

# The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine  
of East Tennessee State University



2020

Volume 47



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EAST TENNESSEE STATE  
UNIVERSITY

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## The Mockingbird 2020

The cover image is a detail from *Lilliana* by Zoey Thomas.  
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# The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine  
of East Tennessee State University

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as a project of the  
Department of Literature and Language



2020

Volume 47 edited by Sam Campbell



A project like *The Mockingbird* requires the support and cooperation of so many people that one hopes the production of the magazine itself serves as an expression of gratitude, but we would like to offer our thanks to Dr. Bert C. Bach, retired Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, who has authorized the magazine's production fund as part of the regular budget of the Department of Literature and Language. We also thank Dr. Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, and Dr. Katherine Weiss, Chair of the Department of Literature and Language, for their continued support and commitment to this project. We cannot overemphasize the creativity and patience of the ETSU Office of University Relations and, particularly, Mrs. Jeanette Jewell, our designer. Thank you all for sustaining this project.



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# Editor's Note

Sam Campbell

Life. What is life? What is the meaning, the purpose, the reason that we are here, that we exist in this space and interact with each other and go to work and school and fall in and out of love and along the way create art to express it all? Furthermore, what is the purpose of art? Artists, no matter their medium, have contemplated these questions for centuries. While I do not claim to be a philosopher ready with answers to these questions, I am a writer, so I will scribe one option here for you to muse upon: the purpose of life is to experience everything that the world has to offer, and art is our way of deepening our experiences, our understanding, and expanding our connection with the world and each other. This is my answer to an unanswerable question, and perhaps I'm wrong, but between these covers live works that I hope will lead you to experience the world in ways that are both familiar and unknown, comfortable and disconcerting, believable, magical, and ultimately sublime.

From the pride of individual and collective identity found in Emily Price's "Collards and Turmeric" and Jessica Dunker's "Border of Success," to the everyday turmoil of Scottie Garber-Roberts' "Scenes in the Life of a Modern Woman," to the excitement of living that is encapsulated in Cheston Axton's "Dropping One Hundred and Twenty Feet in Four Seconds," this volume seeks to represent the balance that governs life, for just as it is impossible to feel happiness without knowing despair, it is impossible to appreciate life without art. These selections of student work are the embodiment of the experience, knowledge, emotion, and spirit—the life—of East Tennessee State University. They represent all facets of the human condition as it has culminated through history and culture into what we live, now, every day—the good, the bad, and all of the vague, beautiful, ugly, wonderful things in between. For this issue, Zoey Thomas's piece *Lilliana* demonstrates the contradictory, yet ever complementing, truth of life and art: that for every thorn, there is a rose; for every dark

corner, there is light to illuminate it; for every tear, there is a laugh to follow. Thomas's work invites the audience to consider that there are multiple sides to every story, multiple stories within a single image, and multiple existences beyond their own.

I'd like to take a moment to thank my reading committee—Scottie Garber-Roberts, Richard Lloyd, Caleb McGhee, Emily Price, Abby N. Lewis, Harley Mercadal, Halley Diehl, and Karissa Doughty—for taking the time to sort through our submissions and choose the best pieces of literature for publication. The work of a number of these readers is also represented here, although no students read for any category to which they submit. My heartfelt appreciation to Tucker Foster and Chris Price, who double-checked every page with me, down to the last word. I would like to thank Darius Stewart for agreeing to take the time to be our interviewee. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge this year's judges: Jonathan Johnson, poetry; Matthew Derby, fiction; Nathan O'Donnell, non-fiction; Derek Davison, drama. It is an honor to have the input of these individuals and to know that each of these experts in their respective categories took the time to select our winners and provide commentary for our students' work. And a special thanks to the chair of the Department of Literature and Language, Dr. Katherine Weiss, for her continued support and encouragement.

I would like to also extend a special thanks to Dr. Isabel Gómez Sobrino for her effort and assistance in helping me keep the recently established tradition of including student-produced poetry translations alive and thriving in this issue. Gratitude must also be expressed for Jeanette Jewell, who works diligently to ensure that the magazine looks beautiful and elegant each year. Furthermore, I would like to thank others involved with and supporting *The Mockingbird*: Dr. Wilsie S. Bishop, Senior Vice President for Academics and Interim Provost; Bert C. Bach, Retired Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs; and Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Special gratitude is due to former editors Matthew Gilbert and Catherine Pritchard Childress, who addressed my concerns and encouraged me to pursue a volume that truly embodies the spirit of life at ETSU. I would like to also thank faculty advisors Dr. Jesse Graves

and Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes, who make each volume of *The Mockingbird* possible.

Dr. Graves has been my mentor since I started attending ETSU ten years ago, and I would not be the writer I am today without him. Dr. Holmes has been an invaluable guide during this endeavor, and I could study at ETSU for ten more years and still not learn everything he has to teach. I am eternally grateful in the trust that they placed in me as this year's editor and the freedom they gave me to craft this year's volume. Thank you to Dr. Mark Baumgartner, whom I have learned so much from and will forever admire.

Moreover, thank you to everyone in the Literature and Language Department who has not been listed for supporting me and shaping my experiences at ETSU and as editor. Finally, I cannot reflect upon this experience without expressing my deepest gratitude, love, and appreciation to my mom, Alley Campbell, who has been my biggest source of support and encouragement throughout not only my time as editor but my entire life. She taught me to love reading, writing, literature, art, and life. Without her, I would not be who I am today. Thank you, Mom—I love you.



## The Butterfly Effect

Marie McLaughlin

A strand of pearly, creamy white, glowing warm like the full  
moon in July,  
Lying on rich, black velvet, dark, a coal in a cave.  
Soaked in an oyster's rainbow tears, layer upon layer,  
Drying into the shimmering reflection of a moment in time,  
Slowly smoothing old memories' jagged edges.  
For each living day a pearl becomes and on a string is in  
order strung.  
If I could reach back and remove just one,  
Would I still be who I've become?

Mrs. Marie McLaughlin (1953-2019) studied English and creative writing at ETSU and received her Bachelor of Arts degree posthumously in December 2019. Marie wrote wonderful poems and stories and brought joy and insight to all the classes she and her husband S. W. McLaughlin attended. She will be remembered by a large and loving family and a grateful community of writers and students at ETSU.

## Once upon a Time a Girl Believed in Magic

Amber Rookstool

She stood in the junction of a willow's  
trunk, as far high as her wit allowed,  
leaning against its skin, the hard bark  
protecting her. She raised her hands

like the tree, reached as far as she could  
on tiptoes and called for the summer wind.  
Eyes closed, she breathed in warmed hope,  
life of the willow's vines, she commanded;  
he billowed, grazing her sun-pinched cheeks.

Holding her sturdy against his voice, he,  
willow, and sun confirm her belief—  
she controls him as she breathes.  
The wind, it tells her, she is magic.





## Fever Dream

*Dillon McCroskey*

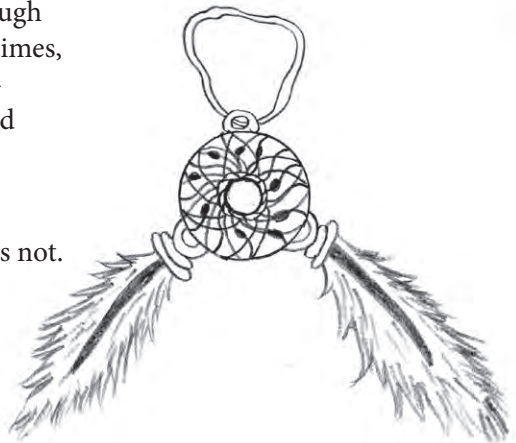
If only we could unearth  
some artifact of our own lives  
from the forest floor—  
then, maybe, we might not feel  
the weight of our bodies,  
the heaviness

that hangs in the air between us.  
If I could just rise above myself  
and see all of my days strung out  
on a thread of beads, each one  
reflecting all the others—  
maybe, then, I could make

something out of it all.  
We look up from our hands  
crusted with red clay  
and watch the sun bleed out again  
behind the blue ridges—  
what comfort could we offer?

I'm only passing through  
this world; yet, sometimes,  
I feel that it is mine—  
the copperhead buried  
in last year's leaves  
slithers over

to remind me that it is not.  
Stumbling through  
this fever dream,  
all that we hold  
is now.



## Collards and Turmeric

Emily Price

My family would be proud of how fast  
I slice collards, and with such ease.  
It was one thing no one had to teach me,  
almost like I was born knowing how to run  
the blade against the stem, how to make  
their wide fans of leaves into tender ribbons.

When I add them to the soup, it changes.  
It smells like the earth now, old and familiar.  
It smells like the collards my Papaw grew.  
I will never leave that past behind. Not really.  
Turmeric for color, a spice not from around  
here—like a sin against the southern.

Maybe these greens embrace the change.  
How proudly I proclaim to be Appalachian now,  
but hardly can we define what Appalachian is.  
It feels to me like an identity made in the dust  
of what has been taken away from us, a culture  
of thieved people trying to thrive in reclamation.



## Border of Success

*Jessica Dunker*



Giselle's favorite color is green, like the rolling fields she imagines beyond the wall, like the pastures of Kansas or Arkansas. Her favorite color used to be blue, like the bright sky above the wall, like the waters of the Great Lakes in Minnesota or Michigan. Nobody asks her questions like, "What's your favorite mountain?" or "What's your favorite city?" If they did, she would say the Rocky Mountains in Montana or Idaho, and Houston, Texas. She has never seen these places in real life, but she has seen pictures. Her second-or-third cousin sent a book to her Tía Maria once a long time ago so she could learn about America before emigrating. Then Tío Alejandro died, and Tía Maria couldn't afford the expenses by herself, so she moved in with Abuela.

Abuela has lived by herself since Giselle could remember, but then Tía Maria moved in with her. When Giselle crossed the street to visit Abuela, she would point to photos of America: the rolling fields of grass; the rising, purple mountains; the immense flow of waterfalls. Tía Maria suddenly shot out of the house and slammed the door. Abuela looked stricken but understanding. Giselle asked what was wrong, had something happened just then? Abuela reminded Giselle of their ancestors and how all of us will one day join them, though some much sooner than they had planned. Tempío was a good place to live, Abuela said with a soft smile wrinkling the edges of her already lined face, but there are other, better places to be in the end. Giselle asked Abuela if heaven looked like America, and if so, which state would it look like most? She expected for Abuela to say that heaven looked like the top of the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee or Virginia, or the beaches along the Atlantic Ocean in North

Carolina or Florida. She didn't expect Abuela to shake her head, her gray wisps of hair pinned neatly in place behind her head. Abuela grabbed Giselle's hands and told her, no, prettier than that.

Giselle's brother, Diego, is a man now, or at least he thinks so. He's nineteen, but Abuela says ruefully how he still acts like a boy. Abuela says he doesn't know the first thing about hard work and diligence, and how Abuelo would be upset with how his grandson has dishonored the Mejia name. On his nineteenth birthday, Diego said he would leave Tempio that night and go to America tomorrow if he could. It's all he wanted for his birthday. Abuela said he is selfish and thinks of nobody else but himself. Diego promised he would send back money to take care for their parents, their three other siblings, Giselle, and even Abuela. No matter what Abuela said about him behind his back, he added with a mean glare across the street at Abuela's one-story home, he would always think of his family first.

Diego left with a group of men two months ago. They offered Diego a passport and a one-way airplane ticket if he promised to go by "Jesus Gonzalez" and help pay rent at a safehouse across the border. Diego agreed without hesitation, said goodbye to everyone the next morning, and they haven't heard from him since. Abuela cried soft tears that night, a fervent prayer on her lips. Diego should be turning twenty in a week and two days.

On a school field trip, Giselle got a chance to see the wall up close for the first time. It was still under construction, had been since Giselle was small, and would continue to be until they were all old like their Abuelas and Abuelos, or so her teacher said to the class. The day was hot, and the sun beat down on their black-haired heads with an intensity that made Giselle wish they were living somewhere cold instead, somewhere that dumped inches of snow on the ground like in Maine or Massachusetts. She has never seen snow before, but she imagines it tastes like the melted vanilla ice cream her school gave out to the kids as a treat for behaving on the field trip. As the class ate their ice cream, Giselle stared at the immensity of the wall. It was concrete, the teacher said, and very expensive. She said America was still paying for it and paying for what it meant to the Mexican people. Giselle's teacher and the other fifth grade chaperones snickered and whispered about how they were supposed to pay for the wall during

their lunch hour. Giselle wasn't supposed to hear them, but she could make out the nasty comments they said about Americans. Giselle felt both angry at the teachers and embarrassed for herself. If all they said was true, did that mean Americans didn't like Mexicans?

When she got home that day, Giselle asked her Papá about the wall and about America. He looked angry that she had asked but softened his expression when he saw tears in Giselle's eyes. Papá kneeled down and said sometimes people don't like other people for no reason at all. Sometimes they're just scared of new people. Giselle couldn't understand, so she asked again. Papá tried explaining a different way and said sometimes people don't know what others are saying. It's hard for people to say how they feel when they can't talk to each other. Giselle brushed aside her tears when Papá looked pained to tell her this. She still felt her question didn't get fully answered, but at least now she knew how important it is for people to understand one another. The next day she borrowed an English book from the school library.

A few weeks later, Giselle sat down quietly by Tía Maria, who had been mute since Tío Alejandro's death seven months ago and helped shuck corn on the front porch. They sat on two rickety chairs that didn't match, their green corn husks falling into one of Abuela's old, wicker baskets. Tía Maria looked sideways at Giselle and asked what she wanted. No girl shucks corn for fun. Giselle only smiled and peeled away layer after layer until she reached the white corn underneath. In English, Giselle asked how Tía Maria's day has been. Tía Maria raised her eyebrows and leaned back against her chair. She did not answer Giselle's question, but in English, asked why she was studying another language. Giselle said with the beginnings of a heavy accent, no girls study for fun.

Giselle's English is extraordinary. All her teachers brag about how much she has learned under their mentorship. In truth, Giselle didn't learn English from any of them. Giselle's class is supposed to study English every day, but it has come down to learning minimal words and phrases Giselle learned months ago. They are too easy, but Giselle plays along with pronouncing them and writing down their definitions in Spanish. The class makes flashcards of these words, and at the end of the year, they are supposed to complete an oral test. Giselle knows the test is a fake and that everyone passes. Diego had

passed the oral exam every year, and he couldn't speak any English at all. All it takes is for the students to walk up to the board and say a few sentences about themselves in English. It can be about anything, and Giselle has chosen her words carefully. She will make a whole speech when the time comes, and everyone will be so impressed that they'll finally stop making fun of her for liking America so much. The opposite is true. They tell her if she can speak like an American, then she must be just as dirty as one, too.

Summer break is usually a time for the older kids to help their families. Some of them work on family farms; some of them work on nearby farms for extra money. In Tempío, it is easy to find work, especially for respectable families. The Mejia family is known by many as generous and hard-working. Only Diego had tarnished the reputation, but he is gone now, and nobody asks about him anymore. Giselle isn't quite old enough for a job, but Tía Maria says she will hire Giselle. Tía Maria found a good job in a local office and will be gone all day, so she can't care for Abuela like she used to. Giselle asks how much she intends to pay her, and Tía Maria smiles. She will pay her in lessons, a trade bargain, she explains. She will tutor Giselle in English to prepare her for higher learning. One day you'll need it, Tía Maria said, the color in her cheeks finally returning to its original color. A bright future comes your way.

Through the summer days, Abuela and Giselle discuss many futures. Abuela notices how Giselle is maturing, not only physically but mentally, too. Abuela says it is not a woman's features that defines the woman, but her mind. Abuela points to her temple with a knowing smile and says the Mejia family has been known for their wit and intellect. In these days, bilingual people have access to many open doors, Abuela says to Giselle. Speaking English may be taboo in some families, but not the Mejia family. Though it is a secret, Papá knows some English, too, but not as well as Giselle. In some ways, he is jealous, Abuela says with a shrug. She sits back in her rocker, the window open to let in the small breeze that flutters the yellow curtains. But Papá loves Giselle and hopes the very best for his daughter. Abuela smiles and draws Giselle closer. She whispers that she and Papá have talked a lot about Giselle's future. Of all the Mejias, Giselle will surely be the one to take the Mejia family name across any obstacle that stands in the way of success.

As the summer draws to its end, Giselle has learned more English than she could have previously thought. Papá looked on with feigned interest as Tía Maria and Giselle stayed up late night after night, working on English vocabulary and grammar. As Tía Maria's older brother, Papá advised against so many lessons. He argued that Tía Maria was only setting Giselle's hopes too high. Both of them may never step foot over that wall, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise when none of them had the money to move outside of Tempío. Tía Maria only smiled and pushed aside her brother's fears. She said if he thought all of this was so foolish, then why had he been working so much this past year? Most weeks, he was gone six days out of seven. With the income of Giselle's two older siblings, they were not short on funds, as many other families sometimes are. Her brother only turned away and reminded his sister his business was his own.

A few months into Giselle's sixth grade year, Tía Maria passes away. Nobody but Abuela knew the truth of Tía Maria's illness. The doctors told her months ago about the cancer growing at her cervix. She told Abuela little detail of her situation, but Abuela said Tía Maria was not an ignorant woman. If Tía Maria chose to live the rest of her days outside the hospital's treatment center, then she made the best choice. When Abuela told Papá about his sister's secret, Papá turned and punched a dent in the siding of his house. Papá knew little about medicine, but he knew if they had lived in America, their doctors would have found it much earlier. Something could have been done. Where was Maria's beloved America when they needed them most? Abuela holds her eldest son, cradling him like she used to when he was a boy. She brushes aside his dark hair, feeling the rhythm of his shaking body. Dying is always too soon enough.

At the funeral two days later, the Mejia family and the entire town comes together to mourn. They lay cards, photos, letters, and other memories down in a pile next to twenty-six lit candles and a glowing photo of Tía Maria on her wedding day with Tío Alejandro. There is lots of weeping, but there are also many jolts of laughter. Tía Maria was a carefree soul, one that loved to run and explore the Mexican desert. She was a kind woman, a smart woman, and her spirit even more beautiful than her youth. Everyone notes how Giselle looks so much like Tía Maria, especially with that clever look in her eyes, as

if she sees something everyone else does not. Giselle's hair is pulled back and braided down the sides, much like how Tía Maria's hair was done most summer days. Giselle put some makeup on her face to show off the Mejia family features. It was something she had watched Tía Maria do over the summers before she left for the day. When Giselle emerges from her bedroom with Tía Maria's lipstick and blush on her face, Papá's face trembles and the tears pour. He hugs his daughter tight, whispering a fervent prayer in her ear, and says she looks just as pretty as Tía Maria, and that when she grows as old as Abuela, she will look like just as wise.

The next few months pass, and Giselle forgets to dream of America. She stops speaking English altogether. With so many night-time lessons that had taken place at Papá's dining table, he had picked up some English phrases like "Hello" and "How are you doing?" and "Can we talk?" Giselle never answers, only shakes her head and turns away. She doesn't feel like speaking again, in either her mother tongue or the language Tía Maria had taught her so much about. Giselle thinks maybe she would have to relearn everything Tía Maria taught her. When she can no longer stand the sight of her own room, Giselle runs to Abuela's arms and cries in her blouse. Abuela holds her tight to her chest and softly sings Tía Maria's favorite songs as she runs her soft, long fingers through Giselle's long, soft hair. What Giselle doesn't know is how Abuela's heart breaks every time she sees Tía Maria's face in Giselle's and knows how one day she will lose seeing them both.

