdom! And in the center of the very shape of the dark continent! How could there be any better omen for success? Those field hands didn't just spin me some Old World heathen wives' tale down by the river.

(HARRIS exits, and his spot goes out.)

JOEL: Hah! That's the problem with them plantation owners. Their servants always know more than they do. The gentlefolk spend their lives sipping lemonade while the river of life roars right past 'em, and them low folks go riding it and wave at 'em as they pass. Not me, though. All my best friends are workin' those cotton fields! And now the Almighty has seen fit to bless my kindness with the reward of their knowledge!

(BR'ER RABBIT hops onstage from the inside of the cave. He wears a pair of stirrups and carries a staff on his back. He intercepts JOEL before he can get close to the pot.)

BR'ER RABBIT: Excuse me? This pot is not up for reapin' or tillin' or any kinda rewardin' without my say-so. You really think you can just prance on up to this here pot and grab it up? Didn't you know it's already got an owner? It's Br'er Rabbit's pot, and you should know not to touch another's gray train without his consent. Saints alive! How'd you like it if I rubbed my paws all over your family heirloom? Hm?

(BR'ER RABBIT and JOEL freeze with BR'ER RABBIT sticking his tongue out at JOEL. HARRIS enters.)

HARRIS: "Sweet heavens!" I thought to myself. "It's a talking rabbit." I thought if I could catch it, I could fetch a pretty Dixie dime displaying the astonishing verbalizations of the amazing field beast. But then I thought better of it. Best to keep my mind on the big prize. That pot was worth a dozen tobacco fields. Why bother with one measly little native?

(HARRIS exits. JOEL and BR'ER RABBIT unfreeze.)

JOEL: Now look here, rabbit, this here pot ain't worth the clay it's made out of. I don't know what kind of deranged swindler stuck you with it, but I'm here to save you from this nightmarish pot. It's a terrible eyesore, but, because I'm just helpful like that, I'll dispose of it so it don't hurt the fragile aesthetic sensibilities of some delicate soul who might walk by and have the misfortune of looking upon it. I'm really providing a favor to the whole community.

BR'ER RABBIT: That's the stupidest load of cow dung that I ever did hear, and believe me, these here ears have heard quite a few sounds.

(A few soft notes from an African windpipe sound as BR'ER RABBIT speaks.)

This pot is my ticket to respect. Animals come from miles around to search me out so's they can get on my good side and peer into the pot. You wouldn't believe how fickle these animals are. I done helped Sista Cow, Old Jack Sparrow, and even Br'er Turtle outta five hundred fixes, and what does it matter to 'em? Jack squat! But since I got this Wisdom Pot, they respect me mo' than anyone in the land. Now even you folks come lookin' for me. That ain't going away, Mista. I done lived through too much to go back to stealin' cabbages and connin' half-wits.

JOEL: All right. I perceive you are not as dumb as I first took you for. Please forgive my little . . . breach of etiquette. My name is Joel Chandler Harris. You might have heard of my column in the *Monroe Advertiser*. Or you may not have, seeing as you're a rabbit. Anyhow, the truth is I *really* want that there pot, and I would be willing to pay a pretty penny to get at it.

BR'ER RABBIT: I had to earn this pot through buckets of my blood, days of my life, and pain and sufferin' the likes of which you plantation folks ain't never even conceived of. You ain't got nothin' worth enough to buy this pot from me.
JOEL: Well, maybe for an exchange of services, then.

(JOEL pulls out his notepad and begins writing down ideas.)

I could . . . write you a little ditty or tell you the latest gossip. Hey! I could even get you a nice big carrot from the private garden of Atlanta's premier Southern belle! Doesn't that sound like a fair trade?

BR'ER RABBIT: So just because I'm a rabbit, you assume I just go stupid dumb for carrots, huh? Well, you can give that to your mule back on the farm! Even if I did eat carrots—which I'm not sayin' I do—I could swipe the most prized root in this whole darn country, and it'd be two years before they knew it was missing! Go back to your porch and swing!

(BR'ER RABBIT grabs the notepad from JOEL.)

JOEL: Give me back my notepad, you varmint! That's where I record my most private reminiscings!

BR'ER RABBIT: If they're anything like the drool you been spillin' so far, I'm doin' you a favor. Let me give you a pictorial representin' of your fancy words and pretentious manners!

(He rips out several sheets and makes paper silhouettes of Southern masters. He hurls the notebook SL and begins to dance while imitating the plantation folk.)

Oh, look at me! I'm Joel Chandler Harris, and I want that there pot. I gots me no idea how to use it or what it means to you, Little Bunny Foo Foo, but you should hand it over to me. I am a *man*, after all. I know how to manage your property better than you do. So why don't you go ahead and fry up some chicken for me while I crank up this here pot. After all, I can always whip you if I have to!
JOEL: You done wore out my patience. Gimme that pot, you little freeloader!

(JOEL grabs one of the fallen rocks from the mouth of the cave and lunges at BR'ER RABBIT, who easily outmaneuvers him and kicks him to the ground near the pot.)

BR'ER RABBIT: A rock? Really? Is that the best your big ol' Dixie brain can come up with? I suddenly realize why you need the Wisdom Pot! You're so stupid, you make Br'er Bear look like a college teacher.

(JOEL pounces on the pot while BR'ER RABBIT gloats.)

JOEL: Hah! You might be fast, but you have no focus. I hope this educates you on the natural superiority of the educated man.

BR'ER RABBIT: Oh, no! Please, Mista, don't grab up my Wisdom Pot! Once it's in your hands, it'll be yours forever! You'll leave me to whittle away my days in stupid, wisdom-free misery.

(BR'ER RABBIT lazily cleans his teeth with one his paws. He is obviously unconcerned and bored with JOEL's actions.)

JOEL: Now scamper on over to Joel, you precious pot of plenitude! You're gonna ladle up the secrets to writing my way up to the big house!

(JOEL tries to pull the pot up, but it will not budge.)

Just gotta lift it a little . . . harder. To think I shoulda expected all the world's wisdom to be light!

(A deep laugh rings out from the sky.)

First the rabbit and now the sky?!

BR'ER RABBIT: That ain't the sky laughin'. That was my old man laughin' his old head clean off at the fool tryin' to run off with his old pot! You know, I think you're a horrible liar. You call them field hands who sent you here your friends, but you ain't shown their folk hero—yours truly—a lick of respect since you got here. That's why you ain't never gonna lift the pot. You can't get no wisdom while you're believin' lies about your own self!

(BR'ER RABBIT and JOEL freeze as HARRIS enters. BR'ER RABBIT assumes the Thinker *pose.)*

HARRIS: I was pretty perturbed by this point. I reminded myself that he was a rabbit. He was just three feet tall, for crying out loud! That pot was mine for the taking; it was just a matter of creative thinking, and I've always been good at that. His brain couldn't have been more than the size of a peanut. I was Joel Chandler Harris! I was confident that I would soon scale over this little fuzzy obstacle 'cause no matter how sly that rabbit was, he was still just a dumb little rabbit.

(HARRIS exits. JOEL and BR'ER RABBIT unfreeze.)

BR'ER RABBIT: See, you big folks always think us little folk ain't able to keep what's ours. And you may be right about most of the poor little animals you eat and the people you chain up. But I gots a bit of information you might have considered before you came to my hole: ain't no one in this whole wide world as smart as me!

(BR'ER RABBIT scratches his ears with his back paws and rubs his nose with the front ones. He then takes the stirrups from his side and begins to tie them to the pot.)

You tickle me down, Mista Man. The idea of you taken this pot from me is downright hysterical! Don't you know who you're trying to fleece? There ain't no animal in this world who doesn't come to me for help, and for good reason.

(BR'ER RABBIT begins to dance a kind of Americanized African tribal dance based primarily upon jumping with chaotic energy. He uses the pot like a drum and maneuvers it as if it were weightless. He moves all over the stage, frequently and unexpectedly invading JOEL's space. JOEL tries to grab the pot every time, but he is unable to cope with BR'ER RABBIT's speed. BR'ER RABBIT begins to speak in a vaguely regular pattern; he has obviously practiced this speech countless times. It's his personal creed. As he speaks, the windpipe plays with the same turbulent energy of the drumming. Lights dim. Silhouettes of the characters he discusses appear as BR'ER RABBIT mentions them.)

This here rabbit done flirted with Sista Moon, my friend.

(A huge spot hits the top of the curtains to represent the moon.)

King Deer done made me his chief advisin' friend.

(A silhouette of a grand deer appears CS.)

I killed Br'er Wolf *and* Br'er Lion!

(Br'er Wolf's silhouette appears right beside JOEL. The image causes JOEL to jump. The silhouette of Br'er Lion lies on top of the cave.)

BR'ER RABBIT (CONT.): I'm the guy who outdid Br'er Fox a hundred times over and even rode him like my mule. See? I keep the stirrups to prove it.

(Br'er Fox's silhouette appears crouching next to the brier patch.)

No net or a well or even a tar baby can keep this rabbit stuck! Ain't nobody able to take anything from me—

(BR'ER RABBIT abruptly stops the dance directly in front of JOEL. Full lights rise again, and the moon-spot and silhouettes disappear. BR'ER RABBIT pushes his face into JOEL's.)

Especially not some plantation-hoppin' carpetbagger!

(JOEL grabs at him, but BR'ER RABBIT leaps out of his path and throws the pot back into the cave. JOEL tries to regain his earlier, self-assured posture and attitude—the one he usually adopts toward particularly harsh editors. He raises his shoulders in confidence and speaks calmly.)

JOEL: Now, Mister Rabbit, I acknowledge your . . . many virtues, and I'm sure that, in your own way, you are something special way out here in the back country. Under normal circumstances—and with just about anybody else—you would be totally justified in the course you have thus far taken. But there is still one fact that has eluded your primitive little mind.

(He cannot hold the façade and snatches up the rock. He begins yelling.)

You don't need that pot like I do!

(JOEL hurls the rock at BR'ER RABBIT. It hits him behind the back, knocks him over, and breaks in two.)

JOEL (CONT.): How could you? You're just a rabbit—a field creature. You don't know what it's like to have to dance around for the schoolmasters and the gentlemen and stomach their cracks about your red hair behind your back. You don't have the responsibility I have. You don't have a mama to worry about. I need that pot, and I'm gonna trample you to get it!

(BR'ER RABBIT gets up and throws half of the rock back at JOEL.)

BR'ER RABBIT: You think you know how to manage responsibility? You've been breakin' this place apart since you got here! You can't even keep the rocks around you from falling apart under all that rage you got boilin' up. You ain't fit to be in charge of nothin' that needs holdin' together.

(HE pulls the staff from his back.)

So you think you can just beat me and get me to comply with your superior wishes? Well, you ain't pickin' the cotton off this bunny!

(BR'ER RABBIT crosses to JOEL, who also uses his stick as a weapon.)

JOEL: Oh, so you think I'm afraid of a little rabbit with a twig? That's the most comical mismatch I have ever heard of!

(He laughs.)

Bring it on, Buckteeth! You might be faster than I am, but the day I get whipped by a rabbit is the day I sail to China.

(The two fight. They roll in the dirt. An intense, white spotlight engulfs them.)

I'll whip that fur right off your hide, boy!

BR'ER RABBIT: Is that all you got? No wonder them other boys make fun of you! At least they actually know how to use a good stick 'stead of just talkin' a big game.

(Eventually, they both tire, and the spotlight gives way to mild, yellow-orange lighting. BR'ER RABBIT wearily pulls himself up with his staff and leans on it.)

BR'ER RABBIT (CONT.): Well, though it pains me to admit it, I have to hand it to you. I didn't think you had the right amount of persistin' to keep after the pot for this long. But I got one question for you: are you willin' to jump into the brier patch for it?

(BR'ER RABBIT uses the stirrups like a slingshot and hurls the pot into the brier patch.)

JOEL: Is that all? I'll figure a way through those thorns before supper time!

BR'ER RABBIT: You have a grand ol' time with that! I'm sure such a creative thinker as yourself should have absolutely no problems with such a measly little thing as a brier patch! Of course, folks like me were born and raised in it.

(JOEL picks his notepad off of the ground and begins writing out ideas. After a moment, he rips out the paper in shapes that vaguely resemble rabbits and makes a pile of them by the brier patch.)

JOEL: I think these shapes ought to do quite nicely for my purposes. You know, I've never tried roasted rabbit before, but once I get back home, I think I'll head down to town and try it out.

(JOEL attempts to speak in a voice that mocks BR'ER RABBIT's. He obviously has trouble articulating this drivel, and it forces him to move his mouth in awkward positions as he tries to create the vowel sounds.)

Look at me! I is a big stupid bunny who thinks dat he knows ever'thin' bout ever'thin'. En you all is notin at aw next ta my zippidy-do-da. You's never gonna get near my smarty pot! Now dat I done sez all dat needs sayin', I'm a hop intow dat dair brier patch en sow ya awul how smarts I is.

BR’ER RABBIT: What is that drivel you’re spoutin’? Has the sun gone and deep fried your head?

(He realizes JOEL’s intent.)

Wait! Is that supposed to be me? Are you tryin’ to say that’s the way *I* talk?! If you think that pile of noise represents my way of talkin’, then you’re as deaf as a doorknob. Maybe you have a hard time hearin’ folks from way up on your big ol’ Southern stallion.

(BR’ER RABBIT takes up his paper silhouettes once again and begins juggling them in order to fight off his anger. JOEL snaps his pencil in half and begins rubbing the pieces together in an attempt to start a fire.)

JOEL: Ah! Nothing warms my heart like a nice, big crackling fire! And there ain’t a cloud in the sky!

(Thunder, lightning, and rain sound. The lighting changes to blue.)

BR’ER RABBIT: Hah! Looks like your sense of weather is about as sensitive as your hearin’! You must not be gettin’ on very well with somebody upstairs. I guess they like rain a lot more than you like fire. They done turned the whole world blue with rain drops.

(JOEL desperately tries to light the paper for several moments before giving up in defeat. On the verge of tears, he looks up angrily at the sky.)

JOEL: Is that your pa, too?

(To the sky.)

It’s not fair to cheat for your sonny! You’ve got no sportsmanship!

BR'ER RABBIT: Yeah. Pops never was much for fair play, but, then again, a big bad man coming to deprive a poor little bunny of his most prized pot is not exactly a balanced matchup.

(They freeze. BR'ER RABBIT is covering his eyes. HARRIS enters.)

HARRIS: All my creative thinking and struggling had come to naught. That rain wiped out my last good idea for getting through that brier patch unscathed, but even after that discouraging blow, my dignity and determination simply would not allow me to quit the business. I was Joel Chandler Harris, by thunder, and I would get that pot, no matter who or what I had to go through! I was at the end of my wits. I just wanted to strike something! It's really quite comical. You often have to become very foolish before you finally find the source of true wisdom, and that's exactly what I did. I got real foolish . . . real foolish.

(HARRIS exits. JOEL and BR'ER RABBIT unfreeze. JOEL tries hitting the briers with his arm, but the thorns tear into him and rip his jacket open.)

BR'ER RABBIT: Are you sure you wanna do that? Ain't you figured out yet that there's a cost for stealin'?

(The thorns tear into JOEL's back and leave cuts that resemble whip wounds. The stage expands. The brier patch pulls farther and farther away from JOEL to reveal black trees and scattered Civil War-era guns left over from a battle. The main lights fade, as bright orange backlighting on this new scenery comes up. Moss vines that resemble nooses lower steadily from the trees as JOEL strains to reach the brier patch.)

Things are lookin' pretty bad. That's some pretty nasty-looking stuff you're getting into. Maybe you should rethink this whole situation.

JOEL: Just shut up, already! This is all your fault!

(JOEL hits at the brier patch until a vine with a piece of the Confederate flag rips his mother's pocket portrait from his jacket. He grabs the cloth and begins

desperately cleaning some of his wounds with it. He suddenly realizes the significance of the action and drops it. He sits and picks the portrait up. BR'ER RABBIT hops up right beside him and whispers in his ear as he dangles a rabbit silhouette in front of his face.)

BR'ER RABBIT: You sure showed me, Mista Man. Looks like you wasn't listenin' to those field hands hard enough. They like to talk about me a lot, but it looks like you ain't ever heard of how I used a brier patch to get out of a very sticky problem. That pot can stay in there forever, as far as I care. It's kinda confusin', actually. It's like the only thing you heard about was how this here pot could put you on the top of good old Southern society.

(BR'ER RABBIT jumps to the oppose side of the brier patch and begins to dig some of the thorns away. He keeps his ears straight as he listens for JOEL's response. He pulls out the pot as JOEL ruminates.)

JOEL: I guess maybe I didn't listen as attentively as I should have. My mamma always did say that was my problem. I only listened to what I wanted to hear.

(He picks up his stick and runs his fingers over its end.)

Maybe I'm more like the plantation folk than I realized, but please let me look into the pot anyway. I need to learn how to survive. I've never been that bright, and I can't thrive in a world full of foxes off of stories and dreams.

(JOEL sets the stick aside and bends over in supplication.)

I gotta find out what to do because I'm all out of tricks and tears.

BR'ER RABBIT: You got some messed-up thinkin', that's fo' sure, but you ain't such a bad one way deep down. At least you got enough sense to put the stick away. You might not even be all that different from the field hands that done told you about the pot, but you need to get this through your thick, unshapely head right now: there ain't no bein' who came from this earth who can hand you wisdom on a

BR’ER RABBIT (CONT.): plate with a side of chicken. And you can’t steal it from folks who got it, neither. That just makes blood and death for both.

(BR’ER RABBIT kicks JOEL lightly in the side. JOEL straightens up, and they lock eyes.)

Don’t you be tryin’ to take the easy way—the cotton road. You can’t just take somethin’ from somebody and expect everythin’ to be gumbo and happy times, especially with wisdom. If you want that, you better struggle for it and seek it out with everythin’ you got inside. Otherwise, you’ll be never be nothin’ but a sharecropper.

JOEL: I think you and that brier patch schooled me with that lesson more than any schoolmaster ever could. I always was a slow learner, and they usually had to beat a lesson into my head. I guess old dogs don’t change.

(BR’ER RABBIT whirls the pot around and plops it down in front of them.)

BR’ER RABBIT: Well, it still only gets you one peek. Mind me! You still ain’t come close to everythin’ I went through to get it, Lord knows, but you earned you a look. Make the most of it. It might even be in a generous mood and give you more than you bargained for.

(A windpipe sounds as BR’ER RABBIT lifts up the pot’s lid slightly.)

JOEL: Another comment from your pa?

BR’ER RABBIT: Nah! That’s probably the voice of the wind. He tends to show up every now and then when somethin’ new happens down here on the earth.

(JOEL draws near to BR’ER RABBIT CS. BR’ER RABBIT takes the lid off of the pot, and a yellow light shines out of it. The light hits the loose paper, the brier patch, and the trees. Evening falls, and all of the light besides that coming from the pot fades away. “Humble and Kind” by Tim McGraw plays as the light fades to black.)

Anne Askew
Melinda Zwirn

Anne Askew was a Protestant preacher in the time of King Henry VIII. Outspoken and opinionated, she was relieved when her abusive Catholic husband cast her out . . . until he signed her arrest warrant. She was one of the only women to ever to endure torture in the Tower. The torture was so brutal that the Constable of the Tower left to seek pardon for her; his departure left her at the mercy of her much crueler questioners. At the time of her execution, she was so badly injured that she had to be carried to the stake and burned sitting in a chair. She wrote of her torment before she died to inspire other Protestants. She never recanted her Protestant beliefs.

Hark, now, the bolt on my cold door is slid.
Here in this cell, the wanton preacher hid.
At last to dream; to 'scape, and in my sleep
My hurts at last will till the morning keep.
Too tired to pray, unfit to speak a Psalm.
My mind removed from that which is my balm.
And yet, I fear the shortness of my days,
To fail so late to lift my word of praise.
So with a crackling voice, near lost in screams,
Pray God deliver me from Hellish dreams.
Dear Father, who in Heaven ever rules,
Thy name be lifted high by earthly fools.
Give me this day Thy bread. My sins forgive.
Deliver me from fear that I may live.
Deliverst Thou? Thou cam'st not to my aid
When I upon that demon rack was laid.
Whence came my help? What mercy shew'd Thou there,
When I with tearful shrieks my soul laid bare?
My wrists they cinched and drew the levers tight;
My ankles locked, my spirit bound in fright.
And when my tears some mercy did entreat,
The Constable in pity did retreat.
What word of mercy sought he from the king
That could undo my present reckoning?
For when he left, the grip grew tighter still.
The cruel tormentor set to break my will,
Abandoned to the devil in his den,

Forsaken by my God and left to men.
What say'st Thou, God? Has not my voice been raised?
Are not my duties done? My deeds be praised?
Didst Thou in all thy ord'ring of the sphere
My pleas for mercy ever chance to hear?
Think not on that. My time is much too quick
To seek for words my loving God to prick.
Forgive me, Lord. My anger has no end
That I should so direct it to my friend.
For ever hast Thou been my steadfast guide;
Thy steps in line with mine; Thou by my side.
Perforce, I must confess, my soul might wait
When next Thou call'st me to some unknown fate.
For never came Thy call to something kind,
No gentle task, no tranquil flock to mind.
How came I to this dark, distressful place?
What highway turn? What path hath set my pace?
Was I a babe or ever I a child?
Did I in rampant play run coarse and wild?
Did I, with flowers, braid my maiden hair
Or wonder that my face should be so fair?
These precious gems of memory are lost.
The gate is paid. These figured in the cost.
I knew a man, who knew me in that place,
But I am vexed to summon forth his face.
How wondrous strange my life would present be
Had I but found my comfort on his knee.
Would I had raised my prayers to living bread
And blusht beneath his hand upon my head.
What face had he? My light is out. What face
Did banish me and send me from that place?
What eyes did burn in anger at my sin?
What mouth beneath the beard upon his chin?
The well is deep wherein these thoughts did swim.
The bucket crack'd, dropp'd by my useless limb.
The face of my accusers is all one:
My husband, jailer, father, brother, son.
For he that cast me out did then protest;
My warrant signed by him that did detest.
What joy was mine when I did but forswear

His fist and rod, his grip upon my hair.
But thought I not of punishment or pain
When losing that which losing gives such gain.
Could I have spent my prayer in wifely peace?
Could I have silenc'd when he bid me cease?
Or would Thy word in burning whisper sue
My mind to fill, Thy purpose to speak true?
Had I but been obedient to his will,
Wouldst Thou have come to summon me forth still?
Had I not breached the air with Thy fair cause
But in my silence given thoughts their pause,
Would not I still within this cell be caught
And all my fasting still this pain have brought?
For surely as Thy word burn'd in my heart,
My silence would have rended me apart.
And opened thus, no peace could I have kept,
Though struggling thus, Thy word would I have wept.
So much for that. No path leads me away.
No alter'd past my present course would sway.
So now my weary eyes I needs must close.
Perhaps I may not wake from this repose.
O bitter eyes, why now begin to weep,
When wat'ry lids do keep me from my sleep?
Thou limbs, ache not. Thou swelling joints must rest.
Thou heart, beat not thy drum upon my breast.
My Lord who joins me in this fearful night
Will not tomorrow cast me from His sight,
Though arms I cannot lift to Him in praise,
Nor legs to stand, nor voice in word to raise.
Sleep now, and wait to climb upon the pyre.
My legs will fail. I'll lounge inside the fire.

Around the Neighborhood

Persistence
Doris Davis

Concrete severed
Like the threads
Of a spider's web,
A hard birthing
For a dandelion
Whose sphere of spikes
Flays the air,
A signal of
Nothing but itself—
One solitary life
Thrusting and bobbing
And now gone.

No Where and Everywhere
Corrine E. Hinton

I am from country music and car rides
across the country in the summer months between duty stations.
I am from lasting military legacy with roots no where
and everywhere,
in American and foreign soil.

I am from starch-pressed white T-shirts
and meatloaf
and night school at the community college,
from “your life will be better”
parents.

I’m from the Berlin Wall,
and Orangemen and tornado alley,
and the arch peeking over highway 64.

My roots might grow from Manhattans and Marlboros,
and the “you can’t be Catholic anymore because
your mom was married before”
group of hypocrites and hypochondriacs,
but my branches reach for sunlight over Carlyle Lake
and Saturday-night spaghetti (with meatballs).

On the Leash
Laura Persons

I walked him every morning
right at the sunrise
before the morning coffee
to shut him up.

He didn’t know what a favor
I did him just in being.
I told him, “There are homes for those like you,”
but he couldn’t understand it
anyway.

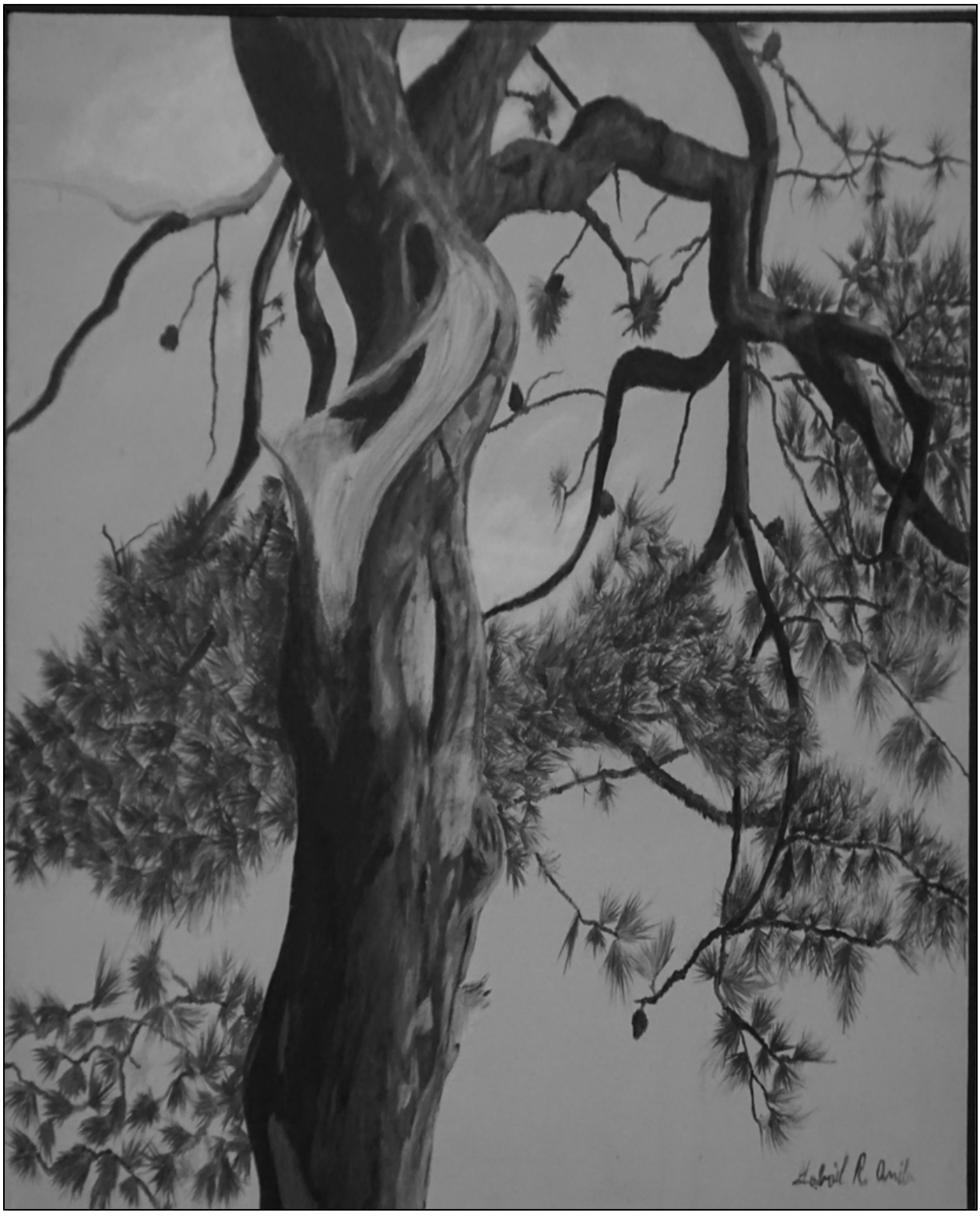
The Pine Tree
Laura Persons

Swaying back and forth.
(Is it left or right today?)
When the lightning strikes,
the pine falls

right on top
of the old man's home.
He is thankful

for it is time
it all went down.

<u>Broken Pine</u>
Gabriel Avila



Home
Hailey Harris

Where did you go?
When you left us in the dark,
You left our home,
So nice and cozy,
And left it empty and cold.
A place that used to be
Full of laughter and family pictures
Is no longer our home.
It's a place full of stale memories
With the windows all shattered,
The ceilings caving in—
A reminder of the hazard
We never knew we were in.
You left us in the rubble
Of your own sin:
A loving wife,
Two cheerful daughters
Wondering where you've been.
The ghost still haunts me—
Your tail lights streaming down the driveway,
My mother's cries on repeat,
Her numb body kneeled against a chair.
"What did I do?"
"What did I do?"
You did nothing.

Grandpa’s Chair
Cyla Maine

long day
done

dogs are
barkin’

snore during
commercials

worry again
tomorrow

The Bougainvillea Tree
Aide K. Soto

In my polluted street, there's only one bougainvillea tree.
Its roots have come out of the concrete looking for fertile soil,
But here there is no water, sun, or air.

The tree has to die
or
be torn from the land that gave it life.

Maybe it will flourish,
or
maybe it will die,
but at least it will have the most vital matter:
chance.

The Show Must Go On
Tobe Gurley

The line was taking longer than usual. Dave's eyes sliced behind me.

"They're probably searching," he said.

Dave knew not to talk in line. I hoped he had noticed the guy behind us. He looked suspicious. I was afraid he was one of them. I wanted to assure Dave that our people were in place and that they would get word to us if they were searching, but instead I kicked his ankle and stared firmly ahead.