Giselle's childhood ends as ninth grade swings into view. Many seasons have passed since Tía Maria's death, and Giselle has matured more than she knows. Papá begins to worry when Giselle insists on walking to school alone. Abuela begins to smile when she sees the Mejia family's womanly curves emerge. Both of them compliment Giselle's English scores when she receives them back from the city high school. She took summer English courses with twelve other prospective students, young and old alike. Giselle can now confidently carry a full conversation in only English. For the words she doesn't know, she remembers and marks them in her Spanish-English dictionary. If she can make the commute, Giselle will be accepted into the city high school, where she can take more English classes as she works toward graduation. Papá and Giselle accept



the offer, and Giselle begins a blank slate attending the same high school Tía Maria did.

Giselle's high school years pass quicker than Papá or Abuela expected. Abuela's face looks much older, her hair much grayer, but Giselle pretends not to notice. Even Papá looks more worn than he did a few years ago. His hands shake when he grips his daughter's hands in his before the ceremony. He notices the stark resemblance between Giselle and his sister, the way their eyes are shaped, the strong nose of the Mejia family, and she smiled with lots of teeth just like Maria did. Maria would have been proud to see Giselle graduate from her own alma mater. Somewhere in those halls, Papá knew Maria's old yearbook was stored in a dusty box, now forgotten as another book with Giselle's face in it is printed and sold for profit.

All of Giselle's siblings have moved out and work full time with families of their own, but they have made time to come into the city for the day and watch Giselle receive her diploma. Giselle has been blessed to be tía to two nephews and one niece on the way. They are too young to remember Giselle, but she holds them on her wide hips and gives them affectionate kisses in the folds of their fat cheeks. The youngest of the Mejia siblings, who is now entering high school just as Giselle is leaving, beams as his hermana walks across the stage with all honors. At the end of the ceremony, Papá takes hold of his daughter and squeezes tight. He says Abuela has a big surprise for her when they get home.

The whole family and all of their neighbors gather at Papá's house for the celebration of Giselle's graduation. It is not every year someone from Tempío graduates from a prestigious city school. The others her age mock her from behind their drinks, but Giselle doesn't take notice. She forgot to listen to their taunts long ago. Already she has been accepted into three different Mexican universities. Just for fun, though she told no one, she applied to an American college: The University of Arizona. It was decidedly not her American college of choice, so even if she received back a rejection letter, she wouldn't have been disappointed. Little did she know, her Papá found the acceptance letter first.

When finally the party dies down and everyone takes their leave (early because Papá told them so), Papá waits until the last person

goes before drawing Giselle over to Abuela's house, who has been contentedly sitting on her porch, still feeling the warmth from all the kisses from her grandchildren and great grandchildren. He wishes Diego could have been here for the celebration. Still, he had not come back to Tempío, not even to visit. Papá had resented his son for leaving, had been angry he had disgraced his role as the eldest man, but now all he feels is grief. Giselle's graduation makes him reflect on all of his children, even the one who'd left. If only he could have afforded safer passage to America for Diego, for his sister, and for Giselle. Despite all that he has done and not done, though, Papá feels heavy with love when he sees Giselle approaching Abuela's porch. Without Abuela, this family would certainly never have survived all that they have.

Abuela lets a slow smile creep up her cheeks as Giselle sits down next to her in the same chairs she and Tía Maria had shucked corn in so many years ago. The pain of the past could not diminish the peace Giselle feels now, holding Abuela's hands, and listening as Abuela unravels the tale of the Mejia family legacy. Giselle had heard these stories more often these days, but because of Abuela's age and Giselle's unwavering patience, Giselle never interrupts or stops listening to Abuela's stories. She always pays careful attention to every detail Abuela shares. Abuela goes down the Mejia family line, listing all of Giselle's relatives she never got the chance to meet. Most of them were illiterate; none of them as educated as Giselle is now. Abuela says Giselle will be the one to continue what Tía Maria had begun for the Mejia family. Then Abuela grabs onto Giselle's sleeve and pulls her close, the sweet smell of home and musk on her skin. She whispers something in her ear, so soft that Giselle has to lean into Abuela's arms, and Giselle's body tenses.

Day after day of admiring pictures of America, night after night with Tía Maria, Giselle had wished she could go to America if only once. Giselle used to have a list of places she would go and the road map to show the way. She outlined all the small places nobody had ever heard of in Mexico, but she knew those places were teeming with life, with Americans, with food and culture, and more than she had ever seen in her whole life. When Tía Maria died, Papá found those lists in the trash, all her books thrown into the yard. Papá never said anything. He only picked them up and stored them in his own room,

cleaning out the dirt, and dusting the fronts for the day Giselle would announce her plans to leave for America. After Tía Maria's death, Giselle had never thought of leaving for America again, not even just to visit. Her Papá and Abuela and all the other Mejias needed her here, to help them age and love them until their time came to join the rest of the ancestors. Abuela feared Giselle would make that decision, and like any good grandmother, she convinced her son to afford the best he could to send his daughter to America for school.

All the while, Abuela kept a secret of her own. When Tía Maria passed away, Abuela sat in her youngest daughter's room for countless nights, wishing she could have done something different to change Maria's fate. She wishes she could have sent her to America with Alejandro, where they could have started a family, lived a longer life, and experience all that Giselle had learned to love when Maria was so young. What she didn't expect to find was a box hidden under Maria's bed, filled to the brim with papers and stamps containing colors, numbers, and letters all written in English. Abuela counted thousands of American dollars tied together at the bottom of the box. There was a short letter addressed to Abuela. Maria knew her mother would safeguard her secrets, as she always has, until the right moment. Maria left everything she owned to Giselle with the hopes that Giselle would leave her grief behind and pursue the future they both always wanted. Abuela held fast to the small, green document with Maria's bold-faced name at the top and an old photo that resembled Giselle. Abuela signed the cross across her chest with tears running down her face and sent a fervent prayer of thanks.



# Scenes in the Life of a Modern Woman: A Play about Doing It All

Scottie Garber-Roberts

## Cast of Characters:

JANE	FEMALE COWORKER #3
JOHN	MS. CLINE
BABY ANNIE	WAITER
FEMALE COWORKER #1	TWO MALE DINERS
FEMALE COWORKER #2	TWO FEMALE DINERS

## SCENE ONE: *Breakfast*

*A family in their kitchen. The husband, JOHN, sits at the kitchen table, eating a plate of sausage and eggs, and reading the morning paper. He is tall, cookie-cutter handsome, dressed in a business suit. Their one-year-old daughter, ANNIE, eats cereal in a highchair. The wife, JANE, bustles around the kitchen. She is plain, but not unattractive. She is also dressed for work.*

**JANE** (*to herself as she places dishes in the sink*): Okay, John is fed. The baby is fed. What about me? I should probably eat something.

*JANE opens a cabinet to look for breakfast but stops in mid-action.*

Oh, but the lunches (*trails off*).

*She abandons the search for breakfast and immediately begins assembling packed lunches.*

**JOHN** (*without looking up from his paper*): Christ, I'm going to be getting a lot of calls today.

**JANE** (*still working on lunches*): Mm?

**JOHN** (*still looking at his paper*): Stocks are down. Way down.

**JANE** (*placing his lunch beside him on the table*): Could you wipe the baby's face? She's all smudged, and I've still got to eat.

*JOHN doesn't respond. JANE returns to the cabinets, pulling out things for breakfast.*

**JOHN** (*putting down his paper and standing up*): It's going to be a helluva day. I better get going.

*He picks up his packed lunch, kisses the baby on the head, and heads toward the door.*

I may be running late tonight. Don't wait up for dinner.

**JANE** (*half hearing him, then calling over her shoulder*): All right, then. Have a good day.

**JOHN** (*going out the door*): You too. (*already off stage*) And, babe? The baby has something all over her face. You may want to clean her up.

*JANE turns, but JOHN is already gone. A door shuts out of sight. The noise of a car engine is heard.*

*JANE grabs a dish towel from the counter and goes to the baby.*

**JANE** (*in a soothing but sarcastic voice as she wipes the baby's face*): I guess I'll just do everything myself.

*She kisses the baby's freshly cleaned face, starts the dishwasher, then grabs her breakfast from the counter.*

**JANE** (*calculating to herself as she places each item onto the table*): Half a grapefruit. 50 calories. Half a cup of granola. 150 calories. Half a cup of skim milk. 40 calories. That's 240 calories.

*JANE sits down and takes a bite of granola. She checks her watch.*

**JANE** (*surprised*): Ten after already? Oh, I'm going to be late.

*She stands and hurriedly eats a few more spoonfuls of granola. She wipes her mouth on the back of her hand, takes the baby out of her highchair, and grabs her bag from beside the door. She gives one final glance around the room, flicks off the lights, and heads out the door.*

*Moments later, JANE darts back in and grabs the grapefruit from the table.*

*Her abandoned cereal bowl sits mostly full on the kitchen table.*

*The scene blacks out.*

*Sounds from the running dishwasher can be heard.*

*The scene ends.*

## **SCENE TWO: At Work**

*The work week. An office. JANE sits at her desk. Stacks of paper are piled around her. There is a phone and a laptop.*

*JANE types away at her keyboard. The phone rings.*

**JANE:** Hello? This is Jane Smith. (*Pause.*) Yes, I'm finishing up the report right now. (*Pause.*) Yes, I'll send it as soon as it's finished. (*Pause.*) Yes. (*Pause.*) Yes, ma'am, I understand. (*Pause.*) Yes, as soon as possible—I mean, now.

*JANE hangs up the phone and turns back to her computer. Just as she begins to type again*

**FEMALE COWORKER #1** (*enters the office without knocking, interrupts*): Jane? Are you done with that expense report?

**JANE** (*stops typing and looks up*): Well, I was working on it, but I'm trying to get this report finished for Ms. Cline, and I—

**FEMALE COWORKER #1** (*interrupting*): Just get it to me. It was due yesterday (*turns and walks out*).

*For a moment, JANE stares at where FEMALE COWORKER #1 was standing, momentarily stunned by her rudeness, then shakes her head*

*and turns back to her computer. Typing resumes.*

**FEMALE COWORKER #2** (*enters the office without knocking, interrupts*): Jane, do you have a minute?

**JANE** (*stops typing, looks up*): Actually, I—

**FEMALE COWORKER #2**: Good. I need those slides for the 4 o'clock meeting. Have you got them?

**JANE**: Um, not yet. I'm trying to finish this report for Ms. Cline and—

**FEMALE COWORKER #2** (*talking over JANE*): I don't need the details. Just the slides (*she turns and begins to walk out*). You've got an hour. (*Exits.*)

*JANE sighs. Massages her temples. Begins typing again.*

**FEMALE COWORKER #3** (*enters the office without knocking carrying a stack of files, interrupts*): Jane, these invoices have the wrong dates on them (*plops the stack down noisily on the desk*). I don't know what happened, but you'll need to correct them before I can sign off on them.

*JANE, with her fingers still on the keyboard, turns to FEMALE COWORKER #3 and gives her a look.*

Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not the one who screwed up the dates. (*She frowns and stalks out.*)

*JANE glares at the stack of files. Pushes it to side, out of her way. She starts to type again and MS. CLINE walks into JANE'S office. She is older than the other women and wearing nicer clothes. There is an air of authority about her.*

**JANE** (*shooting up from her chair, alarmed*): Ms. Cline!

**MS. CLINE**: Jane, please tell me you've got my report.

**JANE** (*stumbling over her words*): Well, I—You see—Everyone just—And I haven't had a moment to—

**MS. CLINE**: Stop. Do you have the report? Yes or no?

**JANE:** Well, I almost—

**MS. CLINE** (*more emphatically*): Yes or no?

**JANE** (*resigned*): No.

**MS. CLINE:** No.

**JANE:** But I can have it in 15 minutes.

*There is a pause. The women appraise one another.*

**MS. CLINE:** Fine. 15 minutes. But not a second more. (*She exits without another word.*)

*When she is gone, JANE puts her head in her hands. Just for a moment. Then, she is back to typing. Within a moment, FEMALE COWORKER #1 comes into the office again.*

**FEMALE COWORKER #1:** Jane? Do you have it? (*A pause—Exits.*)

*JANE seems not to notice, continues to type.*

*FEMALE COWORKER #2 comes into the office again.*

**FEMALE COWORKER #2:** Jane? The slides? (*A pause—Exits.*)

*JANE still continues to type.*

*FEMALE COWORKER #3 comes into the office again.*

**FEMALE COWORKER #3:** Jane? The invoices? I can't do my job if you won't do yours. (*A pause—Exits.*)

*JANE still continues to type.*

*FEMALE COWORKER #1 returns again. This time she stays at JANE'S desk.*

**FEMALE COWORKER #1:** Jane? (*Stays.*)

*FEMALE COWORKER #2 returns. She stays, too.*

**FEMALE COWORKER #2:** Slides? Jane? (*Stays.*)

*FEMALE COWORKER #3 returns. Stays.*



**FEMALE COWORKER #3:** Jane? Seriously? (*Puts her hands on her hips. Stays.*)

*The three women stand in front of JANE'S desk. Waiting. They fall into a round. JANE does not seem to hear.*

**#1:** Jane?

**#2:** The slides?

**#3:** Seriously?

**#1:** Expense reports?

**#2:** Jane?

**#3:** Jane?

**#1:** Are you done?

**#2:** Jane?

**#3:** Invoices?

*JANE finishes her typing. She stands. Smooths her skirt. Walks toward the door. The women follow in a single file line.*

**#1:** Jane?

**#2:** Are you done?

**#3:** Jane?

**ALL:** Jane?

*JANE walks off stage. The others follow, one by one. The phone on JANE'S desk rings and rings. The stage goes dark. The audience can still hear the phone ring for a beat. Then quiet. The scene ends.*

### **SCENE THREE:** *The Bedroom*

*Night. JANE and JOHN'S bedroom. JOHN is in bed, reading an article on his handheld tablet. JANE sits at a vanity table, readying herself for bed. She can see JOHN'S reflection in the mirror.*

**JANE:** What a long day.

**JOHN** (*without looking up from his reading*): Was it?

**JANE** (*running a makeup removing wipe over her face*): It was awful. I had to sit through this pointless meeting all afternoon, so now I'm behind on my project proposal. Then, there was a traffic jam on Midland, and I was late to pick up Annie from daycare. (*tosses the makeup wipe away*) I swear the women who work there look at me as if I'm the world's worst mother. (*starts to brush her hair*) So, I'm a little late from time to time. I have a job for god's sake. What do they want from me?

**JOHN** (*affirmative but unintelligible*): Mmhmm.

**JANE** (*looking over her shoulder at JOHN*): Are you even listening to me?

**JOHN** (*finally looking up*): Of course. (*He sets his tablet on the nightstand*). You had a bad day. I'm sorry.

*JANE turns back to the mirror.*

**JANE:** I'm just exhausted.

**JOHN** (*suggestively*): I know what will make you feel better.

**JANE:** I really don't think—

**JOHN** (*interrupting*): But it's Wednesday.

**JANE** (*turning back to JOHN*): I know, but I really don't—

**JOHN** (*whining*): But Jane. This is our deal. Since we've had the baby, Wednesday night is—

**JANE:** I know. It's just—

*JOHN comes up behind her, sliding his hands up and down her arms.*

**JOHN:** Come on, babe. (*He kisses her neck.*) I'll make it worth your while.

*He squeezes her tighter. JANE looks at their reflection in the mirror. He is smiling at her. After a moment, she smiles back.*

**JANE** (*resigned*): All right. You're right. It is Wednesday.

*JOHN kisses her cheek, then takes her hand and leads her to the bed. They get under the blanket. Articles of clothing are dropped onto the floor. JOHN turns off the lamp.*

*The stage is dark. The audience cannot see JOHN and JANE. They can only hear the couple. Quickly, JOHN comes. There is a pause. JANE sighs.*

**JOHN** (*out of breath*): Did you finish?

**JANE** (*in an unaltered voice*): Yes.

*Sheets rustle. JOHN clicks on the lamp and the couple is visible again. They are both sitting up in bed.*

**JOHN** (*smiling*): That was great, babe. (*He kisses her on the cheek*). I'm going to take a shower.

*JOHN gets out of bed and exits.*

*JANE collapses onto the pillows with an exasperated sigh and lies there for a moment. Then, she reaches over, opens the drawer of the bedside table, and pulls out a vibrator.*

**JANE** (*to herself*): As always, I'll just do everything myself.

*JANE turns off the lamp. The stage is dark. There is the rustle of sheets. Then, the buzz of the vibrator.*

*The scene ends.*

#### **SCENE FOUR:** *Dinner*

*A nice restaurant. JOHN and JANE sit across from one another at a table. There are wine glasses between them. JANE seems tense. There are TWO COUPLES sitting on either side of them. A WAITER circulates.*

**JOHN:** So, why is it again that we're going to your mother's house after dinner?

**JANE** (*picking at her plate*): To pick up Annie.

**JOHN:** Well, of course to pick up Annie. But why is she there in the first place?

**JANE** (*still not looking at him*): I asked my mother to watch her.

**JOHN** (*getting a little frustrated*): Yes, obviously you asked her, but why? Why was she not at daycare like usual?

**JANE** (*snippily*): Like usual. God. She's not there constantly, John.

**JOHN** (*surprised by her tone*): I know she's not there constantly. I didn't say she was there constantly. I just meant that she is normally there while you're at work. That's all.

**JANE** (*puts her fork down and looks at him*): Well, not anymore.

**JOHN:** What is that supposed to mean?

**JANE:** Just what I said. She's not going there anymore.

**JOHN** (*looking confused*): Why in the world not? She loves it there.

**JANE** (*glaring at him*): She does not love it there, John. She's an infant.

*JOHN is at a loss for words. It takes him a moment to compose himself.*

**JOHN** (*a little gentler*): Can you just tell me what's going on? I'm really not following. What happened at daycare?

**JANE** (*in an outburst*): Those women. God. Especially that hag, Miss Emma. I don't know who she thinks she is. She basically flat-out called me a bad mother. Told me I'm being unfair to my daughter because I have a job. What gives her the right?

**JOHN** (*having trouble following her rant*): She called you a bad mother? Why would she do that?

**JANE:** Well, those weren't her exact words, but that was basically what she was suggesting. Just because I run late sometimes.

**JOHN:** You run late? How late?

**JANE:** I don't know. Half an hour? An hour? But it's not like it happens every day.

**JOHN:** How often does it happen?

**JANE:** I don't know, John. A couple times a week. Maybe three times during a bad week.

**JOHN** (*surprised*): Three times a week? What are you doing that makes you run so behind?

**JANE** (*looking at him incredulously, raising her voice a little*): I'm working, John. What do you think I'm doing? Taking a bubble bath?

**JOHN:** Well, Janie, it's no wonder they're annoyed. You're making them stay late multiple times a week because you can't leave the office on time.

*There is a pause. JANE is staring at JOHN. She can't believe what he is saying.*

**JANE** (*getting louder*): You cannot be serious. Are you defending them?

*The other patrons begin to look over at them.*

**JOHN:** I just see where they're coming from. Maybe if you apologize, they'll take her back. You can call them in the morning.

**JANE** (*yelling at this point*): Apologize? Apologize to a woman who called me a bad mother to my face? Are you fucking kidding me, John?

*The other diners are definitely looking now.*

**JOHN** (*sounding embarrassed*): Jane, lower your voice.

**JANE** (*still shouting*): I will not lower my voice. (*Laughs harshly.*) God, I'm so tired of this. I'm so tired of everything always being my fault. My problem to deal with. My job to handle it. It's exhausting. Just unbelievably exhausting. You, and work, and Annie, and everything else. I can't do it. I can't keep doing this. (*She stands. JOHN and the others watch her.*) I'm tired and I'm frustrated and I feel like I'm three steps behind all the time. And, my God, I'm starving. If I count another fucking calorie, I'm going to lose my mind. And you—(*She points her finger at JOHN.*) You just sit there and watch it all happen.

You sit and read your goddamn newspaper while I run myself ragged taking care of our kid and our house and our everything else. I need help, John. I need you to help me out. I need you to meet me in the middle. I need you to listen when I talk to you. Because I can't keep doing all of this by myself. (*She loses steam.*) I am just one person.

*JANE stops. She realizes that everyone is looking at her. She slowly sinks back into her seat. JOHN'S mouth is agape. The onlookers continue to stare for a moment, then turn back to their dinners. The WAITER appears at JANE and JOHN'S table.*

**WAITER** (*smiling and looking between them*): How are we doing over here, folks? Can I get you anything else?

*Neither of them answers. They just look at one another.*

*The stage blacks out. The scene ends.*



## 4th of July

Abby N. Lewis

The rain begins to pound  
every available surface,  
commanding as a war drum.

Perhaps rain is not always  
a show of anger,  
as mother says.  
Perhaps it is sorrowful,  
or perhaps it is a blessing.

There will be no fireworks  
tonight, no dogs  
fleeing secure houses in terror,  
no veterans with closed eyes,  
hunched shoulders and clenched fists,  
the television on too loud  
and not loud enough.



## Grad School Conversations

Harley Mercadal

I.

Sassy and matter-of-fact, Matt tells me how people relate to food; this is no Hannibal Lecter-inspired gourmet cooking show, rather an observation: the ability to season ourselves comes at a price of knowing how to make bland tastes and gritty textures feel like you really paid big bucks for it.

Ah, but we're all flammable, I tell him, imagining knowledge as forbidden as sugar now—the apple, once before—when he shows me a caramelizing poem; his images making my mouth water. I picture a seasoning of the self: a glazing of caramel over my sharp, tart self-loathing to sweeten it awhile.

II.

Mother, maiden, and crone versions of myself, both the subject and object, dance like fairies beneath my eyelids after Brooke explains her love of Lynn Powell to me—how the Biblical imagery combined with mythology fascinates her—after which I realize I cannot even imagine Motherhood on me, not now, not really ever.



Maidenhood and virginity aren't the same to me,  
I tell her later, it's more of an overall state of  
innocence, don't you think? I shrug Maiden's  
image off my shoulders; let Crone wrap her  
withered, veiny palms around my neck.  
Turning my face back and forth, she thumbs  
into the corners of my mouth, checks my teeth;  
Crone pats me on the head, slides into her grave.

### III.

Speaking of childhoods, difficult parents,  
hopeless and hungry times in life, several  
colleagues nod their way into conversation.  
I volunteer no information here, preferring  
sympathetic sounds and empathetic ears.  
What's one of your favorite memories?  
Answers go round the cramped office, but  
I, lost through time, struggle to find a  
stopping point, land on a forgotten place.  
Licking the gold peach-juice from each palm,  
toes buried in the cool soil beneath the tree  
beside my Mamaw's house: one of the few  
moments I recall before my parents divorced.  
Frightened of scarcity, my tears well up, blink  
away; my tongue replaces my fear with longing—  
a longing of soft, sun-warmed peach-flesh.



## Ad Astra

Haley Grindstaff

*For Ben, for opening a door for me*

Us chain-smoking cigarette after cigarette,  
Five in all, I think,  
You teaching me how to light the damn thing,  
Me laughing at my feeble attempts to  
Talk past the bad decision smoldering between my lips.  
For the first time  
in a long time  
I feel  
content.



## Be My Baby

Trevor Stanley

“Be My Baby” is an obsessive song.

The lone drum of the beginning prepares the listener for the onslaught of musical instruments that’ll attack the soul. Suddenly, all at once, sounds race into the ears: each one indistinguishable from the last. Every layer telling its own story. You can almost feel the overpowering drum set playing along with your heart. It steals the attention away from Ronnie Spector. But she keeps pushing back, asking for the attention, asking if you’ll love her.

Lately, I’ve been stuck in a cycle of deleting and reuploading Grindr. The promise of a new hookup excites me. Most days are boring, but visiting a new city means a whole new set of profiles will appear in the limited fifty miles. Messaging blank profiles and meeting up is always a risk but seems to have worked out this one time.

But the drums still persist. Slapping the audience in the face. Like anxiety on the first date or a first kiss, leaning in to meet another’s lips forces blood through the entire body. Feeling each pump in the reddening ears. Hearing becomes harder and the focus shifts into trying to discern the other’s words. Luckily, the pupils dilate, but the now naturally rapid movement of the eyes proves disorienting and a miniature case of whiplash forces a headache. The dropping out of every instrument and leaving only the drum set is that deafening moment. Moving the head forward, trying not to fumble, eyes locked on lips. Until finally, sparks fly. In come back all the players, the drums, guitars, vocals, a euphony of sound. The rest is history.

Driving up on a normal neighborhood at 1 a.m. without street-lights seems really creepy. Considering the guy I'm meeting up with is dog sitting for a family friend, I'm also an intruder. But in the driveway sat a black Honda CR-V, just as he had described. I parked my car on the street, then texted him to say I was there. I saw him look out of his window. He turned on his porch light, and that familiar drumbeat in my head returned. I exited my Jeep and struggled to keep my balance as my inner ear was busy fighting back the blood. I saw his silhouette against the lights inside the house and realized he was much taller than I imagined from his pictures.

"Hi," he said with his smooth jazz, but high voice. I replied, and he brought me over to his couch. I immediately jumped on him.

I've had this song on repeat for the last two hours. Soaking it all in, wanting to discern each instrument. Listening to their compliments with one another. The strings providing their orchestral feel of love. The finger drums adding its Spanish feel of sensuality. The backup singers acting as inner thoughts of encouragement. The blending works wonders as love truly happens in an instance. Once a note passes through, another instrument takes its place. Leaving no room for its own position. Instead, they build and work off one another, trying to fill the listener's room with a masterpiece of true love and aiming to build to that climactic moment.

I kept lying on my back as he had finished all over my chest. I turned my head upside down to check on the progress of the search for cleaning materials.

He mumbled to himself and said, "I was gonna give you some toilet paper, but I don't think that would really work out."

"I think the white speckles would be a nice addition to myself."

He didn't laugh. He kept at it, and I saw him stare at the hand towel next to the sink for a couple of seconds. He was probably asking himself if he would remember to wash that before the owners got back to their house to find a yellow, crusted mess. It started to puddle up in my jugular notch, and I laughed to myself. He must've noticed and threw his shirt to me to use on myself. He quickly began to dress and looked at me as if my shoes should have already been on. On my way

out we kissed for one last time, and I told him we would have to do it again. The next few weeks became an odd, non-personal love affair.

Maybe I look for love in all the wrong places, but this time it seemed different. Sure, he said that he wasn't looking for a relationship, but I figured everyone said that. His reasons were very clichéd.

"I don't do relationships because I have commitment issues," was the response of someone who very well does not have commitment issues.

We talked on the phone every night for a couple of weeks, and he had phrases of "Your voice is very calming" to "You're very interesting and have a lot of things to say."

I'd reply with "Yeah, my goal is to always be so interesting and always have a story at a party or something." A very boring response from someone who apparently has a lot to say.

But I guess I should've known it wouldn't last. Maybe it was the illness that kept him from classes, choosing me to fill his now free time with. Perhaps he would laugh about what he was doing to me to all of his friends. He could have fallen in love with me for two days and then decided he could do better. We never met in person again after that first night. The ending of our three weeks together fizzled out into nothing, leaving me alone with Grindr and Spotify playing "Be My Baby" on repeat for three hours.



## An Interview with Darius Stewart

Darius Stewart is an MFA candidate in the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa and will graduate this spring. He also holds an MFA in poetry from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin. He has authored three poetry chapbooks, including *The Ghost the Night Becomes*, 2013 winner of the Gertrude Poetry Chapbook Contest, and his essays and poems can be found in *Fourth Genre, storySouth, Appalachian Heritage, Callaloo*, and others. He was recently awarded the second annual Englert Nonfiction Fellowship.

**SC:** Thank you for agreeing to share with our readers your writing career and craft. My first question is what drew you to writing poetry? I know every aspiring writer has a different beginning. Could you speak on your writing origins?

**DS:** I think that I've always been drawn to rhythmic prose—you might even call it lyrical prose—and that's how I wrote. I did write some poetry in high school, but most of those poems were what I'd probably call "little ditties with end rhymes." It's probably the only time my poetry had a sense of humor, or at least they weren't as serious as what I would eventually write when I got to college. Speaking of college, I didn't think of using poetry as my primary mode of creative writing until I took an Intro to Creative Writing course with my friend, Stacy Jones, who told me during the fiction writing portion of the class that she couldn't wait to read my poetry because of my poetic prose. That was a surprise to me that she expected that I wrote poetry because of that. Writers like Toni Morrison or James Baldwin or Gloria Naylor, who wrote beautiful sentences, didn't lead me to the conclusion those sentences signaled that they might also write poems—though Baldwin did. At

any rate, maybe because I thought it was “sexy” to be considered a poet, I pretty much dove headfirst in understanding how to write poetry that wasn’t just a bunch of pretty sentences.

**SC:** What is your favorite genre to write in? I know you’re an amazing poet and you’re getting a second MFA for creative nonfiction, and that you were a James A. Michener Fellow in both poetry and fiction. I love that you dabble in all of the different genres, and I’m curious as to which one is your favorite and why?

**DS:** This is a good question because what I’ve learned about myself as a writer, after being in the Nonfiction Writing Program at Iowa, is that the essay is probably the form that I appreciate most. And that seems about right because it’s the genre that I wrote in first. Since I was in fifth grade, I wrote essays either as a pastime or I wrote them for a contest, and won many of them, and each time I wrote an essay—especially personal or narrative essay—I felt as if I were “attempting” to say something that I took pleasure in making. And of course, we know through Montaigne that “essay” means to attempt. Poetry and fiction have their own ways of informing these attempts. Poetry certainly allows me to write rhythmically but also how to maximize compression without sacrificing clarity. Fiction, especially when writing allegedly nonfiction prose, is trickier to negotiate. Typically, I use fiction as a speculative tool when memory doesn’t serve me or as a way to write in scene, to develop personas into “characters,” etc. But yes, the essay is where I’m feeling home these days, almost as if I’ve come full circle.

**SC:** What is your writing routine? One of our previous visiting authors, Silas House, said that he writes every day and that ceremony is very important to him, so he has a little ceremony of reading a specific poem and putting on a specific playlist and going outside or to the couch in order to begin his daily writing. I’ve also heard writers who just write in passionate spurts when the mood strikes. I’m starting to come to the conclusion that every writer is different and so I’m just curious about your writing routine?

**DS:** Yes, every writer is indeed different. Like Silas, I once did “ritualize” my writing habit—though I didn’t necessarily write every day—by reading a poem not before I wrote but having access to many poems that I could turn to during the process of composing a poem. I

needed constant inspiration, more opportunities to steal from other poets to complete that first draft before I revised to make the poem more my own. I also listened to music, usually classical music when I wrote. Nothing with words. Today, however, it's more difficult to have that time—to balance a writing schedule with teaching and attending classes, attending readings, socializing, and sleeping. Obviously, when I have to turn in a piece for workshop, I give myself plenty of time to write toward something. And now that I'm beginning my thesis—which is to say the first draft of my book—my writing practices will change dramatically. So, I'd say that depending on what life is like, how you negotiate structure in your life, what it is you have to write about, all of these factors seem to determine how your habits are shaped. Many writers will tell you to write every day no matter what, some say write when you feel inspired. I don't think there's a formula, or at least there shouldn't be. Putting unnecessary pressure on yourself or feeling a need to subscribe to some arbitrary rule is a waste of time and energy and that definitely isn't conducive to creating *anything* but a stress-induced headache!

**SC:** Can you talk about your editing process? How do you write, and then how do you edit what you write? Do you stop editing once a piece has been published or do you still edit your work even after publication?

**DS:** When I write poetry, I will edit and revise even before I've finished the poem! Once I do come to what satisfies me in terms of a first-draft ending, then I read it through, again and again, looking for ways to craft the poem. Once I figure I've exhausted myself and the poem, I put it away for about a month and go back to it with those fresh eyes we've heard so much about. Prose is fundamentally different. I do edit and revise as I go, but I will never complete the first draft of a prose work in one sitting. So, where a poem can go through my editing and revisioning ritual in one sitting, it may take a week to do that with an essay that's fifteen pages long. And I also usually need to take my eyes off a draft for longer than a month. Sometimes I forget about a piece entirely and then go, oh, I need to go back to this piece and see how I like it. Generally, though, I don't have an established system. Writing is hard enough without those hard and fast rules telling you what to do.



**SC:** Many of our readers are writers that are interested in publishing and in finding out more about how to get their work published. They often know traditional methods of publishing individual pieces and even the process for publishing larger works. However, few of our readers know about chapbooks. Since you have put together and published a chapbook, I was wondering if you could speak a little on the process. How did the *Sotto Voce* chapbook come about? Could you speak just a little about the process you went through for creating it? Did you know you wanted to make a chapbook when you started, or did you just have poems that seemed to fit together so it was a logical next step for them? Tell me about the physical creation of bringing *Sotto Voce* into being.

**DS:** I never thought about writing a chapbook until I was at the Michener Center and the idea came while taking a workshop and seminar with the poet, Naomi Shihab Nye. During one of our conferences, she suggested that I put one together based on what she thought of the poems I wrote in that class. This was in 2005. The chapbook that eventually came from that manuscript was *The Terribly Beautiful*. I submitted it to Main Street Rag for a contest and though it didn't win, it was published as an Editor's Choice selection in 2006. The very same for *Sotto Voce*, which I submitted in 2007 and published in 2008. Then, in 2013, I submitted a manuscript to the Gertrude Press Chapbook Competition, with a few poems from the first two chapbooks and new ones, and this one did win, and in 2014 *The Ghost the Night Becomes* was published. For each chapbook, though, the poems were there already. I needed only to find those that "spoke to one another," as they say. Somehow, I'm able to understand intuitively what impels me to write certain poems, and this allows me to understand, too, what poems belong in their own tiny world together. I do test my intuition by putting all those poems on the floor and reading through them to make sure I sense they are getting along in that world. Poems that seem like they want to fight with the other poems, I take them out. It's ok to have mutual disagreements or different perspectives on a subject, this allows for modulation of tone, but there shouldn't be a noticeable conflict between the poems.

**SC:** Looking through your work, I notice that there is a vast spectrum of shapes that your poems take. They can be large blocks of text, they can be couplets, or some such as "Self-Portrait as a Recur-

ring Bird” that have very short, concise couplets, and some like “A Process in the Weather of the Heart” where you have sections that are indented, and I was wondering how you decide on form or how you decide what shape a poem will take when you’re writing. What thoughts go into line breaks, section breaks, indentations, etc.?

**DS:** The shapes of the poems in *Sotto Voce* are varied largely because they are contributing to this “musical” trope that the book hinges upon. Therefore, each poem wants to be a movement within the larger work, or a solo performance. That’s the reason for the structural variety. I also chose the poems based on their shape, in addition to their content.

**SC:** There are many themes that I see among your poetry as a whole, and specifically in *Sotto Voce*, I see recurring themes of music, bodies, sensuality, sexuality, homosexuality, the celebration of nature and human imperfections, as well as religion, and I think an underlying thread of accepting who you are and experiencing what life has to offer. Could you speak maybe about how these themes play a role in your life or perhaps why these themes are the prevalent themes of your poetry? Were these themes a conscious decision or did they seem to just organically crop up in your writing?

**DS:** The themes you mention in *Sotto Voce* are pretty typical of how I see the personal, the political, and the natural negotiating the same space. I tend to render them together in poetry more than I do in prose. I think it’s because of the way compression works with poetic logic: how do I say so much in a small way that makes sense. That is my life, and the lives of people who are of similar identifications, belonging to historically marginalized communities. Also, it’s the musical inherent within the poetic that really is the hallmark of my poetic style.

**SC:** I feel awkward asking this, but there are elements of religion in some of your poems like “Worshipping the Wrong Gods,” “Prayer,” and “Evensong,” so I was wondering if you could speak to your thoughts on religion and how religion plays a role in your writing and life?

**DS:** Religion is significant because I grew up believing I needed to be saved in order to enjoy an everlasting life in Heaven. And this is a very generous way of speaking about that idea. I try to imbue a

sense of spirituality more so than an overt critique of religion, which is basically what I'm doing. I'm an agnostic, and so I like to believe that positionality allows me to straddle the fence in the way I question organized religion. The poems that come out of that are often grounded in the essence of religion as opposed to an earnest use of it. This was a good question, no need to feel awkward!

**SC:** There are two “self-portraits” in *Sotto Voce* (and three others in *The Terribly Beautiful*). I am wondering what inspired those? Your poems always seem deeply self-reflective but I am particularly interested in these that seem to announce those qualities upfront. What do you think draws you to this type of poem?

**DS:** I like to use the form of the “self-portrait”—if we can call it a form—to suggest that the “I” in the poem is less a “persona” and more so “Darius” the person. Often, when I use the “I,” I’m not talking about myself, or if I am, only casually, and in that sense I want the experience of the poem to engender an objective familiarity the reader might have, rather than the subjective familiarity where the reader might empathize with the speaker but should understand it is “Darius” the person who wrote the poem providing an even more “self-reflective” experience.

**SC:** When I’m reading *Sotto Voce*, I kind of pick up on the feeling of underlying sadness and longing. Is that just my reading of it, or was that your intention? Could you talk more about the mood of the poems in the chapbook?

**DS:** Sadness and longing are also staples in my work, and the chapbooks are no exceptions in how these motifs are conveyed. I think because the subject is so heavy, I felt writing elegiacally was appropriate for the subject matter. Of course, even with the elegy, there should be some sense of celebration, which is what I tried to get at with the concluding poems. A sense of redemptive hope.

**SC:** Many of the poems feature a narrator speaking to someone (“Sotto Voce,” “Aubade,” “You Need Not Lead with Your Heart,” “Even Bones,” “Epithalamion,” etc). Are you speaking to specific people from your life in these poems, or are they vignettes of other speakers? Are you meant to be read as the narrator?

**DS:** I think I was speaking to a specific person in most of those po-

ems, maybe “You Need Not Lead with Your Heart” uses the general “you,” but there was definitely a former lover I was speaking to, or my brother, in “Epithalamion.” It really helped to write the specific “you” poems by imagining myself speaking directly to them.