With all the publicity this event was receiving, we anticipated tightened security. They promised openly not to bow to our demands, and we secretly swore to bring them down. With the authorities on their side and the people on ours, we were in for a long battle.

Dave's eyes widened. He was the first to see them.

"They're coming!"

I grabbed his arm and pulled him close. "No. Don't. Wait."

"You take it." Dave's eyes swirled with fear, and he stared to tremble.

"Dave, be cool," I said, squeezing his arm while my lips were touching his ear. "Listen to me. You are *not* going to run. If you do, then it's over. Over Dave, do you hear me? Everything we've done will be a waste."

Dave had been with the cause from the beginning. He'd helped plan missions and desperately wanted to prove himself in the field. He was flunking the field exam terribly.

Everyone seemed to sense the tension. It hovered over the line like a fog. All eyes were on the big man with the mirrored glasses. He was either paramilitary or a mercenary, wearing a black T-shirt and camouflage fatigue pants tucked into black shiny boots. His mug looked like it had been molded for an action figure. Whatever he was, he was looking at us.

Alongside him was our adversary, Mr. Hay (a.k.a. Make-'Em-Pay Hay). Mr. Hay leaned into the man's ear and whispered something. I took a mental note of his features for future reference.

"Maybe our people got caught," Dave said.

I ignored him and tried to see around the swaying heads. My heart raced when I realized the hired goon wore an earpiece.

Dave tugged my arm. I pursed my lips, slightly shook my head, and, with squinted eyes, scanned the crowd for our people. I had faith in them. I expected a diversion.

Suddenly, to our left by the newsstand , a fight broke out. The fighters fell over the trashcan. A woman screamed.

With everyone's attention on the brawl, I stepped off, knowing Dave was on my heels.

We took long strides to the front of the line. We showed our passes, and, within seconds, we were inside. Our people had responded just in time.
I looked back through the window. The hired muscle had Billy picked up in a bear hug.

Billy was trying to kick out. Mr. Hay had Jimmy pinned to the ground.

Dave pushed me. "We can't worry about them."

He was right. We had a mission to complete. They knew the risk. Everyone knew the risk.

Dave patted his coat. "Let's do it."

We squeezed through the crowd virtually unnoticed. With the cameras directly above us and our backs against the wall, we hunkered out of sight. After what I thought was forever, I raised my head and started looking for their men. I thought I'd spotted one when the lights went out.

"Now Dave. Now," I said. "Let 'em fly!"

He released our weapons.

Within seconds, the theater exploded with ear-shattering blasts, one after another. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Buildings crumbled, searchlights streaked the sky, and tanks rolled over barricades where men crouched behind them, firing their rifles.

We were determined to make Hay pay. We refused to let his greed rob us. He had no right to raise the price of snacks and admission twenty percent.

All of a sudden, the film stopped. The shadows of our three moths were huge on the big screen. I nudged Dave. He gave a giddy laugh. Some people threw popcorn ; others stood in the aisle demanding a refund . . . just like the last two weekends.

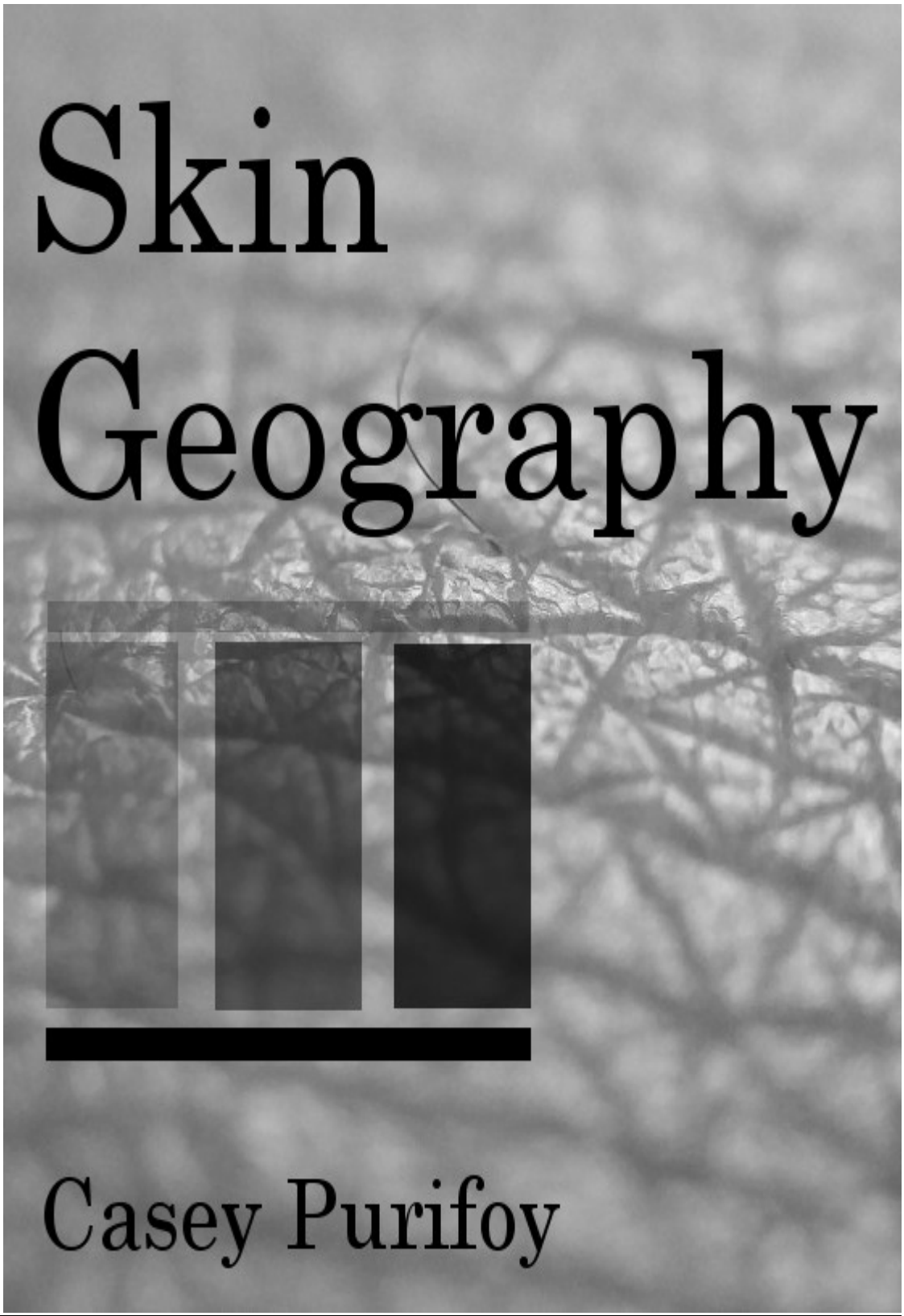
I looked up. Our moths' wings were beating against the glass. A panel opened, a hand holding a can appeared, and then, with two quick sprays, it was all over. Our moths came spiraling down.

There was a round of applause followed by big black letters that scrolled across the screen. They read, "The Show Must Go On."

I looked at Dave, wrinkled my lips, and shook my head. I couldn't believe that they'd installed a door and stooped to chemical warfare.

Leaving the Gaggle
Esther Pippins

First day out of formation,
Heeding calls from the giant *V* in the sky,
Feeling the drag to move to lifting power,
To return to something familiar:
Breeding north, wintering south.
Neck stretched long and thin,
Webbed feet wobbling through the door,
Not sure of what's waiting inside.
It's hope for a new adventure,
Leaving those who both love and nurture.
Eyes look up to see the glaring bright of day
From the atrium window.
Across the green rolling hills,
Water is sparkling to the touch of a golden sun.
Esteemed halls hold the promise of acquisition,
Of humanity and knowledge abounding,
Immobilized, hindered, yet seeking.
A migratory launch to meet
New formations for foraging learning
With the new gaggle one will find.
As they graze intently around the pond,
They search for the ones before them,
Intently looking,
Constantly searching for that information
Other gaggles know.



This chapbook won second place in the 2017 PLACE creative-writing contest.

Night Black
Casey Purifoy

Right across the street
Over the peeling, white fence,
You can see dead bushes,
Green grass, in tufts, abandoned toys,
Black screen over the door.
It's easy to see the woman at night though,
Veiled against the dying bulb,

Right across the street.
Once you see her,
You think it's a shadow
Got stuck trying to follow someone inside.
But she shuffles, and drags, too, her shadow.
I can see her head shake in surrender,
Vindicating the night for what it won't return.

Snow White
Casey Purifoy

Rivers of white sidewalk
Open onto snow-crusted lawns,
Yielding doorsteps like parlors,
Gilded, winged with flowerpots and urns.
But it has no porch.
It's only one house of a neat set,
Valleyed among hundreds.

Right through the door you can't
Open, with its wreath, is red laughter,
Yellow lights, and the white faces of
Giving-and-Receiving.
Bands of dark carolers receive their audience
Inside the warm home,
Their voices muffled, smiles clear, a perfect picture.

Brown Dirt
Casey Purifoy

Run-down gas station,
Oil spots blooming on the concrete beneath its rusted awning.
Young workers wield leaf blowers
Giving chase to cut grass,
Brown dirt, and other leftovers
Into the road where cars don't slow.
Van by the brick station's walls, it's theirs,

Rests in the sun, playing music
Over the traffic. The owner hates it.
Yard's green shine and green smell
Grows across the gas station and road.
Blue shirt man, with glasses, gut, and grin
Is walking, wanting to run but can't, and
Visits the van's window with tapping fingers.

Gold Yellow
Casey Purifoy

Radioactive neon through the store windows.
On the counter, a gold cat waves. Hello? Or Goodbye?
Yellow is the motif on the aisles, labels, and the buggies.
Green fruit and vegetables sit in warm brown crates
Blue labels on fruit sodas and instant noodles.
It has a white atmosphere, like a hospital corridor.
Visiting feels like a vacation, despite the storefront windows

Revealing the brown town where it rests.
Occupying the cashier is a stern face
You get few words, change on the counter top, and
Goodbyes (or hellos?) from the golden cat.
Buddha statues are fifty percent off,
In the basket. Their factory-pressed grins beam,
Venerable as the neon.

Is this Asian
Market?

Concrete Grey
Casey Purifoy

Running is a symptom of concrete.
Old tennis shoes yelp.
You and the basketball's tempo
Grip the tenement walls.
Broken chain link jingle.
It's a symmetrical display:
Vertical pole and hoop, the square court, the chain cage.

Raspy beatbox gushes urban romance
Over a couple of minute-old gunshots.
Younger people ignore and older don't hear.
Gold things become another type of skin
Belonging to teeth, cars, guns, or the chain necklace, like
It's a noose. The apartment building looms around the
Vertical pole and hoop, the square court, the chain cage.

Street Blue
Casey Purifoy

Remember the line in the sand,
Oil-slick as a trigger reset.
Yards flank this artery, quiet with tension.
Guns speak down it, not protecting, not serving.
Blue sky watches a son bleed here.
It's a question trafficked with bullets:
Villains wear black, right?

Regret is a way the law squeezes
Out this black bile from blue.
Yesterday was just a statistic, a quota.
Guy cried against his instinct. He wore
Blue and the tin badge felt like a toy
In his hand and the gun had a tombstone's weight.
Villain was a boy no one would know, nothing could save.

Bruise Purple
Casey Purifoy

Riots pool into the road.
Officers coagulate at saw horses.
Young rage swells with burning storefronts,
Giving this shiner its gleam,
Blood hot after the cold skin
Inside the media blackout.
Vicious questions and half-answers.

Roads bruise with them.
Orders and troops strip the sentences, though,
Yoking the issue again to shadows,
Giving justice weighted scales,
Buying up truths,
Installing obedience, again,
Via the bruise hidden in black skin.

Hide Tan
Casey Purifoy

Regulate a skin tone.
Obey its paper-thin identity.
You must wear its paint,
Give yourself to its washable wall,
Burn it into your heart:
“It’s the only place I belong.”
Vacate that hope for a “You” or “I.”

Remember, also, to choose only
One color. There are no others
You can have. It’s not for you,
Get it? I know you have trouble
Believing. Well, I will help you
Inter that ancestry and culture.
Visit these words again if you doubt.

Rock Red
Casey Purifoy

Rock Red nations, now
Orange pebbles in the grass.
Yestercenturies, this was no one's.
Gales swept in these white sails and then
Buried millennia with Paper, God,
Indigenous weaknesses, and
Very occasional bullets.

Rebellion against this storm
Offers easy lessons:
You cannot wound this anger or
Give the storm enough to end.
Blankets even wear its quiet hatred.
In the end, a Rock Red nation
Vanishes, eroded with tear trails, blood, and forgetting.

Sand Orange
Casey Purifoy

Rolling down the sand roads
Orange, rusted mopeds,
Yellow checkpoints,
Gravel under black-booted feet
Black SUVs become the target for eyes
In this busy mud town with an unpronounceable name.
Visitors wear dirt-colored camouflage and

Roar demands from dirt-colored Humvees.
On a day where their spirits are up,
Yelling with calls to prayers,
Guns will point and jerk with
Boyish fear you can't see
Inside the black goggles and dirt-colored helmets.
Voices mean more than these foreigners can decipher.

White Flag
Casey Purifoy

Red stripes, white stripes, blue sky, white stars.
Old stories say they represent colonies and states.
Years from another century say it stood unscathed.
Guest singers tell that story on baseball fields.
Battles and smoke cleared on its gentle wave.
I look at it now and think of a new story for its colors:
Velvet red rivers running between the white stripes.

Red, white, and blue . . . .
Over the white stars, the sky looks like a tug of war between black and blue.
Yet, the white stripes do not outnumber the red
Gutters, streets where victims continue to
Bleed. Overall, the flag could have been a black-blue window
In a red tent.
But, now, the white stars and white stripes are the bullet holes and slashes,
Viscous edges that grow surrenders and continue to eat.

Sweetness and Light

My Spring Poem
Brooke Barnett

I thought I should write a poem about spring
Since spring has officially arrived on this planet
And practically every poet who has ever lived
Has written a poem about spring
That time of year when hibernating creatures
Awaken from their winter siestas
And the flowers bloom
Bestowing their perfumes (and their pollen) upon the earth.
But in my head I see
Thousands of snowpeople melting
With their stick arms held up in surrender to the warm spring sun
Silently screaming through their pebble lips
Until they are thousands of watery puddles
In which sticks, pebbles, scarves, and top hats sit abandoned.
But then those puddles remind me
Of the swimming pools that will soon be uncovered
And the waves of the ocean slapping the white sand of the beach
Uncovering seashells white, yellow, and peach
And I realize that each spring day
Is one day closer to summer.

Hello, Lemons
Sara Lawrence

Hello there, lemons!

How are you
settled on my happy counter with your bright yellow glow
Still attached
to your branch and leaves
full of life and luster announcing your recent arrival?

One of you
I will add
tart and tasty to my iced tea.

The other
I will drip
moist and mouthwatering on my fish.

Sugary Existence
Aide K. Soto

I like to think that I notice you.
Not in this place, nor in the station.
Perhaps tomorrow or in few years.
Could be in the flower, the rain, the sky, or only in the dirt.
Only . . . to think that I am going to see you in some form;
in some time but without choice in our destiny.
We have no preconceptions to enjoy
in the nectar summary of ignorance.

The Hunt
Melinda Zwirn

I riffle and dig through my basket of eggs
Curled up in the circle I make with my legs.

Eggs pop into halves, and the candy falls out.
And that is what Easter Egg hunting's about.

This morning our Easter Egg hunt's been delayed.
We sit in the church where we sang and we prayed.

We try not to rustle our ruffles and starch.
The hour clicks by in a slow, steady march.

Then, right after lunch, all the grownups say, "Go!"
They won't tell us where, but we know that they know.

We run through the house, and we scream and we shout.
And that is what Easter Egg hunting's about.

The Kiss
Melinda Zwirn

keep in
A mind
kiss
doesn't
have to be
embarrassing for
anybody. I can hand you
one, and no one will know
the kiss came from me.

A Santa Story
Norris Rettiger

Characters

ANGELINE, a young girl
CYNTHIA, a young girl
ELF, one of SANTA's workers
ERIC, a young boy
HELPER, an ageless assistant
LILY, a young girl
NARRATOR, a storyteller
SANTA, the jolly Christmas icon
SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS SPIRIT, the spirit of the season

Setting

The action takes place in a local neighborhood and at the North Pole Workshop. The time is Christmas during 2016.

Scene 1 (The Prologue)

(Lights rise on the North Pole Workshop. SANTA enters. He is an awkwardly conflicting picture—jolly, fat . . . but not old. SANTA speaks directly to the audience.)

SANTA: Another Christmas is very soon here.
The children have no need for any fear.
I am jolly old St. Nick of Claus
With all my faithful helpers in my cause.

(HELPER enters with a list.)

I'll fill the lands with their childish wishes.

(To HELPER.)

Ho, ho, ho! What do they want?
Yo-yos? Trucks? Dolls? Fishes?

HELPER: Well, sir . . . . We've known this day was coming. Prepare yourself.

SANTA: Go on, my happy little helper elf.

HELPER: You see, only about half of the kids wished for anything, and most of them that did send us a letter wished for—

(HELPER shows SANTA the list.)

SANTA: This can't be right! What in the world?! I'm done!
Kids are hopeless. They have no love for anyone!
Well, I'll not too have no love in *my* soul!
Those foolish youngsters! Let them play with coal!

(SANTA produces a lump of coal and holds it in the style of Prince Hamlet.)

HELPER: But, sir, what about Christmas?

SANTA: Well, they did *not* earn Christmas this year. I would normally feel bad. I mean, 2016 has already been hard, but, goodness, they are way too far gone. Maybe this will finally get through to them.

(They exit. Blackout.)

Scene 2 (The Setup)

(Lights rise on a local neighborhood. LILY, ANGELINE, and ERIC enter with bicycles. They line up at one end of the stage as if to race.)

ERIC: You guys really wanna go again?

ANGELINE: You got lucky last time.

ERIC: Fortune favors the bold.

ANGELINE: I've got a quote for that. Just . . . hold . . . .

(She pulls index cards out of her pocket until she finds the right one. She reads the card aloud.)

As Giordano Bruno once said, "With luck on your side, you can do without brains." So there. Hah!

ERIC: Why do you quote things like that?

ANGELINE: I'm not entirely sure . . . .

LILY: Where are we even racing to?

ERIC: Why not to the mall? It's close, and there's stuff to do.

ANGELINE: Neither of you has a chance with the mall as the finish line. Assorted teenage-girl stores, here I come!

(They race. Chaos ensues. Eventually, the fact that ANGELINE will win becomes clear. The race ends with the order for places being ANGELINE, ERIC, and LILY.)

ANGELINE: All too easy.

ERIC: Oh, c'mon. It's just a stupid race.

LILY: Why did we even come to the mall?

ANGELINE: I don't know. There's really nowhere else to go in this crummy little place.

ERIC: Hey, now. It's pretty cool here. We've got the best baseball team around!

LILY: Oh, you both are settling too easily. There are bigger malls and much better baseball teams, if that's all you want. There's a lot of world out there . . . full of exotic places with new and exciting people.

ANGELINE: Speaking of old and boring . . . look.

(She gestures at a sign and reads it aloud.)

"Santa's coming to town." Gosh. Why do people even mess around with this garbage?

LILY: It's not garbage.

ERIC: Right. You know, nobody could ever really prove Santa doesn't exist.

ANGELINE: Except they have. I happened to read a book called *Santa Is Dead*. It was very convincing.

LILY: Funny you should mention that. My mom bought me the book *Santa's Not Dead*, and it was very convincing, too.

ERIC: I think my mom meant to get that *Santa's Not Dead* book for me, too. She ordered it off of *Amazon*, but when it arrived, it turned out she'd ordered *Santa's Undead*. I didn't get a chance to read it.

ANGELINE: Well, I still think this mall-Santa stuff is garbage. Wait. I have a quote for this, too.

(She pulls out and sorts through her index cards until she finds what she wants. She reads aloud.)

Dave Barry once said, "Once again, we come to the Holiday Season: a deeply religious time that each of us observes, in his own way, by going to the mall of his choice."

LILY: Dave Barry? You mean the guy who co-wrote those *Peter Pan* books and then wrote literally nothing else good for the rest of his life? He seems like a good source to quote from.

ERIC: Yeah. Dave Barry doesn't get it.

ANGELINE: You both make me sad. You're so stupid.

LILY: We know that this mall Santa isn't real, but he's here to get us into the Christmas spirit. Santa doesn't leave his workshop until Christmas Eve. Roll your eyes if you want, but when Christmas comes, I know I'll be having a much better time than Mr. Barry.

ANGELINE: Aw. Little Miss Perfect thinks she's gonna get her Big Wish for Christmas just because she believes.

ERIC: Hey. Stop that.

LILY: No. It's all right. I know Christmas is gonna be great no matter what she says.

(ANGELINE and ERIC exit. LILY stands alone. Blackout.)

Scene 3 (The Narration)

(Lights rise on LILY, who is sleeping. The NARRATOR speaks from offstage.)

NARRATOR: As the days passed and Christmas drew closer, Santa's mood did not change. The coal flew off the production lines faster than the toys ever did. It was also extremely cheap due mostly to a speedy chemical reaction process. This process was illegal in all Nine Realms, but Santa didn't care because it helped with the budget, which had been in a deficit ever since 2006. However, it was also very bad for the sensitive environment of the North Pole.

(Aside.)

I'm sorry. Yes. It says that here. Can I skip it? What? We have a legal obligation to read this? This is literally the only mention of this. It has no bearing on the story. Why—? Okay. Anyway.

It was very bad for the environment . . . and . . . many penguins died.

(Aside.)

Geez! That's a low blow.

Santa didn't even notice. On Christmas Eve, he loaded up his sleigh with the carbon-footprint equivalent of three Hong Kongs and set out to deliver his lesson in the form of shattered dreams and deep disappointments.

(SANTA enters LILY's room and sneaks around like the Grinch. He leaves coal and exits.)

After a night of anticipation, Lily begins to awaken.

(LILY begins to awaken.)

It is Christmas morning.

(Aside.)

Is that it? Do I have any more lines? None? Not for the rest of the show? Huh. Well, this'll probably be the best part, but it feels a little cheap. I mean, if the

NARRATOR (CONT.): audience didn’t find this at all funny, I’d say just leave the theater through the marked exits in the back ’cause it only gets worse. What’d you say? My mike is on?

(LILY seems slightly confused.)

Shoot! Narrator out!

(Aside.)

I can’t believe he wrote all those asides in there.

(Blackout.)

Scene 4 (The Journey Begins)

(Lights rise on LILY's bedroom. LILY, now fully awake, runs downstairs.)

LILY: Mom! Dad!

(Beat.)

Huh. I wonder where they are. Oh, I just can't wait. I've got to open my present now!

(She finds a present and tears into it.)

Coal? No! This can't be right. Santa has made a mistake! I'm sure of it!

(She takes her phone out of her pocket and calls ERIC.)

Hello?

(A light rises on ERIC on the other side of the stage. He answers his phone.)

ERIC: Hello?

LILY: There's a problem. I got . . . coal!

ERIC: Hey. Me, too! You don't think—

LILY: Oh, I do think. Something's gone wrong with Santa. Get here as quickly as possible.

(They both hang up and then immediately notice each other.)

ERIC: Huh. Guess I'm here. How does—?

LILY: No time for questions. We need a plan.

ERIC: Hm. Should we montage?

LILY: No. Not yet, you silly boy. Oh, I've got it! We'll write a speech and go to the North Pole to read it in front of the Fat Man in Red himself.

ERIC: Wouldn't it be easier just to send a letter?

LILY: Probably, but it would be far less interesting. I've always wanted an adventure, and now we have one!

(ANGELINE enters.)

Oh, Angeline. I'm so glad you're here!

ANGELINE: It seemed about time for something to finally happen.

LILY: You were right! Something is happening! We are going on an adventure! To the North Pole! To get Santa to give us our real gifts instead of this coal!

ANGELINE: Wow. You actually got coal?

(She laughs.)

LILY: Yes. We both did. Didn't you?

ANGELINE: I have no idea. Don't really care.

(She pulls out her index cards and finds one she likes. She reads the card aloud.)

As a spoiled brat once said, "Christmas is for people who are too poor to buy what they want during the rest of the year."

LILY: So you don't want to come with us?

ANGELINE: I'm on a roll today already. Booyah! Index card.

(She reads aloud.)

As Marya Mannes once said, "The sign of an intelligent person is their ability to control emotions by the application of reason."

ERIC: That is an obscure and oddly applicable quote.

ANGELINE: So, no. I'm not coming. Have fun. *Not*! I won't be seeing you later. 'Bye!

(She exits.)

ERIC: Are you sure this is a good idea? It seems outrageous.

LILY: It's not so crazy, I hope. It at least makes a little sense. Come on. We'll write our speech as we ride.

ERIC: How?

LILY: Sh. We'll ride off into the sun together.

ERIC: Why do I hear Wagner?

(ERIC and LILY fetch their bikes. They ride around the stage. An ELF with two large candy canes enters and blocks their path.)

ELF: Halt! Who tries to pass?

LILY: We do. We need to speak to Santa.

ELF: No one speaks to Santa without going through me! I'm the first line of defense! So . . . defend yourselves!

(The ELF throws one candy cane to ERIC, who fumbles with the weapon. The ELF attacks at once.)

ERIC: I can't hit a—! Ouch! Stop it.

(They fight.)

ELF: You have fought well. You have beaten me.

ERIC: I work out.

ELF: It really shows. Do you play football?

ERIC: Baseball, actually.

ELF: Very nice. So why do you want to see Santa so badly?

LILY: He gave us coal even though we did nothing wrong!

ELF: Oh, no! I guess people really do change.

ERIC: You mean you didn't know about this?

ELF: No. I had no idea! You see, I've been banished ever since . . . .

(The ELF looks into the middle distance with fists clenched and freezes.)

LILY: Hello?

(The ELF snaps out of it.)

ELF: I'll come with you! I must see with my own eyes!

LILY: All right, then. We leave the bikes. We continue on foot.

ERIC: Ugh. Can't we take a break? I'm tired. We should build a campfire and just chill and talk about stuff . . . like your Big Wish. Don't you want to tell us all why you're going on this adventure?

LILY: I do love campfires in the snow.

ELF: But a lull in the second act is a good way to lose people. We should hurry.

LILY: She's right. The quicker we get to Santa, the better. All this talking is wearing me out.

(They journey by struggling, leaping, bounding, crawling . . . whatever.)

ELF: Let me sing us a song as we go! Music always helps in moments like these!

(The ELF sings to the tune of "Jingle Bells.")

Jingley bells! Jingley bells!
Jingle all the wayyy!
Oh, what fun it is to walk
On a stormy, awful dayyy-ayyy!
Jingley bells! Jingley bells!

ELF(CONT.): Jingle till we freeze!
Oh, why did we choose to wear
Seas'nally incorrect sleeves! Hey!

(The SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS SPIRIT enters.)

SPIRIT: Stop where you are! Why do you seek to enter Santa's domain?

LILY: You'd think eventually we'd have hammered this point home. We want justice, and we don't want coal.

SPIRIT: Ah. Um. Yes, well, in order to enter, you must answer these questions. They will test your Christmas spirit to the utmost degree. No mortal has yet gotten them all correct.

LILY: Try me.

(Music for a Mexican standoff plays.)

SPIRIT: Santa is facing trial. What do you do?

LILY: Here's a one-dollar bill.

SPIRIT: You're home alone—

LILY: Set booby traps that would kill normal humans.

SPIRIT: You owe a lot of money and are contemplating—

LILY: Keep an open mind and let Clarence show me the error of my ways.

SPIRIT: You're a human, but you think you're an elf—

LILY: Find James Caan and do weird stuff until he likes me.

SPIRIT: You're being visited by spirits—

LILY: Really? Just stop being a terrible person.

SPIRIT: Tom Hanks is serving you hot chocolate—

LILY: The spirit of Christmas lies in my heart.

SPIRIT: You can't do anything right—

LILY: Is it okay to talk about this one?

SPIRIT: Why wouldn't it be?

LILY: That's pretty much the question I asked during the controversy.

SPIRIT: So what's the answer?

LILY: Luke. Chapter two. Verses eight through eleven.

(LILY delivers the next line not directly at the SPIRIT.)

Look it up if you don't know it.

SPIRIT: Whoa! Well, I won't keep you any longer. Go speak to Santa. He's waiting for you.

(Blackout.)

Scene 5 (Santa Again)

(Lights rise on the North Pole Workshop. LILY, ERIC, and the ELF enter.)

ERIC: Do you still have the message?

LILY: Thanks for reminding me. I almost forgot.

(SANTA enters with a flourish. He displays unexpected power and anger.)

SANTA: You dare to disturb me? You. Elf. Have you come back to torture us with more of your horrible renditions of "Jingle Bells"?

(The ELF cowers.)

And you, Eric. What are you going to do? Or even you, Lily? The Christmas Spirit is strong with you, but you are no match for me. Go now and never return here. You have already seen too much.

(ERIC turns to LILY.)

ERIC: I didn't expect him to be such a bad guy right now. It's like a really bad version of *The Wizard of Oz*.

LILY: I know, right? Seriously. Even if the coal thing was because he wants to teach us a lesson, this is taking it too far. It's not really what I expected. I kind of don't care about this whole thing anymore.

SANTA: I'm right here. I can hear you. You're talking very clearly and loudly. Your projection is wonderful, but it's bad for telling secrets. Your indifference has made me curious. Please. What is it you wanted to say to me?

(ERIC prods LILY.)

ERIC: Go ahead. I believe in you.

(The ELF gives small signal of encouragement.)

LILY: I have a letter written by myself and Eric. I will read it now.

(She takes out the letter and reads it aloud.)

LILY(CONT.):

Dear Santa,

I love Christmas. It's my favorite time of the year. That doesn't mean it's perfect. It never is. Things go wrong . . . sometimes really wrong. But I don't think Christmas can be ruined by mistakes or disappointments. During Christmastime, I forget about those sad things very quickly because I know that I have no business being anything but thankful. That's why I love Christmas. Not because of gifts or snow or pretty decorations or breaks from school. I love Christmas because I feel like Christmas inspires something in myself and others that is sometimes . . . even oftentimes . . . lacking during the rest of the year. I'm not sure what it is exactly because it's not just one thing. I'm thankful, joyful, excited, grateful, cozy . . . but most of all I'm hopeful. Christmas is a celebration of hope, not only for this life but for the next one as well; and as long as we preserve the spirit of Christmas, as long as we celebrate—no matter how bad things seem—I will have hope for the future. So that's why I'm writing this. I was worried that maybe the world got to you and made you give up the very thing that makes Christmas worth anything. If hope does seem lost and you are despairing, then I would like to comfort you with this: Hope is never gone even if it is lost for a while. Please bring Christmas back.

Sincerely, Lily

(SANTA, overcome with emotion, falls.)

SANTA: Your letter has broken my coal-colored heart.
I was so very wrong right from the start,
But I can't act like this didn't happen.
I don't know what misery I've left the world in.
Oh, there's no chance, no chance of going on
As if nothing inside me was at all wrong.
My dear, please tell me, what was your Big Wish?
Maybe I can be redeemed if I grant you this.

LILY: Well, it may seem silly now, but since I already have a mom and a dad—and brothers are highly overrated—I really wanted a puppy.

SANTA: I prithee, heart, break. Such wondrous true spirit.
In a crisis so dark, I know how to fix it.
Here, my dear. Take this and put it on because
You—yes, you!— are the new Santa Claus.

(SANTA removes a fat-suit and places it on LILY.)

LILY: This is all I've ever dreamed about and so much more! Santa, I hope you are okay after all of this.

SANTA: My dear, I haven't been this whole in many years. I've lost a lot of perspective, and it's going to take time to get that back; but I trust that you'll help me along the way. You're a better Santa Claus than I could ever hope to be. Thank you. Bless you. I must away now. So long, my dear friends. So long!

(SANTA exits.)

ELF: You know, since you're the new Santa Claus, I feel like we should skip the unnecessary sequel and wrap up this little romance right here and now, eh?

(LILY, standing tall, reaches out her hand to ERIC. ERIC takes her hand, and they face each other.)

LILY: Thank you for being so brave in coming with me on this journey.

ERIC: I'm not sure I could've done anything else. I think you'll make the best Santa Claus that has ever been.

LILY: There are still so many adventures to be had! Oh, do stay. I'm sure you'll love it here. There's such magic here to explore, and I wouldn't want you to miss out on any of it.

ERIC: Really?

(LILY nods.)

Thank you so much!

(They embrace. The ELF cries and joins in the group hug. The ELF addresses the audience.)

ELF: Well, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your time. Don't think about this one too much. It's pretty nonsensical . . . but I do ask you all to go and face the days ahead with the hope that Christmas has brought to all of us and continues to bring to us each year anew.

(Blackout.)

<u>Shanty Claus</u>
Macaira Patterson

Harmony and Discord

Number-One Classroom Rule
Doris Davis

As I look back on decades of being in classrooms, I'm embarrassed to admit that early on I understood little about teaching. Granted I had graduated with honors with a major in English, the subject I taught, but I knew far more about Hawthorne than human nature. What I didn't understand was that I must do more than communicate information. I had to learn to be sensitive to the individuals sitting before me. I had to be able to read others with empathy. I needed far more than my feeble assortment of classroom-management theories gained in college courses.

During my first year, I taught *Macbeth* to sleepy seniors whose Arkansas upbringings, I believed, promised futures in chicken plants and pulp mills. They raced their pickups to school and spoke fondly of shotguns and hunting dogs. The atmosphere churned with turmoil. Students argued and fought (more often among themselves than with me), lost books and papers, and—it seemed to me—generally amused themselves at will, sensing the inherent uncertainties of a first-year teacher.

With a longing for graduate school, I began my second year: fewer smiles and more stamina with classroom rules posted on the wall in large black letters. I would reign as firmly in my kingdom as the historical Elizabeth, who had few qualms about killing a relative if necessary, did in hers. Students of thirty-five to a class sat in long, straight rows wilting in the September heat while the window fans whirled in the distance. I talked of Ernest Hemingway and dangling participles. The first week of classes trotted along so flawlessly that I began to imagine myself a lieutenant in the vanguard and remember no specifics. If Prufrock measured his life with "coffee spoons," I would willingly measure mine with school bells; but in the second week, an incident occurred that has stayed with me the rest of my life.

Perched one morning on my solid, black stool, book in hand, reading "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" to a sea of still, strange faces, I saw out of the comer of my eye a note being passed, moving steadily across the back of the room and up the center row. "This is it," I thought to myself. "If I fail to take charge here, I may blow the rest of the year." Classroom Rule Number One: "Don't write or pass notes in class." I readied

myself to see where the note stopped; I would act in a swift and sure manner toward both the sender and the recipient.

To my surprise, the note came to the student sitting right in front of my stool, who then handed it to me. I saw quickly that it had my own name on the outside and, with the swiftness of someone opening a long-awaited letter, I unfolded it and read: "Teacher, your pants are unzipped." To my dismay, they certainly were, my front gapping a good two inches to reveal blue cotton panties. No attempt at composure could disguise my wild warble through the end of Dickinson as I both read and zipped, as though that were the way everyone finished reading a poem. But when I looked out into their faces, to my surprise I saw no smirks . . . not even a smile. At that moment, I read their faces and understood our collective humanity. They sensed that if they laughed I would probably cry and instead gave me a look of silent sympathy.

I never knew who sent me that note, but that act of kindness helped me see what 1 lacked. I had read Shakespeare's line "the milk of human kindness." Now I needed to develop some of my own. In short, I began to realize the importance of being kind to others, not just to one's family and friends (which surely I already knew) but also, as the early twentieth-century Scottish clergyman Ian Maclean reportedly suggested, to all. "Be kind," he reminded his peers, "for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

Kindness would become my number-one classroom rule, and I would begin with myself. My students and I were all engaged in our own respective battles, but with kindness emblazoned on our shield, we would support each other and come closer to success.

The Healing Heart
David Harrison

I'm going to tell you a story. It's a very sad story, but it's also a very happy story. All the really good stories are like that, and this is a very good story.

Once upon a time, there was a teddy bear named David. Like all teddy bears, David wanted to be loved. All teddy bears should be loved, after all; that's why they're made. Teddy bears are made to be loved, and that's what David wanted . . . but David had a problem. He didn't believe that anyone could love him.

This is a serious problem for teddy bears. You see, if a teddy bear doesn't believe he can be loved, then it's very, very hard for him to believe it when someone actually does love him. It takes a very special person to cure a teddy bear of this problem—a very special and very rare person .

You may wonder why David the teddy bear had this very serious problem. After all, teddy bears are not made with this problem. In fact, when God makes teddy bears, He gives them a special gift: the ability to be loved by anybody. The only way a teddy bear gets this very serious problem is if something very, very sad happens to him when he is a brand-new bear. Well, that's what happened to David the teddy bear, and that's why he believed that no one could love him.

David's first owners were a mean little boy and a selfish little girl. The girl acted like she loved him when she first got him, but pretty soon she got bored with him and got another teddy bear. It wasn't the first time this had happened. She had five other teddy bears before David, and she had gotten bored with each one in turn. Whenever she got bored with a teddy bear, she would give it to the mean little boy and go get another bear, so it should not be surprising that the same thing happened to David.

The mean little boy treated teddy bears the way mean little boys treat everything. He was mean to them. He would hit them and poke them and throw them, and he would even tear off pieces of them.

After being thrown away and thrown around and hit and poked and having pieces tom off of him more than any teddy bear should have happen to him, David the teddy bear was in pretty poor shape. He had one ear missing; his cheek was torn; some of his fur was missing; and his big teddy-bear heart was broken. It was broken so hard that some of the pieces were missing, and if you hugged him too hard, the sharp edges of his broken heart would scratch you. It was still a very big heart for such a small bear (all teddy bears have very large hearts), but it was hard to tell because of all the missing pieces.

One day, the selfish little girl and the mean little boy left and never came back. When the Teddy Bear Adoption Service found out that David and all the

other teddy bears in the home had been abandoned, they picked them all up and tried to find them new homes.

The first place that David the teddy bear went was the Teddy Bear Orphanage. Whenever something so bad happens in a teddy bear's first family that the family can't keep him anymore, that bear gets sent to the Teddy Bear Orphanage to wait for a new family. It's a sad place because all the teddy bears who live there have broken hearts, and some of their broken hearts have pieces missing; but David had to stay there until someone came to take him to a new home.

After David had been at the Teddy Bear Orphanage for a while, a family came there, put David the teddy bear in their car, and drove him to a new home. David was confused. He knew that a home was supposed to be a special place where you go to be loved, but he hadn't been loved in his first home. If he hadn't been loved in his first home, how could he be loved in his second home?

Sadly for David the teddy bear, his second family didn't love him either. You see, David's second family already had a teddy bear of their own, and they had given all of their love to the bear they already owned. They didn't have any love left to give. Some people have small hearts, and they only have a little love to give, and once they give it away, they don't know how to find any more.

A day came when David's second family realized that they didn't love him, so they sent him away to live with another family. When they did this, David lost another piece of his heart. By now, David was convinced that nobody could love him, and he became an angry little bear. He went from family to family trying to find a home, and everywhere he went, the same thing happened. His new family could not convince David that they loved him. In his poor, broken teddy-bear heart David believed the lie that no one could love him, and because he believed this lie, he gave the lie power and made the lie look like the truth. That's what happens when you believe in a lie with all your broken teddy-bear heart.

Being an angry little bear now, he did what angry little bears do. He acted angry. When a family talked nice to him, he would scrunch up his torn little teddy-bear face and stick out his little teddy-bear tongue. When a family gave him toys, he would pick them up in his little teddy-bear paws and throw them across the room. When a family tried to hug him, he'd scratch them with the leftover pieces of his big, broken teddy-bear heart. He would do this over and over again until the family was too worn out to try anymore, and they would give up and send him to another family to try again; and every time this happened to David, he lost another piece of his heart.

Eventually, David grew tired of trying to find a family, and he gave up. He moved far away from all the families that had tried to help him, and he found an old broken-down house to live in. He never talked to people anymore unless he

couldn't avoid it. He found a job and went to work (because even teddy bears have to get jobs when they live by themselves). He wasn't really mean to the people he met, but he wasn't very nice either. He was the kind of teddy bear who would say "Hi!" to you if you met him at the store but would never invite you to sit at his dinner table.

This went on for years. David the teddy bear lived a rather sad and particularly empty life. He'd go to work when he had to, but he'd try not to talk to any people. He'd go to the movies, but he always went by himself. He'd go to a restaurant to eat, but he always ate alone. When he got back to his old broken-down house, he'd read a book for a while, turn off the light, and go to bed . . . all by himself.

It wasn't a very happy life for a teddy bear, for, as I'm sure you remember, teddy bears were made to be loved; but it was the only life he had, so he lived it as best he could. He continued to live this rather sad and particularly empty life until The Day It All Began To Change.

He called it The Day It All Began To Change because that is exactly what it was. Everything didn't change on that day, but everything began to change. That was the day that he met Judy.

Judy was a very special and very rare kind of person. You see, Judy had the gift of a healing heart. Years ago, somebody had broken Judy's heart. When it happened, it hurt her so much that she thought she could never love anyone again; but Judy was wrong about this. She discovered that God had given her the gift of a healing heart, and a healing heart doesn't stay broken. When a healing heart is broken, God's magic can heal it, and that's not even the best part. A healing heart can heal other hearts as well! Although David the teddy bear didn't know it yet, this would become very important to him.

On the morning of The Day It All Began To Change, David the teddy bear didn't know that it would be a different kind of day. He thought it would be a day just like the day before. He got up in the morning and ate his breakfast just like the day before. He put his work clothes on just like the day before. He even drove to work just like the day before, but when he walked into the store, he was introduced to Judy, who had been hired to help him.

David was angry. After all, he was an angry little bear, and he did what angry little bears do. He acted angry. He didn't want any help. When Judy talked to him, he'd scrunch up his torn little teddy-bear face and stick out his little teddy-bear tongue.

Judy just smiled at him and said, "You have the cutest little teddy-bear tongue! And that rip on your little teddy-bear cheek makes you look ruggedly handsome."

When Judy gave David a flower to brighten up his day, he picked it up in his little teddy-bear paw and threw it across the room.

Judy just smiled at him and said, “Thank you, David. That’s the perfect place to put my flower! Now everyone can see it, and it will brighten up everybody’s day.”

When Judy tried to hug David, he scratched her with the leftover pieces of his broken teddy-bear heart. There weren’t many pieces left, but there were enough left to scratch her, and that’s just what he did. He knew that she would leave now. Everybody left when he scratched them with the broken pieces of his big teddy-bear heart. It worked every time.

Only it didn’t work this time. Judy just stood in front of him and stared at his chest. A tear came out of the comer of her eye. It traveled down her face next to her nose, around the comer of her mouth, down her chin, and down onto her beautiful healing heart.

Judy’s heart began to grow.

She looked into David’s eyes and said, “Now I understand why you’re so angry. Your big teddy-bear heart has been broken!”

David the teddy bear was scared. He didn’t understand why Judy had not left when he scratched her with the broken pieces of his heart.

He said to her, “What do you know about broken hearts? Your heart is big and beautiful and growing in front of my eyes! You’ve never even had a chip broken off from it!”

“You're wrong, David,” said Judy. “I’ve had my heart broken. It hurt so bad that I asked God to help me, and He gave me a special gift. And now I’m going to give it to you.”

And that’s just what she did.

Judy reached up to her heart and broke a piece of it off. She reached over to David and put the piece of her heart on his chest, where piece began to grow. The piece of Judy’s heart grew and grew and grew and grew, and then it grew some more. Then it gathered the leftover pieces of David’s heart and sorted them out. It filled in all the missing pieces of David’s big, broken heart, and his heart wasn’t broken anymore.

“I don’t understand ,” said David the teddy bear. “Why did you break your heart for me?”

“Because you’re my teddy bear, and I love you,” said Judy. “When you love someone who’s in pain, your heart breaks for them; and if God has given you the gift of a healing heart, then God’s magic can heal their heart, too. Now your heart is just like mine!”

David realized that she was right. Their hearts were just alike. He also realized that he loved her, too . . . but that’s not the best part. He discovered that,

for the first time since he was a brand-new bear, he believed that someone loved him; and believing that you are loved is the very best part.

So Judy took David the teddy bear home, and that's where they are today. After all, home is the special place you go to be loved.

A Family Divided
Lauren P. Ort

Characters

ALEX, adopted son; unusual and quite drastic circumstances surround his adoption
MARISSA, daughter; cynical loner; won't leave her room
PAULA, mother; puts on a brave face; in a lot of denial about a lot of things
ROSEANNE, grandmother; wise and gentle; says what needs to be said

Setting

The action takes place in a typical American home at Christmas. The time is the present.

Scene 1

(ALEX, ROSEANNE, and PAULA are in the living room. They are making Christmas decorations. ALEX holds up an arrangement of bells similar to one that PAULA is holding. ROSEANNE is holding a silver bell.)

ALEX: Does this look right?

ROSEANNE: There's no right or wrong way, sweetheart, only what you want it to look like.

ALEX: Yours looks just like mine, Mom.

(PAULA has been looking down in a trance up until now.)

PAULA: Oh, yeah . . . that. Great minds think alike, I guess.

ALEX: Are you okay?

PAULA: Oh, yeah. I was just thinking about, um, you know, tomorrow.

ALEX: I hope it snows like it did last year, and we can have another snowball fight.

PAULA: That was a good day, wasn't it?

ROSEANNE: Has anyone seen Marissa tonight?

PAULA: If I had to guess, she's probably in her room. I'm going to get her. She doesn't get to ignore her family on Christmas Eve.

(PAULA exits. Blackout.)

Scene 2

(PAULA enters MARISSA's room. MARISSA is sitting down on her mattress and listening to music on her phone with headphones in her ears while staring into space. PAULA, annoyed, stands over her. She's dealt with this too many times, and she knows how this is going to play out.)

PAULA: Hey, honey. You want to come make Christmas decorations with us?

(She gets no response. It's possible that MARISSA didn't even hear her.)

Marissa, I would really like for you to come.

(Still nothing.)

Okay, you may not be able to hear what I'm—

(Silence.)

Marissa, I'm not going to ask you again.

(MARISSA ignores her. PAULA disconnects the headphones from the phone.)

MARISSA: Wow. Rude much?

PAULA: Excuse me, but you're the one barricaded in your room when it's just about to be Christmas and deliberately ignoring your mother while she's trying to talk to you.

MARISSA: So?

PAULA: So you should want to spend time with your family.

MARISSA: I don't have time for that right now.

PAULA: Why? Because you need yet more time to sit here in here and sulk?

MARISSA: Because I don't want to waste my time making Christmas ornaments or whatever you guys are doing.

PAULA: Yeah. Because you're being so productive with your time here.

MARISSA: I just don't feel any desire to go in the living room with you guys.

PAULA: You know what? I give up. If all you want to do is hang out in the dark and the only company you want is your angry music, fine by me.

(She exits.)

MARISSA: Finally.

(She puts her headphones back in and continues her brooding. Blackout.)

Scene 3

(ROSEANNE is alone in the living room. She is reading a book. PAULA enters.)

ROSEANNE: Is she alright?

PAULA: Yes. She's just being as impossible as ever.

ROSEANNE: You know, you're always quick to put the blame entirely on Marissa for the conflicts between the two of you.

PAULA: All I did was ask her to spend time with her family. Is that really too much?

ROSEANNE: Have you ever considered using different tactics from the ones that always fail?

PAULA: It's just so difficult to talk to her, Mother. She pushes every button I have, and then she stonewalls me. It used to not be like this. We were so close, and now I can't even reach her. I don't know why this is happening.

ROSEANNE: Come on, sweetheart. You and I both know exactly how this family has ended up where it is today.

PAULA: Can we not go there?

ROSEANNE: We have to. Someday you have to face reality.

PAULA: That's what I've been doing every single day since that awful day.

ROSEANNE: You've lived it, but you haven't truly dealt with it. Your father and your husband died on the same day, and you still have yet to really talk about it.

PAULA: Stop it.

ROSEANNE: No, Paula. I can't let this go on anymore. Our silence is how this family has drifted so far apart. Baby, you've committed some unforgivable breaches of etiquette. And I know your loss. I lost my husband that day, too.

PAULA: It's Christmas Eve. Are we really going to talk about this now?

ROSEANNE: He was the love of my life—a man I committed forty years to. I would give up everything in this house to hear him say good morning on Christmas day . . . but there's something I wouldn't give. I wouldn't have my family be consumed by bitterness. That's the only thing I wouldn't give.

PAULA: And I would give everything in this house to have my family back. But it seems like everything I do makes things worse. No matter what I do—no matter what I say—Marissa's still angry at me, and my father and my husband are still dead.

ROSEANNE: This wasn't your fault. And it wasn't mine. And it wasn't Alex's. You can't undo what happened. Only love can save us now. I want you whole again. I know you can't be that way with your husband again, nor can I be with mine. My Gregory . . . a kinder man never lived. I have no doubt when he saw that car veering towards him that if he'd known there was a child in there, his parting thoughts would have been to save that child. That's why when we got the news about the accident, and they told us Alex's parents were killed . . . that's why I insisted we take him in. Because I knew if Gregory and Joel were here, that's what they would want us to do. That's how they were. That's why we fell in love with them.

PAULA: You know, even now, years after it happened, I still wake up in the morning, and for a split second, I think it was all just a horrible dream.

ROSEANNE: That's because you haven't faced it yet. And you haven't let your daughter face it.

PAULA: What is this thing you think I did so horribly wrong?

ROSEANNE: You didn't even let her go to the funeral, Paula.

PAULA: That's not fair. That is *not* fair. She was a child. What was I supposed to do? Walk her over to her father's grave?

ROSEANNE: That is exactly what you should have done. She needed to see her father's grave. She needed to say goodbye to her father. She also needed to be allowed to grieve for him.

PAULA: She did grieve. She grieved and grieved and grieved. You, too. You weren't sleeping, and you barely ate. This family was spiraling down the drain at a million miles an hour. Somebody had to be the one to pull this family up by its bootstraps, and that job fell on me. And if that makes me a terrible person, I guess that's what I am.

ROSEANNE: I understand why you handled things the way you did. Honey, I applaud you for the way you kept such grace under pressure . . . but it's damaging our family now, and you know it. You can't wash away your daughter's loss like writing in the sand. You have to let her feel. Heaven knows both of us feel. You can't just tell her she has soccer practice on Monday, piano lessons Wednesday, and drama lessons on Thursday and expect her never to feel anything about her father and her grandfather.

PAULA: Mother, now you're being—

ROSEANNE: Think about your daughter. She lost her father and her grandfather on the same day when she was just a little girl. People around her ask her how she deals with that. If you never let her deal with it, how is she ever going to answer that?

PAULA: I only did what I did because I didn't want her to feel the loss. I was trying to spare her the pain. I never meant to hurt her or anyone else.

ROSEANNE: If she's never allowed to feel the pain, then she can never feel happiness. It's our way to keep trudging on, but in our humanity, can't we let people feel what they went through? If Marissa ever brought up her father, you'd ask her to go to her room, and now you ask why she's always in her room?

PAULA: You're right. All this time, I thought I was helping her. I should have realized that wasn't going to do anything but make it so that she could never heal. I need to talk to my daughter right now.

(She exits. Blackout.)

Scene 4

(ALEX walks into MARISSA's room. He stands in front of her. She rolls her eyes and takes out her headphones.)

MARISSA: First Mom, now you. I can't hope for a moment's peace today, can I?

ALEX: You can't tell me you're not just a little bit excited about tomorrow. What do you think you got?

MARISSA: I don't know. And I don't particularly care.

ALEX: I've been thinking lately. Didn't Aunt Linda say she had sent us some Christmas card like a month ago? You think the post-office guys just forgot or lost them? It goes so well with the saying: "Mail your packages early so the post office can lose them in time for Christmas."

MARISSA: How do you do it?

ALEX: Do what?

MARISSA: I mean . . . after what happened. You know what I'm talking about.

ALEX: Yeah. I do.

MARISSA: How do you act so positive all the time? Every day you have a smile on your face. You laugh; you joke; you deal with everything. You go on. How do you do that? All I ever am is angry. The only place I ever am is that day, when I lost everything. And I don't want to be there. How do you do it?

ALEX: I do it because I don't want to be like you.

MARISSA: Excuse me?

ALEX: Well, come on. You sit here all alone all the time. You're always thinking about that day. I can't do that. That's no way to live. My life hasn't even started yet, and I don't want it to be over already. I'm not going to stay in that place my whole life, and I think that deep down inside you don't want to either.

MARISSA: I don't. I want to feel some joy in my life again . . . but I'm scared to. And I know that sounds downright insane, but I can't help it. I want to move on, but I feel like if I do, I'm betraying my dad and my grandpa.

ALEX: And you think this is what they would want? For you to be miserable every second? To stay trapped in the day they died? To keep us trapped there? To keep me there?

MARISSA: I don't keep anybody anywhere. I just don't want to be around you or this family. I don't want to make tree ornaments. I don't want to have a snowball fight. I just want to be left alone. Why does everyone think that's too much to ask?

ALEX: It's like if there's ever any happiness around you, you have to throw a grenade at it and blow it to bits.

MARISSA: I don't do that!

ALEX: Yeah . . . except you do. You lock yourself in your room all day and then when you do come out, you're rude to everyone around you . . . especially to me. I think a big part of you blames me for what happened. No. I don't think it. I know it. If you didn't, you wouldn't make it a point to be so miserable around me all the time. Doesn't it feel like a chore after a while? This is the last Christmas I'll let you do that to me!

(PAULA enters.)

PAULA: What's going on here? Why are you two yelling at each other like this?

MARISSA: We just disagree about something.

PAULA: Marissa, no. We can't keep on doing this. Christmas needs to stop ending in a fight. I won't let it happen anymore!

(Beat.)

And I know it's on me. I know I've made huge mistakes. I let you down, Marissa.

MARISSA: I don't need this right now.

PAULA: No. We've avoided this long enough.

MARISSA: We've avoided it all these years. Why change it now?

PAULA: I understand why you're upset with me. I never let you talk about your father and your grandfather because I couldn't handle it myself. I was trying to be strong for you, but really I was weak. And that's something I'll always regret. I wasn't there for you like I should have been. But you can't punish your whole family—and Alex—for things you're mad at me for.

MARISSA: If you just want to tell me what a terrible person I am, I get the message. You can go now.

PAULA: That isn't what I'm trying to say. Listen to me. Look. What I'm trying to say more than anything else is that I'm sorry. For everything I've done.

MARISSA: Wow. I don't know what to say. Really. This is the first time I've heard you say that. I didn't know if you ever would for a long time.

PAULA: I know, and I'm so sorry for that. But I'm here now, and we can't lose sight of the big picture. I know we'll have problems in the future. We'll have fights. Things will come up. But do you want Christmas to be that way? In this awful place we've been in?

MARISSA: No. No, I don't. I'm really tired of the fighting. I don't have it in me anymore.

ALEX: Same here.

PAULA: Then let's all lay our weapons down. Whatever stupid arguments we've had, whatever things we've said, it can't matter more than us as a family. Let's have a good Christmas. We'll have plenty of time for big discussions, but not tonight . . . and not tomorrow. In fact, there's still something we haven't done yet. We need to go hang the stockings.

MARISSA: Right. That. Our stockings.

PAULA: You know, I never got rid of theirs if you'd like to hang them beside ours this time around.

MARISSA: I’d like that.

(They exit. Blackout.)

Interior Light
Joshua McGuire

I had black neighbors: a woman who appeared to be in her thirties; a male who seemed, confusingly, between seventeen and thirty; and two children—a boy and a girl—four and seven or so. I never saw all of them at the same time, much less on the same day. The kids were noisy on the weekends and threw everything throwable into my yard. They had a four-door, brown Buick Sienna from the eighties that made more noise than the dump-truck on Monday morning. They conveniently parked the Buick in the middle of their dirt yard. I had tried waving and friendly eye contact to no avail. They were not bothersome neighbors.

My friend Casey often came over to smoke cigarettes and drink. I had a good porch with a good swing. The swing made the porch good.

One evening, while we were swinging, I noticed that the interior light of the Buick had been left on.

"Do you think I should let them know?"

She said, "Yes."

I went inside to get another beer, and then I walked barefoot across my yard toward their front porch. I first made a pass by the car to see that, indeed, the interior light was on in the car. I glanced into the car: deep maroon upholstery with a deep maroon dashboard and a deep, dark wood grain. Specks of ash littered everything; the armrest was half open.

A single, unhoused fluorescent light bulb hung from the porch ceiling. The brightest porch light on the street was illuminating the crummiest porch on the street. The porch was large enough to hold several curb-side sofas, but it did not; it held nothing but time, slightly tilting down and away from the house like the sliding vowel of a Southern drawl. It was calm. Humid. Dead summer air and I looked to see Casey on my porch but could not because of a holly bush.

I knocked on the door, the wooden part. The top half was glass, but a mauve bed sheet was draped across it from the inside. Old, half-scratched-off stickers of Mother Mary and a Vote-Rambo-for-Sheriff sticker seemed out of place but were on the window of their front door.

A long wait. I knocked again. Someone was home. Someone needed to know.

The young boy pulled back the mauve bed sheet and looked into my eyes. His face scrunched. He was shirtless, and the hand that wasn't holding back the bed sheet was holding a hotdog—no bun, just the weenie. Ketchup was on his knuckles. As quickly as he was confused, he released the bed sheet to fall.

I heard him say, "It's a white dude . . . . I don't know."

His face returned. He had a shorter hotdog in hand.

"What you want?"

"Your interior light is on."

"What?"

"Your interior light is on."

"What?" His face scrunched.

"Your . . . . The light. The overhead light in your car is on."

More face scrunching.

"Someone left the light on in your car, and I thought y'all should know because your car won't start in the morning if you leave it on."

Then I just turned and walked off . . . down the porch, across the yard, and back to my porch. Shaking my head and smiling, I opened my beer and sat down on the swing next to Casey.

"What did they say?"

"I just talked to the kid. He never opened the door."

"Did you tell his parents?"

"Didn't see them."

Some time later, we watched the seventeen-to-thirty-year-old man—like a shadow—open his car, turn off the light, and go back inside. No wave.

We swang and drank and smoked and waited for the night to deepen.

The next week, I came home after work with the usual bag of beers. As I walked up my back steps and worked the key into my back door, I noticed the seventeen-to-thirty-year-old at the top of his back-door steps. He had a twenty-four-ounce Bud Ice in his hand.

"Whassup?"

I give him the head nod. "Not much, man. Not much."

And I went into my house.

The Communicative Styling of an Angry Black Woman[*]

Esther Pippins

As a young black woman grows into adulthood, she will more than likely hear about the importance of hard work, honesty, and being safe. However, what she will not hear about is the importance of communication and how her physical appearance will have an impact upon her interpersonal interactions, education, work, and even her medical care. The angry black woman stereotype and what others read onto her skin will taint her communication. What is a black woman to do when her body communicates something other than what she wants to say? That frustration is the burden a black woman must carry; she possesses an inability to express deeply felt emotions freely for fear society will judge her more harshly than it already does.

In a room where opinions are shared openly, she will hesitate to be heard; her apprehension will prevent her from expressing emotions. Communication means being able to listen actively, speak freely, and openly express an opinion that contributes to the meaning and context of a communication. The question remains, however: should contemporary black women rebuff the negative and insidious archetype that haunts them, or should they embrace the new variations of the angry black woman that the media continuously perpetuates?