**SC:** Did you have an intended audience in mind when writing the poems in *Sotto Voce*?

**DS:** My audience is always very broad. I say that if I can reach one person and change them for the better with my work, then I have written for the intended audience.

**SC:** What is your favorite poem from *Sotto Voce*?

**DS:** I don’t tend to have a favorite poem, but certainly ones that I like to read because they resonate more with audiences when read aloud. But from this collection, I am partial to “Self-Portrait in Atlanta, Georgia,” because it was written for my best friend who had HIV, and he passed away in 2016. I’m not certain if his death was related to HIV, but this poem holds him in memory.

**SC:** How do you think being from Appalachia informs your writing? Does it? Do you consider yourself an Appalachian writer? And how has being from Appalachia affected you and your writing since you’ve spent a lot of time away from Knoxville?

**DS:** I’ve never thought of myself as Appalachian or think much about being from Appalachia as opposed to being from the city. Many reasons for this is because if one is to imagine a black gay man, one doesn’t readily conjure the image of an Appalachian. Obviously, and perhaps even ironically, because geography says I’m from Appalachia then, sure, my identifications are those of an Appalachian. I do recall that a poem I wrote called “On the Bus,” which I believe is in *The Terribly Beautiful*, is about the speaker finding out his friend has tested positive for HIV and it’s on the bus that Appalachia is invoked. I think I made that choice to suggest the strangeness that the speaker feels by juxtaposing HIV and Appalachia as incongruous to one another. In that way, I think Appalachia informs my work because it signifies displacement, of feeling like a stranger or foreigner in a geographical space in which one doesn’t feel legible. Although, now, I don’t think much about Appalachia or being from this region, but I should say that I frequently think of myself as a Southerner.

**SC:** Many of our readers are potentially interested in pursuing MFA programs in the future. As a student of two different and very prestigious MFA programs, is there any advice or guidance you could share with writers looking to get into a program like Michener or Iowa?

**DS:** Advice for applying to MFA programs...make sure that you present yourselves and your passion for writing not only in your samples but in your statement of purpose as well. This is so often overlooked but so terribly important. Make sure you get letters of recommendations that do likewise. Your writing sample may be brilliant, and it should be your absolute best (whatever that means), but showing a sparkling personality in your statement is key. Make the admissions committee choose you as the one candidate they could take to a deserted island. You will be competing with so many talented writers from throughout the world—when it comes to applicants to Michener or Iowa programs—so setting yourself apart is often the deciding factor between you getting in or someone else. They should remember you. Don't be afraid to step outside the box. If you have a curious way of showing how you came to writing and how it influenced your decision to apply to a particular program, tell that story—just make sure that it doesn't adversely make you seem like a loon. Also, make sure the school has what will make you better as a writer. Find the faculty you want to study with and apply there. Don't pay for an MFA; apply where you can get funding. Many programs do offer funding to help offset going into debt. New York or equally culturally vibrant cities—attractive as they are—is not the place to go to write. It's where you go *after* the program. Iowa is ideal for that. Go somewhere where you can write; I can't stress that enough. If you are more interested in the nightlife than the program, then consider something else. Finally, don't be afraid of the big-name programs like Michener or Iowa. You will never get in if you don't apply.

**SC:** There are also readers that are interested in editing and publishing work. I know you worked as the poetry editor of *Bat City Review*, and I was wondering if there was any advice or insight you could offer students who are interested in editing or working for a journal or magazine?

**DS:** I love my time as the poetry editor at *Bat City Review*. These positions allow you to facilitate your writing by witnessing the type of poetry being written today versus the poetry you read for classes, which sometimes doesn't reflect the temperament of the day. You also get to shape an aesthetic in poetry and literature that you think the reading public should be privy. That is also exciting. You also get to see what is being poorly written and learn how to avoid those pitfalls, and this is especially helpful if you recognize some the same tendencies in your own work. But at the end of the day, working on a journal with other enthusiastic writers is a sublime experience; at least it was for me.

**SC:** Going off of the last question, as an editor for a journal, is there any advice you could offer our readers who are trying to get their work published in journals? Any common mistakes you saw or any bad habits to avoid or perhaps any extra steps young writers could take to improve their chances of their work being selected (beyond writing good pieces)?

**DS:** When you submit to a journal or magazine, make sure that you are submitting to a journal that you are familiar. Don't submit to an experimental journal like *Fence*, for instance, if you're writing more traditional verse. The same can be said for writing programs. Alabama and Brown are excellent programs for those who write more experimentally. Of course, what defines these terms is arbitrary, the point is to know that what you're writing is what the journal tends to publish when it is written exceptionally well. Brevity is welcomed in a cover letter if the editors ask for one. I have read cover letters that list every journal they've ever published in, and in a few cases, cover letters that listed every major literary journal in alphabetical order. In nearly all cases, it was obvious that those writers did not publish in those places since they did not elicit an appreciation for the work they wanted us to consider. Let your work speak for itself. You might also mention a few of their contributors whose work inspired you to submit to their journal, but only if that's true. Don't waste anyone's time being disingenuous, and that goes for life as well.

**SC:** Finally, what are you plans for the future? What exciting new work can our readers look forward to from you, and what do you think your next step will be after you finish the MFA at Iowa?

**DS:** After the Iowa MFA, I might pursue a PhD, or I might spend time working on my book, which will look through the lens of excess to examine alcohol and drug misuse, trauma and personal health, identity politics and the like. I don't like to forecast the future too much these days since me ending up pursuing a second MFA was never a consideration.



## Star Shells

*Matthew Powers*

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The Field, 1918

Star shells quickly rushed from behind our line. Suddenly in front of us they would lose momentum as their tiny parachutes open. They slowly descended, casting a flickering light over the battlefield. There were always several in the air, each one falling and casting shadows that moved like wraiths. The shadows grew and shrank and melted into each other and clashed and—

We had known the attack was coming. We were lying in our shallow ditches, our stomachs on the ground, rifles pressed into our shoulders. Waiting. When we had seen the gray mass of men emerge from the woods, we waited. Wait until the star shells go up, our Sergeant said. Then we can really nail those fuckers. So, we waited until they were halfway between their woods and our wheat field. Then the men in the back let loose with the big guns. I was extremely thankful for how hard it was to make out each individual, their gray uniforms advancing in stop motion under the flickering lights.

I did what George had taught me. I kept both eyes open, breathed evenly. I squeezed the trigger slowly and controlled my movements. Every muscle in me wanted to shake. I pulled the bolt back, loaded another round. I didn't think about what I was doing or what was happening; that only makes everything harder. George was next to me in our little ditch, our shoulders gently pressing into each other. His body jolted with each shot he took. I hope he could feel the shots I took. I hope he was proud.

Gray-clad Germans fell over in droves. Shells would explode above them and little spurts of black soil would rise to meet them. I tried to not look at them. I let my body do as it would



as my mind escaped me, something I learned to do on the day that George was at my door.



Home, 1910

The water is cold and soapy as I wash the window that overlooks the hills behind our house. Rainbows dance in the thin streams of water as they fall down the pane. Past the soap and glass, the hills build upon each other until they become mountains in the distance. My dad is out there somewhere, hunting. Dad has been getting these big, healthy looking raccoons all spring. We are well fed from the money he gets for the pelts, but I miss him. He is gone for days at a time, and he never takes me. He tells me to focus on school and help around the house.

Mom had taken some money out of the jar she kept beneath a loose board in her bedroom she thought we didn't know about. She said she was going to walk into town with Aunt Omeys to get groceries. She promised that she would bring us some sweets if we could keep the secret and I had solemnly sworn that we all could, though Nancy was just four and she would inevitably let it slip. Mom told me I was the man of the house and to watch after my sisters. She said that if anything happened, I should run and tell any of the neighbors, except for Mr. Williams down the road. I told her that I would, and to bring back Hershey's Silvertops. She simply smiled and left.

I'm absentmindedly watching the window dry, Mary faintly reflected behind me, when I hear a sharp knock at the front door. I turn to see George Williams through the storm door. George is a couple of years older than me, and big for his age. He is a legend us younger kids whisper about at the schoolhouse. He had dropped out of school a year earlier, and now he was a symbol of freedom for me and all the other boys at school. He is usually only ever seen coming out of the woods carrying half a dozen squirrel by their tails with his rifle strapped to his back. Sometimes dad would buy pelts from him. Mom would make him pay more than they were worth. He would growl and grumble about this, but he would always cave.

"Hey kid, is your Pa home?" he asks.

“No. He took his dogs out to get some raccoons. He probably won’t be back for a day or two.” I said. My feet seemed to shift around on their own; I couldn’t meet his gaze.

His face twists in anger. He stands in front of our screen door, quietly cursing to himself. My oldest sister, Mary, walks up behind me and gently tugs on my shirt. I turn to look at her. She looks worried. I turn back to George and say sorry. I don’t know what else to say. He looks at me like he had forgotten where he was. “It’s okay. I’ll go hunting again. Maybe I can get more pelts before I see him. What’s your name, kid?”

“Albert.”

George smiles. “You want to go hunting with me, Bert? I know all kinds of good spots in the woods around here. I can show you.”

“I can’t. I have to stay here and watch my sisters.” He looks past me into the house. “How old are they?”

“Nancy is four, and Mary is nine.”

“Shit, that one should be watching the other girl. Raising kids is woman’s work, that’s what my Pa says. She’s old enough to do it.”

“My mom said—”

“How old are you, kid? You’re too old to be doing woman’s work for your Ma. Come with me, I’ll show you how to hunt. I’ll make a man of you.” George opens the door. I feel my shirt tighten on my chest as Mary pulls harder. George smiles at me. He beckons me to come, a great explorer leading me to adventure. I look down to see my feet moving me forward as Mary’s grip fails.



### The Charge, 1918

His face was always illuminated by multiple moving points of light. The light and shadow danced across his features. We were separated during the charge. The whistle had shrieked above the shells bursting and the machine-gun fire. Our line had gone eerily silent as everyone stood and fixed their bayonets. I had remained on my stomach. I felt a strong hand grab my shoulder and pull me up. George looked into my eyes, not unkindly. He knew I was scared, and he knew of-

ficers would stay behind to shoot any man who didn't advance. He had helped me fix my bayonet; my hands had been shaking. We had charged out of our wheat field. I couldn't look at the woods we were charging; they seemed to be alive with gunfire. Instead, I had watched George's shadows. They were always moving. Sometimes they would span the entire field, the shadows of giants. Once he had tripped over a German's helmet, half buried in black soil and gore. While he was crouched, trying to stand, there had been only one star shell in the sky. It had been very nearly overhead, and his shadow was small. It looked like the shadow of a small boy, one knee on the ground, head downturned. Powerless. Crying maybe. By the time he stood, the sky was on fire again, and we had continued the charge, deafened by the roar of blood.

Then we had reached the woods. The trees were constantly shifting and growing. It was impossible to know who was firing from where. We had been separated, and I hid behind a tree. Everything in the forest was alive and moving. I would catch glimpses of men between the great bars of shadow the trees cast. There was a wild look in their eyes, like dogs on a strong scent, baying and frothing at the mouth. Machine guns swept the forest, and the men's bloodlust succumbed to fear. When I saw men running out of the forest, I followed. That's when I found him. George was lying on his back, his face to the sky. Shot in the gut a few times.

I lay on the ground, my face near his. I smelled his blood, pungent and metallic. I was lying on my stomach, clutching my rifle. Our noses were nearly touching. Shadows fell from the branches of every tree, a desolate harvest. They crept along his face, black tendrils stretching over his features. When the shadows reached his eyes, they seemed to settle deep in the sockets. As I peered into those black holes, I was reminded of the house he grew up in.



### The House, 1910

The black windows of his house stare across the front yard at me. They contain no glass; the house looks abandoned. The siding is worn and unpainted. It's falling off in places, and large gaps are present in the helter-skelter pattern that has emerged. The door is plain;

the hinges are rusted. George had gone around to the back; he said there was a way in back there. He said he just needed to grab his rifle, that he would be quick. He had told me to stay at the road, to not look like I was waiting for him. He had said to be quiet. His Pa was probably asleep, and he didn't want to wake him.

I stand by the road kicking pebbles, watching them skid along the packed dirt, occasionally jumping when they strike a rock. I have been doing this for at least thirty minutes. I wonder how Mary and Nancy are. I wonder when mom will be back. I hope she gets home soon. I hope she stays gone all day. So far, the adventure hasn't been worth the Hell I'll have to pay when I get home. I could walk back. It would just take me ten minutes to get back. I could promise Mary my cut of the sweets to call Nancy a liar when she tells mom I had left. She would do it, and mom would believe us. Nancy always lied. Maybe I wouldn't have to give Mary all of my candy.

The hinges scream as the door opens. George comes out, his rifle leaning against his shoulder, its butt in his hand and its barrel in the air. He looks like the soldier my dad had whittled for me last Christmas. When he gets close, I say, "Why'd you come out of the front? I thought you didn't want to wake your dad up."

"He was up." George's face looks wet, like he had been sweating or crying. Maybe both. The top three buttons of his shirt are unbuttoned. I can see his chest.

"Is everything okay? Was he all right?" I ask.

"Of course he was all right. Are you going to be asking questions all day? How are we supposed to bag any goddamn kills if everything can here you coming from a mile away?" He glares down at me.

I don't answer. He walks past me, and I follow him. Before long he cuts off of the road and into the forest. I silently follow. We march through the woods for a couple of minutes, and then I look back. I can't see the road. All I can see are the trees. They stand perfectly still and silent, the world's most dutiful sentinels.



## The Woods, 1918

I might have been the last American alive in those woods. The sky was dark again; the guns had gone quiet. I didn't know how long I'd been there with George. I watched as our men retreated from the woods. Like a wave we had all charged, crashed into the trees and machine-gun fire, and the survivors had receded. None of them seemed to notice me.

I knew I couldn't stay. I needed to take advantage of the darkness. I knew I couldn't carry him out of there, especially not while being quiet. I had died with George before. I didn't need to do it again. He wouldn't want that. I rose, but I stayed crouched low. I looked at George one last time. There was a glint of starlight in his eyes. I looked up to see the canopy was broken above him and millions of stars were shining in the dark. I started to creep away, trying to stay as quiet as I had been when we stalked the fawn.



## The Woods, 1910

We creep through the woods stalking the fawn. George wanted me to stay behind once he spotted it. He said it was small enough that his underpowered .22 should be able to kill it. He said it was alone. It would be easy to take. I told him I wanted to come. He looked unsure, so I told him my father took me hunting all the time. He didn't need to know my mother thought I was too young to hunt and that my father often scolded me for treating his dogs like they were my pets.

"Have you ever killed a deer?" he asks.

"Of course," I answer.

"Then take this," he says, holding out his rifle. "I've never actually taken a deer. I've only ever killed little critters, squirrels and raccoons." He looks embarrassed as he says this, though he never drops his gaze. "I can't afford to mess this up. That deer is small, but it could feed me and Pa well." I nod and take the rifle. I am elated that George trusts me, and the power in my hands thrills me.

I watch where each step lands as I follow George to the clearing where he had seen the fawn. My heart is pounding so loudly that I

can't hear anything else. I hope I'm being quiet. I don't want the deer to hear me. I don't want George to hear me. George kneels behind a fallen log, and I slowly move in beside him. Before me is the clearing, and a mere twenty yards away I see the fawn.

The fawn's head is down. It is eating, oblivious to its surroundings. It's standing with its side to us, its head slightly turned in our direction. Uneven rows of white spots start at its tail and follow the graceful lines of its body, down its neck, and to the back of its head. The rifle seems immensely heavy as I lay it across the log. I try to fix my sights on the fawn. My eyes sting and the fawn's spots swim together, forming long, thin, white stripes that melt into its brown coat.

The light that shines into the clearing seems to saturate everything, and the fawn fades before me. I try to wipe my eyes before George sees.

Slowly, evenly, George reaches over. He gently takes the rifle from me. He presses it into his shoulder. He never moves his head; he keeps both eyes fixed on the fawn. He breathes evenly. He gently pulls the trigger. The rifle fires, a sharp crack rips through the air. George's head falls and rests upon the log. He exhales; a long whining sound escapes him.

I look to the clearing to see the fawn trying to bolt. It wants to run so badly, but it can't. Its legs are shaking hard. With each step it loses more and more control and it dips further to the ground. After a few strides it falls. I hear the bolt of George's rifle open and a slight tinkling as he digs into his pocket for another round.

George vaults over the log and approaches the fawn, its side still rising and falling. He walks with his rifle to his side in one hand, its barrel pointed toward the dirt. He stands, his back to me, his head bowed. He holds this pose for a moment, then in a single motion he moves the rifle's barrel to the fawn's head and pulls the trigger. This time the crack of the gunshot is quieter, muffled against the deer's head.

I stand and approach George. By the time I get to him he is on one knee, following a line of spots down the deer's back with his finger. He looks calm, but sad. His .22 is on the ground next to him, specks of blood glistening on the dark gray metal of the barrel. "You've never killed a deer, have you?" he asks.

"No. My dad won't take me hunting."

George turns his head and looks up at me. "You did well, Bert. You didn't scare the deer away. You stayed calm and quiet." I try to control my breathing. I don't want him to hear the tears in my voice. "Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"My Pa taught me," he says.

"I wish my dad would teach me stuff like that."

"I can teach you. I'll teach you how to hunt and shoot. I'll show you everything my Pa showed me."

Kneeling before the fawn, George shows me everything his father taught him. He shows me how to skin the deer, how to shoot. He shows me his father's sins. I search for something to look at that isn't dead deer eyes or blood or George. I look at the sky, as the forest seems to consume us. I fall into the clear, blue sky as the shame of these hills threatens to drown me.



Dawn, 1918

A dull orange dawn pushed back the lingering blacks and grays of night as our artillery pummelled the woods. Both lines were silent as the Germans were pounded. They hid in their trenches and bunkers, trying to survive. We were too exhausted to even raise our rifles. Only our shells still had the strength left to fight.

I sat with my legs crossed in the same shallow ditch George and me had shared the previous night. A light breeze bent the wheat around me. A stalk tickled my cheek. I watched as the artillery destroyed the woods. Trees were snapped like twigs; their great corpses littered the ground. Their roots held fast, and stumps stood like thousands of grave markers. The forest was gone, and with it George. I stood, turned, and walked toward the endless, dawn-lit horizon.



## A Trailer's Secret

*Harley Mercadal*

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Frigid air surrounds me, standing still  
as I, too, exaggerate my stillness:  
no creaks nor pops escape as the two  
women bag up the man's things.

Steps from the women skirt the closed  
door, water drips behind the plastic tub,  
unheard and unseen. The young one opens  
the door, steps in, feels the sinking beneath.

Quick air escapes her, she steps back;  
my blackened, spotted secret shames me.  
I wanted to remain strong, did not want  
sweet-smelling rot to spread in the plywood.

Tiles of my roof-head leak like tears;  
wind presses each fissure to tremble.  
Her step, her cutting of grimy carpet  
exposes my blackened, spotted skin.

Earth moves beneath me; she breathes  
in silence, but I creak softly around her,  
hoping for this moment I can protect  
her still. I clamp down, sway, listen.





## A Contemporary Experience of Death

Harley Mercadal

My mother-in-law and I perched on separate sides of the television, not watching the news but listening, my pug Luna dreaming at my feet.

*Ba-ding!* Facebook Messenger called for me; my Mama, in Winston-Salem for her cancer treatments, asked me had I made it home yet.

*Yep*, I tapped out before a video call appeared. I grinned, greeting her darkened face, *what's going on, Mama—Honey, I've got some bad news.*

Short, exasperated breaths echoed in that silence, both of us afraid, one to ask and the other to tell. *Honey, your Daddy died—what—your Daddy's dead.*

I looked up and away from her, blood-rushing, heart-beating, and sound melting away as I slid down into my own selfish, grievous puddle.

Tremors come that I cannot stop for weeks— not when I return to the trailer on Rich Drive, nor when I hold the small, black box of ashes.

*It's illegal to spread human remains in Tennessee,* I remember Jesse saying, both our hands on the box, *but what can they really do about it once you're done?*

After that, I burn everything I can find, cremating photographs, letters from Sullivan County jail: those promises of second chances and sobriety.

The tremors have stopped, but fires still creep at the edges of my dreams, promising renewal or rebirth of this relationship, and stranger things.

## Una experiencia contemporánea de la muerte

Harley Mercadal

*Traducido por: Samantha Adams, Tucker Boggs, Tegan Brown, Olivia Campbell, Mykia Dowdell, Kathryn Ford, Milady Maldonado, Olga Orozco, Abigail Richardson, Emily Richardson, Angela Rosales, Andreza Silva, Jose Siuffe, and Nicole Sowell*

Mi suegra y yo posados en lados separados  
de la televisión, no viendo las noticias  
sino escuchándolas, mi carlino Luna soñando a mis pies.

*¡Ding!* La mensajería de Facebook sonó;  
Mi mamá, en Wiston-Salem para sus tratamientos  
de cáncer, me preguntó si ya había llegado casa,

*Sip*, escribí antes de que apareciera la videollamada.  
Sonreí, saludando a su cara sombría, *¿Qué esta  
pasando, mamá?—cariño, tengo malas noticias.*

Cortas, exasperadas respiraciones resonaron en ese silencio,  
ambos temerosos, uno de preguntar y otro de contar.  
*Cariño, tu papá murió—qué—tu papá está muerto.*

Alcé la vista y la alejé de ella, sangre corriendo,  
corazón latiendo, y el sonido derritiéndose mientras  
me resbalaba en mi propio egoísta, charco doloroso.

Me llegan estremecimientos que no puedo parar por semanas –  
ni cuando regreso al tráiler en Rich Drive,  
ni cuando sostengo la pequeña, negra caja de cenizas.

*Es ilegal esparcir cenizas humanas en Tennessee,*  
recuerdo haber oído decir a Jesse, con nuestras manos en la caja.  
*¿Pero qué pueden hacer realmente al respecto una vez que hayas  
terminado?*

Después de eso, quemo todo lo que puedo encontrar, incinerando  
fotografías, cartas de la cárcel del condado de Sullivan:  
esas promesas de segundas oportunidades y sobriedad.

Los temblores se han detenido, pero el fuego todavía se arrastra  
en los bordes de mis sueños, prometiendo renovación  
o renacimiento de esta relación, y cosas más extrañas.



## Unforgiven

*Harley Mercadal*

---

Five years passed: my father and I had not spoken a word—let alone  
any apology.

He knew where to find me, but neither of us moved; both a  
blackened, bloody shade of wrong.

I told my mother a few weeks before that sometimes, I forgot he  
wasn't already dead; maybe it would be easier if he were.

When the November night came of his passing, I didn't know what  
to say.

Those words followed me like a shadow I had spoken into being.

I heard it crunching the dry, autumn leaves behind me.

I saw it in the corners of my eyes, slippery and dark, wondering  
why I turned away from a half-hearted wish come true.

Remembering the sound of my father's back-handed slap made my  
cheeks burn.

I amputated my father's hold over me long before he died, but I still  
wish he had died differently.

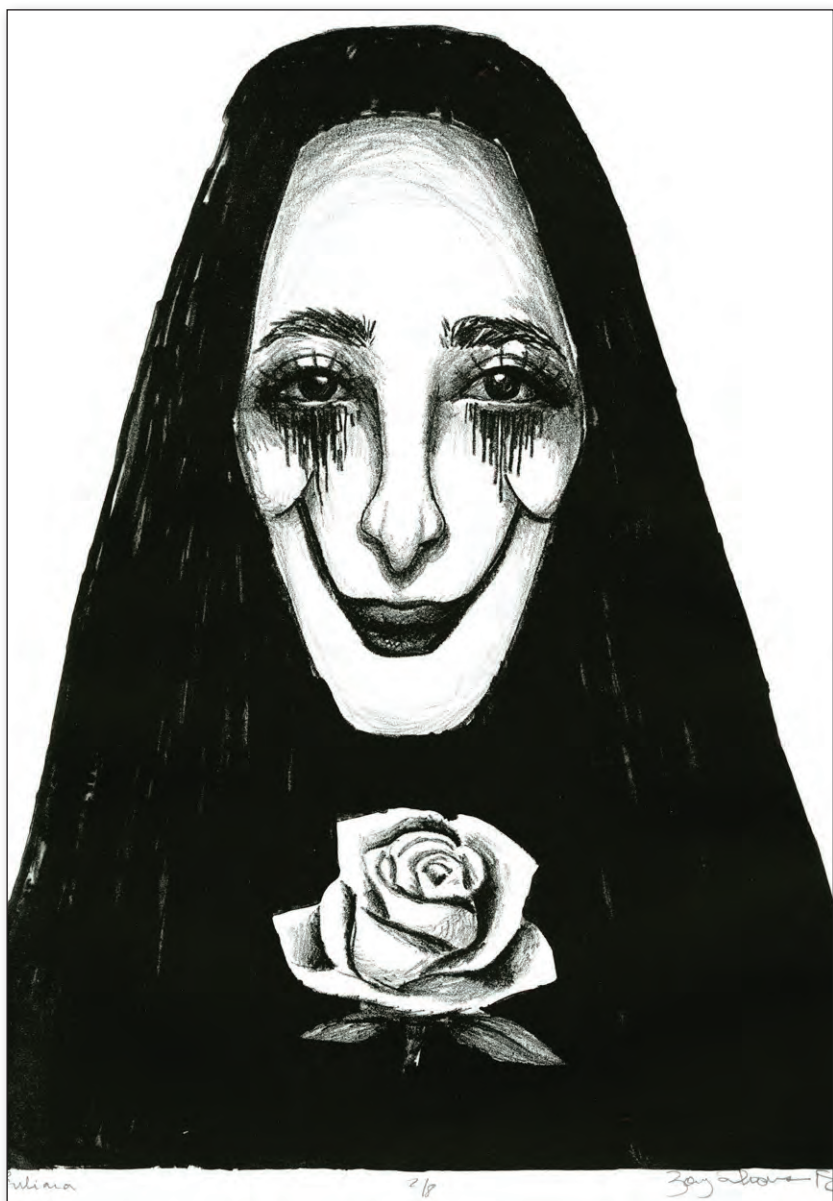
I could not go into the back room of the Rich Drive trailer and look  
at him, even in death.

I could not look and see his body lying on the floor, his flesh  
purpling to match the dirty plum-colored carpet, nor could I  
stand the swollen, diabetic hands.

I could not stomach his loneliness; I could not breathe the heavy  
cigarette-smell of silence.



# Lilliana



*Zoey Thomas*

## The Ruins of God's Corpse

*Matthew Powers*

---

God's eye had been hanging from a thin sinew for nearly a decade before it fell. They were sitting around the enormous tongue the wealthy used as a table in a feasting hall when it dropped, the great jagged teeth rising all around them. The last decade had been marked by a rising sense of paranoia; that eye had been watching, slightly swaying every now and then. It landed with a soft squelch, splitting at the sides a bit.

That night they feasted. They thought it was a good omen, a meal landing on their table. God's eye became a delicacy that could only be found in the black markets of their home's innards. Down among that stench commoners would thinly slice any eye they could get their hands on and claim it had fallen from the walls of their home. It wasn't impossible; as the Corpse they all lived in decayed, one would sometimes find new organs where a solid wall used to be.

They had found God generations ago. When they found it, the chest was still heaving, the heart still pumping. Their forbears had been tall, their bodies were rivers of muscle flowing together, their posture was upright, and they had wandered the world with long gaits. That had been long ago; they had crawled into the great dying beast to escape the heat and hostility of their world. They had pushed deeper and deeper into the beast as it died. Occasionally it would attempt to move, but this didn't last long. Generations of living in the cramped, lightless Corpse left them hunchbacked, often walking on all fours, their skin translucent and their eyes nearly useless.

Their God was ever present, yet formless. Everyone knew at least a part of their God, but they couldn't picture the whole. What wisdom is to be gained from the lining of God's stomach?

As the rot progressed the highest caste of society left their homes. They had lived high in the sky, nesting in God's many heads. Servants would climb the rungs of spinal columns to deliver their food. Slowly these towers began to bend under the weight of the huge skulls placed atop them. The last of the elites had moved into more sensible abodes within the ribs before the necks started snapping, the towers falling from their perch in the sky. The ribs became overcrowded, but those who had previously considered themselves to be comfortably middle class couldn't bare the idea of moving into the bowels. Many of them followed dry arteries until they found a place to settle. Some made it as far as the roots of claws. They would press themselves between the soft bone and sweetly rotting flesh and sleep, dreaming of the wonderful chest cavity they had called home once.

Then, parasites began to devour their home. The parasites were voracious, little more than mouths with legs. They would wake to find their walls crawling with them, the flesh and bone of their home being devoured before their eyes. This started in the bowels among the poor, as these things often do. They combated the voracious invaders as best they could, but nothing stopped them. They dug until they struck bile, which they poured on the parasites. It accomplished nothing; they consumed it as readily as they consumed every other part of God. When they would strike out at the creatures with clenched fists and the heels of their feet, they would often pull back bloody stumps. Once again, they became wanderers, constantly searching for a place to settle were neither the rot nor biting insects could find them.

The blight spread throughout the Corpse. Where the poor went, they were blamed for bringing the parasites with them, though they really couldn't be blamed; the insects were becoming as omnipresent as God itself. As tensions rose, outsiders began to be executed whenever they tried to enter a new organ or appendage. Their bodies would be taken to a faraway pit in the Corpse and tossed in to feed the insects that writhed throughout the flesh of their home. The bodies would land with a thump, and then the scattering of a billion tiny legs would become deafening.

As their God was eaten away around them, they began to feel a light breeze. Drafts were forming from holes in the flesh. Within the stench of rot, they could smell other things; things that the inhabitants of

God's Corpse had no words for. They became confused by changes in temperature; they had no concept of heat or cold. Everyone began to sit very still, never moving more than what was absolutely necessary. They huddled together and let the biting parasites crawl over them, afraid they would blindly stumble out of the Corpse.

They became increasingly irritable and began to lash out violently at one another. Eyes were gouged. Throats were clenched. Skulls were split. Fights would spread from one inhabitant to the next as they wildly flailed at each other. Some just accepted abuse, sullenly waiting for it to be over. This went on until one of the Corpse's inhabitants found it to be unbearable. It stood up and began to speak.

It told the others that they could not live like this, that they were all speeding towards extinction. It said that they could no longer live within the Corpse, that it was time to venture out of one of the newly formed holes in its flesh. Their forebears had lived outside, why couldn't they? It proclaimed that it was a Pilgrim, and that they all should follow it. It gently walked through the mass of its neighbors, urging them to follow. Some stood and walked behind it. Most remained still.

They followed the feeling of moving air, and before long they had found an exit. The light blinded them. The Pilgrim was the first to leave the Corpse. It reached out and held its hand outside, allowing the wind to catch its palm. It took its first step out of God's Corpse. As it emerged from the shadows, heat beat down on its skin. The heat became more intense as it stood there, but it didn't say anything; it didn't want to discourage the others. They emerged one by one, feeling the sun's rays for the first time. Some cried out in pain as their feet touched hot sand. Others stood quietly until their pale skin began to burn and slowly bubble. Some couldn't bear the heat and blinding light, and they receded into the familiar, fading comfort of God's Corpse. The others shielded their eyes and tempered their resolve to follow the Pilgrim.

They shuffled forward through the desert, the sun shining through their eyelids. The Pilgrim constantly talked so that the others could follow it. It told them they could get used to the heat, that their eyes would adjust. Secretly it hoped they could find a new God to burrow into.



Eventually the light and heat began to recede, and they rejoiced. They opened their eyes, and they could keep them open. They still couldn't see much, but they were happy to know their blindness wasn't permanent. The sand still burned their feet, but their skin stopped bubbling. The Pilgrim said they should rest, that they had been walking for quite a while.

Very few survived the night. They didn't think they would miss the sun, but without its presence they froze on the sand. When the Pilgrim awoke, it called out to its followers and very few answered. They sounded weak. It stumbled around and found its dead and dying flock. It gently stroked their heads and kissed their hands. Finally, it stood and faced God's Corpse.

The sun was rising, and the Pilgrim couldn't keep its eyes open for very long. The Corpse was far away, but it was huge. It couldn't focus its vision on God's Corpse. The looming mass shifted. The rising sun nearly blinded it, and its eyes watered profusely. Still it stared at God. Before long the heat was nearly unbearable. The Pilgrim fell to its knees. Then to its stomach, its pale face upturned. It didn't blink. The specter of God shifted as tears flooded its eyes. As the blinding light faded and pure void consumed the Pilgrim, the ruins of God's Corpse remained an unknowable blur.



## Meltdown #?

*Matthew Bennett*

---

This wasn't my first, but I hope it's my last.  
Autistic fits: wanting my fists through glass.  
Lack of language to escape the past.

Bruised-up face and stomped-up ground.  
Screams to infinity.  
Show the Lord where I am found.

Suffered several self-slaps on the face.  
A loved one's embrace,  
would bring peace and grace.



# Gollum Sonnet

*Alex Mauger*

---

Oh, Precious, Precious, how you make me sing  
As chirping birds who fly around the Shire.  
Their little necks I truly wish to wring,  
Yet thou, my Precious, light in me a fire.  
With thee I feel as free as birds in flight,  
And mighty kings have no more pow'r than I.  
My stealth displayed when I go hunt at night  
Makes orcs and men fear what in shadows lie.  
But ev'ry day you fill my soul with fright,  
For many wish to keep thee as their own.  
Though often wrapped around my finger tight,  
I think about my bones interred alone.  
While thou be mine, I shall contented be,  
And none shall vex poor Gollum while he's free.



## Fruit, Stone, and Soil

Emily Price

I thought the raspberry bush would never die.  
It rests now, a stump uncut, with no new green leaves  
to peer out from the bark's grooves in early spring.  
Only dead wood reaches towards me with gnarled fingers.

I thought my grandfather, too, would never die.  
But his headstone peers out of the family cemetery,  
property that soon will not be ours. He died on linoleum,  
only to be laid out naked on cold steel later the same day.

His ashes, half buried and half swept away in Easter winds,  
are part of the ground now. None of us will take the grave marker  
when the farm is sold. Someone will uproot it eventually.  
That will suit him, always soil more than stone.



## Someone's in the Attic

Abby N. Lewis

### Cast:

ELIZA HAYWITHER

MARTHA

DR. DELITTO

YOUNG BOY

YOUNG BOY'S MOTHER

NURSE

### SCENE 1

*The scene opens in a hospital waiting room. MARTHA is sitting in a chair next to ELIZA in her electric wheelchair. They are in the middle of a discussion, one they have had many times before. On the other side of the waiting room, a YOUNG BOY plays with a giant dollhouse while his mother sleeps in a chair nearby.*

*Attention will be divided between the set of SCENE 1 and that of SCENE 2, so both sets should fit on stage together. Perhaps place a door in the middle of the stage and dim one half of the stage while keeping the other half lit during each scene.*

**ELIZA:** I don't see why you won't. My parents hired you to make sure I don't get too depressed. This would help keep me from getting worse. There are actual studies and research about this. It's a healthy thing to do. Encouraged even!

**MARTHA:** I would prefer not to discuss this in public, Eliza.

**ELIZA:** (*ignoring MARTHA'S comment*) We could set up a time, a schedule, if you want. That way you don't have to worry about when I'm going to ask you again.

**MARTHA:** Eliza—

**ELIZA:** It would have to be a time when my parents aren't home . . .

*Across the room, the YOUNG BOY places an adult male doll in the attic of the giant dollhouse. The walls of the attic are red. Then he takes an adult female doll and a little girl doll out of the house and starts narrating a conversation between them in front of the dollhouse. MARTHA watches this happen. ELIZA does not.*

**ELIZA** (*noticing MARTHA is no longer focused on her*): You know, there are other ways for me to do this. I could always buy a—

**MARTHA**: Those contraptions are made by the devil. You will not be buying one of them. Not in my company.

**ELIZA**: So then you're my best option.

*MARTHA sighs and is about to speak.*

*Enter NURSE.*

**NURSE** (*reading from a clipboard*): Eliza Haywithers?

*MARTHA stands and walks toward the nurse. She does not look back. ELIZA watches MARTHA for a minute, then steers her wheelchair after her.*

*End scene.*

## SCENE 2

*Inside a smaller room in the doctor's office, ELIZA sits waiting for the doctor. MARTHA paces in front of her, no longer calm. ELIZA opens her mouth to say something, then thinks better of it. They wait in silence for a few moments.*

*Enter MARK DELITTO.*

**MARK DELITTO**: Hello. My name is Dr. Mark Delitto. How are we today?

*He takes a seat in the swivel chair in front of ELIZA. The room is now overcrowded and MARTHA has no room to pace. She stands in front of the doctor, behind ELIZA, for a moment, then sinks into the only other chair in the small room.*

**ELIZA**: Fine. Doctor, I wanted to ask. Is it true that a guy's manhood can fracture during intercourse?

**DR. DELITTO**: Yes, unfortunately, that is true. Why do you ask?

**ELIZA:** (*looking behind her at MARTHA*) Just curious. Asking for a friend.

*MARTHA flushes visibly.*

**DR. DELITTO:** (*clearing his throat*) So, Eliza, you wanted to make a consultation appointment to discuss—he looks down and reads from his notes—your sexual maturity.

**ELIZA:** Yes.

*Silence from all. MARTHA clicks her tongue and looks around the room.*

**ELIZA:** Doctor, I've tried to get Martha to help me masturbate, and I've even threatened to buy a vibrator—

**MARTHA:** (*interrupting*) Doctor, we've already established she feels no sensations down there so I don't know why—

**ELIZA:** It's a muscle, like everything else. If you exercise it—(*MARTHA clicks her tongue again, quite loudly*)

**DR. DELITTO:** If you want to, Eliza, and if you have a willing participant, (*beat*) then I see nothing wrong with trying.

**ELIZA:** (*looking back at MARTHA*) You can't break me.

*MARTHA looks visibly pained.*

**ELIZA:** Besides, I'm already broken, if you haven't noticed. Just think of it as part of your job description.

**DR. DELITTO:** (*standing*) I think perhaps I should give you two a moment. Call for the nurse when you would like for me to return. (*he starts to leave, and then*) Oh, and Eliza, maybe try and be a little kinder to your companion.