We live in a world and a society in which communication at times is based upon who one is rather than what one is going to say or how one is going to articulate a message. This sentiment is sure to resonate with those black women who have grown and aged into a society in which they have become victims of negative stereotyping (especially within the mainstream American culture). Such stereotypes include the myth of the angry black woman that characterizes these women as aggressive, ill-tempered, illogical, overbearing, hostile, and ignorant without provocation (Ashley 27). The negative images, labels, and beliefs that arise from these myths present a communication challenge that is unique to black women. Because the media and popular culture continually perpetuate this perception of black women, these forces foster the notion that this image is a true representation of who black women are as a group. Such fostering makes engaging in social discourse or debating the veracity and nature of their true identities difficult for black women. For example, S. W. Littlejohn and K. A. Foss call attention to structuring, which is the process of erecting meaning and defining relational interactions with blacks based upon misrepresentations. Structuring has

[*] This essay won first place in the 2017 PLACE graduate-essay contest.

diminished black women in their capacity to rise above the oppressive social scaffolding either through their work or their education.

A black woman should be able to interact and communicate effectively in a society and culture that hears her before she speaks and does not judge the authenticity and value of her message based upon misguided perceptions of her identity. Orientation of the listener plays an important role in the interpretation and clarification of a message. If the listener is not actively participating and making a conscious effort to approach the message with a positive attitude toward the communicator, then something may be lost in the translation of the message during the actual encounter. How the listener views black women and how black women see themselves as communicators affects the interaction.

Although some change has come to American culture in terms of recognizing the richness of diversity, race- and gender-specific stereotypes breed dehumanizing representations that still promote disparities in how people view both verbal and nonverbal communications of black women and other minorities. Stereotypical images have either limited black women when interacting with others or led them to deny their physical or emotional realities.

Stanford M. Lyman asserts that in the beginning of the American film industry, blacks had no control over how they were portrayed. Differences in color, culture, condition, and a meager knowledge of the realities of African-American (or black-American) life were not enough to constrain white European and American filmmakers from trying to characterize black mannerisms and customs in film (49). Nargis Fontaine emphasizes that before the film era, the representation of African-American behavior in minstrel shows were stereotypical and offensive. In the name of entertainment, minstrel shows distorted the appearances and behaviors of black men and women (Fontaine 1).

Black women in particular have carried the weight of this abuse and objectification of character; viewers still see them through a modernization of three old stereotypes: the Mammy, who is the all-knowing housekeeper and nanny who can solve everyone's problem; the Jezebel, who is sexually promiscuous and immoral; and the Sapphire, who is a masculine workhorse who labors with black men in the fields and drives children and partners away with an overbearing nature.

Patricia Hill Collins asserts that whites view themselves as the subjects who have the right to define their own realities and establish their own identities, whereas blacks are the objects whose history defines itself as it relates to the history of the subject (78). These fixed, generalized beliefs not only create negative communication contexts but also define the patterns, connections, and institutions that shape the interactions in which black women participate. More than a hundred years have passed since the day Sojourner Truth stood before an assembled body of white women and men at an anti-slavery rally in Indiana and

bared her breasts to prove that she was, indeed, a woman. Proud of having been born black and female, she faced her audience without fear or shame . . . yet a white man yelled at her, "I don't believe you really are a woman" (hooks, 159).

In that moment, the man did something telling and illuminating in terms of the communication difficulties that black women experience. The man not only voiced America's contempt and disregard for black women during the nineteenth century but also provided a snapshot for the role sexist perceptions play in the interactions of black women. Nineteenth-century America regarded black women as creatures, things, animals, and chattel. People did not see a black woman during that era as anything more than a mere possession; her life experience did not afford her the opportunity to express herself freely either verbally or nonverbally. If a contemporary black woman today is seen as nothing more than a caricature that is boisterous and dimwitted, a good chance exists that people will misunderstand and misinterpret her during interpersonal interactions.

In her critique of media theory, bell hooks assumes that the critique of the media is important because of the media's pervasiveness and power. In *Theories of Human Communication*, Littlejohn and Foss point out that hooks's argument does not make the media responsible for the ideology of oppression; hooks asserts that everyone contributes to oppression's continuation . . . even the oppressed. She emphasizes that taking part in decolonization involves a process of breaking with the assumptions of the reality of the dominant culture (including the tendency of oppressed people to internalize their inferior status) (Littlejohn and Foss 362).

The portrayal of black women as angry Sapphires permeates American culture as people—especially younger generations of black women—see and internalize these images. Some black women are embracing the idea of a Sapphire in much the same way that the younger generation of black men embrace the N-word as a term of endearment. A rush has developed to embrace and identify with caricatures and labels forged in oppression as symbols of dehumanizing hate.

While possession may be nine-tenths of the law, the real answer lies in perception. Today's contemporary black women cannot escape the stereotypical image of Sapphire, who is sassy, quick tempered, and aggressive. For black women, this image immersion means many different things. First and foremost, black women who have lived with the perception of always being angry—that anger is the essence of their being—exude a hatred that others feel and cannot escape while in their presence. As a black woman, why should society not allow them to express emotions or deal authentically with experiences that shape their worldviews, expectations, or social judgments? The answer to this question is not that simple because communicating as a woman is not simple, and being an older woman and a black woman is even less simple.

Just being a black woman adds layers to communication in terms of physical appearance, message, interpretation, and conversation. When reviewing the idea of identity as a performed construct, Littlejohn and Foss emphasize that identities are always in the process of becoming as people respond to the contexts and situations around them (112). Black women who receive classification according to skin color and gender will continue to struggle in the way they feel they must present themselves. Their life experiences—their interactions with others—shape their identities.

Works Cited

Ashley, W. "The Angry Black Woman: The Impact of Pejorative Stereotypes on Psychotherapy with Black Women." *Social Work in Public Health*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2014, pp. 27-34.

Collin, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics Of Empowerment*. 10th ed., Routledge, 2000.

Fontaine, Nargis I. "From Mammy to Madea, an Examination of the Behaviors of Tyler Perry's Madea Character in Relation to the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire Stereotypes." MA thesis, Georgia State University, 2011.

hooks, bell. *ain't i a woman?—black women and feminism*. South End Press, 1981.

Littlejohn, S. W., and Foss, K. A. *Theories of Human Communication*. Waveland Press, 2011.

Lyman, S. M. "Race, Sex, and Servitude: Images of Blacks in American Cinema." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 4, 1990, pp. 49-77.

Probiotic
Joshua McGuire

I was hoping that a bit of yogurt every morning would get my stomach back to some kind of normalcy. Probiotic. Active germs. The label said, "Improved digestive health in two weeks!"

Pressed for time most mornings, I enjoyed eating my yogurt on the way to work, collecting spoons on the passenger-side floorboard of my car, and unlocking the master lock on the chain of the gate at my job.

They'd say, "Why are you eating yogurt?"

"Because I like yogurt."

I lived in the crummiest apartment. In living there two years, I let two people come over. Because we were going to drink whiskey. And who cares about surroundings when drinking whiskey?

At the end of the apartments, there was a stop sign. The crossing road was very busy; it poured out of several low-income apartments. At that end was a bus stop for about thirty middle-schoolers.

One morning, leaving my home for work, at the stop sign, I saw a tall, lanky black girl beating the tar out of a fat, little Mexican girl.

All of a sudden—yes, all of a sudden—I find myself with this twelve-year-old girl clutched in the air above my waist and my left arm wrapped around her. I'm yelling at all of the kids to "Stop it!" The fat, little Mexican girl is being picked up and dragged back by her friends to their consoling area. I'm spinning around in this circle of children, piercing the eyes of all those with the slightest inclination of ever throwing a single punch for the rest of their lives.

Then my eyes made contact with my neighbor. His pickup truck window was rolled down, and his face was open.

What the hell was I doing?

I turned to see my car—driver-side door open—in the middle of the busy street. I was holding up traffic. My God! I was holding a small, black girl off her feet!

I put her down and walked to my car with the eyes of children and neighbors upon me. Confusion. I drove on to work.

I never made the decision to get out of my car.

I never did put down my yogurt or my spoon.

Girl and yogurt in my left, spoon as the staff of Moses in my right.

Does Race Affect the Use of Deadly Force?[*]

Kashyra I. Thompson

Any student of history examining race and its effects of the use of deadly force may conclude that the issue has been cycling for decades. Statistics show that "although crime has been decreasing since the 1990s, arrest related killings of minority men by police officers are on the rise" (Zwach 186). This essay studies whether race plays a role in the decision to use deadly force by using evaluations within social control, quantitative research, macro-level examinations, and theoretical frameworks. Aspects affecting the use of deadly force on minorities include the lack of African Americans in policing, racial profiling, and social disorganization as well as structural and organizational issues within police-force agencies. Another factor is the media coverage of cases and the potential perception that media outlets have biased reporting against victims. The literature of interest for this essay includes data measured in a scholarly article and a peer-reviewed article. Other empirical articles include charts, graphs, and statistical information. The Texas A&M University-Texarkana John F. Moss library (and its online tools) has been a primary source for research.

Research shows support for the hypothesis that race plays a role in the decision to use deadly force. Statistically, African American men and women have received different treatment within the criminal justice system (Bui and Cox). Racial profiling is a huge controversy in the United States. Risse and Zeckhauser relate an anecdote of an African-American man driving a luxury vehicle. Although he never received a ticket, police often stopped him (more than fifty times) and asked if he were hiding any drugs or weapons in his vehicle. As a dentist driving in a predominantly white neighborhood, the man believed the police were racially profiling him.

Risse and Zeckhauser believe that racial profiling leads to violent interaction between police and the public: "The harm caused by profiling per se is largely due to underlying racism" (146). While policing is necessary to prevent and solve crimes, a balance must rest between public safety and the abuse of civil rights. Risse and Zeckhauser further note that "[p]olice abuse is a pressing problem that must be addressed on its own, and the screening of minorities beyond the level useful to the goals of the investigation is illegitimate" (143-44).

The death of Michael Brown at the hands of a police officer in Missouri provides further support for the aforementioned hypothesis. On August 9, 2014, Darren Wilson, a white police officer, shot and killed Brown—an eighteen-year-

[*] This essay won first place in the 2017 PLACE undergraduate-essay contest.

old, unarmed black male. According to I. O. Onyemaobim, "The death of Michael Brown may have been shocking but it was not surprising
. . . . Fatality at the hands of police brutality has become so prevalent in today's society that one could argue it has become a societal norm" (158).

In this specific case, a surveillance camera caught Brown as he was stealing several packages of cigarillos from a convenience store. The officer noticed that Brown fit the description from the surveillance footage. When the officer asked Brown to step on the curb, Brown did not comply. The officer shot Brown once before Brown fled the scene. During the subsequent chase, the officer fired several additional shots that further wounded Brown. Witnesses stated that Brown approached the officer with his hands up, but the officer stated that Brown tried to disarm him when approaching his car. The grand jury did not indict the officer, and an enraged community resulted (Onyemaobim 158).

While Brown's death may have resulted from racial profiling, the trouble also may have resulted from inadequate cultural diversity training. Onyemaobim claims that ". . . police forces must be required to undergo better training programs to equip them to handle dangerous situations (without resorting to unnecessary force and violence) while protecting themselves and their communities" (178). If officers have not had any type of contact with minority communities, said lack of experience can cause tragic communication conflicts.

The Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws have also contributed to the disproportionate use of deadly force against minorities. According to L. R. Mack and K. Roberts-Lewis, "The aftermath of the Stand Your Ground law has led to an increase in justifiable homicides of minority victims" (47). The rates of justifiable killings have increased, and proponents often express a preference to let their guns do the talking rather than rely upon other, less lethal means. Mack and Roberts-Lewis reveal a surprising statistic: "Among the people shot to death in the black population in states with the SYG laws, the rates of those found to be justifiable more than doubled between 2005 and 2011" (49).

One often-cited case involves the justified death of an unarmed minority male. George Zimmerman, who identified himself as a neighborhood watchman, shot Trayvon Martin (Mack and Roberts-Lewis 49). The teen was taking a trip to a convenience store, and he had a jacket covering his head. Martin purchased a beverage and candy. As Martin was walking home, Zimmerman saw him and contacted the 911 dispatcher to report Martin as a suspicious person. The dispatcher told Zimmerman not to pursue the teen, but Zimmerman ignored the dispatcher. Zimmerman shot the unarmed Martin, and the subsequent court ruling defined the shooting as justifiable self-defense under the SYG law.

SYG laws give people the right to defend themselves and use deadly force (Fan 876). Combined with racial profiling, such a disturbing atmosphere would

cause any young, African-American male to think twice before going to the store after dark. M. D. Fan further comments that "[s]cholars have highlighted how police use deadly force more often in communities with pronounced racial and economic stratification and in regions with a higher concentration of minorities" (890).

Smith and Holmes have concentrated upon the distinctions between social conflict and community violence. When communities do not have a law-abiding culture and resist attempts by police to intervene in a violent manner, violence meets with more violence. While the final decision to use excessive force may not tie directly to race—indeed, violence from the suspect often prompts the decision—the initial instigator for the event is often race. Smith and Holmes suggest that moving more minority officers into rural minority communities could address this problem. They note that "officers who live within the community are thought to have greater rapport with citizens, better knowledge of community problems, greater responsiveness to community concerns, and a larger stake in the community" (1039).

Smith and Holmes also recommend providing highly educated officers to provide an extensive level of community training for other officers. Smith is quick to offer qualifications for the implementation of educated officers: "Notably, the existence of college requirements for officers, a common recommendation by advocates of police professionalism, [does] not influence police killings. Perhaps a better measure of the concept would be the percentage of officers with a college degree" (Smith 551).

Fan discusses the issue of predominately white police officers in black communities. As administrators identify problems with minority communities, they set goals to hire more minority officers. Fan examines whether these goals are actually being met and asks, "[D]oes adding more minority officers actually reduce the risk of police encounters escalating to violence?" (875). After studying various methods that police forces have implemented to reduce the effects of race and police violence, Fan concludes that the trouble stems from the minority community perceiving minority officers to be as violent as the white ones (875).

The relevance of this topic has much to do with what is occurring within today's society. The review of the literature does indicate that race affects the use of deadly force. In the case of the police, the *New York Times* reports that ". . . black men and women are treated differently in the hands of law enforcement. They are more likely to be touched, handcuffed, pushed to the ground, or pepper-sprayed by a police officer, even after accounting for how, where, and when they encounter the police" (Bui and Cox). The reviewed cases reveal that courts favor the shooters and classify the killings as justified. As the conflict between the

perceptions of lawmakers, police, and minority communities continues, shootings continue while tensions rise.

Works Cited

Bui, Q., and A. Cox. "Surprising New Evidence Shows Bias in Police Use of Force but Not in Shootings." *The New York Times*, 11 July 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/07/12/upshot/surprising-new-evidence-shows-bias-in-police-use-of-force-but-not-in-shootings.html?_r=0.

Fan, M. D. "Violence and Police Diversity: A Call for Research." *Brigham Young University Law Review,* vol. 4, 2015, pp. 876-914.

Mack, L. R., and K. Roberts-Lewis. "The Dangerous Intersection between Race, Class and Stand Your Ground." *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, vol. 23, no.1, 2016, pp. 47-60.

Onyemaobim, I. O. "The Michael Brown Legacy: Police Brutality and Minority Prosecutions." *George Mason University Civil Rights Law Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2016, pp. 157-82.

Risse, M., and R. Zeckhauser. "Racial Profiling." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2004, pp. 131-70.

Smith, B. W. "Structural and Organizational Predictors of Homicides by Police." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2004, pp. 539-57.

Smith, B. W., and M. D. Holmes. "Community Accountibility, Minority Threat and Police Brutality: An Examination of Civil Rights Criminal Complaints." *Criminology,* vol. 41, no. 4, 2003, pp. 1035-63.

Von Drehle, D. "The Roots of a Riot." *Time Magazine*, vol. 185, no. 17, 30 Apr. 2015, pp. 34-39.

Zwach, S. "Comment: Disproportionate Use of Deadly Force on Unarmed Minority Males: How Gender and Racial Perceptions Can Be Remedied." *Wisconsin Journal of Law, Gender, and Society,* vol. 30, no. 20, 2015, pp. 185-222.

The Absent Bride
Aide K. Soto

You dressed in fine linen for me?
Thanks.
Your beauty amazes me.
You waited so long.
What were you expecting? Unselfish love?

But you forget that I have hands, eyes, ears, and soul,
And you have not even noticed that I had love.
For years, I looked for you
and never found you.

Believe me,
there's no life to wait
(nor to seek)
when innocence and patience
is lost.

The only thing left is the white dress.

The Good Ol' Boys: Internal Racism in the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department[*]

Thomas Strawn

Science experiments will often go awry. Carefully planned procedures and meticulously made calculations produce unpredictable reactions due to the omission of a single detail or an error in some minute variable. The small lab and models of scale allow for careful consideration of these potentials, yet still they exist. Society and history prove that the same exceptions occur in the great human experiment with little opportunity for foresight other than historical precedent where available. New endeavors are equivalent to dark and uncharted territory. Conservation law and game-enforcement agencies on paper exist to protect the natural resources and heritage of all Americans for the sake of all future Americans. These entities developed rapidly over the past century. Much like social endeavors before (and like many still to come), the all-inclusive ideal plays witness to an unfortunate exclusionary reality. Of the approximately five hundred Texas game-warden officers charged and given authority to protect public resources across the second-largest American State, black officers compose only a small percentage. Internal racism with respect to hiring practices, promotions, and advancement (as well as in inter-officer relations) still abounds in Texas game-law enforcement.

Conservationism carries a historical connotation of white control of resources for the leisure and benefit of upper-middle class white society. Anastasia Yarbrough describes the white privilege of natural-resource access as a reflection of the primary influence in wildlife policy that upper-middle class whites possess; this group traditionally funds conservationism through the commercial use of resources (Gillespie, Collard, and Yarbrough 108). The white dominion over the natural heritage of Texas compounded and solidified until the latter part of the twentieth century. Previously, as Yarbrough discusses, blacks and Latinos could not use public lands, and the federal government forced Native Americans onto reservations in order to preserve parks such as Yellowstone for the use of white, middle-class America (118).

[*] This essay won second place in the 2017 PLACE undergraduate-essay contest.

The past exclusion of minorities from control and influence in the realm of natural-resource conservation and exploitation translates into the modern era as an environmental and natural heritage disenfranchisement of minorities (and of African Americans in particular). Underuse of outdoor recreation opportunities by minorities is due to socioeconomic status, perceived discrimination (past and present), subcultural norms, values, and learned behavior (Floyd). Just as minority communities tend remain where they have lived historically, minority culture adheres to traditional pastimes and leisure activities learned from families and communities. Groups barred from experiencing the natural elements in the past have difficulty breaking learned behavioral barriers. Invisible walls from the past remain that create unspoken, informal limitations for minorities.

According to data from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) department and the United States Fish and Wildlife Department (USFWD), the TPWD manages one of the largest agencies of game-law enforcement (i.e., game wardens) in the nation. In 2012, an investigative article in the *Austin Chronicle* exposed evidence of systematic racism and discrimination in the Texas Parks and Wildlife game-warden division. The article contains interviews, both anonymous and official, that recount the bigoted subculture of the TPWD across decades.

Two formal complaints cited in the article—both filed with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—involve twenty-year-veteran African-American warden Sergeant Melvin Fowler of Pflugerville and veteran white warden John Rao of Clear Lake. Revealing the prejudice and inner-agency loyalty requirements of Texas game wardens, the two veterans describe how their professional and friendly association not only resulted in informal discrimination from their peers but also in the official withholding of promotions for their perceived transgression of betraying the agency in defying norms and filing complaints (Ruland).

Interviews with multiple anonymous agents provide insight into the discriminatory misconduct of bigoted wardens and of superior officers: “The color of one’s skin can mean thirty years of going nowhere” and “if you work well with a ‘nigger,’ . . . you’ll be treated like a ‘nigger’” (Ruland). Statistics from the article highlight that in forty-nine years, only one percent of the game wardens that TPW has commissioned have been African American (Ruland). As of 2012, no black game warden had been hired since 2005 (Ruland). The rotten-apple myth of police misconduct that postulates any deviance is merely an aberration of the norm in a

police agency perpetuates public opinions that racial discrimination from a state agency cannot possibly be systematic. Allegations from multiple agents including John Rao, one of the filers of the complaints, point fingers all the way to the top of TPW—director Pete Flores. The attorney for Mr. Rao is on record in Ruland's article as stating that TPW Director Pete Flores "is very much part of the 'GOB' [Good Ol' Boys] network—believing 'do not turn on your brothers [and] do not go out of [the] department' . . . . People at TPW who step off the plantation—if you will—are not getting promoted" (Ruland).

In *Forces of Deviance*, Kappeler, Sluder, and Alpert analyze the research that Sykes and Matza published about the neutralization-of-deviance techniques in police subculture used in various high-profile departments over the past several decades. Their analyses are applicable in the situation of the TPWD. Sykes and Matza's technique of neutralization by appealing to "higher loyalties" is manifest in the atmosphere of white agents pressured into limiting interactions and cooperation with black wardens due to the fear of peer backlash (Kappeler, Sluder, and Alpert 123). John Rao's decision to file a complaint defied normative expectations of white game wardens and subjected him to alleged discrimination in the form of promotion blocks from the highest office of the TPWD.

The stigma further creates a potentially dangerous element among game wardens. Neutralization of deviance techniques are manifest internally and externally. Racial discrimination in the form of assignment, promotion, and operational support includes both official and informal methods of controlling one's own in the police community. Investigation of such corruption is often difficult. Subsequent internal investigations and state inquiries into the TPWD's potential misconduct have found no evidence of institutional racism (although this investigation does not rule out informal bigotry). J. H. Skolnick's 2008 research concerning police subculture misconduct reveals that multiple major investigations such as the Knapp (1972) and Mollen (1994) Commissions in New York and the Christopher Commission in Los Angeles (1991) all found an internal loyalty code as "an obstruction to their inquiry into police corruption or excessive force" (37).

Skolnick illustrates the difference between institutional racism and bigotry by using comparisons of the legally segregated South prior to the civil-rights reforms of the 1960s and the contemporary legalistic approaches of the police departments in Oakland, California, and Gary, Indiana. In spite of a lack of institutional policies designed overtly or inherently to discriminate based upon

race, bigotry among the non-segregated departments has prevailed with subtle methods of subverting official anti-discrimination policies (Skolnick 38).

Recognizing that a problem exists does not automatically provide outcry or forthcoming solutions. The question of segregating police duties along racial lines based upon the racial predominance of a community leads to ideas that black communities work better with officers of the same race. Since Department of the Interior statistics show that minorities do not visit national parks and natural-heritage sites in the same numbers as whites, some critics argue that white prevalence among game wardens is a natural result of conventional thinking. Ronald Weitzer concludes in his study of multiple communities of color and their respective police forces that little evidence exists to support this hypothesis (322). Communities have no particular preference for race; in fact, many black participants in Weitzer's study express views that they prefer white officers who might be more cautious in their interactions so as not to stir racial tension (322).

Lack of diversity in the TPWD's game-warden ranks, when removed from the idea of racial representation of a community, may be a product of agency or warden-community normative deviance in the form of racial bigotry. According to an Associated Press report—following the release of Ruland's report—the TWPD created a Chief Diversity Officer position to ensure the implementation of policies and hiring or promotional practices that would support greater game-warden racial representation. However, no change in statistics has been released or specific programs announced to date ("Scrutinized Texas Parks Agency Plans Historic Hire").

Texas is one of the states with the largest employment of game-law enforcement officers in the country; the discovery of racial bigotry and unofficial discrimination in hiring and promotional practices for the TWPD places a disturbing spotlight on a too-little-discussed aspect of racial inequality in the justice system. Loyalty to the police subculture transcends departments and agencies and inhibits transparent investigations into allegations.

Subversive methods of neutralizing deviance (such as those alleged against the TPWD's Director Pete Flores) reveal a race-driven corruption in a form of law enforcement that should be steeped in noble, conservation-based principles. Studies suggest that racial representation of TWPD-policed communities has little value in law-enforcement effectiveness. Nevertheless, law-enforcement agencies often overlook internal racial equality. Perhaps the times are changing, but large

subsets of social stagnation continue to go unnoticed by society's sleeping watchmen of civil liberties.

Works Cited

Floyd, Myron F. *Race, Ethnicity, and Use of the National Park System*. United States Department of the Interior National Park Service, 1999.

Gillespie, K., R. Collard, and A. Yarbrough, eds. (2015). *Critical Animal Geographies: Politics, Intersections, and Hierarchies in a Multispecies World*. Routledge, 2015.

Kappeler, V. E., R. D. Sluder, and G. P. Alpert. *Forces of Deviance: Understanding the Dark Side of Policing*. 2nd ed., Waveland Press, 1998.

Ruland, P. J. "Parks, Wildlife, and Racism." *Austin Chronicle,* 10 Aug. 2012, www.austinchronicle.com/news/2012-08-10/parks-wildlife-and-racism/ The Austin Chronicle.

"Scrutinized Texas Parks Agency Plans Historic Hire." 8 Jan. 2014, dfw.cbslocal.com/2014/01/08/scrutinized-texas-parks-agency-plans-historic-hire/Associated Press.

Skolnick, J. H. "Enduring Issues of Police Culture and Demographics." *Policing and Society*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2008, pp. 35-45.

Weitzer, R. "White, Black, or Blue Cops? Race and Citizen Assessments of Police Officers." *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2000, 313-24.

The Secret Keeper
Belle Lee

I am the Secret Keeper.
I know them one and all.
I push them deeper and deeper.
I buried them behind her wall.

I have snapshots of how he touched her.
I have snapshots that show her pain—
Snapshots of the ways he hurt her;
Snapshots that created her shame

I saw how she was never safe.
I saw her while being hurt.
I saw him rob her innocence.
I saw how he stole her self-worth.

I heard her gasp when her mother said
That it was all in her head.
I heard how she cried at night,
Wishing she were dead.

I know when he would leave her room.
Her emptiness would flood with pain.
She'd lie there alone and abandoned
Wondering, "Am I going insane?"

Her burden became too heavy,
A load no one should bear.
No one can carry all that hurt.
It really isn't fair.

I became her Secret Keeper.
I bury her secrets, but not so well.
At times, her memories escape to taunt her,
Chasing her into her own mental hell.

I am the Secret Keeper
Who buried her memories alive . . .
Yet they find a way of escape to accost her
Since alive memories when buried won’t die.

Into the Darkness

The Last Few Days
Lee Russell

"Careful," he whispers to himself as the bowl wobbles. "Careful!"

The bowl tips . . . .

Splash!

Milk and cereal slosh across the cracked, stained linoleum. The small boy cringes. His eyes fill with tears as he looks at the mess.

Mommy will be mad, he thinks to himself. *Mommy will shout!*

The shouts never come. Mommy's been sick. She hasn't been shouting for the last few days.

The boy sniffles and wills back the snot and tears. He carefully sets the bowl, containing the last of their cereal and some funny-smelling milk, on the floor. He stands and wipes dirty hands on dingy briefs; he sighs.

I'll clean it up before Mommy sees, he thinks.

He rubs his eyes dry and searches the kitchen for paper towels. All he finds is an empty cardboard tube.

No paper towels!

The boy sobs again, frustrated, but then he remembers the towels in the bathroom. Mommy hasn't washed clothes in the last few days, so they're all dirty; but they might work.

He runs for the bathroom but slows and tiptoes as he passes Mommy's room, not wanting to wake her up before he cleans up the mess. When he gets to the bathroom, he snatches the first towel he sees and returns to the kitchen.

He mops at the milk, smears it around until the table looks clean, then hurries the soggy, milk-heavy towel back to the bathroom; he leaves a trail of drips and dribbles in his wake. He lobs the towel into the tub with a wet splat. He smiles and returns to his cereal.

A large roach circles the bowl's rim, but the boy flicks it across the room and picks up the bowl.

Knocking startles him. More milk and cereal slop onto the floor.

There's someone here!

He sets the bowl back on the floor and sprints over to the light switches. He has to climb up onto his stool to reach them, but he hurries up and flips off the lights. Mommy told him to hide if anyone knocks when she's not home.

Since she's sick, he thinks, *I'll do that.*

He runs to the cupboard under the sink and climbs inside. He pushes things out of his way as he curls up tight, and he pulls the door almost closed. He feels safe here even though it smells funny and unseen things scuttle around in the dark.

The knocking continues. A woman's voice calls out.

"Hello? Mrs. Miller? Are you there? Can you open the door? We're worried about you. Mr. Donovan called for a police officer to come check on you." Her voice changes, becoming the fake-sweet voice most adults use when they talk to him. "Jamie, sweetheart, are you in there? Come open the door, honey. It's just your neighbor, Mrs. Howard . . . ."

She continues to knock and talk for a while, but eventually she goes away.

The boy climbs out of his cupboard, brushes a spider from his hair, and goes back to his cereal in the dark. His feet splash in the milk. The tears return, but there's no time to clean it up now. It's suppertime, and they need to eat.

He lifts the half-empty bowl, grabs a spoon from the drawer, and heads down the hallway. He stops at the first door, sets down the bowl, and taps softly with the spoon. Loud noises make Mommy mad .

"Mommy?" He waits, but there's no answer. It's been like that for the last few days. "Mommy, it's time to eat. I'm comin' in."

He pushes the door open, picks up the cereal, and walks into the room.

The room stinks.

Mommy needs a bath, he thinks. She hasn't had one in the last few days.

He walks over to the side of the bed, lifts the bowl up onto it, and then crawls up himself.

Mommy's really sick. She won't take the bowl or feed herself. He has to feed her.

The spoon shakes, and he spills some milk onto the comforter; but he gets the cereal to her mouth, which is already mostly full of stale vomit and food he's put in during the last few days. He dumps some more cereal on top.