*Exit DR. DELITTO.*

**ELIZA:** Look, I know it's a lot to ask, but you're my friend, aren't you?

**MARTHA:** (*ignoring Eliza, goes to the door*) Nurse! Tell Dr. Delitto he needn't have left. We have somewhere to be in an hour and I would like to make sure we keep to schedule. Please tell him to come back.

**ELIZA:** (*quietly, to MARTHA'S backside*) Maybe you should go back to the waiting room while I talk to the doctor alone.

**MARTHA:** Maybe I should.

*MARTHA goes through the door in the middle of the stage and into the blackness on the other side.*

*Re-enter DR. DELITTO.*

**DR. DELITTO:** Now, where were we? You had more questions?

*Eliza begins to describe her symptoms and her failed attempts to masturbate on her own. As she is speaking, the dark part of the stage lightens and MARTHA makes her way to the seat she was in at the opening of SCENE 1. The YOUNG BOY is still playing with the two female dolls in front of the dollhouse. He lays spread eagle on his stomach on the floor. His sleeping mother is gone. MARTHA sits and watches the YOUNG BOY.*

**ELIZA:** And I mean it when I say I've tried nearly everything, Doctor. I've used my hand, I've researched how many fingers to use, I've gone inside and fumbled around, I've tried to stimulate from the outside, I've tried rubbing, I've used Kleenexes, I've used a washrag. Nothing is happening. I'm numb. Always numb.

*DR. DELITTO sits on the swivel chair, legs spread, elbows on his knees, and the clipboard in his hands. He is very engaged and listens intently to what ELIZA is saying.*

**DR. DELITTO:** Tell me, are you dry as well?

**ELIZA:** Yes. Painfully so.

**DR. DELITTO:** Painfully? Does it hurt when you rub?

**ELIZA:** No. No, I wish. I just meant . . . frustratingly so. My wrist does grow tired after a time.

**DR. DELITTO:** (*gently probing*) And that's why you want Martha to aid you, is it?

**ELIZA:** I just thought it would work better if there was another person doing the stimulating. Because then I could close my eyes and focus on trying to feel it down there. My mind wouldn't be distracted by what my hand is feeling.

**DR. DELITTO:** And why do you supposed Martha is against buying a vibrator? There are plenty of highly effective ones out nowadays.



Many people use them. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

**ELIZA:** She just is. But even if I did get one, I don't think it would work. It has to be another person.

**DR. DELITTO:** Have you considered getting a boyfriend? There are dating apps for individuals with disabilities—

**ELIZA:** I don't want to try that. I'm not stable enough to handle talking to men in that way. I don't trust them.

*(beat)*

**DR. DELITTO:** I see. You seem to be talking to me just fine.

**ELIZA:** Yes, but you're my doctor. You aren't hitting on me.

**DR. DELITTO:** I see. *(he straightens up in his chair)*

*The doctor's office side of the set goes dark. In the waiting room, MARTHA stands and makes her way to the YOUNG BOY and the dollhouse. She takes a seat on the edge of a chair closest to the YOUNG BOY'S head.*

**MARTHA:** Tell me, young man, why have you put the father in the attic?

**YOUNG BOY:** He was bad. A bad man.

**MARTHA:** Was he? What did he do?

**YOUNG BOY:** We don't talk about it.

*The YOUNG BOY sits up and takes the male doll out of the attic, then puts him back again so the doll lies facedown. MARTHA watches.*

**MARTHA:** Hmm. Why did you do that?

**YOUNG BOY:** He listens. Even when he isn't there, he can hear what you're saying. The only way to stop it is to make his world dark. We can talk now.

**MARTHA:** *(getting concerned)* Where has your mother gone?

*The YOUNG BOY holds up one of the female dolls.*

**MARTHA:** No, I mean your actual mother. She was asleep in this chair earlier.

**YOUNG BOY:** Oh, she went in for her exam.

**MARTHA:** You didn't go with her?

**YOUNG BOY:** No, she likes to be alone for it. And she says it's not something proper for a boy my age to witness.

**MARTHA:** A boy your age . . . I see.

*The door of the waiting room opens and ELIZA and DR. DELITTO enter from the darkness of the other side of the stage. ELIZA steers her wheelchair over to MARTHA and the YOUNG BOY, who have both stood up. The YOUNG BOY clutches the female doll to his chest.*

**DR. DELITTO:** So, Eliza, we have a game plan. You'll give me a call in two weeks and let me know the results, correct?

**ELIZA:** Yes, I will, Doctor.

**DR. DELITTO:** (*nodding his head*) Good, good. Well, you two have fun. Looks like a nice day outside. The nurse will take your card, Martha.

*Exit DR. DELITTO into the darkness.*

*MARTHA walks to the counter by the door and hands a card behind the door to an off-stage nurse.*

**ELIZA:** (*to the YOUNG BOY*) What's that doll's name?

**YOUNG BOY:** What's your name?

**ELIZA:** Eliza.

**YOUNG BOY:** (*nodding*) That's her name too.

**ELIZA:** Is it? Well, what a coincidence.

**YOUNG BOY:** She doesn't have a cool chair like you though.

**ELIZA:** It's a special privilege.

*The YOUNG BOY nods solemnly. MARTHA returns.*

**MARTHA:** (*to ELIZA*) Shall we then?

*ELIZA nods. She waves goodbye to the YOUNG BOY.*

*Exit ELIZA and MARTHA.*

*The YOUNG BOY, alone, retrieves the male doll from the red attic and*

*stares into the doll's face. He still clutches the female doll to his chest. From the darkness of the doctor's side of the stage comes a rhythmic knocking sound.*

*End scene.*

### SCENE 3

*Two months later. The setting is ELIZA's home, where she lives with her parents. ELIZA sits looking out the window while MARTHA sits cross-stitching to her left. ELIZA does not move during several beats while MARTHA stiches. Then MARTHA glances over, sighs, and lowers her stitching to her lap.*

**MARTHA:** Eliza, please tell me what's wrong. You haven't been yourself for quite some time now.

*ELIZA remains motionless.*

**MARTHA:** You know, I can't stop thinking about something that young boy said last time we were at Dr. Delitto's office. The one who was playing with the dollhouse? (*beat, still nothing from ELIZA*) He said he wasn't allowed to go into the doctor's office with his mother because she said it wasn't something a boy his age should witness. What do you suppose he meant by that?

*ELIZA's hand twitches.*

**MARTHA:** (*taking this as a good sign*) In fact, that young man said lots of peculiar things while we were there. He said that the male doll was a bad man, and he put him away in the attic—

*MARTHA stops talking as ELIZA leaves the room, wheeling her chair offstage. MARTHA's stitching is still in her lap, but she pays it no mind. She stares after ELIZA as the lights slowly fade to black.*

*End scene.*

### SCENE 4

*Six months later. The setting is back in DR. DELITTO's waiting room. The YOUNG BOY is the only one present. The lighting is dim, and the DR.'s side of the stage is black. The YOUNG BOY picks up the male doll from his position face down on the bed in the attic of the doll house.*

**YOUNG BOY:** (*muttering*) Bad man, bad man, bad man.

*The YOUNG BOY'S MOTHER emerges from the darkness of the left side of the stage. Her clothes are visibly disheveled, as if they had been torn off of her and then hastily arranged back into place.*

**YOUNG BOY'S MOTHER:** Come.

*She takes the YOUNG BOY's hand. He drops the male doll on the floor. The doll lands beside a female doll in a wheelchair. There is a second female doll seated in a chair inside the dollhouse. The YOUNG BOY'S MOTHER does not notice and drags him offstage. The YOUNG BOY does not cry, but his hand is stretched towards the dollhouse as they exit.*

*DR. DELITTO enters from the darkness of his office. He leans in the door for a moment, hands in his doctor's coat pockets. Then he pushes himself forward and picks up the doll in the wheelchair.*

**DR. DELITTO:** Ah, my dear Eliza. What have we done?

*DR. DELITTO strokes the doll's hair and retreats back into the darkness of his office.*

*Blackout.*



## Boys Can't Wear Makeup

*Trevor Stanley*

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I've recently developed an allergy to cats. It would be fine if I didn't own any, but I have two. The one can deal without constant touching, but the other acts like I intentionally stopped petting her months ago. My eyes get itchy and red and my nose becomes snotty. To combat this, I've stopped letting her into my room. The ultimate sin in the eyes of this cat. A crack in the door becomes an opportunity for her to shove her nose in between and run onto my bed to lie down. She'll turn towards me and start purring, trying to convince me to let her stay. It works for a couple of minutes before I force her back out of my room and make sure the door is tightly closed.

Before the days of cat allergies, I remember being fascinated with my mom while she put concealer on her blemishes. Atop of the concealer came the blush. She'd then move on to her eyebrows, filling them in as she had plucked them too thin. Highlighting and contouring didn't exist, so she immediately began to paint her eyelids; most often the colors were dark. To finish the look, she would take a mascara wand and swipe it twice on her eyelashes. I would watch each morning as she transformed her face before my eyes. Following her long process was a drive to my grandmother's, who we quizzically call Grammar. She was my mom's mom and she considered her job raising kids for the last thirty years. Around a year after my mom had my twin brother and me, Grammar had another child, ensuring she still had a job and, as my dad would say, competing directly with my mom.

My dad's mom is another story. When my brother Travis and I would sleep at her house, the contrast between our

morning routine versus our cousins' morning routine always astounded me. Every button on a top examined. Skirts were mentally measured and colors analytically scrutinized. Hair put up in pigtails and bangs galore. My brother and I never faced the same montage as Cheyenne and Cassie. We would be woken up five minutes before leaving. Our destination: my great uncle's small church.

Leading up to the great holy day was more akin to a boot camp for *American Idol* than family bonding time. Competition grew fierce between me, my brother, and my two cousins. Each of us would pick whatever artist our grandmother liked. Most of the time it came down to a race to be the one to pick a Michael Jackson song. After the first pick, the other three would scramble for "Over the Rainbow" and on down the list of songs everyone in America listens to on repeat. The next stage of the process: the auditions. The music would be siphoned through my aunt's laptop with my grandmother, papaw, and aunt writing notes down about what they liked in each singer's time on stage. The in-between seats on the sofas would be crammed into by the competition. This moment was make or break. I would look on to my crowd with intense anxiety. I'd look over to my aunt and nod at her to start to music, feeling like Tonya Harding at the start of her performance. I remember making it through the song and noticed there wasn't much scribbling next to my name on their pictures. At least I made it through the song, unlike my cousin that stood in front and had a mental breakdown. I would check off her name on my list and resolute myself to *Harding* my way through the rest of the competition.

Cassie threw a curveball once and sang a simple church hymn with choreography. Needless to say, the auditions shifted for exploitative reasons and turned into *Christian Idol* (which oddly isn't too dissimilar to the original name). My Mamaw was so inspired, she made us all learn a dance she found on Facebook. Uncoincidentally, the Sunday before, a distant cousin sang in front of the ten-member audience at our Uncle's church. The only possible one-up to this would be four children, crudely dancing and singing to a Jesus-loves-me song. She must have felt like Joe Jackson when he formed the Jackson Five, minus a member, multiple shades of skin tone, and any constructible talent.

That need for holy appearance plagues her existence. My dad's mom is biologically my grandmother, but the person I call Papaw is not biologically related. A few months after my birth, while my mom and dad were living with my Mamaw, she met a man named Jeff in a bar and hit it off. To hear her describe the story of them meeting, she would now call it a haven of sin. But then, it was a normal occurrence for her to end up meeting men in bars. Their large age gap is explained in this way; he is almost twenty years younger than my cougar grandmother. Somehow, they managed to continue seeing one another and this man was introduced into my life as my papaw. My dad's biological dad didn't have much to do in our lives.

The introduction of Jeff brought a transformative age for my grandmother. She quit smoking, drinking, and started voting republican. George Bush, Jr., was a great president and God became a new figure in her life. With all the newfound love, she had to push something out of her heart to make room. Those evicted were gay.

As talks about the border wall in the south inflamed, we decided to go to a Mexican restaurant to eat dinner. My brother and I were around eleven years old. As puberty struck, his effeminate side grew. Our aunt became more socially liberal and seemed to accept his difference with an open heart, to the point of an almost affront to her parents. She wasn't the only one to notice his new personality. The entire day something seemed to be on Jeff's mind. He spoke little and when he did, his sentences were short and to the point. Something about this situation sent him to the edge. It might have been Travis' liberal Facebook posts, or maybe the food was just taking too long. When Travis was talking about something that annoyed him, Jeff felt the need to put his two cents in.

"You know what's actually annoying? You feeling the need to push your gay shit on me. I don't know what's happened with you to make you feel like it's OK to go around and act like being a faggot is something to be proud of." The waiter had just gotten back to the table and was pouring Cheyenne a Mellow Yellow while he went off on my twin. I stared at Jeff with disgust. We all sat there quietly and Travis looked like he had tears in his eyes. Cheyenne patted his back. Two hours before that was the last time I told the man I loved him and meant it. Every time after felt insincere and I eventually

stopped saying it altogether. As much as I want to say I discounted his words, just like my brother that insists it meant nothing to him, this moment did affect the discovery of my identity.

It never crossed my mind to call myself gay until I was sixteen. I had experimented with a male friend before that age, and the hailstorm of the aftermath sent me down the road of my modern depression, but it didn't make sense to say I was gay. My first introduction to the culture came from a recently made friend from school. I had sat next to someone, her name was Faith, in my introductory French class and it formed into an important meeting in my life for the next two years. When first introducing myself, I told her I was straight. She, on the other hand, was intensely bisexual. She never pussyfooted around the subject. She colored her hair blue, pink, purple, whatever she was feeling. Just like her hair and sexuality, she had an in-the-face personality. She had a way of looking at you, insulting you, and you thanking her. The insults were more observations about your being than actual mean words. She did this with my sexuality. One night, while staying up late, Faith, Katie, Katlynd, and I played truth or dare. I told them about my experimentation with a boy and from that day forward, they knew I was bisexual. I had finally come out.

From there, I grew more and more confident. It started with me staring at boys in hopes they'd notice and approach me, then it evolved into a blank Grindr profile picture. I didn't grow the confidence to put my face in the profile for another year. I also began my first job a year after coming out to Faith. I decided to be upfront about my sexuality at work instead of being in the closet like at school. A gap-toothed redhead seemed attracted to me. Casually, we would flirt and talk all night. We promised one another Christmas gifts and seemed to have an emotional connection. He had a girlfriend, though. She eventually began to notice something different because he started to talk about how jealous she got. He told her about me but left out some of the important details of our conversations. This all came to head until one day she came in and he pointed me out, to which she responded, "oh good, I thought Trevor was the guy over there," and she pointed at one of our coworkers: a tall, long-haired, strong-



jawed, boy. I had to agree with her to be honest; I wasn't nearly as attractive as him. The redhead and I never did anything, continuing my legacy of emotional affairs with no fruit.

A couple of months ago I started wearing makeup. I quit the job the redhead worked at and I stopped being Faith's friend a year and a half ago. In their absence, I began to self-reflect. I have friends, but Mack and Katlynd aren't at the same level. Their introversion annoys me and our friendship wanes when they start talking about anime. Megan is like a tame Faith; she's straight but almost as abrasive. The lack of closeness in friendships brought forward a new emotion in me when I watched *Euphoria*. The trans character of the show, Jules, paraded around, proud and eyes full of makeup. I loved the scenes with her in it. I initially owed it to the meticulous cinematography and realistic dialogue, but something nagged at me. I loved the way she did her eyes. I only put on concealer, blush, and a dab of highlighter on my face, claiming I didn't like the way eyeshadow looked on me. I had never actually tried it. When I saw the look of Jules, I felt connected. The bright colors on her lids brought me happiness. I began emulating her makeup looks.

For Halloween, I've decided to go as an angel. I put on the dress I'm planning to wear, then apply the makeup. I put on glitter and sparkles. I ruminate about the color the red should be in the eyeshadow. I then put on the hair. I look at myself in the mirror and brush out that cheap Halloween store wig. I begin to dissociate while looking at myself, dreaming. I keep it all on and go into my room to finish an assignment. After, I return to the bathroom and look at my beaten face. My eyebrows are thick, my hairline recedes a bit, my upper lip is too thin, and my five o'clock shadow shows through the concealer. It depresses me. By the time I've gone through a variety of emotions and schoolwork, it's three in the morning and I have class at 9:45. I close my bedroom door, take off my clothes and lie down. Before I turn on the fan, I hear my cat meowing at my door to be let in. I ignore her and shove my face underneath my pillows, smearing the eyeshadow and glitter all over in the process. An action that'll surely leave a stain behind.



## Autumn-Colored Memory

### Amber Rookstool

Sun-washed in too much light, a polaroid  
flashes wrong, the Eiffel Tower disappears,  
the buildings we passed all blur when I remember  
we met where *rue Boulainvilliers* meets *rue Ranelagh*.

We agreed to meet at the metro station,  
but he got off one stop too late, and when  
I finally found him I thought; this is him, and he  
asks, what have you not seen. We ran hand-in-hand.

We pranced around the cobblestone  
streets of an ordinary city named Paris—  
a bookstore, a park, a rooftop—we sang  
Country Roads and smelled of rose buds in late

spring; we fought a war with tissues packets,  
and when we were done, he and I waited  
on opposite sides of the metro, one  
to *La Défense*, the other to *Ranelagh*.

Now as autumn cools the streets,  
I have returned to the valley of Tennessee.  
I cannot help but notice the leaves fade.  
Our memories change color too, weaken,

feeble in the winds, whither in grass,  
victim to rakes and crushing boots, crinkled.  
I relive our time together, but like the leaves  
you and I lay in broken pieces.



## The Pool

G. Johnson

You stare at the wall and try to count the cement bricks. It's been weeks since the last time you've been out of your cell, and you want nothing more than to leave. Day in and day out, you do the same routine—get up, eat, stare at the wall, fill your day with boredom, eat again, sleep. It seems that your entire life has been nothing but a series of days strung together by this same routine, but the brief and few trips to the pool give you temporary release from the mind splitting silence and monotony. You don't even know how long you've been in here, only that you're here and that you want out. In fact, you don't even remember the day you first arrived. Maybe you've been here forever. It doesn't matter though. The fact is that everything now fades in and out until it all swells around the one thing keeping you sane: the pool.

The metal door opens and clashes against the wall, revealing two guards standing in the hallway. Interrupting your counting and thoughts, the sound accentuates the silence of the room before. The door hadn't been opened since the last time you went to the pool. Of course, the food slot had flapped open twice a day, but that'd been it, and the sound of the slot was nothing compared to the door. You notice the door's echo fading out. As soon as the ringing stops, you wish that it would start back up again. Somehow, the silence after the door opened seems much louder than the silence before.

"Come on. It's time to go," says a guard. "You know the drill."

You begin to walk towards the guards—one is short and fat and the other young and awkward. The short, fat guard is a regular. He's been taking you to the pool for a couple years now, but you don't know his name. After the first couple of trips, you had hoped that he would loosen up and talk to

you some, but that hasn't happened yet. Instead, he always wears the same foul face as if he smells something you don't. The other guard is a newbie—very young and immature looking compared to the regular. His shoulders awkwardly hunch down, and he keeps fidgeting with his sleeves. He refuses eye contact with you.