"You need to chew and swallow your food, Mommy! Then you can eat more."

He gives her the look she uses on him when he misbehaves. Mommy won't chew!

His stomach growls, so he eats the next bite himself. He's really hungry. He gives Mommy another bite. Then he eats another bite himself. It isn't long before the bowl is empty.

He stacks it on top of the other bowls on the nightstand. He counts them. *One, two, three, four, five!*

His elbow bumps one of the empty pill bottles beside the pile, and some of them fall. He winces and waits for her to yell . . . .

She doesn't.

He breathes a sigh of relief and then pulls up the comforter on his side of the bed. He slides under the covers beside Mommy. Even under the blankets, she's cold! He snuggles up next to her and begins to cry softly.

“Mommy, I don’t like this,” he whispers, and he begins sobbing harder. “Please get better soon!”

He cries himself to sleep.

He doesn’t wake until the policemen come.

Hunting
Jason Clayton

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

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

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

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

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

"What the Hell?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mary smiled. She was completely at ease. "My phone's broken."

His face fell.

"But do you have your phone?" she blurted.

He pulled an iPhone from his pocket.

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

He smiled and looked away bashfully. "Sure. I don't mind."

"All right! Come on in!"

He followed her inside. She led him to the kitchen.

"The charger's plugged into the wall there. I'll be right back."

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

The kid was standing by the counter. He joined her at the table.

"It's really nice of you to open your home up to someone you don't even know at this awful hour."

Mary smiled at him. "It's fine. My name's Mary Lefave-Turner."

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

"Really? Who?"

"Eddie Frank."

Mary laughed. "Seriously?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Yeah. He's an odd one."

"He's sweet."

"Well, I guess he'd have to be, wouldn't he? What else does he have?"

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

"Hey! But I'm not wrong!"

Mary blushed and giggled.

"Am I?"

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

"Oh, I'm Joey."

"Joey Frank . . . . I guess you are, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you just said—oh, never mind."

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

"Can I get you something?" She lingered a bit on the last word. "A drink, maybe?"

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

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

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

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

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

"So what do you teach?" Joey asked.

"Sophomore and A.P. English. Occasionally, I sub for the theatre teacher. She's off on maternity leave."

"That sounds like fun."

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

"Do you like musicals?"

Mary raised an eyebrow. "Do you?"

Joey thought about it. "*Touché*." He took another drink. She found herself praying he would dribble some on his shirt. He set the glass down. "So what's a pretty girl like you doing at home on a Saturday night?"

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

"Oh, I was just at a party."

"Oh, really? And you left before midnight?"

He scowled. "Cops showed up."

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

He couldn't suppress a grin. "Yeah, it sucks."

"No shit. What was going on at the party?"

"Nothing spectacular. I was hoping to seal the deal with this girl I've been seeing, *but* . . . "

"The cops crashed the party."

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

"Hm." Mary looked off into the corner. "I remember my first time. It was in a barn at my best friend's sweet sixteen."

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

"Hey! I'm sick of that joke!" But she was laughing.

"So how old are you?" she asked.

"What is this? Twenty questions?"

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

He thought about it. "Okay, sounds good. I'm sixteen."

"I thought you were seventeen." She really didn't. This seemed to please him, though, and he chuckled like he was a little embarrassed. "Okay. Your turn."

"Hm . . . ." He took a sip. He looked out the window over the sink at nothing in particular. "What's the craziest thing you've ever done?"

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

His eyes widened. "Holy shit! Are you serious? That's awesome!"

"Yeah. It was fun. How old were you the first time you did 'it'?" She attached the air quotes.

"I was fourteen. It was with my best friend's sister. She was sixteen."

Mary opened the bottle and poured him more whiskey.

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

She burst out laughing. "You're hung up on that?"

"Just interested." He winked and took a drink.

She refilled her glass. "Well, it was during lunch. All the kids were in the cafeteria. The other teachers were with them or in another part of the building. It

was perfect timing. Not a soul came down that hallway until *way* after we were done."

"Sweet."

"Yeah. Okay, buck-o, spill. What's the craziest thing *yoouuuuu've* ever done?" She sipped her drink.

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

"School people or random people?"

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

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

"It's your turn." She spoke a bit softer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's going on?" he asked.

She watched for a moment and turned around. "It's a possum."

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

"It's my turn, isn't it?"

He nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She slapped him on the shoulder. "Hey! You've had your question! It's my turn!"

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

He chuckled and glanced at the floor. "About three weeks ago. It was in a cemetery."

Mary snorted. "*What?*"

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

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey! Why are you laughing at me?"

"It's just so *random*! Oh, *shit*!"

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

"Have any of your students told you they love you?"

Mary scoffed. "Where did *that* come from?" She laughed to shake it off.

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

Mary pursed her lips. "Maybe once or twice. Does it really matter?"

"But do you love them?"

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

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

Mary kissed him. He made a small sound and nipped at her bottom lip. It reminded her of the Wharton kid in her car after the class trip to Shreveport. The

Wharton kid with his pouty lips, strong hands, the tears in his eyes that day with the Hanson kid—

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

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

"You're like an animal after prey," she gasped. She stared up at the ceiling light over the table in languorous ecstasy. Joey kissed her collarbone. Two of his teeth had grown nearly an inch.

"Well, we have that in common, don't we?"

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

Joey cleaned himself up at the sink. The teacher smelled like the fluids of at least ten adolescent boys; he could detect them in her essence, some part of them she stole when she took their virginities and tossed them aside for the next one. He managed to wash her stench off himself at the sink, but he conceded that he would have to burn the shirt and maybe the pants. When he was done at the sink, he used the shirt to wipe the bowl dry. He collected the handful of buttons that were on the floor. He was considerate enough to turn the lights out before he left.

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

"Pate?" Deputy Johnson eyed the body and froze. He nearly dropped the clipboard.

Pate reached over and snatched it away from him. "Anything new, Johnson?"

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

"And by then the girl was already dead." Pate looked at the paperwork. The neighbor's testimony was short. She was an old woman with a few cats and very much the busybody. Some dogs down the road started howling and "carrying on"

around eleven forty-five, according to another neighbor—a retired officer with thirty-five years experience. The dogs started up again around twelve twenty and were silent after that.

Pate glanced back down at the girl and tasted bile.

"I've got to get some air. Johnson, when's the M.E. supposed to be here?"

"I think he's up the road."

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

"What's going on?" Pate called.

"I think Abe caught wind of somethin' he didn't like!" The dog sniffed around fitfully and pressed on down the driveway.

"He found somethin'!"

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

"Someone hurt that poor teacher?" he snarled.

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

"How many of my neighbors have to die before you pigs *do somethin' about this?!*"

"Mr. Hillis! We're doin' the best we can!"

Another officer came down the driveway. "Grandpa! What the blue hell you doin' out here?" He tried to walk the old man back to the truck.

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

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

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

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

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

The victims were bled out, either through the jugular (like the new one) or the femoral (like one of the other teachers). If they were at home, and several of them were, they were alone (either in the bedroom or the living room) and were usually in a state of undress at the time of death. A few, usually the ones convicted of violent or multiple sex offenses, were mutilated nearly beyond recognition. (The youth minister, for example, was found floating in the Red River north of Texarkana with his head and genitals missing.)

What marked them all as being of the same mind was the lack of evidence at every crime scene and what the deputies collectively called "missing blood" because the amount of blood on the scene and the amount of blood in the victim's body just didn't add up to the amount of blood a normal, healthy human being would need to survive. And if these victims had one thing in common, it was their health.

The old man drove away. Deputy Hillis apologized and stepped over to his cruiser to get more film.

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

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

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

The Menaced Assassin

Casey Purifoy

He thinks of a question behind the glass lens. The guests continue mingling, unaware of 9:30. He adjusts the scope. The vague pointillist bushes turn into hedge sculptures of elephants and dogs, a garden party's evening scene presided over by a menagerie of green giants. The party writhes below them in a sea of tuxedos and silk dresses that displays a mixture of black and white paint that never commits to gray. They weave through white tabletops while a small instrumental ensemble grows music from the patio, which blooms waltzing couples on its crimson tiles. The lights from the tall stone manor coat the throng of musicians, waiters, ushers, and wine glasses with silver silhouettes.

He pulls away from the rifle to examine his notebook and the rough sketch of the manor grounds and floor plans. Graphite lines and squares recreate the blueprints of the posh structure but do not show the people, the leather furniture, or the mahogany tables and bars inside. The sketch doe not show his target or provide any information other than a red *X* inside of an office with a window overlooking the lawn's party. Beside the *X* reads "9:30 p.m."

He checks his watch. 9:15 p.m. With a leather-gloved hand, he performs a brass check on the rifle. He does this not because he needs to but because it helps him forget about Who. Who cannot kill people. Who cannot watch a family man's life for weeks while preparing that man's final day.

But What can do that and more. What can leave his family to spend young adulthood killing freedom fighters or terrorists barely older than himself. What accepts offers to protect the rich dirty dealings in the Middle East without any ROE red tape. What accepts a little more to aim at the rich in the dirty dealings. What squeezes them under the trigger. What doesn't have to listen to the voices or see the faces in the dreams afterwards.

What is the assassin's armor. It's thicker than the plating of the Humvees he rode through streets whose pregnant silence hid Kalashnikovs and IEDs. What kept him alive then. What is the only thing letting the assassin live now.

The assassin looks into the chamber and a gleaming .308 round looks back. The round puts everything back into perspective . . . like the hard stares of the MTIs who yelled a thousand lessons on how to kill but then teased the assassin about being a "regular Vasily" at the marksmanship qualifications.

Now years make boot camp feel like picture frames on a stranger's nightstand. The assassin looks through the scope again; he snaps the bolt back into place and hides the shell's gleam.

The guests, unknowing, continue going through the motions. At times like this, the assassin contemplates his role. The assassin is an unseen guest who attends life like Death. Everyone's world moves like this. Even without an assassin, a regular person's hands cannot touch another life without leaving a ripple.

Once, the assassin had a friend. He was a fitness buff, and his physique was his religion. He rode a bike to the gym every day and ate only the most healthy suggestions from his fitness friends and life coaches. One day, leaving the gym for one of his favorite health-food restaurants, a car struck him. His bike frame blended into his body. The assassin remembered the closed coffin and how the man's parents used his chubby baby photos for the visitation's slide show. No one ever found that driver, but, then, who has less understanding of Death's power by not knowing its face?

Down below, at the party, glasses chink, lustful smiles beam, waltzes continue their circles like a vulture's flight plans, and the band plays whispers as silent and soft as a dirge.

The party's sounds die before reaching the assassin's perch. The lull is by design. No large noise from the party means no report will reach the guests' or security's ears—due either to the rifle's suppressor or the concealment of the bullet's impact by the party's activity.

The assassin directs the rifle to the large decorative clock face above the office of his target. The minute hand looms five minutes from the bottom cross-hair. He levels his aim over the door across from the desk inside the office.

And he waits.

The assassin breathes with a motionless chest as he lies prone on the blanket across the grass. His head remains as still as the rifle barrel. Only his eyes move. Gaps in the window's glare offer the assassin a glance into the target's life. A trophy cabinet sits in the corner of the office next to two paintings, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* and another piece, obscured by the party's glare. They hang to the right of the office door and to the left of the cabinet. He examines the target's desk. A silver lamp, pens, stationery, and a row of small picture frames

decorate its black top. The frames may hold pictures of family, parents, children, a spouse, or any other thing, but the distance offers no hints.

The door to the office opens, and a man in a tuxedo walks in. A woman with laughing red lips and a matching dress accompanies him. The assassin leads the reticle as close to the man's face as the smell of the summer grass. He has made all the calculations for this shot—including wind, humidity, gravity, elevation, and cartridge temperature—inside his notebook. He is completely zeroed in.

The assassin has even considered the impact point for the shot. There is no guarantee for when the bullet hits the body, but he at least plans to have the round avoid breakable items like the trophy cabinet or window. If he's lucky, the cold-loaded round's slower velocity might prevent it from exiting the target. But nothing is certain when bullets hit the human body. The round might deflect off bone or muscle to snake down the man's leg into the floor. It could tumble out the side of his target's head and gong into the brass trophies.

The man and woman walk from the doorway to his desk. He sits and smiles at the woman. She returns the grin and says something to him that she seasons with a smirk while gesturing at the window. The man nods. His smile broadens. She leans her lips into his before moving the rest of her body.

She opens the window and nods to no one in particular. *Signal*. Her red dress catches the seven-miles-per-hour wind. She moves again to the desk and says something to the man. Her head tilts with the question, and he nods an answer to the left of the window. The space is out of the assassin's sight-line. She walks out of the shot.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Squeeze.

Broken glass splashes into brass trophy cups. The red-dress lady comes back into view. She is retrieving the cork from the cabinet. She has a foaming bottle in hand. Outside, the clock shows 9:30. She turns to the wet, red desktop. She stares. *What, not who*. She drops the bottle and raises an authentic scream while the man's desktop continues to match her dress.

The assassin searches for the bullet impact and finds it. The other painting is missing from the wall above the woman's scream. The masterwork, a hole in its

center, leans on the floor against the same wall where a man examines a phonograph while a corpse lies in bed.

"Magritte," he whispers to himself.

The Enchanter
Tony Williams

How does someone measure success in life?

I figure you choose a profession, work hard every day, and at the end of your life you gauge your success on how well you did your job. I've always felt this way. I'm not really sure where I got this notion, but it's what I believe. If this is in fact the way success is measured, then I wasn't very successful . . . at least not 'til recently, and that success is both a blessing and a curse.

My profession, my passion—the only real desire I remember having—was to be an illusionist—not just any old run of the mill illusionist but the best in the world. No one ever succeeds without the desire to, but my desire came early and strong. I made this choice at the very young age of five. You might think that all children have dreams at these early ages and that eventually reality sets in and those dreams become more realistic, but that wasn't the case with me.

My parents thought it was just a phase I was going through, so they attempted to do as all parents do: take steps to get me to forget about it and move on. They bought me a magic kit.

These were just simple tricks, the kind that little kids love but soon figure out . . . and, usually, that's what convinces them that magic isn't real or something you'd want to do for the rest of your life. Instead of having the desired effect, this magic kit fed my young dreams and solidified my love of illusions. It was then that I became certain that this was what I wanted do forever.

I soon learned all those tricks and was hungry for more. I practiced every day, and every penny of my allowance for doing chores went toward buying new tricks. As I entered my teenage years, I'd do odd jobs to earn money like all teens but my goal was not clothes or a car or even taking a girl on a date. I was making money only to further my goal of being the best illusionist in the world. I taught myself sleight of hand because any good illusionist must have this as one of his prerequisite skills. I learned every card trick known and even created a few of my own. My dream had become an obsession.

I spent so much time on magic that I had no social circle in school, and the only time I'd speak to my peers was when I wanted their opinion on some new trick I'd perfected. My grades suffered, and I barely graduated high school. Any hope that my parents might have had of my going to college was out of the question. I sought jobs working in carnivals that featured magicians so I could learn showmanship, and I bounced from site to site for several years after high school. I was an opening act for a dozen different magicians, and I was better than all of them . . . and they knew it. Soon after my performing, they'd always find a reason to let me go.

On my twenty-fifth birthday, I vowed to myself that it was time to hit the big time. I had enough material and illusions that I could put on a show that would last an hour easily. I had tried most of the tricks in my various jobs, and they'd always dazzled my audience . . . but where does an up-and-coming magician get a break? Every theater in which I got an audition would always give me the same answer: "No original content, so-so presentation." Once I was even referred to as mediocre at best, and often I was told I would never make it big. I was told to hire an illusion engineer if I wanted to be taken seriously.

Don't be fooled. There's always a great engineering mind behind every illusion. The illusionist only presents the illusion and makes it seem real. Only a couple of the greatest illusionists build their own illusions, but they're rare; and before they made it big, they, too, used the services of an engineer. Naturally, back then I didn't believe in real magic. Real magic only existed in stories, but my whole belief system was about to change.

My fall began like any other day. It was on my thirty-fifth birthday. I'd been on my own for just ten years, but where I had once been an optimist, I was now a pessimist. At the time, I'd been with a low-budget theater with a thirty-minute act for three years. I could barely keep my bills paid. Too often I would subsidize my income with street-corner performances, but where illusionists like Chris Angel and David Copperfield could do street magic and draw huge crowds, I wasn't the crowd-drawing kind of magician.

My constant lack of success had worn me down; I was so cynical that I had all but given up hope. I would never rise above my current level of renown. Now this is not an excuse for my behavior. I freely admit that what I did was wrong, but I hope that this tribunal will take into account who I was before passing sentence on what I became. I love magic with every fiber of my being, but I had failed to become what I had dreamed was possible. My failure wasn't through a lack of trying or even a lack of talent. I had a great imagination when it came to tricks. I could come up with some of the best ideas. I just could never produce those ideas into useable illusions, and along the way I was treated cruelly by my peers, who constantly ridiculed me for my poor presentation and for doing the same old tricks with no differences. A good illusionist is only as good as his last illusion.

But I was good at nothing else. I'd neglected all other forms of education. I'd been so single-minded in my pursuit that I'd unwittingly limited my options. I was so convinced that I could be great that I'd ignored my peers' advice and suffered for my hubris. All those ideas that I had for illusions . . . well, I finally broke down and consulted an engineer. He told me they were impractical and that to produce those types of illusions I'd need a bigger budget than I was likely ever to get from a theater. He even told me that only someone of Copperfield's skill could pull them off.

Eventually, I became desperate. I was only days away from being evicted from my apartment. I hadn't had a decent meal in days, and I made the decision to put aside my morals, ignore my upbringing , and begin using my skills to swindle people. I know this seems more like a validation of my actions, but it's not. I just want you all to know that it wasn't an easy decision to make. At first, I felt guilty after I'd gotten rid of the hunger pains. I never took more than I absolutely needed. I told myself that I wasn't greedy, so stealing was okay; but that was my rationalization to myself. You might ask what the difference between then and now is. Then I was lost and trying to avoid taking responsibility for what I was turning into . . . and now I'm not.

I fully expect that I'' be punished for my actions, and I accept that without reservation. Once you enter the criminal world, you eventually get caught. I had begun associating with conmen who used illusions and other magic tricks to swindle people out of their money. They'd perfected the art of mixing minor illusions with convincing lies. I learned this art quickly, and I was even better than most of my associates. Because I had practically no social life as a teenager and young adult, I'd never discovered that I was naturally charismatic. I could convince even the most suspicious individual that I was as honest as Abraham Lincoln.

To be able to lure someone in with the perfectly crafted story? This was a new magic, and I took to it like a duck to water. Naturally, the endgame was to bilk my audience for as much money as I could yet make them feel like they were getting one over on me. They always came back, and, for once in my life, I had a small taste of success . . . so when I got caught in a sting operation, the fall was that much harder. I got two years in prison, and, more importantly, what little prestige I had earned honestly was lost. I'd never be legit again. I had taken a pure love for something and tainted it with larcenous actions. I was the orchestrator of my own downfall.

Did I recognize that fact? No. I was blind to my own faults. In fact, I was convinced that a cabal of illusionists who feared my ability had banded together to set me up. When I was released, my record and my paranoia kept me playing in the lowest dives on the circuit. I made my rounds and survived—just barely—for another three years. I'd learned my lesson, and I stayed away from my old colleagues. I didn't want to spend any more time behind bars, but I also stayed away from my parents because every time I looked into their eyes, I saw disappointment.

On the day I turned forty, I was drunk. I hadn't shaved in three days. I was expecting company; he was a friend from my early days with the carnivals (back when my dream of being great was still alive). He'd tracked me down by contacting my parents and saying that he wanted to catch up on old times and

maybe had a job for me. My parents meant well when they sent him to my rundown apartment. Maybe they hoped he'd get me back in the game. Whatever their intention, what actually took place was completely unforeseen. I listened to the buzzer for a full minute before deciding to answer the door. There Sam stood. He was full of life and looking healthy and prosperous.

Sam and I had once shared a RV to cut down on living costs while working for a carnival in the midwest. We'd planned on creating a show together, but I was never quite as good as Sam, so we soon went our separate ways after vowing to remain friends. We never spoke again, but years later, while I was sitting in prison, I saw Sam on TV. He'd become hugely successful. I think I hated him a little that day, but I got over it. When he showed up at my door, I was actually glad to see him.

"Tommy, I'm here to help you," Sam said with a smile.

Nothing else. Just a simple statement and a smile. I thought, *How? Can you make me believe in myself again? Can you give back all the wasted years? Can you undo my criminal record?*

Naturally, I kept those thoughts to myself. I was experienced enough at survival to know that if a handout's in the air, you don't insult or question the one providing it. Still, my questions may as well have been painted on a billboard for all to read because he answered me.

"I can restore your confidence and make all your years of work count. I can help you move out of the shadow or your criminal life. What I have to offer you will open your eyes and change you forever."

At this point, I was starting to worry that Sam was some kind of religious nut or something. He was sounding like those door-to-door preachers who are always showing up at the worst times and saying, "Repent and you will be forgiven!" But I was wrong about Sam . . . so wrong!

From his pocket, Sam pulled out a plain ring box, the kind you might use for semi-expensive jewelry. He handed the box to me, and, not knowing what to think, I accepted the proffered item. Inside were two platinum bands with a few symbols etched upon them. I couldn't recognize the symbols, so I looked at Sam with a quizzical expression.

He took the hint and said, "What you hold is the key to great power."

This statement threw me. I was drunk, and I didn't understand that he was being literal.

So I said, "Key?"

Brilliant right? After a moment Sam took pity on me and explained.

"These rings are ancient Egyptian in origin. The pharaohs had court sages. Everyone thought these sages were merely highly educated wise men, but the truth was known only to the pharaohs. These men were practitioners of true magic.

Had the superstitious found out their true natures, the sages would have been stoned to death in the streets. These magicians entered into a contract with the pharaohs. In exchange for magical services, they'd receive protection. This is why the pharaohs were considered divine. All of the mythological acts attributed to the pharaohs were a direct result of the true magicians.

"These mages had a hierarchy, and the most powerful always led. To indicate the leader, a pair of platinum bands were created and etched with mystical sigils. These rings when worn would enhance the power of the mage while signifying his authority. Now the mages often would intermarry to keep the magic strong. Every third generation, they'd bring in new blood so as not to cause birth defects; so all the mages, to some extent, shared the same bloodline, and the rings were keyed to that bloodline so that no one else could use the rings.

"See, over the generations of use—because of all the power that was used around them—they took on a new aspect . . . one that was unforeseen but not unwelcome; the rings became a repository for magic. Spells and incantations were stored and passed on to the next leader. Things that no other mage knew were stored there; it was knowledge that was intended only for the leader of the order.

"Any mage of the bloodline could access the information, but only if he had been given the ring freely and had accepted the gift freely would the magic work. However, the bloodline began dying off; through careless actions, many mages died without offspring, and the choices for a new leader became more and more difficult. Infighting began. Some believed that it was time to expand their circle while others wanted to remain secret. Inevitably, the downfall of the order came about, and the rings were lost to history.

"Through meticulous research and great expense, I located, and acquired these rings. Then I traced the bloodline all over the world. I was looking for someone with enough of the blood to use the rings. My travels finally brought me to your front door."

I can't say I wasn't fascinated by this story, but I was something of a con artist myself. I'd learned from some of the best, and I could spot a strategically placed lie. It was mostly true as he knew it, but there was something he was leaving out. I didn't know his reasons for lying, but my natural paranoia about a cabal of illusionists kicked into hyper-drive. I'd never pictured Sam as a likely member, but now I wasn't so sure.

He was at the right level of success to be one of them . . . but why were they still after me? I was no longer a threat; in fact, I was a small-timer who'd never amount to much. There was no reason to continue to stalk me, but reason and logic rarely go hand in hand with paranoia. I put myself on guard, but I wasn't too obvious; if I could still get a handout, I wanted it. I played a little more drunk than

I was and smiled. Slurring my words, I said, “That’sh a great shtory. How do I shign up?”

Sam beamed back at me and replied, “Tommy, it’s actually quite easy. Just put on the rings and claim them as your own.”

Knowing I hadn’t heard the whole story but fully committed to the promise of a better life, I slid on the first then the second ring. Sam merely indicated which ring went where and on which finger.

I didn’t feel any different, so I asked Sam, “Sho what happens now?”

“Well, now comes a short ceremony where you declare your authority over the rings, and then they’re yours.”

“How doesh it work?”

My drunkenness had started to dissipate; my natural instincts for danger were burning off the alcohol in my blood.

“One minute, Mr. Foster. Are you testifying to this tribunal that Sam Metcalf brought you those rings on August 31, 2014?”

“Yes, sir, I am. At least, I thought it was Sam Metcalf at the time.”

“What do you mean you thought it was him? Either you’re sure of it or not. The facts we have indicate that you murdered Sam Metcalf using magic.”

“Sir, I’m trying to clarify my meaning. You’ll understand if you’ll just have patience a little longer. The facts in this case have been twisted to make me appear as a deranged, power-hungry monster deserving of death, but I implore you to hear me out. I’m guilty of many crimes, but I didn’t murder Sam Metcalf. That crime happened months earlier and thousands of miles away.”

“Very well. Proceed.”

I was looking as Sam expectantly. He motioned that I should stand and follow him to the middle of the room. Stepping over an old pizza box and various other trash that littered the floor, I realized that I was actually scared.

Sam started chanting some gibberish; it sounded like something a beginning magician might say to sound more convincing to his audience. I figured this could be a big joke being played on me, but my fear was too real. (My heart reminded me of that fact.) Then something seized hold of me; I felt as if I’d been wrapped up in duct tape or really tight rope.

“Tommy, we’ve invoked the rings of power. Now you must repeat after me. If you falter, the power will lash back and kill you!”

I knew he’d left something out. My fear turned to terror. I was involved in something truly supernatural. It wasn’t as awe-inspiring as some would expect. It was scary as hell. The windows were closed, but a wind rose out of nowhere. My clothes mixed among the trash being whisked around the room. My birthday buzz

was completely gone as my adrenaline spiked, but I couldn't move. Sam stood among the strange windstorm completely unaffected.

"Tommy, repeat after me: '*Stratum un lux. Fiat tos nunc sempre no dium.*'"

Before I could comply, I saw another man literally step out of the wall. He was like a ghost—there except that you could see through him. He stepped up to me and whispered in my ear. Despite the roaring wind, I could hear him clearly.

"He seeks to steal your rightful power by having you give it to him willingly, but his words are a trick. Repeat them not. Instead, focus on being free and shout, '*To septum locare pucarium*."

Then he vanished. The words were difficult to recall clearly; my brain was foggy, and the wind was distracting. Something told me that if Sam succeeded with whatever he was doing, I wouldn't live to tell the tale.

I focused like never before. For a moment, everything seemed to slow down, and details I'd never noticed were as clear as daylight. I pictured being able to move freely. I don't know if it was the fear or the adrenaline coursing through me—maybe it was a little righteous anger for Sam's trying to use me—but I believed the ghost. Does it sound ridiculous to say that I believed a ghost I'd never seen before over an old friend that I used to live with? Maybe so, but it's true. From the very beginning, something had felt off about Sam, but my drunkenness had prevented me from noticing the problem until it was too late. I put all of that fear into my shout. As the words came out, the wind died. I could move again, and Sam grabbed his head in what appeared to be excruciating pain. Shock was on his face.

"How did you know how to do that?"

I figured I shouldn't mention the ghost, so I kept quiet. I think it's worth noting that I'm a huge fan of movies, especially supernatural movies. If there's a TV program out there that has a supernatural or magical plot, I've watched it. You might ask why this is pertinent to my testimony, but I assure you it is. My purpose for watching those types of shows was to spark my imagination; I wanted to create a new illusion that would actually be useful. Little did I know at the time that all the different types of spellcasting that went on in those films and TV shows had stuck in my head.

In one such program, a powerful sorcerer could will things into existence by thinking of what he wanted and speaking his desire aloud. To me, this resembled what I'd just done, but without any more mystic phrases, plain English would have to suffice.

I imagined knowing the truth of what was happening, and aloud I said, "Reveal the truth."

I was totally unprepared for what happened. Sam just exploded like he'd swallowed a live grenade *sans* pin. Instead of blood and guts covering everything,

there was a clear, viscous jelly-like substance that began evaporating immediately. Where the old Sam had stood—the one from my early days—now stood a different Sam. He had a short goatee, dark hair slicked back, and a designer suit. He was almost a complete stranger. I could see some resemblance to Sam, but he had changed in a way that, instinctively, I knew was bad.

"Well, perhaps you're not as helpless as I anticipated," said the stranger.

I was shocked. I had no clue how to react. I was literally acting on impulse. The stranger began chanting, which I deduced meant that another spell was coming my way.

The only thing I could think of was to deny him the ability to speak, so, visualizing an airless vacuum where sound couldn't travel, I shouted, "Silence!"

Just like that, his chanting stopped. Not knowing if the spell would still work or if he could counter my silence spell, I turned and ran from the apartment.

It occurred to me that only pure luck had allowed me to survive that encounter. I was in way over my head. If that ghost hadn't appeared when he had, I'd have unknowingly passed on who-knows-how-much power to the impersonator. The ghost combined with my obsession with supernatural movies had provided me with an avenue for escape. I figured my luck wouldn't last much longer.

I dashed down the hall and took the stairs two at a time. I hadn't moved *this* fast since high school. I didn't slow down for two whole blocks. The only reason I slowed down then was because people were staring at me, and I didn't need the attention. I kept walking and started to calm down as the adrenaline quit pumping.

However, as my heart rate dropped back to normal and I was able to think clearly, I started to freak out in a completely different way. I had just witnessed—no, actually taken part in—a battle between real magicians. I had proof that there was real magic, that I could use it, and that the cabal I had feared for so long really did exist. I walked for hours without caring where. I lost myself in thought. I reviewed the events of the hours before over and over again. I wanted answers for how such things could happen, but I had no idea where I could seek such answers. I doubted the local library would contain what I was looking for. Besides, I'd plumbed those stacks exhaustively firsthand!