“Close your eyes,” the regular says.

As usual, you do so. After a few seconds, you feel one of the guards walk behind you through the ever so subtle air that moves in his wake. Although you can't see it, you know the guard in front of you is carefully examining your eyes, making sure that they are in fact closed. When you first started going to the pool, you would try to peek out to see what the guards were doing, but that always led to them beating you. You feel a cage slip down your face. It's cold and smells of bleach. You don't know if you're alone in the facility, but you assume not because of the cage's smell. They probably reuse it on everyone in here and clean it to inhibit the spread of germs. Even though you've felt this very same cage lock your face for countless years now, it always feels and smells as electrifyingly cold, new, and terrifying as it did the first time you found it upon your shoulders.

The cage isn't just a cage, though. That is, there aren't slots that you can see out of. In fact, you only call it a cage because it locks up your head. Maybe you should start calling it a harness, you think. Around the eyes and mouth, there are leather straps. You're not positive they're made of leather, but they feel as if they are. The straps are kept in place by something hard that knocks heavily against your forehead and scalp. Since they make you close your eyes before revealing the cage, you've never seen it. All that you can determine about the cage, harness, comes from your sense of touch and smell. You've always wondered why you aren't allowed to see it.

“Hands out.”

You put your hands out and the guards begin to wrap a rope around them. From prior experience, you know that a guard will use the rope to lead you to the pool. When you first started going out, the guards used metal handcuffs, and they made them as tight as possible so that you had burns around your wrists for a couple days after. Years ago, they stopped bringing the handcuffs and used rope

instead. Although the rope was prickly, it wasn't near as uncomfortable as the handcuffs. Sometimes you wished that they'd let you hang onto the rope instead of being tied to it, but you know that's out of the question. You hear a couple of steps and feel the rope begin to tug at your wrists; the guards have begun the trip to the pool.

When you first started going out, you would count your steps as you walked through the hallways. Week after week, they would walk you around and around and you would count, trying to feel which direction you were going—forward or backward, left or right, up or down. But this became extremely difficult. Some days, it felt like the guards were wandering around just to mess with you. Left, right, downstairs, upstairs, back down stairs, go forwards, now back. These days were miserable, and your wrists would be worn raw by the end. Other days, it was a simple five-minute walk and sometimes even included what felt like an elevator, but you don't think they've taken you on the elevator in a couple years now. Not once during your time here, though, had you detected the same path twice. You specifically try to find patterns, but you haven't been able to do so yet.

“Steps.”

You gingerly walk forward, tapping your foot in front trying to find the ledge. When you find it, you start stepping down quickly because you feel the slack in the rope growing tighter. In case this is a long trip, you want to preserve your delicate skin for as long as possible. So far, you have counted seven steps. Then ten. Then twenty, fifty. You stop counting. There are a lot of flights today.

During your trek downwards, you notice a weird scent in the air. It smells like moisture, but the kind of moisture that is laden with bacteria and other repulsive things. Although your room hasn't been cleaned in some time, it doesn't have this smell. To the right, you think that you heard a few water drops, but you aren't sure if it's just your imagination going wild with two of your senses turned off. Over the last few trips to the pool, you've thought that you've heard water drops, unfamiliar creaking, and other odd things, which hadn't been there in the beginning. You listen more carefully, but the guards start talking over the silence.

“What'd you think of the game last night?”

“Real crazy, sir.”

You have no idea what they’re talking about, but you assume that whatever it was, it was more fun than exercising in your tiny room like you did last night. The guards talk on the walk a lot, but you normally choose not to listen because listening makes you feel isolated. If it’s been a while since you’ve last been out though, you listen out of boredom. Some days they talk about a game, others they talk about people named Jimmy and Ella. Never is it something you fully understand though. The guard in front of you stops walking, and you run straight into him. He spins around and punches you in the gut.

“Watch where you’re going,” he says. “Want to get the pool revoked?”

You try to nod your head side-to-side to communicate that you wish to continue into the pool, but the cage restrains your neck’s movement. The pool is the only thing you live for anymore. You can’t go without it. You fight through the pain from the cage and try to nod your head harder. The guards laugh.

“Come on.”

You hear several high-pitched beeps, and the door slides open. Quickly but heavily, the door makes the all-too-familiar screech of metal on metal. Sometimes when you’re feeling down in your room, you’ll try to move the bed frame around to mimic the sound of the door moving. Fanatically, you shake and shake and pull and pull at the bed until you’re worn out and decide to lay down. It’s a hideous sound, but it’s the sound of freedom. Through this deafening metallic scream, you get to go to the pool. You walk forward, and you hear the door slide back shut.

“Okay, hold still.”

Immediately you stop moving. One of the guards starts untying your hands, all the while smacking away on something. You feel the pressure release from your wrists as the guard starts to pull the rope away. You jab your arms downward and flop your hands back and forth trying to stretch the tense muscles. After being roped up, you always want to throw your hands arounds and really move, but they don’t permit wild movement until the cage is off and the guards have carefully stepped into their glass box. With the rope off, you feel like an almost free being. Only the cage, harness, remains. You feel it

rub and pull at your scalp. It pinches your head tighter for a second, almost feeling as though it will pinch it right off. But then there is a painful release as you feel the cage slide over your head. The light nearly blinds you, so you raise your hand to shield your eyes.

“Okay, stay there until we’re in the box,” the regular yells. They run towards a glass box to the right, the only shaded part of the pool.

You hear the door shut and so you know you’re temporarily free. The light still hurts a little, but you try to crack your eyes—only allowing a little light to come in at a time. It’s weird, but you savor these few seconds of the in-between. The moments where you are still affected by the darkness of the cage and room but finally tasting the sweet flavor of the sun. The slower you open your eyes, the sweeter the release. You start to twist your body and raise your hands as your eyes open more and more. The more you move, the more of you that the sun kisses until its warmth radiates throughout the rest of your body. Finally, your eyes flutter completely open and you take in everything around you.

The first time you went to the pool, you were stunned to find out that the water was missing from this pool. Instead, it is just an empty basin with only the clear box and dirt within. You think that the designers purposefully replaced the water with dirt, but you have no clue as to why they would do that. All brown and dusty, the dirt cakes onto the ground and walls of the waterless pool and eventually finds its way into all the nooks of your hands, elbows, knees, feet, and clothes. You even find it tickling the inside of your nose and smearing your eyes during your time in the pool, but you really don’t care. The pool is worth giving up clear breathing and vision.

Sometimes, the dirt on the walls scares you though because it makes them look like they are going to come toppling down at any moment. But they haven’t yet so you admire them. They go up and up and up as if they are trying to point to something. And they are. The four walls form a perfect square to frame the sky that is sometimes filled with clouds. This boxed-in sky is the loveliest thing you’ve seen in your entire life and you feel like it’s your home. Shooting down beams of light and the occasional breeze, the sky mingles with your skin and allows you to feel and absorb other life around you. When this happens, you feel like you’re not just in the facility or the pool.

You're somewhere else.

You decide it's time to move. You run to the wall on your left and start the sprint around the pool. Around, around, around you run, creating a trail of dust that follows in your wake. You hear it swirl behind you, which pushes you to run faster. The dirt starts creeping onto and into your body and makes you tingle all over. But the warmth of the pool, the stretching of your muscles. You use the tingling sensation to propel you further and you start to run in a circle. The more you run, the more you tighten that circle. By the end, you create a swirling figure in the dirt, and when you get to the swirl's center, you plop down and start rolling. You roll and roll, laughing hysterically all the while. The dirt coagulates onto your sweating body and into your throat until you can barely see or hear or breathe. Eventually, you find stillness on your back to appreciate the tightening feeling.

Everything is perfect at this moment. You look up at the sky above you, which today has a few clouds artfully painted onto the light blue backdrop. The air feels thick from the dirt and smells tastefully stale, but the light almost seems to vacuum it all up. As the sun prickles your body, you feel beads of sweat begin to dry, leaving behind a crusty feeling. Your body is now coated in a delicate mix of dirt and dried sweat. Your pants, shirt, face, hair, arms, legs, belly, back. You savor every inch of it because you know that when you go back inside, they'll make you take it off. You lay in absolute stillness, feeling the dirt, walls, sky, clouds, air and everything in between.

"It's time to go," the newbie says.

Reluctantly, you stand up and walk towards him. You know the drill and so you close your eyes and extend your hands. The guards are chuckling and mumbling to themselves as they begin to get you ready to go. Before they place the cage on your head, you sneak one more look at the pool. It always looks different when you're going back inside. Your vision is blackened again, and your hair pinched as the cage slides over your head. Once it's on, the other guard starts wrapping the rope around your wrists. You feel the guard pull at the cage and rope to make sure they're secure. The guard holding the rope starts walking towards the door. From experience, you know that's only about twenty steps. You take those few steps and wait, silently inhaling and exhaling, feeling the last bits of dirt snake around



in your nostrils and throat. The silence is broken by the sound of metal on metal. It lasts several seconds and then it stops. The door is open. You feel the guard in front of you start to walk again by the tension on the rope.

“Walk.”



## There Is a Yellow Rose on the Scroll of My Violin

*Amber Rookstool*

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Four strings end and roll around the pegs,  
stretching down the finger board, over the bridge,  
never perfectly tuned or played. They end again  
at the tailpiece's fine tuners.

I rest my chin  
on the chin rest and dangle my fingers an inch  
down from the nut on the neck. I place my bow  
across the strings where the f-holes meet.

One stroke, and the violin with the yellow  
rose on the scroll makes a screeching squeal.  
A novice at age eight, I did not know the E string  
could be so ugly.

I learned to play the violin from this old fiddle—  
a hundred years old, and no one knows who made it.  
Legend says, it was Pawpaw Patterson or Flanagan,  
or one of their brothers or uncles, and they passed it  
through their children until Pawpaw Clyde gave it to me.  
Now when I play that violin with the yellow rose  
on the scroll, I swear I hear the mountains of West Virginia,  
the history of our family in the reverberation of strings.



## Night Watch

*William Rieppe Moore*

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Once the marvelous grey of dawn  
began subsiding to marvelous light blue  
like the fallout from a thunderhead,  
I knew the night watch was near-over.

Call it the rooster watch, though  
he had skedaddled up the mountain  
around the herb garden past the house  
and further up the mountain a bit  
when I tried to remove him from the porch rail,  
but he outdid my grip with a hail and jerk.  
So I perched there and rocked away  
reading about our intractable headwaters  
that flowed about me quietly.

Call it a raccoon watch, 'cause I knew  
she was rummaging and had snatched  
venison scraps in the live trap  
leaving hip bones clean as cold teeth;  
had rummaged the disjointed remains  
of the scalped wynedotte whose legs  
were stretched to its shoulders  
by a head-bobbing raccoon, I insist,  
that can vanish on the south side  
of a well-known, yellow line maple  
that has a girth that's hard to believe,  
yet houses crickets, which drag their  
barbed bows across their rusty strings.

Orb weavers sewed their invisible threads  
one right behind another one  
clingy and quiet as bean vines.  
The pin head arachnids walked out their lines  
measuring out macrons in a breath  
to start and restart all over again.

And I sat there, and I waited for the coon's coins  
to scoop my headlamp with her yellow eyes.  
And while I did, the darkness wound my limbs  
like tendrils of early summer squash  
searching for a place to put down its roots  
between my sleepy bones.



## Do You Hear the Creek Talking?

Dillon McCroskey

*Creek flooded again last night—  
I thought it was gonna come plumb up to the porch!*

This is the third morning of rain.  
Last night, after mamaw and papaw fell asleep,  
I slipped out the back door and walked to the creek bank.  
Sitting in the unkempt lawn underneath the floodlight  
that hangs from the barn wall, I watched the creek churn,  
the eddying surface endlessly fading into another form of itself.

*Darlin', will you bring me that pot of coffee?  
My knees are aching bad today—when will this rain stop?*

I glanced up, surprised to find the first sliver of ashen light  
flowering out from behind the ridgeline—  
though it felt like I'd just plopped down by the bank,  
I'd been glaring into the creek for hours,  
listening to the voices rising up from the muddy water.

*I had planned on mowin' today—just look at that grass!  
It'll be tall enough for a damn bobcat to hide in come tomorrow.*

The voices were low and mournful, speaking  
in a language I had heard only in dreams.

The hemlocks stood spectral beside me.  
They could hear the creek murmuring too,  
answering with a hollow silence.

*Oh, honey, what on God's green earth  
were you doin' sitting out by the creek 'til dawn?*

Now I poke the center of mamaw's egg  
with my fork and watch the yolk pool out,  
slowly, across the surface of the plate.  
Setting the coffee pot at the edge of the table,  
she ruffles my damp hair, and glides to the back door  
to smoke her morning cigarette. Papaw sits still,  
staring out the kitchen window at something beyond  
the creek and the trees and the jagged blue ridges—  
past the weeping sky.

*Maybe tomorrow it'll pass over.  
Maybe tomorrow.*



## Under the Hummingbird's Wing

Dayton Sheffield

Sitting in the dimly lit room, I stared down at the photo with the ornate silver frame. Two teardrops fell onto the pristine glass, distorting the picture below. It had been taken four or five years ago. I remember it so clearly; it had been a crisp fall morning in the days that follow Thanksgiving, just before Christmas. The days that pass were filled with stifled anticipation of holiday cheer. A small boy and his grandmother stand huddled over a pan looking deep into its depths, daring to fall in themselves. I wiped away the teardrops and the colors and lines of the picture shot outward and flew to every corner of the room enveloping everything in sight. The warmth of the kitchen wrapped tightly around me, and the scent of freshly melted chocolate filled the room. I took it in as if for the first time, for the colors were livelier than I remembered, and the smells seemed to completely ensnare the senses.

The little boy giggled, "...but Grandma how am I supposed to know when it's ready?"

"Patience is key, dear. Fudge-making is no simple science," she said with a smile. The small wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she watched her grandson stir earnestly. This day had been so long ago, but it was one that I held ever so closely to my heart. My grandmother had always been the first to nurture my love for cooking and had finally deemed it time to pass on the family fudge recipe. It took years to master it, but my grandmother would always be happy to receive a batch, no matter how much it resembled small bricks, though she always gave helpful pointers. I took a step towards the captivated confectioners and the light in the room cooled and shrunk back into the photo in my lap. I sighed a lament as I remembered that memories were

meant to be felt, but not touched. So, I set the picture aside and scuffled to the window.

Two fingers wreathed the blinds apart large enough for my eye to gaze through into the outside world. It was a dark and dreary day. Clouds stood in arms against the rays of sunlight trying hard to slip through, and the sky itself wept for what was to commence today. It was the end of November when my grandmother departed this world. Her funeral was to take place in the early, chilly days of December. But these days were not filled with any anticipation of holiday cheer. The funeral was to begin at three o'clock today and the hands of the clock that had just passed twelve seemed to be in freefall, tumbling towards what I was dreading. I had spent most of the week in bed and hadn't deigned to leave the house for any reason, but it was nearly time to get dressed and make my way to the cemetery. I rifled through a dark closet for my nicer clothes and found the outfit I set aside days before. I found myself thinking of the weekends I spent at my grandmother's house.

My grandmother was given seven grandchildren and nine great grandchildren, but she always made sure to find time for each of us. On our weekends, I would always sleep well into Saturday morning until I smelled breakfast then I would leap out of bed and run to the kitchen and start helping her cook, then we would lazily scuffle to the living room where we would watch old tv reruns and gaze lovingly at the hummingbirds who had come to sample her selection of nectars and syrups she always left for them. We would do puzzles or play card games well into the night, and she would pretend to not see me sliding the good cards under my seat to save for another game. Once we were tuckered out from all the games, we'd head to our beds. Then, it was up early Sunday morning for church. My grandmother went to a different church than my parents did, so I always enjoyed doing things differently than my church would. Anything was made better with my grandmother. We spent every holiday and every birthday together with the whole family. We would all gather at her home and be delighted to eat her cooking every chance we got. I cherished every second I had with her and I still somehow took all that she did for granted. You never realize what a big role somebody plays in your life until they are no longer there.



I was luckier than most, however. Her health declined slowly the last year and I got to say my goodbye. It was my first year of college. I was balancing everything: work, school, and new relationships. I lost time I didn't realize I was losing, time that should've been spent with her trying so hard to give back all that she gave me. That would have taken a lifetime, at least. I was young and naïve and had no inkling of the transience of life. The only thing left to do is love and remember all the lessons she taught me unintentionally. I halfheartedly brought myself back to earth, in the cold, rainy room in which I had been living. It was time to head out. Soon, I would have to face everyone and somehow hold it together. I felt as if it was my job to carry the burden of sadness for everyone else. I wanted nobody else to feel as I have for the past few days. My mind drifted to the old memories of happier times, while my body seemed to know what to do: get dressed, grab the keys, and lock the door before setting out.

I looked up at the sky on my way to the car. It was no longer raining, but the wind had picked up. Sunbeams occasionally shot through the clouds to offer their condolences. Feeling their warmth helped a bit, but their comfort was often short-lived. The drive to the cemetery was easy enough and spotting the tent amongst the graves was like spotting a skyscraper in a landscape of foothills. I took a deep breath and stepped out of the car. As I inched closer to the growing crowd of my loved ones, my stomach felt a twinge and tears started to well in my eyes, but I pushed them back. I spotted my parents first and the next thing I knew I was in their arms. I couldn't say how long I was there; it could have been two seconds or two years. For that enormous, tiny instance, time was irrelevant. But eventually we found ourselves underneath the tent in the felt covered chairs. The preacher walked in silent, somber to take a spot opposite the group, half obscuring himself behind the casket. I forced myself to take it in. It was a beautifully lacquered wood of cherry or walnut with a bountiful display of pink roses, baby's breath, and carnations. They cascaded around the edges like heavy curls of hair, nearly covering the entirety of it. The preacher introduced himself in a scratchy voice to break the deafening silence. He began speaking about the time that he knew my grandmother and revealed himself to be her pastor from years and years ago. She had written in her will that she wanted him to deliver her final address.

Most of his words were lost on me, echoing around the graveyard trying to find souls to soothe and hearts to heal, but I batted them away. Nothing could fix a problem this terrifyingly big. He began talking about what he believed to be her biggest attribute. He said that at the heart of it all, my grandmother was a humble woman. Humble before God, and before family and friends. I felt dumbfounded, for, in all the wonderful words I had ever picked to describe my grandmother, humble had never made the list.

Though, it was a far better word than I ever thought to use. She was always there to lend a hand, asking for nothing in return. She always accepted every person regardless of race, creed, philosophy, or disparity. She was wholly devoted to her religion, but never forced others to believe what she did. A tear welled up in my eye that was far too great to fight and plummeted down to the ground ending in a deafening splash that surely cleared birds from the surrounding trees. I looked around as the preacher went on and I saw that tears were flowing as readily as raindrops, soaking the morose black clothes of my grandmother's loved ones. The preacher went on for what seemed like hours. I wanted it all to be over, but I was also not ready for it to end. I listened more to his words that wrenched tears from eyes in every passing syllable. I shut my eyes as tightly as possible to keep the tears from finding their way out, but this was to no avail. A cascade opened in my eyes as emotion was forced out of every corner of my body, and my only solace was my sister next to me who had succumbed to the same thing. We had talked quite a bit the preceding nights in order to not feel quite so alone in the world. It was a reprieve having her next to me now, my mother was sitting in the row ahead with her siblings hearing the same words about their mother. I couldn't imagine how much more difficult this must be for them, saying goodbye to the woman that brought them into this world. The preacher spoke up, gathering the attention of all the people whose lives my grandmother had touched and said,

“Now Ruth asked us to conclude the celebration of her life by singing a couple verses of “Amazing Grace.” The preacher paused for a moment, and after a collective breath, the cemetery erupted in a soft angelic choir that grew stronger with every note. Overwhelmed with emotion and caught off guard, I fumbled for the words and croaked out a few words in between sobs.