The sun had nearly set when I came back to reality. I was sitting on a park bench—probably some homeless guy's bed—but I was without any energy to move. Finally, my hunger pushed me to rise and seek sustenance. I figured there had to be a diner open twenty-four-seven somewhere nearby, so I set off in search of it.

I found what I was looking for: a greasy little diner that sold meat best not thought about. At least it was warm, and coffee would be there. When I entered, I

got a couple of looks thrown my way. I realized that I probably resembled the homeless type that always tried to get handouts.

"Just coffee," I said to the waitress. "I'm going to use the restroom first."

She looked skeptical, but my nonchalant confidence gave her just enough pause to let me get to the restroom. When I looked into the mirror, I gave myself a start. I barely recognized myself. Bags were under my eyes. My beard wasn't quite full, but it was definitely ragged and mussed. I actually looked worse than some of the bums I'd passed on the way over.

I splashed water my face and tried to put my hair right. I went looking for a comb in my pocket; I wasn't really expecting to find one, but I was hopeful nonetheless. Instead, I discovered that I was even worse off than I'd first thought. I'd left my wallet in my apartment. I had no ID and thus no access to the pitiful amount of money in my savings account. I was flat broke. I didn't even consider going back to my apartment. I felt incredibly lucky to have escaped the first time.

I focused upon my immediate circumstances. I had no money, and I was a mess. If I went back out into the diner in this state, I'd be ejected faster than the roadrunner racing away from Wile E. Coyote. What could I do? I caught a glimpse of the rings still on my fingers. Everything came rushing back, but the most important thing at that moment was that I could do magic.

The answer then seemed simple. I'd repair my situation with a little magic. The two times I'd used the power of the rings, my desires had manifested quite powerfully, so I knew that I needed only slight improvements. So as to not draw too much attention to myself, I looked into the mirror and pictured my clothes being free of smell and stains. I whispered, "Clean." My clothes were clean in the blink of an eye.

The magic excited me, and my next thought was about money. I pictured a handful of hundred dollar bills. The words to summon these eluded me for a moment, but then I had it: "Money needed to provide, appear right here from where you hide."

There in my hands was a wad of hundreds. I fanned them out to take a quick count. I'd produced five thousand dollars. My immediate needs met, I returned to the diner and found a booth. The waitress approached with a pot of coffee and a cup. She set the cup down but didn't pour the coffee.

"Sorry, sir, but I've got to see some money before I serve you."

I could tell she would've given me the coffee for free—she had kind eyes—but her boss obviously had told her to question me. I reached into my pocket where I'd stored part of my newly acquired wealth. I peeled a single hundred from the wad. I placed it on the table and watched her eyes widen.

"Ben and I have found our appetites," I said, "so bring me a breakfast steak with hash and a couple of eggs on top. Bring me a bigger cup for my coffee.

When your boss is satisfied that I'm a paying customer, come back and I'll show you a magic trick."

Combining money and a confident, commanding voice meant my appearance no longer mattered. Where once I'd looked homeless, now I was just eccentric. She smiled at me, and she was suddenly five years younger and much prettier. She wrote my order down and went back to the counter. She held a whispered conversation with the cook—who was probably the boss as well—and then he began cooking what I assumed was my order.

While I waited on my food, I imagined all I could do with my magic. A mansion, fancy cars, loose women—anything I wanted. Then my analytical side kicked in, and I realized that if I attracted too much attention too quickly, I might draw the interest of the IRS and other alphabet agencies. I was forty, though, so to move too slowly would be just as bad. I'd be too old to enjoy my achievements. A little of both would be the best course to follow. My meal arrived, and I dug in; I hadn't realized how hungry I was.

Halfway through my meal, a plan formed. I was, after all, a magician. With these new powers, I could finally perform the act that I'd always envisioned. With my magic, all my illusions could be real instead of fake. I could perform magic disguised as magic! I thought myself quite clever, but I was smart enough to know that I'd need to gain more precision over my magic.

After all, master illusionists would be watching me and trying to figure out how I did my tricks. It's a little-known fact that the rivalry amongst illusionists leads us to perform some really juvenile acts like staking out shows to figure out the tricks so we can copy them or make them better.

They'd all be trying to figure me out and determine whether I was good enough to be included among their ranks. With the cabal still at large, I'd have to be extremely careful. I would completely reinvent myself. Tommy Foster would have to vanish. In his place, I would become the Enchanter!

"Mr. Foster, you've provided this tribunal with an interesting story, and some eyebrows have been raised as a result. What you have failed to do is defend your actions . . . nor have you touched upon how you learned the more powerful spells you so carelessly used against the order when you were taken into custody."

"I know, your honor, but I thought a little background necessary. If the facts are taken out of context, that could lead to an adverse decision, which I hope to avoid."

"Very well. So noted. Proceed."

I figured it would take at least six months to prepare an act, but first I'd have to provide the basic necessities for myself. I needed an apartment, clothing, food,

and identification. After my little stunt in the diner, I knew that I could produce money—which would solve the first three items on my list—but the ID would be a little different. I knew from my time among criminals that an ID has a lot of things connected to it. Magic could produce one . . . but could it also make all the connections? I wasn't sure about all of the connections myself.

For those first days, I lived in motels that accepted cash and didn't ask for ID. I practiced every day until I was exhausted. Through trial and error, I discovered that vocalization when casting spells wasn't necessary. It helped because it focused intent better, but a strong will was just as effective.

During my training as a performer, I'd learned exercises that could be conducted to improve visualization while still doing other things. These exercises in no way were intended for helping in the use of real magic, but I discovered that they worked. I dusted off my old skills, and within weeks I could tell a story and produce magical effects simultaneously. After only three months, I'd become proficient enough to produce very powerful effects.

I felt as if I could rewrite reality in my vicinity. I cannot describe how intoxicating this feeling was to someone like me. For once in my life, I was in control. My old life was forgotten like a bad memory. I was a force to be reckoned with. My new identification was easier than I thought it would be. After a little research on the Internet, I was able to put together a list that would cover any contingency. I pieced together a spell that just a short time before would have been beyond my comprehension—let alone my skill—but after all the practice, I was up to the task.

Armed with my new ID and an unlimited supply of cash, I leased an entire apartment building that had three large studio apartments. I decided that I'd live in the lower apartment; the two upper apartments would become a workshop and a practice room. I knew that if I planned to pull off this charade, I'd have to go all the way. Every illusionist has props, and the more successful the act, the larger the number of props. Having a large amount of props was directly proportional to how successful one was. If I wanted to disguise real magic as illusions and be considered successful, I, too, would have to collect some props. My props, of course, would just be there to help me disguise that I was doing real magic.

I knew quite a bit about prop. I'd come into contact with a large variety of them, but building them was a different story. I could have conjured them, but another little-known fact in the magic business is that the prop artists talk to each other. If I showed up with props that none of them had lent a hand in making, I'd have a hole in my cover story.

I hired a prop artist and had all the normal props built. I even produced plans and had a few custom props built. The new props would explain some of my never-before-seen tricks. Of course, the props were completely bogus and would

never be part of a real illusion; they were mere window dressing in case anyone ever questioned my tricks.

After another month, I realized my skills with real magic wouldn't be good enough for my self-imposed deadline if I didn't have help, but I had the same problem as before. Where could I obtain such help? I racked my brain for days, and then, completely by accident, I stumbled over the answer. One of my favorite fantasy books that I'd read as a kid was being reprinted; it was some anniversary or some such. I ordered a copy online and read it; I was hoping for inspiration.

In this story, spell-casters always have a library full of handwritten spell-books. Since magic was real, maybe caches of such spell-books really existed somewhere. If I could find these books, then I could learn from them. With access to such a collection, I could advance my knowledge of magic by leaps and bounds. In real life, such ancient sites are often filled with dust and cobwebs, so this is what I visualized: a tomb of some great magician full of dusty old tomes full of spells. To flesh out the picture, I added the hieroglyphics from my rings as standards hanging on the wall. Then, to ensure success, I added a verbal component: "To this place I must go to claim knowledge for my show."

What happened next was completely unexpected. I had perhaps thought that I would know where to go, but that isn't what happened. I felt a stomach-twisting jerk, and I found myself in a crypt very much like I'd imagined. I became violently ill from the effect, which I figured was some type of teleportation, and I was suddenly very tired . . . as if I'd worked hard all day instead of casting a quick spell. I never thought that instant travel was possible even with the discovery of real magic; I figured that physics would still play a part in what was possible, but I was so wrong. This sudden journey proved how little I really knew and that I still had a long way to go.

I also realized that my own physical resources were being taxed to use magic. The more I used magic, the quicker I felt it. Little magic wasn't a problem, but powerful magic like teleportation was totally different. The tomb was a treasure trove of artifacts. When I started using real magic, I noticed that I could sense residual traces of spells. After my spell-casting was finished, I could almost see an aura around the area or object when I concentrated. In this tomb, I didn't have to concentrate; the aura was so powerful that I actually got a slight headache. Some of the items in the tomb had a stronger aura than others. In particular, a book, a staff, and a set of bracers were very bright. I'd known that my senses had expanded to detect residual magic, but I didn't know that they'd expanded to such a degree. I took the book, staff, and bracers, which I thought would work as both costume components and tools to wield more powerful magic.

I felt like the bracers were the coolest, and I couldn't wait to try them on. When I did, they were just as cool as I'd anticipated, so I left them on.

Eccentricity is something a lot of illusionists cultivate to enhance their mystique and prestige. I figured I should get started. I reversed my teleportation spell, already forgetting the drain I'd experienced earlier, and went home only. This time, I didn't feel the drain. What I didn't know at that time was that I'd awakened something in that tomb. The entity had hitched a ride home with me and was just waiting for its moment to pounce.

I poured over the book, and my first realization was that I'd barely scraped the surface of what was possible. The little that I could understand opened my eyes to worlds of possibilities that I had never dreamed of. I knew that I'd be able to produce a show like no other illusionist in history. As I was daydreaming about all I could do, I had a sudden thought. Almost all illusionists that I knew of had an assistant. Some were visible on the stage while others worked behind the scenes. More often than not, these assistants were beautiful women who would wear outfits to aid with misdirection; their primary job was to make sure that the audience was looking one way while the trick was happening elsewhere.

Where could I find such an assistant that I could trust with my secret? The answer was that I couldn't; there was no such person in existence. My act would be real magic disguised as illusions, and the more people who knew this meant more chances that the truth would come out. Then the cabal that had sent the imposter Sam Metcalf to steal my magic from me would be able to come back and finish the job.

I resolved that I would have no assistant, but that would look odd. I thought that this problem might be unsolvable, but one day while I was walking down the street, I found the answer. In a store window, I saw an advertisement for a movie I hadn't seen in years. It was called *Mannequin*, and that's when the answer hit. If I couldn't hire an assistant trustworthy enough, then I'd make one.

I went home and pored over the book from the tomb. I finally found a formula that would accomplish what I wanted, but the complexity was far beyond anything I'd attempted to date; the power requirement was astronomical. I feared that the spell would kill me if I tried to use it. My goal was apparently unattainable, so I tried an alternative. I thought I could cut corners by providing a body instead of making one with magic. Like the movie that gave me the idea, I went to several department stores and found dummies outside. I appropriated them. Back home, I worded the spell differently to account for the dummies, but while I was able to animate them, they weren't lifelike. They were obviously plastic and very stiff.

I needed an assistant who looked so real that she could take her clothing off for a doctor's examination without the doctor's being able to tell the difference. The current iteration of my assistant wasn't going to work. I realized that if I wanted to go from plastic to flesh and bone, I'd need to use the complex formula in

the book. Up to that point, I'd repressed the events in my old apartment so well that I didn't even remember Sam's name, let alone that it was he who gave me the rings; but I was focusing upon the problem of a helper so much that those memories started to leak through. When I was engaged in the altercation with the Sam *doppelgänger*, a spirit had appeared and helped me. Why couldn't I summon another one? Since I would only summon and not create, I figured I'd have sufficient power. I worded my spell and cast my magic.

My visualization was of a helpful spirit. Consider my experience a lesson in carefully wording your desires. A helpful spirit doesn't mean one with your best interests in mind. Upon completion of the spell, the bracers I'd started wearing began to glow; from them, smoke appeared and solidified into a spirit in front of me. It wasn't the same spirit I'd seen before, but I wasn't too choosy at the time.

"Greetings, great magi," said the spirit.

"Uh, hi," I responded lamely.

"You have summoned me with the bracers of Azulog, which means you are a descendent of Septunuare. How may I serve you?"

"I desire a tutor in magic, and that type of person is hard to find. I was attempting to summon a magician of ancient times to be my tutor. Are you the one I seek?"

"Yes I can teach you. Already you show wisdom by knowing your limits."

I pride myself on being able to spot lies; after all, you have to be a good liar yourself to be able to spot others. This spirit, though, was of an entirely different caliber then any human; I didn't know that I was already being manipulated. The had quietly been influencing me since I'd first put on the bracers; the entity was hoping to bring about this very situation.

I know it may be hard to believe that I'd stumbled upon the very same tomb that Sam had discovered, but it's true. The spirit was the very same one that had possessed Sam and changed him into what he was the day we'd fought. Now I was in his clutches . . . and I had come willingly.

In the next two months, he taught me unbelievable things—spells so complex as to boggle the mind. My skills grew exponentially, and every time I learned something new, I was amazed at how much power and knowledge I'd been missing. The spirit had existed for over a thousand years, and he was passing on to me all his learning. He taught me about magical springs or ley lines where pure power welled up ready to be harnessed. Armed with this knowledge, I was ready to make my assistant. By now, I'd decided that one wouldn't be enough. Since the number three is a powerful number in magic, I decided to make three assistants.

Let's jump ahead to the night of my debut performance, for that was the night that the enchanter was truly born. All my hard work would finally pay off. I'd signed up for a talent show, but this was no ordinary event. It was a nationally

televised competition. Three judges, all famous in their own right, would either hold you back or send you through. I had several illusions prepared, and the early rounds were easy to get through with such standard fare. Only during the finalist rounds would I need to unveil the fantastic stuff.

The judges and the audience got used to seeing my assistants . . . but never in their mannequin forms. I had given them unique personalities, and they were completely able to interact with others even when I wasn't around. I made it to the finale. My last performance would determine if I would win and go on to Las Vegas or lose and disappear into obscurity. I did *not* intend to lose!

I walked out onto the stage dressed in a black T-shirt, blue jeans, and a beat-up pair of sneakers. Only my cape and bracers were odd. The cape was full-length and billowy, and the bracers were the ones from the tomb; I'd started wearing them all the time. I brought with me three mannequins with wigs, no clothes. The judges were shocked. I was in the finals, and I didn't look the least bit impressive.

"Mr. Rand, are you taking this competition seriously?" asked one judge.

"Yes, sir. This is all part of my finest illusion to date. To truly appreciate it, you must experience it completely."

"Very well, but I think you may have blown your chance at winning."

One of the female judges asked, "Where are your lovely assistants tonight ?"

"Have no fear. They'll be joining me very shortly."

With that, I nodded toward the sound man; he started a soundtrack specially prepared for this performance. I feel that I must note that one of the most impressive things about my assistants was that I could control when they phased from mannequin form to human form with just a thought. This trick was convenient for me in many ways; in particular, they could be shipped as props and not people. You notice that I was already becoming callous. I didn't think of them as people, so I treated them rather badly. This behavior would carry over to my interaction with others eventually.

Anyway, I digress. As the music queued up, I gave my cape a swirl. When it fell back into place, my clothing had changed into a full tuxedo finished with ballroom dress shoes and a bowtie. You must understand that my body was hidden for only a fraction of a second by the swirling cape, so the effect was dramatic, to say the least. I'd placed all three mannequins on the far side of the stage in a line. At this point, I walked across the stage to the first mannequin in line and again gave my cape a quick swirl to hide the mannequin for a brief second. I had named this one Cynthia, and when the cape revealed her, she was fully animated and dressed in an elaborate ball gown. These clothing changes were easy—a mere thought, and it was done.

The music changed to a slow waltz, and I took her hand and began dancing across the stage with her. Once we were on the other side, another flick of the cape

left Cynthia once again a mannequin . . . but the mannequin was dressed in the elaborate ball gown. Notice not only the subtlety of the trick but the intricacy of the illusion. The audience gasped at the change. I spun in place while whirling my cape once again; when I stopped, my clothes had changed into those of a techno dancer. The soundtrack changed appropriately, and the beat of the music increased in tempo; several digital sound effects added to the music.

I moved to the next mannequin in line; I'd named her Rose. With a twirl of my cape, she became animated; she was dressed in the same type of clothing that I was wearing, but her outfit sported a much sexier cut. We started gyrating across the stage to the music while the audience clapped and cheered loudly. Once I'd reached the other side of the stage, I de-animated Rose just as I'd done to Cynthia. I left the mannequin fully clothed in the techno gear.

My final assistant was Jessica. As I approached her, I underwent another wardrobe change; this time, I was wearing a costume suitable for dancing the tango when my cape settled. The clothes were very tight and very revealing. I haven't told you this until now, but I'd used magic to sculpt my body into a very lithe yet muscular physique to better capture the audience's attention . . . so when I say revealing, there was definitely something to reveal. When I animated Jessica, her costume was much like mine but even more revealing. Her dress was cut low on top and one shade away from being transparent. Black sequins were strategically placed, and black bikini panties along with high-heel dancing shoes completed the look. As the music underwent its final change, we danced the tango.

It was so erotic and sexy that you could feel the tension in the air throughout the theater. With every flash of leg and every glimpse of Jessica's impressive cleavage, the trance became that much stronger. Finally, we reached the other mannequins; with one last twirl, I de-animated Jessica but left her dress intact. I then made my way back to center stage. I swirled my cape, and I was back in the full tuxedo. I then looked at the judges.

For just a moment, they thought my act was complete, but then I backed up a few steps and took a running jump off the stage. Most people don't realize the distance involved. I had to clear easily twenty feet to reach the raised dais where the judges sat; I cleared the distance, and then I was floating above them. I was twirling in the air; my cape looked like a giant top spinning around me. Suddenly, I dropped. I hit the ground a mere five feet from the dais, and I exploded into an impressively sized fireball.

I'm not talking about a quick flash of flame. I'm talking about a fireball that looks like it could last forever . . . but it actually lasted a full second and a half. Then the fireball erupted. Spurts of flame shot into every direction before revealing me at the center wearing my T-shirt, blue jeans, and beat-up sneakers. The cape was nowhere to be seen. There were little pieces of black cloth raining

down on the audience, and I was unscathed. As I took a bow, the audience went crazy.

I was sure that I'd won, and the next night I was proven correct. Hands-down, I had the greatest act. I was showered with congratulations, and then I was thrust into the big time. I was to headline a Vegas show, and, if it went well, I would be given my own show. I debuted in Vegas to immediate success. Everyone who had watched the television show wanted to see me live, and the show was sold out for every day it ran. There was talk of extending the show, but I wanted my own show so I could enter the ranks of David Copperfield and Chris Angel. I knew I could write my own ticket, and that's what I did.

Most Illusionists only come up with a new illusion once or twice a year. The props have to be built, and the trick must be practiced repeatedly before it can be unveiled. I was showing a new illusion at every performance. Within months, I was the biggest act in Vegas. Offers to partner with other illusionists came up along with offers for TV specials, cable specials, a life-story movie, and even a series of DVDs teaching magic to others.

Above all else, I wanted to perform, and I was always pushing the envelope. As my magic became more complex, the illusions became grander. My trusted instructor kept pushing me to even higher levels.

I quickly became arrogant. Without quite realizing it, I'd become addicted to power. Everywhere I went I was catered to. I enjoyed chauffeur-driven limos, all-night parties, and women by the dozen. Every major designer in the fashion world had custom-designed clothing they wanted me to wear during my performances. My rise in fame was meteoric, to say the least, but instead of questioning why I was so popular so quickly, I felt it was my due for all the years of hard work during which I hadn't succeeded. I simply enjoyed my fame and everything that went with it.

I know you wonder why I'm telling you all of this, but, you see, there are some things that don't make sense without some perspective. Now comes the really important point of the story. It all started to unravel when I was watching a news report. I don't usually watch the news. For some reason, it had become abhorrent to me. On this day, though, I was watching the news, and the reporter stated that someone had caught me on camera beating up some guy in a club.

It showed me being led out in handcuffs. The problem with that was I couldn't remember any of it. I wasn't hung over. I discovered that when raw magic is coursing through you, it's almost impossible to get drunk. Why couldn't I remember? Could I have had a blackout? I'd never had one before. I thought about the night before. All I remember was going out to eat and then coming home and sleeping with Jessica. Yes. I had taken to having relations with my animated

assistants. My tastes had become decidedly strange, and my assistants were always compliant. Also, they never talked about it.

The point is that I had no recollection of the alleged event as portrayed on TV, but I couldn't get around the video, which clearly showed me under arrest. Then I thought of my old nemesis the cabal. I knew it must be them; they were setting me up to put me in my place. I had the right idea but the wrong enemy.

I knew I had to have had a memory replaced. By now, memory modification was easy for me. With enough preparation, I could implant a memory into an entire audience to help with the illusions. It was easier than you might think. With this ability, I could also erase or alter memories. If I could do it, why not the cabal that had begun working against me? With a quick thought, I cast a spell on myself to clarify my memories and make those memories match the muscle memory of my body. I was shocked by what I revealed!

For months, my memories had been altered . . . sometimes subtley and sometimes drastically. I'd been abusing people on a vast scale and in the worst way. If people came backstage after a performance, I would take control of them and make them do humiliating and sometimes disgusting things to each other. I would implant suggestions that would make them do worse things once they went home. I physically abused both male and female fans. I frequented bars in disguise and would pick up women and do horrible things to them. I'd even murdered some prostitutes. I was horrified and sickened by what was now a part of me. I couldn't fathom how I could have actually done these things.

At first, I thought I'd botched the spell and created something out of a horror movie instead of revealing my memories . . . but that was just my mind trying to shy away from the truth. I knew that someone had to be altering my mind to make me do these things. Someone wanted to discredit me and make the world hate me before my greatness eclipsed him. I was confused at first as to why this person had hidden these atrocities for so long only to allow me to discover them now. Then I realized that my discovery must also be planned.

I was guilty of so many crimes that there was no way I could explain to a court of law what had happened. I'd be considered insane and locked up. One of the very first spells I'd used was to reveal the truth, but when I tried it, nothing happened. I felt resistance to the magic like someone or something was blocking my spell.

Then I remembered the guy who had taken Sam's face. He'd started all of this. I could summon him to get answers. I'd become so much more powerful in recent months. I knew that I could handle him. Sadly, I was mistaking arrogance for confidence. I willed this guy into my presence. I tried visualizing him, but he didn't appear; instead, my spiritual instructor appeared . . . but he looked different. His features were similar, though not identical, to the man I'd fought. He looked

surprised, and that's when it hit me. All of this was his fault! There was no cabal of illusionists out to get me. Just him. He'd manipulated me from the beginning. I also realized that he must have been slowly possessing me much like poor Sam.

The veil was gone, and I saw clearly for the first time in months. My skin had darkened considerably. I looked as if I were of Egyptian descent. I'd grown a goatee and started wearing suits when I wasn't performing. I'd never been a suit kind of guy. I'd started to resemble him, and I felt instinctively that I'd continue to change if I didn't find a way to rid myself of him. Sometimes people can make leaps of logic that are almost uncanny. The information available is not enough to form a conclusive answer, but you can arrive at one anyway. This was one of those times.

I somehow knew that the bracers I was wearing were housing the malevolent spirit. I had to remove and destroy them before I was completely lost, but when I started to rip them from my arm, I froze. I was trying to move, but he was stopping me. I was being physically restrained by a spirit. I fought back with everything I had, but I was like a paper wall trying to stop a tsunami. I didn't give up. I knew that if I could find a small weakness I could live another day. That's when the magic exploded.

I'd harnessed a wellspring of magic so that I wouldn't tire myself. At least, that was the reason I'd believed at the time. The well wasn't far from the casino where my show was held, and I could siphon energy from it easily. The spirit reached for this source of raw magic at the same time that I did in order to bolster his attack. My idea was to counterattack, so a large amount of destructive energy was gathered with nowhere to go.

Our battle manifested in explosions in the hotel. Fires were burning everywhere. People were running and screaming and trying to escape. I knew I wasn't a match for him, but his display of power was phenomenal. I lasted only minutes before I was subdued, but it was enough. He couldn't go on living as me; no amount of cover-up would be enough.

You might wonder why he'd gone through all the trouble to set me up if he wanted to possess me and live on in my body. Occam's razor. The simplest answer is always right. He didn't set me up. He was never trying to set me up. All the crimes he had committed and all the horrors he'd visited upon those helpless people were not attempts to set me up but merely a part of his personality. He was such a twisted, evil bastard that those actions were the norm for him.

He'd hidden his proclivities from me so that when his evil was revealed I'd be overwhelmed with guilt and vulnerable to mental erasure. He;d thought I was ripe for assimilation when he'd allowed me to see the news report. He hadn't counted on the fact that my life had made me tougher mentally.

He knew that I'd resisted enough to thwart his plan, and he spoke to me in my mind: "Since you've deprived me of living this life, I'll ensure that you cannot have it either!"

He went on the devastating spree of destruction that brought the council down upon me. When the Defenders appeared and engaged him in combat, I saw my chance. I began fighting him again. I was a nuisance before, but now, with his need to defend against the Order's attacks as well as my own, he became overextended. I was able to take control of my body long enough to rip the bracers from my arms.

Immediately, I felt complete control return to my body. I knew that I was rid of the spirit. I couldn't undo what had been done, but I could prevent him from doing worse. I fell to my knees and surrendered to the Order of the Defenders. I had no idea that such an organization as yours existed, but I was glad that it did. The Defenders were able to make it appear as if a major magic show was nothing more than a mass gas explosion. Then I was brought before you. The rest you know.

"Mr. Foster, you have indeed surprised us today. We must think about your story and conduct additional investigations into your claims. This tribunal will recess for three days."

I was led back to a cell and left to wait. Those days seemed like years to me. Then I was summoned to appear before the tribunal once more.

"Mr. Foster, having admitted to a long list of crimes, your admission counts as a plea of guilty and is accepted by this court; but you are also innocent of those crimes because you were under the influence of the spirit within the bracers. After careful study, we have proven the existence of the entity within the bracers. We have learned that we have encountered him before. We are well aware of his abilities and evil ways. Several members of the magical community want us to be lenient on you. After long thought, we have decided to be merciful. Your punishment is one hundred years of community service to be served helping those you hurt and their descendants. You will also tell your story over and over to the younger generation of magicians in training so that they may see the folly that awaits the unsuspecting. This hearing is concluded."

"So that's how I came to be your storyteller today. I've served only ten years of my sentence, but I don't feel like it's difficult. I rather enjoy knowing I'm helping others to avoid my mistakes. The fact that I also discovered that magicians

live for hundreds of years means that I'll be able to complete my sentence and continue to help beyond it."

The group broke up. The young magicians had many things to consider.

One boy was eager not to avoid trouble but to grow up fast.

He had to go find that tomb.

Sangfroid in Shadows
Lee Russell

Slowly he stalks her, silently slipping from silver mists to silky shadows as he circles. The soles of his shoes slide over the sands and small stones. They strive to steal his stealth, but the small sounds that escape are swiftly silenced by the mist.

Still, he sees her stop. She scans her surroundings as if she's suddenly sure of someone's presence in the shadowy silence. He slowly sinks down and assumes the aspect of one of the surrounding tombstones. She spins, searching each side, but still his stealth is superb.

All seems safe, so she takes a stuttering step forward, still unsure but no longer as suspecting as before. He sees her look south, toward the safety she so recently surrendered. He's sure she's considering recessing toward that sanctuary. Scared and sequestered from support, she must choose to escape to that safety or stand and see herself safely to her destination.

He has experience on his side. He's set this snare before—snatched countless women. He's sure of every step. Steeping himself in secret memories, he sees chase after chase: the stimulation, the speed, the sudden success . . . . He tastes the fear on their skin; he suffuses their sweat like sweet ambrosia.

As he slips his stiletto through supple skin, he relishes in the suppressed screams. As he sunders a spirit, he supplants it with sorrow. So soon, it's over. He sets the shell free not with a swift strike or slash but softly with his skilled fingers slowly squeezing as he savors the strangulation.

He stares into their eyes as the substance of self recedes. He's snuffed out numerous sacrifices to sate the screaming spirits inside. Their struggles and sufferings served only to strengthen his skills.

She has no escape, only illusions. He's scouted each street and secured each route to safety. He's been surveying her and observing her schedule. She's slipperier than most, less stable. He sees her only after sundown as she leaves her studio. She is strong in flesh and spirit—a superb sacrifice. She will still the restless screams of his spirits this night.

She straightens and sets herself in defiance of her fears. She seems so strong. She will scream before the end—he's sure of that—but the sounds will be sweetened by her stubbornness. Her struggles will be a symphony to send his sated demons into slumber for several weeks.

She strides on, her confidence ascending with every step. Her shoes sound loudly on the cobblestone streets, each step speeding to the next. The solitary stalker stands—one with the shadows and the stones—and speeds stealthily her

way. Her strides mask the sounds of his as he slides out of the service gate of the cemetery. His soft-soled shoes are silent on the stones.

As his side street intersects with hers, he assumes a soft demeanor: slumping, shuffling his steps, and softening his visage. She sees him so close and somehow unavoidable, so she stops. She seems unsure, still undecided as to whether this is the source of her disquiet.

Despite his misdirection and subterfuge, she still senses danger. He sees the shift in stance and suspects she will succumb to her distress. He stops . . . but not soon enough. She spins and sprints away just seconds before his planned strike.

His excitement is unleashed. He drops his assumed disguise and strides powerfully in pursuit, sure in his speed and skills. She stumbles, betrayed by her shoes on the stones. He reaches forth, sure he has her, but she surprises him and slides to the side, speeding for safety down a side street.

He smiles as he follows, sure now of the cessation of the chase. She'll find a surprise—and her demise—down that street. He's set his snares well. She is soon to be his.

She fails to see the wires set across the street. The fine, silvery strings slice into her shins when she strikes them, and blood is shed as she slams face first into the cobblestones. She scrambles, trying to stand, but with speed and strength she is secured. His hands grasp her throat, squeezing softly, and then one hand strays to her mouth to still any scream she might unleash.

He possesses her now; she is his. Usually, they struggle, striving with him to escape. It's useless but stimulating. Sometimes, they snivel and beg, beseeching his sympathy. Such tactics incense him. She does neither. Instead, she shuts down. Her body relaxes and shudders. Is she sobbing so soon? Perhaps she's not as strong as he supposed.

That suspicion is dispelled when she reaches up and seizes his wrists in a steel-firm grasp. He struggles for release, but her hands have shifted into an unrelenting vise. She frees her mouth, unleashing the sophomoric giggles he mistook for sobs. The sound is high and sweet. He shudders as she spins, rising effortlessly to stand. Her strength is obvious and surprising.

She leans in, sniffing his exposed neck.

"So," she says, her silky voice seductive. "You finally sprang your trap. I've been waiting so long for you to stop skulking in the shadows and come to me." Her saliva-covered tongue slips against his skin.

He struggles for release, but his strength is insufficient. He's stuck firm in his own snare. His fear is sharp.

She suddenly assaults his subconscious with a vicious mental spike. He screams as shards of memory, long suppressed, stab into his brain. His mother's deprecations, the sick source of his depravity, suddenly strike him hard.

As he stares in terror, his captor's features shift, assuming the visage of his deceased mother. His bladder succumbs, releasing an acrid stench. She stretches out a hand, stroking his cheek.

"I always said you were a little sissy." She leans in close, savoring his fear as she caresses his face. "Go ahead. Scream for Mommy."

He does, screaming from the depths of his soul. She licks one supple fingernail, which slowly extends into a severe, sickle-shaped claw. With one swift slice, she silences his shrill screams, severing his throat and arteries. She bathes her face in the sticky, sultry spray. Shivering in ecstasy, she shoves her mouth straight into the slash and begins siphoning his life's blood and sucking out his shattered soul.

Seconds later, she discards his desiccated carcass. She swipes her tongue, scouring her shifting face spotless as it slides back to its simple, innocent shape. She smiles down at his remains then skips away, singing as joyously as a schoolgirl. She slips into the silvery mist and silky shadows, sated.

Juggling Kittens: A Review
Casey Purifoy

To many, a *noir* story features grey trench coats, fedoras, and 1940s Los Angeles. These stories have *femme fatales,* big bad crime bosses, small dirty cities, and good guys who have seen too many bad days. In *Juggling Kittens*, however, Matt Coleman twists *noir*'s most familiar elements into a thrilling Southern Grit crime novel about a teacher's search for one student in the rural outskirts of Texarkana, Texas.

The story starts when Ellis Mazer, a middle-school English teacher for Ruddy Creek (and a soon-to-be father), notices that one of his regular students, Spencer Sims, is missing more class than usual. Before long, Ellis and his principal (and moonlighting private eye) friend The Drew tangle themselves in a mystery that takes them from the school's classrooms to Southern backwoods and grimy trailer parks.

Coleman's Southern *noir* offers a fresh turn on the genre with a tonally dark locale and a varied cast of characters that reminds readers that the detectives, criminals, and seedy underworld denizens of the silver screen's gritty cities also exist in the wooded South. The author's descriptions of Ruddy Creek set a suitably bitter and melancholy tone through a liberal use of rusted trailers, dark pine forests, and winding foot trails to abandoned shacks.

Ellis Mazer and The Drew pursue this mystery together with a humorous rapport and sincerity that juggles the themes of school and teaching with those of family and fatherhood. One can expect to read about the frustrations that instructors face when dealing with standardized testing and daily dealings with parents and children.

The strongest aspects of *Juggling Kittens* are Mazer's first-person narrations and the nonlinear structure of the novel. Mazer's voice is a source of dry humor, wry wit, and insightful reflections. He constantly considers his role as a teacher, a soon-to-be father, and his obligations to his students as he searches for Spencer Sims. The result is a mystery that takes as much place in the hinterlands of Ellis Mazer as it does in those of Ruddy Creek.

The nonlinear aspect of the novel also serves Mazer's voice as a continuous point of characterization. Each flashback or aside builds the mystery surrounding Ruddy Creek as well as the tensions Mazer feels as a caretaker for his students' futures.

Readers of *Juggling Kittens* will find a story composed of equal parts humor, grit, and *noir*, but the tale ultimately explores the relationships between teachers and students, children and adults, and humans and monsters.

The Triumph of Death
Marquice D. Hall

This is the exact result of warfare.
The people who are dead have stab wounds.
The people who are alive have stab instruments.
Some are looking up to the sky for an explanation.
There is none . . . except war.

Upon Reflection

Shark Nets
Lee Russell

"There's shark nets,"
she told me.
"You can swim

in the water.
It's safe, I
promise you."

Years later,
pictures show
I'm gullible.

Guilt
David Harrison

It stings and stitches ’round my face and down the scarry curve
and leaves behind it pain and fear,
but it is less, far less, than I deserve.

Sister, in the hall quaking, wonders how a boy of three could reserve
for himself this physical lash and psychic spear.
It stings and stitches ’round my face and down the scarry curve.

She waits in line to receive her helping of what she must now observe,
for she knows that he will serve it, as before, with a lewd sneer,
but it is less, far less, than I deserve.

This won’t be the last time, nor was it the first, for him to serve
us pain and degradation, his face painted a warped leer.
It stings and stitches ’round my face and down the scarry curve.

I travel these memories often, and each time my heart will swerve
onto a path of regret, for what should have been is clear,
but it is less, far less, than I deserve.

Though, as the youngest, my pain ended early, my heart must preserve
the guilt of what I did not endure and they did for longer and by degrees more severe.
It stings and stitches ’round my face and down the scarry curve,
but it is less, far less, than I deserve.

Suitcases
Lee Russell

No memory of that first case,
a blank in my mind, like his face.
Gone before I could think or speak a word.
It's absurd, but not unique.

The second case . . . I recall it was small,
yet all my tears could fit
inside with room to spare. "Don't cry.
I'll see you all the time." He lied.

Two loaded trucks. Case number three.
What happened to our family?
Adoption: meaningless words spoken in haste.
A waste. Promise broken.

Another suitcase comes in through the door.
No more! I'm old enough to
know that you won't stay. They all say
they love you before they go away.

To a Stranger
Laura Persons

He liked this song.
He played it every morning.
He knew every word.
He knew every word.

Now when he hears it at the supermarket,
he wants to scream
Because he knows every word.
He knows every word,
but he doesn’t like it
anymore.

Bitter
Melinda Zwirn

My mother gives me baking chocolate—
A big bar with perfect breaks.
I bite.
I make a face that makes her laugh.
It is a mean trick.
But then she eats some, smiling.
She says that when I grow up, I will like
Dark chocolate
More than milk chocolate.
I can’t see switching the silky sweet
For the hard, harsh, dark,
But, smiling, she nibbles at the corner.
“It grows on you,” she says,
“Loving the bitter with the sweet.”

My Pencil
Cyla Maine

The pencil
has no voice.
It is a tool.
A tool for me.

My voice can
be heard
in the
scratching.

It echoes
my words
with every
reading.

Shoes with Holes
Aide K. Soto

The sermon of every Sunday afternoon at the kitchen table was about responsibilities, tasks, homework, complaints, and common scolding for what I did or did not do. Above all, it was my favorite moment of the week because my family shared a private moment of unity even in the uncomfortable situation of being singled out. Strangely enough, that Sunday of 1994, when I was only nine years old, my perspective of suffering and necessity changed forever. The atmosphere in the dining room was dry and silent. My mother did not raise her voice with complaints or statements. Something rare was happening.

My mother quietly said, "There is not enough money for new shoes this year; we need to take all the shoes to the shoe repairmen at the market."

No one said a word because we were not allowed to talk back to her. Distress filled up the room, and many questions popped into my head.

As a matter of fact, my siblings and I got two pairs of shoes per year. We always got bigger shoes so that when our feet grew, we still were able to use the shoes. We walked everywhere, and my shoes were a necessity. It was hard to keep the shoes' soles without holes, so my mother took the shoes to the repair store twice a year. December was our favorite month of the year because we acquired a pair of tennis shoes and a pair of black shoes along with one toy. The shocking news awakened a monster inside me.

I could not make complaints or ask why, so the silence filled me up with bitterness and anger. For many days, I walked, rubbing my shoes on the rough pavement and trying to make the holes in my shoes bigger to force my mother to buy me new ones. My sister and brother did not complain or fight on my side. In my little and irrational mind, there was not a reasonable excuse for why we did not have the money for shoes.

One of my daily activities was to go to the *tortilleria* for fresh *tortillas* before supper. As normal, the waiting line was so long. While I was waiting in the line, I noticed that a little girl was two places ahead of me. She was a particular little girl. She looked filthy and was wearing a faded and torn dress, which was very common in my neighborhood.

However, something called my attention; she did not have shoes on. Her heels were so cracked that the skin's color was almost black. Her feet were cut and so swollen that they caused me pain just to see them. I was astonished; my eyes pierced her feet, and I asked myself, "Where are her parents?"

When her turn came, she put one *peso* on the *tortilleria*'s counter and said, "Can you sell me one *peso* of tortillas?"

The cashier responded, “Well, the half-kilo cost one *peso* and seventy-five cents. That is the least that I can sell you.”

The little girl sadly replied, “I don’t have more money,” and she walked away.

No one in the whole line helped her; she was one more of those forgotten children. My heart was broken, and at that moment, I realized that shoes with holes are blessings that not everyone has. I walked back home wishing to have those seventy-five cents to help that little girl. I looked at my shoes and thought that I was the most selfish person in the world. I never mentioned anything to my mother, but I was so happy to have a mother to cover my feet.

She
Corrine E. Hinton

She's bent over the white ceramic kitchen sink, the ache in her back sharper and more prolonged after birthing what will be her last baby, a little girl, Mable Pearl, named after the baby's great-grandmother. She never knew the elder Mabel herself; the woman died nearly twenty years before she was born in that closet of an apartment her family shared off West 35th Street. The fictionalized memory of a grandmother she can only pretend to know is replaced by a genuine memory of her father kissing her gently on the cheek, as he did every evening when he returned home. Handing his lunch tin to Mama, Daddy would tug playfully on the ribbons at the end of her braids, bending his long body over hers. She could feel the scruff of his face, the easy beginnings of his five o'clock shadow on her chin amidst the fragrance of menthol and metal. The rush of a sudden breeze through the open window blows her father's face from her grasp like a balloon let go just a moment too soon and riding the wind.

Her hands move effortlessly over each plate, spoon, and glass—rinsing twice for good measure as her mother had always instructed. "Even poor folks need to be clean," Mama would remind her. "Bein' poor don't mean bein' dirty, and don't you let anyone tell you different," she would say. Wrapped in her mother's voice, she forgets her place and rinses again for good measure. Her breath is heavy with exhaustion, and she longs to retreat to her bed, but there is still so much to do. Plus, the younger Mable will need to feed again soon and will threaten any delay with her biological organ pipes. Her strong legs steady her as she carries her leftover baby weight around with her, picking up some of the boys' things that have traveled without legs into their small living room. She tucks their trinkets inside the pocket of her faded pink house dress, the loose end bowing slightly inward at the weight of the new arrivals. She reminds herself to repair the pocket tomorrow, as she has done nearly every day for the last ten years.

"What a difference thirty years makes," she laments. Just two years ago, right after James was born, riots tore through Harlem in the heat of the summer. "That policeman killed that boy," she mutters softly and to no one in particular. Her husband didn't know why, but she had switched James's names in honor of that poor boy taken from his mama. He was going to be Henry James, but James Henry sounded meaningful to her.

A tune crawls out from the sky-blue Heartbeat radio that sits on the small dining table. The song begins like a lazy Sunday morning as the sun stretches itself in the sky,

Oh, she may be weary

quickens like a child who spies his mother from across the playground,

Them young girls, they do get wearied

crescendos like a summer romance on the Fourth of July,

Wearing that same old shaggy dress, yeah, yeah . . . .

She holds herself up on the back of the chair, extending her back and releasing the smallest burst of air down the neck of her dress; even its slight coolness is relief to the small beads of sweat that have settled between her shoulder blades.

From around the corner, in the hallway, he watches his wife: the twinge of two decades of pain in her crow's feet, the weight of four children in her thick legs, and the guilt of untapped potential in her sagging cheeks.

But when she gets weary
Try a little tenderness.

She senses a change in the room. Her eyes rise to meet his. Instinctively, ashamed about the few moments she has taken for herself, she straightens herself quickly. In that time, she could have gathered the laundry for tomorrow.

"And that's my story."—
King's Quest, the Role of Narratives, and the Hero's Journey[*]

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 Graham—now an ailing king—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

[*] An earlier version of this essay appeared in volume nine of *Aquila Review* in 2016.

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 a re-imagining of the original *King's Quest: Quest for the Crown*. The chapter explains how Graham became the king 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 the crown.) 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 who 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 knight who initially befriends Graham, eventually turns on him during the competition for the throne 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 lead the country 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, Gart, 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, 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 first in 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.

The fourth chapter, *King's Quest: Snow Place Like Home*, begins to push this application farther, as Gwendolyn begins to realize that the audience archetype is only a stepping stone on the path of the hero. This chapter introduces Graham's children, Alexander and Rosella, who are engaged in a struggle over Daventry's line of succession; this struggle mirrors Graham's own struggle in the first chapter. Such tension is a common motif in medieval and fantasy media, but the struggle this game portrays is not simply a political one. Rather, the decision focuses upon who best fulfills the Hero archetype.

Alexander believes that Gwendolyn's respect for others qualifies her to rule, but Rosella argues that Gart is the perfect candidate because of his practical experience with questing. The parents' battle comes to a head at a family dinner during which Gart displays an arrogance that is much more fitting for Manny than an heir of Graham. Gwendolyn, however, does not prove her ability through her actions, as Graham did in defeating Manny. Instead, she allows her emotions to control her. She verbally attacks Gart and so temporarily steps off of the hero's path.

Oddly, this chapter (a mash-up re-imagining of *King's Quest III: To Heir is Human* and the ice-palace element from *King's Quest V: Absence Makes the Heart*

Go Yonder) actually features less correlation between the frame narrative and the main story than players might expect. Gwendolyn does not reach any goal at the conclusion that parallels Graham's. Gwendolyn only carries out the story's most basic theme—that reconciliation and acceptance are the only means to uniting a family—in her own circumstances by attempting to make peace with her cousin. Though they do reconcile, this fence-mending does not mirror the younger Graham's growth in the chapter's companion story (in which Graham recounts his experiences as a father, particularly his struggles with his son, Alexander). The main thrust of the narrative lies in Graham's coming to accept his son even though Alexander has grown into a very different kind of person through his being kidnapped and raised by Manny, who has now revealed himself as the wizard Manannan. Gwendolyn and Gart reconcile not through learning to appreciate each other's differences but through learning of Graham's imminent death. The frame and the story do not complement each other as completely as in the other chapters. Though this inconsistency could reflect Gwendolyn's temporary divergence from the Hero's Journey, the lack of any complementary elements (such as the goblin's relationship with stories in the second chapter) leaves the chapter looking more simplistic than its predecessors.

Following this trend, the chapter is also less story-driven than the rest of the game. In the first three chapters, puzzles and locations serve as a means of storytelling; each puzzle comes at a logical place, and the environments with which Graham interacts always further the narrative or extend the player's knowledge of Daventry. Chapter four, on the other hand, consists almost entirely of puzzles in a nearly unbroken chain that eventually create the impression that the story only exists as a container for mindgames. One might interpret this choice as having symbolic significance. After all, the characters are trying to solve the puzzles while also navigating their maze-like relationships. The over-reliance upon puzzle mechanics, however, pales in comparison with the other chapters' rich variety of symbols.

The final chapter, *King's Quest: the Good Knight,* although still plagued with an excess of puzzles, does bring a satisfying conclusion to the game's overall progression. Graham not only reveals the cause of his terminal illness but also gives Gwendolyn the catalyst she needs to become a storyteller rather than just a story-listener and a hero in her own right. Once again, the frame narrative and the story have equal importance and actually blend effectively on several levels.

First, the narration and game mechanics once again work together in order to portray Graham's manner of storytelling. This time, the story is much less cohesive. Graham struggles to remember details and attempts to add details he forgot to include in other stories; this technique leads to several surreal sequences that represent his ailing mind. (In once instance, white space represents missing details.) The confused storytelling also reflects Graham's newfound paranoia for capturing every detail and presenting an accurate account of the events; this obsession displays a complete reversal of his earlier philosophy. Gwendolyn, on the other hand, counters that she loves the stories just as Graham presented them to her; she reinforces the previous valuation of ideas over hard facts.

Second, the frame and story combine at the climax as Gwendolyn must help Graham finish his last story. This conclusion contains three layers of meaning. In the story, Graham's final battle of wits with Manannan explains his sad mental condition. Graham gives his life (and his wits) to protect the people of Daventry from Manannan's final revenge by casting himself in the path of a powerful death curse that would have destroyed the land. This sacrifice is an integral part of the Hero's Journey, which always contains a sacrificial death of some kind (either literal or symbolic). The core of heroism is, after all, selfless sacrifice for the benefit of others. In the frame, Gwendolyn finally moves from a listener to a storyteller; she shows herself prepared to make and tell stories and so secures her position as the next ruler of Daventry. All of the family members acknowledge this shift in status upon the story's completion. Gwendolyn's rite of passage mirrors Graham's victory in the first chapter, but her ability does not stem from intelligence, strength, and speed. Instead, her skill with words, bravery in the face of her grandfather's passing, and love for her family make her the ideal heir.

The juxtaposition of these two narratives reveals the last and most meaningful part of the Hero's Journey: the Hero's return or rebirth. Graham's obsession with preserving his stories as a legacy and the longing for adventure that the stories awaken in him point to his desire for a rebirth, which he believed would come in the form of one final quest from the magic mirror. At the end, however, he realizes that the experience of sharing his stories with Gwendolyn was his final adventure. The process planted the seed of the Hero archetype in her; this seed flowers when she takes up his role as storyteller. Graham lives on in his granddaughter. She is both his heir and the new bearer of the same archetype.

The game ultimately presents the Hero's Journey not as a linear narrative but as a cycle. Once Gwendolyn has finished the story for Graham, his unfilled desire is satisfied; he realizes that her life will continue the quests from his. Graham tells Gwendolyn, "I now know that all of my adventures will live on forever inside of you. As long as you keep telling my stories, they will never die" (*King's Quest: Adventures of Graham*). Gwendolyn, however, does not simply recite the stories; she continues to make them and tell them by using her life to find adventure. The game's short epilogue chapter expands upon this idea by following Gwendolyn as she captures a young dragon and meets Achaka's granddaughter; this simple quest playfully mirrors Graham's own conquering of the dark beings in Daventry and forming of powerful friendships. Gwendolyn continues to spread Graham's story through her lifestyle, but she remains her own person. The game suggests that each journey is reborn as the next in a circle that ultimately connects all stories together. Each hero relives the story of the last and ensures that the archetypal path will always exist upon which heroes may adventure, protect the weak, and lead.

Though the final chapters suffer from multiple problems such as an overreliance upon puzzles and restricted exploration, the game's ultimate theme endures throughout all of the chapters. 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. Narratives are not only entertainment devoured through print, film, and video games, but forces that exist in how people live. Though modern men and women might not face dragons or evil wizards, *King's Quest* invites people to consider whether they can, in their own way, follow the Hero's Journey and then invites them to look at their particular lives as part of an epic cycle. 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.

Works Cited

King's Quest: Adventures of Graham. Created by The Odd Gentlemen, Sierra Entertainment, 2015-2016.

Lewis, C. S. *Of Other Worlds*. 1966. Harcourt, 1994.

The Map of ME
Kayla Vaughn

My pores are like dig sites.
Inside you will not find bones,
Only artifacts of past makeup sessions
Or non-permanent decisions.
My nose formulates a mountain.
Inside are two caverns,
Both leading to winding pink rooms
Filled with a breath of fresh air.
Lines on top of lines form
Rivers and spillways in my skin.
My tears form a stream only
Frown lines can create.
Soon the plates beneath my skin will quake,
Creating
Deep valleys and small hills
Smashed in place.
Soon, when the time comes,
I'll pay a visit to the mapmaker,
And he will survey the land of ME;
And for a large fee,
He will fill in those big rivers
To create tiny little creeks
And cut and stitch me back together
Until I am the *perfect* map of me.

Clarifying the Blur in Dionne Brand's
"Madame Alaird's Breasts"
Erin Gloster

In its most simplistic form, "Madame Alaird's Breasts" by Dionne Brand is the short story of a schoolgirl and her classmates' mutual obsession with their French teacher's breasts and lips. The girls love to watch Madame Alaird's fullness as she teaches them French (particularly conjugation within French). More specifically, however, the story explores a particular moment within the lives of these thirteen-year-old schoolgirls—the moment of feminine liminality (i.e., the sexual threshold between girlhood and womanhood). Textually, "Madame Alaird's Breasts" works to demonstrate this moment of feminine, liminal sexuality through Brand's use of a blurring effect within the story's narration and use of a foreign language. Both of these blurs—the narration blur and the foreign-language blur of code-switching—work to capture, unravel, and examine the incremental liminal space or gap that separates a girl from a woman and ultimately demonstrates a specific time in the development of female identity.

"Madame Alaird's Breasts" uses retrospective narration through the first-person perspective of one of the thirteen-year-old schoolgirls. The narrator speaks in past tense when recounting her experience as Madame Alaird's student and often fills in observations about how she and her friends behaved. In the middle of the story, for example, Brand writes, "In the wooden and musty paper smell of our thirteen-year-old lives, in the stifling, uniformed, Presbyterian hush of our days, in the bone and stick of our youngness, Madame Alaird was a vision, a promise of the dark-red fleshiness of real life" (574). In this excerpt, the narrator uses past tense to reexamine her time as Madame Alaird's adolescent student and incorporates observations that attempt to explain the obsession with Alaird's breasts.

However, when recounting past dialogue, the narrator does not specifically use past tense to signify the girls' conversations as something viewed in retrospect. Instead, the schoolgirls' dialogue occurs after the narrator's moments of looking back without any sort of lead-in to frame the conversation in the past. Following the narrator's mention of Madame Alaird as a "vision, a promise of the dark-red fleshiness of real life" and the past-tense form that accompanies this retrospective observation, Brand immediately inserts dialogue from the schoolgirls, without any signifying transition from past tense (Brand 574). Brand writes,

> . . . Madame Alaird was a vision, a promise of the dark-red fleshiness of real life.
>
> "Madame Alaird looking like she catching trouble, eh?"
>
> "But why she looking so bad?"
>
> "It must be she husband, *oui*!"

"Madame Alaird don't need he . . . . '" (574)

At this point in the text, the narrator switches (rather suddenly) from speaking in observational, past tense to dialogue essentially slapped after the observations.

Throughout the story, the two narrative voices—that of the retrospective schoolgirl and that of the present schoolgirl—work interchangeably to explore the period of young adolescence within a girl-woman's life. The inclusion of two narrative versions of the same girl (just at different time periods in life) emphasizes the liminal moment between girlhood and womanhood by causing one to question the degree to which the schoolgirls are aware of their behavior.

While the retrospective narrator can explain the behaviors of her group by filling in narrative details with observations, the present dialogue of the schoolgirls cannot fill in details or observations because it does not exist in the form of past tense with any past-tense signifiers and rather sits by itself within the text. One half of the story's narration provides flexibility and leniency by examining a time period (i.e., young adolescence) from the perspective of an individual who has passed through the phase of adolescence. Effectively, she has landed on the other side of the liminal space between girl and woman and gained the ability to use past-tense narration. The other half of the story's narration denies any opportunity for retrospective discussion of young adolescence; this narration exists in present, fixed dialogue with no signifying transitions from past tense. The narration rests upon the liminal space between girl and woman.

By writing about young teenage girls and their fascination with their teacher's breasts through two perspectives on opposite ends of adolescent liminality, the story approaches a specific time within the development of female identity or femaleness through a narrowed, pinched focus; this focus provides, first, womanhood and its accompanying hyperawareness of explanation for adolescent sexual behavior and, second, close examination of girlhood and its accompanying unawareness of sexual behavior. In his article "Dionne Brand's Poetics of Recognition: Reframing Sexual Rights," Greg A. Mullins discusses Brand's use of similar narrative techniques of blurred narration in her novel *In Another Place, Not Here*. Mullins explains:

> *In Another Place, Not Here* draws upon literary techniques that aim to frustrate linear narrative conventions: stream of consciousness, intrusions of elliptical and oblique narrative fragments, and a plot that circles and spirals as it is told through the recollections of its two protagonists . . . . By making demands on the reader to understand these women on their own terms and to read several times until the spirals of language condense into moments of insight, by representing passion not through a named sexual identity but rather though memory, loss, beauty, and exuberance, Brand engages her

> readers in the difficult task of recognizing the urgency, the complexity, and even the contradictions of these characters' humanity. (1106)

Mullins's idea emphasizes Brand's reoccurring literary ploy to incorporate multiple narrative perspectives with the incorporation of insight and memory; Brand attempts to isolate time or specific moments of time, such as feminine liminality, within the narratives of her characters. Brand's tactics in other texts is similar to her tactic of blending the retrospective and present dialogues of the schoolgirl at different times in the narrator's life, as Brand seemingly attempts, overall, to position time in terms of her characters' understandings of that time. The blur between the two narrative voices points to the space between girlhood and womanhood by slurring the opposite perspectives of looking forward and looking back; she places emphasis upon the time (i.e., the liminal space of adolescence and female sexual development) that lapses between them.

When the girls discuss Madame Alaird's breasts on their way home from school, they speak in a combination of English and French (i.e., code switching); they combine their native language and the language Madame Alaird teaches. In the beginning of the story, the narrator explains:

> Every Tuesday and Thursday after school, bookbags and feet dragging, we'd discuss Madame Alaird's breasts.
>
> "But you see Madame Alaird breasts!"
>
> "Girl, you ever see how she just rest them on the table!"
>
> "I wonder how they feel?"
>
> "You think I go have breasts like Madame Alaird?"
>
> . . . "And you don't see how they sticking out in front like that and when she walk is like she falling over! *Oui*! *Bon jieu*!"
>
> "But Madame Alaird ain't playing she have breast, *oui*!"
>
> "And girl she know French, eh?" (Brand 574)

The girls discuss Madame Alaird's breasts in terms of themselves by recounting the different ways they each see Alaird's breasts and wondering whether they will eventually have breasts like Madame Alaird's. The young girls discuss Alaird's breasts in a way that is somewhat mocking of her teaching in the sense that they use Alaird's profession (i.e., speaking and teaching a second language) to discuss her physical attributes. However, the girls do not necessarily mock Alaird's ability to speak a second language; instead, the girls seemingly use Alaird's teachings to inform themselves and each other of mutual thoughts regarding Alaird's body by using the knowledge Alaird has given or taught them.

Regardless of whether the students understand the English translation of the French dialogue they use to discuss Madame Alaird, the students still repeat her dialogue in an attempt to imitate her. In the article "Code-Switching and

Predictability of Meaning in Discourse," Mark Myslín and Roger Levy explain the significance of such repetition:

> In sociocultural approaches, language switching is a resource that can be used to construct identity, modulate social distance and affiliation, and carry out interspeaker accommodation. For example, code-switching itself may be the unmarked choice for a community in which speakers maintain affiliation with two different socioethnic groups simultaneously . . . . [I]f code-switching is a tool to signal affiliation with social groups, code-switching patterns should depend in part on the participants present and their social affiliations. (873)

In the case of the schoolgirls, their act of code switching becomes an attempt to affiliate themselves with the social group of woman that is most often present to them. The girls take on Madame Alaird's taught language in order to mimic her social affiliation with femaleness (or her development into womanhood). The schoolgirls do not yet posses the physical qualities they admire in their teacher, so they adopt the teacher's language as a resource for constructing their hope for obtaining a female identity.

Brand chooses to write the schoolgirls' dialogue with both English (the girls' own language) and French (Madame Alaird's language); this choice further demonstrates the shifting point from girl to woman in the adolescents' lives. The girls discuss a woman they view as the promise of womanhood by using that same woman's language or dialogue. In the dialogue, which is fixed and absent of post-adolescent behavioral explanation, the schoolgirls essentially practice becoming Madame Alaird by faking or taking on the most obvious behavior they can grasp from Alaird—her language. The girls are fascinated with Alaird's breasts because the girls do not have them and wonder if they will have them in the future.

They cannot exactly mimic having Alaird's breasts at this point in their lives. The girls can, however, effectively mimic Alaird's language in an effort to appear or feel more like her. In this sense, Brand's use of blurring the schoolgirls' native language and Madame Alaird's foreign language demonstrates the feminine, liminal space of sexuality between girl and woman by emphasizing the schoolgirl's indirect route (i.e., speaking and repeating French) of becoming Madame Alaird.

More specifically, the girl's act of code switching demonstrates this specific time in the development of female identity because it demonstrates the girls' awareness that they will eventually become Madame Alaird (or at least possess her physical qualities). As the girls excitedly discuss whether they will one day have breasts like Madame Alaird's, they interject pieces of Madame Alaird's dialogue into their own speculation about the other side of the liminal space between girl and woman; they mimic Madame Alaird's language as they think about how they will one day appear like her to practice their eventual ascent into womanhood via

their picture of womanhood. Because the girls do not physically possess Madame Allaird's womanly physique, they borrow Madame Alaird's language.

Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind discusses the repetition of authority language in a chapter titled "Received Knowledge: Listening to the Voices of Others":

> Although most women find the powers of their voice and mind most readily in relationships with friends, those who think they *receive* all knowledge are more apt to think of authorities, not friends, as sources of truth. They equate receiving, retaining, and returning the words of authorities with learning—at least with the kind of learning they associate with school. (Belenky, et al. 39)

This idea demonstrates the larger idea that the schoolgirls equate their "receiving, retaining, and returning" of authorities' words (or Madame Alaird's words) with their ability to learn from her as an authority (39). When the girls participate in code switching to embody or pretend to embody a woman, they effectively return the teacher's words; they associate this process with learning, and, more specifically, they associate this process with the learning they experience in the classroom with Madame Alaird.

The schoolgirls attempt to decipher and use Alaird's language because they are not like her; they do not yet possess the same physical qualities they admire in Madame Alaird because they are caught between girlhood and womanhood. The schoolgirls use Alaird's language to discuss the physical attributes (i.e., breasts) of Madame Alaird that they may possess one day. The girls slowly try to become the woman that Madame Alaird represents by mimicking her outward expression of language and participating in code switching because they can only mimic what is most available as an aspect of femaleness—their role model's language. Within a broader context, the girls participate in code switching as a ritual while they wait for their time to develop into someone physically similar to Madame Alaird.

Another moment during which the schoolgirls mimic Madame Alaird's language is attached to the schoolgirls' additional obsession with Alaird's lips. The narrator links the two items closely: "Madame Alaird's breasts were like pillows, deep purple ones, just like Madame Alaird's full lips as she expressed the personal pronouns, '*Je-u, Tu-ooo, Ell-lle, No-o-us. Mes enfants, encore . . .* '" (Brand 573). The narrator carefully builds upon this initial linkage:

> "*No-o-us, Vo-uus, Ell-lles*," which we deliberately mispronounced to have Madame Alaird say them over. Madame Alaird's breasts gave us imagination beyond our years of possibilities, of burgundy velvet rooms with big-legged women and rum and calypso music. Next to Madame Alaird's breasts, we loved Madame Alaird's lips. They made water spring

> to our mouths just like when the skin bursts eating a purple fat mammy sipote fruit. (573)

The narrator talks about how the girls loved watching Alaird's lips reciting conjugations to the point that they would deliberately mispronounce the words and force Alaird to repeat them just to watch her lips again. The girls mimic Alaird's language through code-switching again, but they mimic her incorrectly to reinforce the womanly features they desire (i.e., her lips).

While the girls cannot yet possess full lips, they can act out the language that escapes Madame Alaird's lips. The narrator explains the phenomenon: "[We had] [g]iggles reaching into belly laughs near Carib Street and in chorus, *'BONJOUR MES ENFANTS'* rounding our lips on the *bonjour*, like Madame Alaird's kiss" (Brand 574). The narrator notes how the girls would round their lips like Madame Alaird in order to pronounce French words fully. The girls associate Madame Alaird's lips with her language. The girls mimic the movement of her lips in order to appear or feel more like Madame Alaird.

That the girls begin to imitate Madame Alaird's language through code-switching in order to achieve a close version of her lips demonstrates the girls' positioning at the frontier of a liminal moment; they do not possess womanly attributes, but they can speak more like a woman. More broadly, this attempt to imitate Madame Alaird physically while verbally imitating her through the act of code-switching demonstrates the specific liminal moment within the development of female identity; the girls are aware that they may eventually become Madame Allaird and posses physical qualities like her full lips, but they can only act the embodiment of womanhood by physically and verbally imitating their ideal embodiment of a woman.

"Madame Alaird's Breasts" explores young adolescent schoolgirls and their shared admiration of their teacher's fullness as a woman in her breasts and her lips. They adore her together during school, talk about her after school when they walk home, and speculate about aspects of their teacher's life. The structure of the story, with Brand's use of two blurs—that of narration and that of code switching—works to capture the young girls' specific time period of female development in the course of their lives. This time period is the moment of feminine liminality—or the gap between girlhood and womanhood—in which the girls yearn for the womanly qualities their teacher possesses.

Brand's narration blur, incorporating both a retrospective narrator and a present narrator, works to emphasize the space between girlhood and womanhood by focusing the narration upon the time that has lapsed between present dialogue and the narrator's recollections. The retrospective narrator and her ability to fill in observations about the girls' behaviors towards their teachers' breasts and lips provides hyperawareness of explanation for adolescent behavior. The absence of

signifying past-tense transitions when incorporating dialogue from the past forces the dialogue to stay fixed in the present and provides an extreme lack of explanation for adolescent behavior.

These two perspectives exist as the ends of the liminal space between girl (i.e., the present-tense narrator) and woman (i.e., the retrospective narrator), and such juxtaposition narrows the reader's focus to the liminal space between girl and woman. This liminal space and the blur of narration points to the larger idea of female development by exposing the space that the girls are aware they will eventually cross. Brand's blur of code switching—incorporating a combination of English and French into the girls' present-tense dialogue—demonstrates the girls' inability to become Madame Alaird completely.

The girls discuss Madame Alaird and her breasts using French language like their teacher while they converse about her in their own language; this form of imitation becomes the girls' attempt to appear or feel more like the woman they see in the front of the classroom. The girls' discussions with a blur of English and French reveals their excitement about eventually being on the other side of the liminal space between girl and woman. Additionally, the girls use Alaird's language with the element of physical imitation by rounding their lips with conjugation in order to appear to speak more like a woman with full lips. Code-switching demonstrates the girls' positioning at the beginning of their adolescent liminality between girl and woman by emphasizing the schoolgirls' attempts to appear like the woman they clearly see on the other side of the liminal gap.

Overall, Brand's use of the narration blur and the blur of code-switching points to the space between girl and woman by emphasizing the beginning and the end of the liminal gap of feminine sexuality and the girls' attempts to imitate Madame Alaird. Blurring places focus upon the time, bridge, or space that exists between the girls' beginning of female adolescent development and the desired ending of the fullness of womanhood.

Works Cited

Belenky, Mary Field, et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind.* 10th Anniversary ed., Basic Books, 1997.

Brand, Dionne. "Madame Allaird's Breasts." *The Longman Anthology of Women's Literature*. Edited by Mary K. DeShazer, Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2001, pp. 572-76.

Mullins, Greg A. "Dionne Brand's Poetics of Recognition: Reframing Sexual Rights." *Callaloo*, vol. 4, 2007, p. 1106.

Myslín, Mark, and Roger Levy. "Code-Switching and Predictability of Meaning in Discourse." *Language: Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2015, pp. 871-905.

from *Alive* (Chapter Nine)
Lauren Braswell

Twelve days later, on April 20, 2012, I turned twelve years old. I sprang out of bed and raced to the living room. I knew my parents' rules. I would get one present in the morning and the rest after school.

"Morning, Mom," I said, in a loud whisper.

She was sitting by the fireplace with her right hand wrapped securely around a beige cup filled with coffee. Her tangled hair hung in greasy locks. I wished she would wash her hair more often, but because of her back condition, I knew showering was difficult for her. It was a little after six in the morning. I glanced out the window. The sun was just beginning to peak above the trees.

"Happy birthday, dear," Mom whispered, waving her hand to indicate I should be quieter. Holland was still asleep.

I glanced around, looking for my present. Mom read my expression.

"I know what you're looking for. Wait till Dad gets up. We're giving you the big one this morning."

I giggled excitedly in my pajamas and went in the kitchen to fix something quick for breakfast. While I ate, I fiddled with the apps on my phone. To my delight, Heather, Anna, and Emma had all sent me happy-birthday texts. Gavin had posted on my *Facebook* wall. A smile forced its way over my cheeks and only got bigger when I heard my parents' bedroom door opening.

My dad strode out of the bedroom, his hair still damp from the shower and his beard neatly trimmed. I looked up at him expectantly, and he kissed the top of my head.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," he said in a cheery tone.

"Where is it?" I asked, dragging out the syllables of the word *it*, making me sound like a small, impatient child.

He laughed and told me to follow him quietly to the garage. The garage door rumbled as it lifted, and it took my eyes a moment to adjust to the dark. I was thrilled at what lay in the dimly lit building. It was a stunt bike.

I stepped up to the gleaming bicycle lying at an angle on the grey marble garage floor. I ran my fingers over the cool, white metal of the handle bars for the first time and then traced the green squares that had been painted on the frame. Sleek black pegs stuck out from both tires. The Giant logo was engraved on the camo-green rims of the tires. My new bike looked out of place on the ground. This bike wasn't meant for storage. This bike was meant for action—for racing through neighborhood streets, for kicking up gravel, for getting splattered with mud, and for all sorts of other things. This bike had been tailor-made for somebody with passion. Somebody like Lauren Braswell. Somebody like me.

Gripping the dark rubber grips on the handlebars, I lifted the bike to the upright position, feeling its weight. My hands fit right onto the pattern. I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for this perfect birthday gift. I had gotten exactly what I wanted, but now it was time to get dressed for school. Back to the real world. Even so, nothing could wipe the grin off my face today.

Walking through the metal doors of Redlake Middle School, my spirits felt lighter, more buoyant, lifted from the burdens of the previous week that had been dragging me down. Even the thought that Bethany hadn't wished me a happy birthday didn't damper my attitude. All I could think about was that brand-new bike lying in my garage and beckoning me to take it for the first ride. Anticipating my first test run, the day dragged on; I thought it would never come to an end. Squeezing the rail of my desk impatiently, wishing my hands were wrapped around the handlebars of that beautiful bike instead, I glanced at the clock. Only fifteen minutes had passed. I sighed, terribly jumpy and unable to focus. I scrawled some inane answer on my social studies worksheet and finally turned it in. I sighed again, itching to touch those precious, sleek, black rubber bars.

Then I remembered. The mile test was coming up next period. My heart skipped a beat. Recalling how scared I had been earlier in the school year when I had been told of the mile, the fear returned tenfold. A line of goosebumps rose on my flesh. The fear was primal, the type that made me draw into my center—the only kind of fear I'd ever known—something that couldn't be brushed off.

At this point, I would've told my apprehensive twelve-year-old self not to worry because, after some years had passed and she became me, a mile would simply be a warm-up run. I would've told her there was no reason to be afraid because she was going to fall in love with every part of this sport soon enough. But to become the older, wiser self that I was now, I had to push through the fear that nearly shut me down then.

I walked to the gym with my head up and shoulders back, my posture belying the fact that my hands were sweaty and my tongue felt like a lump of sandpaper. Along with the other students, I was getting ready to run four laps around a four hundred-meter field. I wondered which classmates I had the capability of beating. Once inside the locker room, I donned the running shoes my mom had packed for me. With slightly shaking hands, I laced the white shoestrings through the eyes of the crisp blue New Balance shoes. After we were all dressed out, Coach Gabby blew the whistle, and we all gathered around her. It bothered me a bit that nobody else seemed as uneasy as I was.

"As you all know, today we will run the mile for the physical-fitness test. All of you will run four laps around the field by the administrative offices. Remember to refrain from walking, and breathe in through your mouth and out through your nose," Coach Gabby said.

I should have paid better attention to her advice, but I was too jittery and distracted. My classmates began walking toward the door, and I followed. I saw Bethany and wished her good luck. She didn't say a word. I remembered asking her for running tips at the first of the school year. With a sinking feeling, I wondered exactly what I had done to make her despise me so much. We walked outside and across the pavement to a field of pale-green, freshly mowed grass. The only thing that stood between me and my trick bike were four laps on that field and Mrs. Holdsen's class. I was going to have to find a way to get through them both.

Coach Gabby separated the boys from the girls. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least I wouldn't have to compete with the boys (especially Gavin). It would be so embarrassing for him to watch me finish last. We all lined up on the grass, Coach Gabby placed the black-plastic whistle between her lips and blew, and I started sprinting. *Oh, God!* The fear pounded at the base of my skull. I panicked. Sweaty bodies passed me right and left, with no other than Bethany taking the lead. I rounded the curve, already breathing hard. Another one hundred meters. I was worn out and close to the end of the pack. Struggling to find a grip on my thoughts, all I could think about was running. What had possessed me to ever think I could possibly do this? I was confused. I had trained, hadn't I? I had done all the ten-minute jogs. What was different about those runs and this one?

My rhythm. Right now, I was just mindlessly racing forward. In the past, I had always fallen into a methodical rhythm. I started jogging, first focusing on my breathing and then trying to shape my ragged, uneven gasp into a circuit between my nose and my mouth. Bit by bit, my breathing regulated to an even pattern. Next, I concentrated on my speed. *Faster.* I started sprinting again. *No, not that fast. Just cover more ground.* I sped up my jog to a light-tempo run. Suddenly, I was on the other side of the field with three more laps to go. Beads of perspiration formed on the top of my forehead, but I refused to throw in the towel. I willed my arms to keep pumping and my legs to keep moving. Grace was ahead of me by about forty feet. Lengthening my strides, I finally caught up to her. I could hear her panting. Stealthily creeping up behind her, I passed her by. Daring a glance back, I saw ten girls behind me, five of them walking. Pride welled up within me. *I've got this.* I focused all my attention on my running rhythm, making certain that my heartbeat, footsteps, and breathing were all in sync. It became effortless, enjoyable. The third lap was gone.

"Finish strong, girls!" Coach Gabby shouted as we passed her.

I tried to accelerate my jog, breaking my synchronized breathing pattern. My legs felt like dead weight, but it didn't matter because this was the last lap. Drenched in sweat, I pushed a little harder, easing up at the last turn and saving all my energy for the last one hundred meters. With the oppressive heat pressing in, oxygen became a luxury; I couldn't get enough. I pushed my arms back and

kicked my legs up, straining for every lick of speed I could get. Keeping my chest pushed out and head up, I passed Grace. And I ran, and I ran—and then it was over.

Air. Oxygen. It filled my lungs and humbled me. Bit by bit, the tension melted from my legs. It was all over. I had run the mile. A mixture of relief and satisfaction brought a smile to my face. I walked back to the gym to get dressed the same way as I had walked out—chin up, palms sweaty, and throat dry. However, it was all for entirely new reasons.

Today was the only day that Mrs. Holdsen's voice didn't shatter my mood. I even dared to look her right in the face and smile. When Mrs. Holdsen's class ended, I wasted no time getting to the car-rider line and into my dad's truck. I was so close to being with my trick bike.

"Is it okay if I go ahead and ride when I get home and eat cake and stuff later on?" I asked.

Dad winked at me. "I'm glad you like your birthday gift that much."

I took that as a yes.

Once home, I threw my backpack in the backseat of the truck, slammed the door, and waited a few seconds until Dad was inside.

Pressing the button, I heard the rumble of the garage door. The bike was in the same position as I had left it early this morning. The bright afternoon sun made it look even more beautiful. I sprinted over to it, grabbing the handle bars with a solid grip. Finally feeling the rubber in the palm of my hand, I exhaled. After seven hours, I was where I wanted to be. Straddling the bike, I put my feet on the pedals and pushed off. The position was slightly awkward. Because it was a trick bike, the seat was low, so I had to stand on the pedals to ride. I looked down at my feet and then focused straight ahead. I pushed down on the pedals and started riding up and down my driveway. The way the pedals gripped the tread of my shoes appealed to me. I found a rhythm, built up speed, and rode around on the concrete of my driveway. This bicycle had a different feel to it than my mountain bike had. This bike had a unique way of making me feel like I was in flight. It was absolutely addictive.

After maybe thirty minutes or so of this, I stepped on my pegs. Deliberately slowing my pedaling speed, I lifted my right foot, which immediately threw me off-balance. Extending my leg until I felt the balls of my feet touch the back peg, I shifted my focus from the back pegs to maintaining my balance. Without warning, my foot slipped off the peg, the world tilted, and I collapsed onto the concrete, my new bike on top of me. Cursing under my breath, I untangled myself. My knees stung, and both pant legs were stained red. Although I felt shaken, I had an uncanny urge to get back on the bike and try again. Maybe I was still angry at Mrs. Holdsen or upset with Bethany or just mad at school in general (or still riding

my high from the mile), but no matter the reason, a spark of determination had been ignited. I ignored the pain in my knees and let my newfound energy pick me up, dust me off, and guide me back on the bike.

I grabbed the bars and repeated the same maneuvers, but this time, I didn't slow down as much. I firmly planted my foot on the peg before my sense of balance wavered. Jumping down from the peg before having a chance to fall, I stood on the ground with the bike between my legs.

The clean pride that had welled up within me when I ran for the full ten minutes in gym class washed over me yet again, but this time it was slightly more penetrating. There were plenty of other amazing runners at Redlake, but none of them did bike stunts. This sport was all mine. Pulling out my phone, I searched for bicycle stunts on Internet Explorer and found that BMX Flatland was the official name for the sport of bike stunts.

At sunset, I finally conceded to going inside to finish my birthday celebration and doctor my scraped knees. I wheeled my BMX bike to the garage.

"Till I see you again," I said, giving the seat a tender pat.

Mom's eyes widened in horror when she saw my blood-stained knees. I couldn't help but laugh.

"What the hell did you do?" she exclaimed, a tint of anger coating her words.

"Had a wreck, but I was almost able to stand on the ba—,"

"No more. Not till you get knee pads or perhaps a full body cast of bubble wrap," Mom interrupted.

"Yeah, cool, so when can I get some of those?" I directed this question at my dad since he was usually the more relaxed person in such situations.

He promised to run by the bike shop on his way to work tomorrow. I smiled, sat down, and enjoyed dinner and cake with my family. After dinner, I opened my other presents—a pair of new headphones and some money. Holland had drawn me a picture of myself that featured bright red hair and an oversized purple nose. I loved it.

With Mrs. Jen still in the picture at Redlake, I knew the few remaining weeks weren't going to be enjoyable ones. The school's atmosphere had become stilted after Mr. Black left. Little things, important things, were missing. Teachers no longer slapped high-fives in the hallway. They gave more homework. When Mrs. Jen walked into the classrooms, teachers frantically scrambled to make it appear as if we were inundated with work. Redlake's climate had become oppressive. I didn't like it, but I took comfort in the fact that summer break was around the corner.

During school, I kept my mind focused on getting home and riding my bike. Little by little, I got better at BMX. First, I learned to ride in a straight line with

my foot on the peg. From there, I could ride in a straight line with both feet. Mostly, I just liked the way it felt to be on the bike. Many days after I got home from school, I wouldn't do any tricks. I'd just jump on the bike, grab the bars, and fly down the neighborhood streets. Sometimes, I'd ride so fast that the edges of my vision would blur.

I'd fallen in love. That's the only way to describe it. My passion for this sport continued to grow. BMX allowed me to lose myself while finding myself at the same time. I could forget the world by focusing on the pedals taking my feet off the ground. My little stunt bike had become my new best friend. Developing my skills and expanding my knowledge of the sport gave me something to look forward to.

Behind my BMX handlebars, I could conquer whatever life threw at me . . . or so I thought.

About the Contributors

Gabriel Avila enjoys making a wide variety of art through different mediums and seeing art from other artists. For him, spotting different art styles and understanding pieces from someone else's perspective is an enjoyable learning process. His works consist of pencil sketches, acrylic paintings, soft chalk pastels, and watercolors—each medium consisting of different styles. He hopes to branch out to oils one day.

Brooke Barnett lives with her family in Texarkana, Texas. She is a senior at Texas A&M University-Texarkana who is majoring in psychology. Her goal is to become a high-school counselor.

Lauren Braswell is fifteen years old, a Texas resident, and a lover of stock shows. Most importantly, she is an author. The book *Alive* is the first of many stories she will share with the world.

Jason Clayton was born in Texarkana, Texas, during the administration of George Bush, but he grew up in Maud, Texas, where he attended school. When he was a child, he read folktales and books by J. K. Rowling, both of which continue to influence his writing. As he matured, he discovered the novels and short stories of Stephen King—his most important writing teacher—before becoming enamored of the Southern-gothic style (specifically the short stories of Flannery O'Connor). Reading and writing comprise the bulk of his leisure time . . . along with a casual interest in etymology, history, and general shenanigans. "Hunting" is his first published work.

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.

Erin Gloster is from Texarkana, Arkansas. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science at Texas A&M University-Texarkana in the spring of 2017. Her areas of interest include modern American literature, gender and

sexuality studies, and popular culture. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in English at the University of Arkansas.

Tobe W. Gurley was born in California. He joined the army in 1978 and ended up in Arkansas, where he worked various jobs. Tobe enjoys writing, exercise, and good movies. The lack thereof inspired him to write three screenplays; however, finding a home for them has proven to be more difficult than creating them.

Marquice D. Hall is currently a junior at Texas A&M University-Texarkana majoring in psychology. As a kid, he spent the majority of his life living in New Boston, Texas; he spent some valuable time in Mesquite, Texas, as well. Throughout his adolescent years, he had a strong desire to express his ideas but could not find an artistic manner to do so. After taking an advanced American-literature class in the Spring of 2017, he became inspired after reading so many great poets for class. With his newfound artistic passion, he has decided to put his best efforts into producing poetry.

Hailey Harris was born and raised in Texarkana, Texas. She graduated from Texas High School and recently graduated from Texas A&M University-Texarkana. Now she is living in Conway, Arkansas, and preparing to start a master's-degree program at UCA. She hopes to become a dyslexia therapist so that she may help students who struggle with academics (just as she did).

D. J. Harrison is a native of Illinois, where he graduated from high school in the top seventy percent of his class. After experiencing a brief career in the food service industry, he decided that school wasn't so bad after all and moved to Arkansas to attend John Brown University. He graduated with bachelor's degrees in both business and broadcasting before accepting a commission in the United States Army. He retired after twenty-three years in active and reserve service. He is astonishingly happily married to Judy, with whom he has four terrific children and the four most wonderful grandchildren on the face of the earth. He writes fun little stories for his grandchildren; he hopelessly dreams he will publish those stories one day. As a form of therapy, he writes mediocre poetry; he knows it doesn't stand a chance of publication, but he pines for it regardless of how maudlin it seems. He is currently working for "The Man."

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.

Corrine Hinton is an assistant professor of English at Texas A&M University-Texarkana who teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in writing and the teaching of writing. She received her doctorate in English from Saint Louis University in 2012. A veterans-studies scholar, her primary research interest lies in explorations of student veterans' transferability of military writing practices to college writing practices. She is the assistant editor for the *Journal of Veterans Studies*. Her other research interests include rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, writing pedagogy in the Renaissance, and innovative English Language Arts pedagogies in the teaching of preservice educators. She is the proud wife of a retired combat Marine and the daughter of two retired Air Force veterans.

Rachel Horne is a senior at Texas A&M University-Texarkana who is majoring in English and minoring in mass communications; her research interests focus upon audience responses to works. She has performed in A&M-Texarkana's productions of *The Fifty-one Percent* and *Bernie Wolf*, and she currently holds the record for the most onstage deaths. Cats and naps are among her favorite things. She spends her time writing science fiction and fantasy whenever she isn't writing papers for classes.

Allison C. Johnson recently graduated with honors from Texas A&M University-Texarkana with a double major in history and English; she will be pursuing a

master's degree in English at the University of Texas at Austin. 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 and a tutor in biology and English. She spends her free time writing creatively, drawing, and painting.

Molly Kyles is a sophomore at Texas High School whose core beliefs are that David Tennant was the best Doctor and that *The Office* is far, far better than *Parks and Recreation*. Her hobbies include trying too hard to be creative and obsessing over a number of geeky books, musicals, and movies (including her most deeply rooted obsession, the Harry Potter franchise). Most of what she says derives from a badly placed pun, and if you tell her a joke, she will unfailingly laugh more than what's appropriate for the situation. Excited to be published in *Aquila Review*, she asks you to forgive her if she still references memes from three years ago. (She's trying her best.)

Sara Lawrence is an assistant professor of educational psychology and the director of the Quality Enhancement Plan at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

Belle Lee is a writer and poet from Pittsburgh, Texas. She loves family and friends. She enjoys using poetry to explore psychological themes.

Cyla Maine is a twenty-six-year-old junior at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She enjoys reading, writing, and running her own small business. She lives in Broken Bow, Oklahoma, with her husband and two-year-old son. They are her inspiration and her whole world; she wouldn't be where she is today without their love and support.

Joshua McGuire recently earned an MA in English at Texas A&M-Texarkana, where he also worked as a tutor in the university's Success Center. He is a poet and an artist who hopes to succeed in the field of creative writing. His interests include literary theory and international travel.

Lauren P. Ort recently graduated from Texas A&M University- Texarkana with a degree in psychology. She is passionate about acting, writing, and singing. She gives a shout-out to her mother, Joyce Ort, for always being there to cheer her on.

Macaira Patterson is a high-school student at Washington Academy Charter School in Texarkana, Arkansas. Her interests include drawing and renovation projects.

Laura Persons is a twenty-two-year-old former English major and tutor who has taken a break from college. She currently lives in Dallas, Texas, and works as a model. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling . . . particularly to Los Angeles, where she plans to live permanently while pursuing reading, writing, music, and fashion. Her current project is a short film that she is writing, directing, and starring in that examines the connection of self-indulgence, vanity, and loneliness. She coined the term "Iphone note poet," which is her medium for the poetry she writes; her work—titled *A Girl You Know Compilations*—chronicles her life through her eyes as well as through the eyes of others. She plans to release this project in a zine format that will include exclusive Polaroid self-photographs with each issue. To keep up with Laura and her latest work, follow her on Instagram at *@caller10*.

Esther Pippins is a native of Los Angeles, California, and she has lived in Texarkana, Texas, for four years. She has over twenty-five years of experience in public transit and over seventeen years of experience in organizational training and development. She graduated *magna cum laude* from Texas A&M University-Texarkana with a Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences degree and a professional complement in Liberal Arts. She is a member of the A&M-Texarkana Honors Program and a member of the Alpha Chi National Honors Society. In May of 2017, she earned a Master of Science degree in Adult and Higher Education from A&M-Texarkana. She is currently pursuing another graduate degree at A&M-Texarkana in English Composition. She is a former AmeriCorps member and is currently serving as the graduate assistant for the BAAS program at A&M-Texarkana.

Casey Purifoy recently completed his MA in English at Texas A&M-Texarkana. His creative project, the first in TAMU-T's history, was the novella *Voice Box*. He is an essayist, a poet, a short-story writer, and a budding dramatist.

Norris Rettiger is twenty years old and attends college at Belhaven University, where he is majoring in creative writing. When asked who he is, all he can say is that he likes to party. His passions include making dated Batman-versus-Superman jokes, quoting movies you've never seen, and occasionally writing things. At his nucleus are three beliefs: 1) Your political views are pointless; 2) *Wonder Woman* was most definitely not a good movie; and 3) Steven Spielberg invented closure to sell movie tickets.

Lee Russell has dreamed of being an author since the seventh grade, when an inspiring teacher assigned her class to spend the last semester writing a novel. Despite the draw of the keyboard, Russell majored in physical science in college and received his Bachelor of Science degree from Arkansas Technical University in Russellville, Arkansas. He has worked in many areas, but the love of writing has never left him. He has spent the last year in Texarkana, Texas, focusing upon his writing.

Aide K. Soto is an English major at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is an English learner who loves the beauty of the English language deeply. She appreciates writing because it expands new horizons, shows appreciation for cultures and beliefs, and addresses humanity. One of her greatest dreams is to learn English so well that she can use it as her first language and become an excellent writer. She believes in the power of writing and in the idea that people must advocate for writing.

Thomas Strawn graduated from Texas A&M University-Texarkana in May of 2017 with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology. After graduation, he accepted a position teaching chemistry and environmental systems at Pleasant Grove High School; he is currently in the process of developing the environmental-systems course into a completely inquiry-and-problem-based learning-style course to provide students with the opportunity to learn the course standards with an emphasis on local Texas, East Texas, and Texarkana issues through research,

design challenges, project creations, lab investigations, and field studies. He has two girls—six-year-old Romina and two-year-old Kalesi—and a wonderful soon-to-be wife, Shelby Elliott. His time at TAMU-T really did shape his future; he couldn't be more thankful to the university and all the staff with whom he worked while completing his degree.

Hollis Thompson is currently a student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, where he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in English and minoring in drama. 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. He frequently pursues his interests in drama, medieval literature, fairy tales, film, and superheroes.

Kashyra I. Thompson is currently a senior majoring in criminal justice at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is currently the president of the Criminal Justice Association. She works in TAMU-T's Admissions Department as an Eagle Guide. She graduated from Liberty Eylau High School and has been involved heavily in the Texarkana community. She was a Las Amigas Debutante and Homecoming Queen and is a member of the NAACP. After graduating in the spring of 2018, she plans to obtain a master's degree at A&M-Texarkana.

Kayla Vaughn graduated from Texas A&M University-Texarkana in the spring semester of 2017 with a bachelor's degree in history featuring a minor in English. She has returned to A&M-Texarkana, where she is currently pursuing a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and earning her teaching certification.

Tony Williams was born in California and raised in Arkansas. At an early age, he began reading books and telling his own stories. An average student at best, he taught himself the basics of fiction writing by adopting techniques from role-playing games to help him with language and world-building. Tony is now writing his first novel and hoping to entertain the world.

Christian Wright is a former A&M-Texarkana student and graduate. He then studied at Texas State University to pursue a master's degree in literature. He is currently running his own construction business after moving back to Texarkana. He enjoys reading short-story fiction, spending time with his family, and working alongside his father.

Melinda Zwirn is a history major and an English minor—along with her husband David—at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She will graduate with a Bachelor of Science in December and then begin pursuing her master's degree in history in the spring of 2018. She believes in the power of literature to bring depth and understanding to the study of history (and vice versa) and in the desperate need for the study of both in understanding ourselves. She is also a Methodist pastor serving churches in Nash, Texas, and Redwater, Texas; a mother of three; and, recently, a grandmother.