Much to my dismay, I did not know many words of the later verses; therefore, I sat in silence thinking I had let my grandmother down for the last thing I could ever do for her. But not singing gave me the privilege of listening to all the voices that had come together to make one harmonious melody. I realized in this moment that this is all that life is: our lives do not belong to us, but are rather a patchwork of songs sung by those we choose to spend it with.

We concluded the ceremony in a barrage of heartfelt embraces of sobbing laughter that seemed to symbolize acceptance of what had come to pass. The skies loomed everlastingly with grey clouds sculpted by the persistent wind. And as my friends and family cleared out in a hastened reluctance to return to their lives, I held back. Perhaps I was anticipating some form of closure by watching the casket lower into the ground for I had hoped to sneak in one last goodbye for the woman who played an enormous role in making me into who I am today. I walked up to the casket and placed a hand on it, and I just started speaking. I was speaking as if she was standing right in front of me, as if she could hear every word I was saying. I spoke without limit for what seemed like hours, bursting forward with everything I hadn't had the chance to tell her. Tears came again without hesitation as I started talking to my grandfather who had been interred right next to her plot some twenty-odd years before. I never got the chance to meet him as he passed away before I was born. He existed in my head as a collection of memories of other family members and brought to life by their stories. I believe that this is where my grandmother lives now.

People say that your loved ones are gone but not forgotten, for nobody can truly die while there are still people alive that remember them. She exists as the smiles she brought to everyone's face and the small, selfless deeds she never forgot for the people she loved. She exists in the flap of a hummingbird's wings as it dances in the air waiting to drink the nectar. She exists in the wind as it ruffles the hair of her great-grandkids, as she would always do when she planted a kiss on our foreheads. She exists in the harmony of voices in a church choir where she would always sing out passionately. She exists in every teardrop that forms from an aching heart that desperately misses her presence. She exists in all the beautiful things that make you stop and notice the magnificence of the world.

For in the end, that's who she was, someone who was so momentarily humbled by the beauty of life, love, and family that nothing ever got in the way of her lending affection to those that she cared so deeply for. Life is so incredibly fleeting that the only thing that is of any worth is the way that we treat people. The only way to live forever is to live in the hearts of those we love.



# [The scent of early morning coffee clouds the dawn]

*William Rieppe Moore*

The scent of early morning coffee clouds the dawn  
with its smeared butter horizon that  
sparks the rimey grass; dead okra stems  
with the promise of green still in nicked leaf  
are lying through their teeth.

The chickens barely left a twig unpecked.  
Now they hardly make the journey across  
the upper pasture to the far garden where rows  
stand at attention with stalks like wrinkled skin  
and paper thin,

But the tomato sticks scaffolding is all the order  
that remains of the vines, while a few Mr. Stripeys'  
limber, yellowed branches arch like the arms of a man  
fallen in with the soil, so that his flailing recedes  
between rows, sprawling if you can believe it,  
into something it couldn't ever be.

But when the long frost sets in, our green  
will retreat like the grass within, where the fire burns,  
will go with the sun in the morning when the wood stove's  
iron mouth flickers out.

Then our bones will recall a talking wooden floor  
to look and see beyond the wind-break walls of home.  
My breath-warmed hands will reach the distant mountains  
with my eyes from this mountain where I descended  
like an orb-weaver from a freshly-shattered web.

When I thaw out from these five years of cold, I will  
be changed, and I will be the same.  
The knocking butter churn will stomp its music,  
and a scent of awakening will paint the windows  
with the light of the coming day.



## Roan Mountain Rain

Nancy Jane Earnest

vapor tendrils

wispy as cricket's breath

escape

the fogbank

coat grassy paths

where mist settles

like ghost hens

on empty nests

secure lichened limbs

in undulating coils

of nothingness

then tumble

down

foothills

to burst

silently

against

a rhododendron

brake



## Flowering Weeds in Late Springs

Emily Price

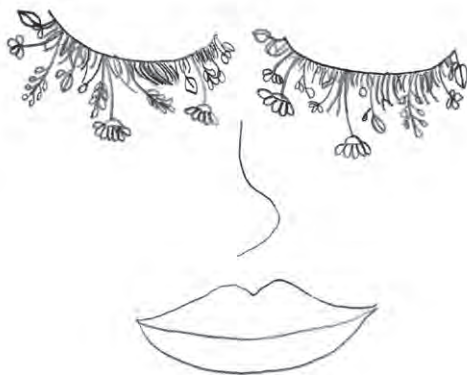
as a child, i picked wild violets and dandelions  
from the yard to bring my parents in my fists,  
clutched hands crumpling their fragile stems.

purples and yellows and whites bunched together  
that my father told me were nothing more  
than weeds as he tossed them back into the yard.

some old story said that the white dandelions  
are for wishes, so i blew tiny gusts of wind  
from my lungs furiously from my little lungs.

i don't remember my wishes like i don't remember  
what the soft, cotton-topped seeds felt like against  
my fingers. i stopped bringing flowers soon, instead

loving the control of sending the seeds on their journey,  
and the loss of control as they flew away in a small explosion,  
thousands of little deaths to bring life somewhere else.



## Dropping One Hundred and Twenty Feet in Four Seconds:

*My Daughter and I Experience the Summit Plummet at Blizzard Beach, the Third-Tallest Free-fall Water Slide in the World*

*Cheston Axton*

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I felt like Lucifer. At one moment I was looking down at earth from the heavens, and in the next I was staring at the heavens from my back.

Five minutes before drop

My nine-year-old daughter and I watched the tattooed veteran walk past us and descend the stairwell. He was the second adult to abandon their place in line, showing the rest of us that this ride was less about bravery and more about determination. He had been a stalwart figure for those of us approaching the ride's summit and was definitely a tethering point for our waning fortitude. However, one look over the guardrail—the one separating riders from the descent—was enough to make him reconsider his decision. Lorelei and I watched the middle-aged man maneuver past the other park-goers as he made his way back down the slope.

“There goes another one,” I whispered to her. She smiled back at me, reveling in the fact that she might be more determined than those that left. She was a stick-figure of a girl, weighing only 60-pounds, but that didn't limit her bravery any.

“Am I going first or second?” she asked, as our feet passed the last step. It was at this moment that I knew we would have a story for generations to come.





Five hours before drop, passing the park gates

It was the middle of June, and the monochrome-gray morning clouds had just begun to dissipate. What started out as a muggy 10 a.m. was now beginning to look like an ideal Floridian day, with temperatures hovering just under unbearable. The forecast had been set at ninety-seven degrees, which presented a level of humidity more than tolerable for anyone choosing to participate in outdoor activities. In fact, the atmosphere that day couldn't have accented the park's theme any better, as the whole thing had been designed to resemble a melting winter resort.



Bizzard Beach is one of two Disney waterparks in the Orlando, Florida area, and, in my opinion, houses the better half of the corporation's water attractions. This includes several free-fall water slides, a bobsled slide, and a tumultuous wave pool that conjures six-foot waves in a stormy sea atmosphere. While all these rides attract a good number of people, the main draw of the park is a one hundred and twenty-foot-tall free-fall water slide called the Summit Plummet. This intimidating attraction is ranked as the third largest slide of its kind worldwide. Stationed inside the center of the park, this pseudo-ski slope towers over the other attractions.



After securing entry into the park, my mother (a fifty-three-year-old retired Certified Nursing Assistant), my daughter, and I decided to set up an itinerary for the day. Since we all had different tastes in rides, we thought it best to hit the ones that suited all three of us first. This course of action allowed us to maximize our enjoyment at the park, while simultaneously giving me time to build up my mother's courage for the more thrilling attractions. This objective was important to Lorelei and me because we hated any instances where my mom missed out on something fun. Of course, there were times this outcome couldn't be helped, as she was deathly afraid of heights and had specific health complications. Since she was a survivor of three heart attacks, her body was not in an optimal state to handle excess stress. While we wanted her to get on every attraction with us, we were certain that Blizzard Beach's main

attraction would be too much for her. This suited Loreleí and me just fine, as we were the thrill seekers in our group. I had grown up afraid of most thrill rides and wanted to spare my daughter the disappointment of missing out on such experiences, if possible. I had fulfilled this objective rather well, as she almost always attempted the rides I did. She had even talked me into riding things I had not initially thought about riding in the first place.



Two hours before drop, resting on the artificial beach

After three hours of waiting in lines, climbing up steps, and sliding into three-foot pools of water, we had covered a majority of the park's attractions. We decided to update our itinerary at the wave pool. With another four hours left, we felt like this was a good decision. This moment of respite would help the excitement subside for a moment, as well as give our feet a break from walking. Besides, my mother wanted to take a break on the man-made beach. The multiple ascents and descents had started to take their toll on her, and she needed a moment to build her energy back up. It was in this moment that Loreleí and I decided to tackle the Summit Plummet. My mother agreed and told us to go ride the attractions she wouldn't do.



One hour before drop, standing before the base of the Summit

We tilted our heads up as we approached the Summit's line. From a distance, the ride had seemed much more manageable, and much less intimidating. This was not to say that neither one of us had thought the ride was going to be a pushover, but it was definitely a moment of reevaluation. It was the first time either one of us had to look directly up in order to see the top of a water slide, which provoked our curiosity that much more. The line started at the bottom of a plastic snow mound and increased in a slow incline as people reached the tiny platform at the top. It reminded me of the Grinch's cliff from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. This effect came from the ramp encasing the slide. This design allowed the attraction to keep the resort theme, while simultaneously masking any possibility of ascertaining an angle of the descent. Riders would never realize that the drop was almost vertical, until they were standing before it.

By the time we secured a position in line, the queue was already full. This problem was a trifle, though, as our time spent inside the line was minimal. As we climbed higher and higher, we looked out over the expanse of trees and marsh, pointing out the other kingdoms inside Disney's Empire. We had found the Animal Kingdom, due to its star attraction the Expedition Everest roller coaster, and what we assumed to be the Magic Kingdom. The sight of the other parks was beautiful to behold; however, it was also a means of blocking out any second-guessing. We didn't have to time to think twice because each step up the slope allowed us to see more and more of the growing empire. It was similar to the mitigating effect felt on a Ferris wheel. The higher the wheel placed you, the better viewpoint you had of your surroundings; it was only until the ride stopped at the top that you realized you were hovering in mid-air in a rotating carriage.



Time of drop, peering over the threshold

"I'll go first, that way you can see how to do it," I told her. Like every other rider before me, I had performed the ritualistic action of looking over the guardrail. I hadn't really thought about the meaning behind doing it and could only reason it to be an excuse for exhaling a few public profanities. After all, no one seemed to mind. I turned my head, and took one last glance at the Disney Empire, before sitting down in the tube. The operator chuckled. It must be fun watching peoples' expressions at this moment, I thought.

"Lie flat on your back, cross your arms and legs as you descend, and push off when you're ready" the operator said. I looked down the slide one last time, held my breath, and pushed off.



Have you ever had a moment where time feels like it slows down? A moment where you have entirely too much time to think? Well, this drop issued one of those moments. In my four second descent, the ride managed to rip open my swimming-trunk pockets and dislodge my wallet, park-access band, and other contents; to raise me about an inch off of the slide, before slamming me back down; and to make me question whether or not I had potentially wet myself. I also found the time to regret, come to terms with, and enjoy my decision

to conquer the Summit. I felt like Lucifer. At one moment I was looking down at earth from the heavens, and in the next I was staring at the heavens from my back. Even though there was barely enough time to comprehend the entirety of what had happened, my brain somehow found a way to overclock itself for a fraction of a minute. As the adrenaline left my body, I found my excitement quickly turning over to worry. My daughter was still on the platform, one hundred and twenty feet above me, alone, and potentially rethinking her decision. I exited the tube and prepared myself for a sprint back up, before noticing a small, pink figure darting down the slope.

In the same four seconds, Lorelei had reached the shallow pool at the bottom and was lying there in the same dumbfounded position as I had been in. As she sat up and exited the tube, I noticed that her lips were blue; her hands were shaking; and that her eyes were still wide.

“I did it, Dad,” she said, broadcasting the same smile as before and running to me with her hand raised for a high-five. “Can we do it again?”



## California Butterflies

*Emily Williams*



The land is dusky-dry, hot, and hard like the people I meet on the road. My companion, Sal, likes the other folks, the folks who carry their shoes over their hands like gloves because the soles are so worn that they aren't good for much else. I don't make much of them, these people. I try to take them in with my queerest eye. I try to. Like this guy we met yesterday, under a big billboard sign by the way.

Sal and I had hunched up all underneath the wooden supports of the thing, begging for a little bit of shade to chum on the seeds Sal sifted out from his pocket. Sal always has seeds, doesn't matter what season we are at. There's fennel after spring, white-tan handfuls of sesame late in summer, and pumpkin to gnaw on through the colder months. This batch was sunflower, and they rolled around like a nest of black beetles in Sal's knobbed hand.

"The work's the later this year," said Sal with a munch in his mouth and an elbow pressed high up to the billboard post.

"You're telling me."

This time last year, and even the year before, we were out on our butts in the dust by August with nothing to do. Yet, here we were in the browning days of September, and our days were still full of plowing and pulling, except for today, of course.

The boss was a man for setting time aside to shoot long stares up at the sky and down at his own dirty toes, at least once a week. We'd all seen him in the creaking chair with its own slackening back, doing what he'd call "getting reacquainted." A man has to remind himself of where he's standing and of what he can't reach, he tells us. So, on Sundays, he shoos us all out of the bunk and the loft where we keep the whiskey tucked under molded hay and sends us out into town or, in

the case of Sal and me, toward the road, which we know better than anything else in this secret-keeping world.

The boss claims he sends us out to keep us from working when we should be paying attention. I, always the skeptic if you're done asking Sal, say he just wants the place free of our walking and whining about. People are really noisy, if you've noticed. As an example of that, I'll tell you that, while Sal and I were sort of observing—we had noticed we were still in work and not yet without—the man I mentioned happened down the road, noisy as could be. He could have been towing a horse with him, but wasn't, the way he was dragging his feet in the dirt, then, still finding time to thud them there. You would have thought he was a caravan, another mixed mulch of people, all collected and blackened by their individual disappointments, making West for land that might have more hold, that might stay with them awhile to make something.

This man was marking the land by himself. It made my shoulders ache with tightness to watch him, cutting through the dirt and making a loud mess, an un-ignorable mess, like the path was his for the taking. My jaw started to smart, too. So, I buckled, but Sal pressed me down. I couldn't help but think to myself that this man was far too busy "getting acquainted" with his whereabouts to have any worries about where those feet he was watching might take him.

I cleared the old motor of my throat just loud enough when he dug and stomped by. He did not catch it. Yet, Sal stepped out and offered him a flower seed and a sit-awhile, and the man smiled like this was the best day of his life and dug and stomped over to join us. I was starting to wonder if there was something wrong with his legs.

He thanked us, again with that pristine grinning-in-God's-face smile. Sal asked if he had a stop where he was going. That son-of-gun said nope. I never heard such weeded speak either. His voice was high and bent all out of shape by one knocker of a nose. Seemed nice enough, in the esteemed opinion of Sal, but he prickled me a bit. His shoelaces were undone, probably by that unusual approach to moving. He wore a bleached button-up undershirt that looked like it might have once been for more formal days. Over that, he had on grease-stained overalls that hit as high up by his collar bone as I have ever seen a pair fit.

“Nothing to do, boys. Nowhere to go,” he said, again with that smile. He propped his arms up on his knees and looked at us both like we might tell him a story, like that was what we might’ve stopped him for. A bit of black seed cover stuck between his upper teeth before he could spit it out. I blame that black speck for my words.

“Nothing for them that don’t find it themselves.” I smiled myself now, but Sal wouldn’t let it pass. He snuffed like a fly was stuck in his nose and asked the man where he wanted to end up, if there were no plans. What did he want for his time, if there was no job waiting to tell him?

“Ah, it’s the butterflies that make it for me,” he said. “They’re migrating. Talked to a railway station manager in Topeka who turned out to know some biology, and he said they got offset by a strong wind where they’d normally fly. So, you’ve got them now, here. Came to see what it’s all about. Pretty little things. When they’re all in a bunch, it’s even better, I heard.”

I spit out a mouthful of casing. “Ain’t never seen any butterflies.”

Sal said he had not either, but that he would be on the lookout. He said he liked a good nature-show.

In truth, it’s not a nature-show that Sal likes. He used to be a picture-maniac. I know this; Sal never brought it up to the traveling man. Back when we were further East, a rich man, whose crops did not die off until he had sold them all off to the hoppers, whose minds were cocked and starry, used to pay to project up on the supermarket bricks. It was all about spending an hour or two in the shadow of Clara Bow, Rudolph Valentino, and the sleek Louisa Brooks. All blown up in their greyest and most powdered shapes, those folks were still too big to touch. Yet, Sal is the brand of folk who likes having someone to look up to. He is a mirror-image man who shapes himself by example.

“Not too much to see in one of them things,” I said. “They don’t live long neither.”

The new guy, of course, took issue with that. He spent a moment spreading the batch of seeds Sal had just handed him out on his palm. I finally noticed that his shoes, of all things, looked new, despite being rubbed up to ankle lip with dirt. The heel and toe were smooth and scratch-less, and the sole still hung thick off the bottom.

He said that it did not really matter that butterflies do not live long. “I’ll make it a day or two longer than they will.” He winked. “And I’ll be better, I think, if I see it. The swarm. Been all over the country, now—Boston to Salinas—and I think it’s just making me better.”

“A new man every day.” I made my stare slip slow and heavy from his face to his shoes. He followed me.

“They’re empty,” he said.

I blinked at him. Sal’s brows were crawling up his forehead in a frenzy. I figured he was mad at me. The man fired up that luxurious grin again and shimmied off his shoe. He told us to take a look. There was no rotten sock and no calloused heel. Worse, there was not a stump to feel sorry for—Sal would have ripped me for that back in the bunk, but he always forgives. Where the ankle ended, there was a rim and a shadowy hole that went up and up to wherever a man ends. I dropped the seeds in my hand and swallowed what was left under my tongue, casings and all.

That was yesterday and this is today. I’m out on the road; skipped bagging duty for this. Sal was on time this morning and is probably already sore and sweaty from the lifting. This is not a problem he would have.

In fact, Sal checked last night. Didn’t blush or anything to do it. He just chugged down his boot laces, slipped the things off, and looked.

For me, it’s a waiting game. Just got to plant my heel hard and wonder what I feel. I know that the foot is there for sure but can’t help worrying about the rest. So, I drag my feet lonely in the dust and listen for the internal janglings that must make a man.





## Judges' Biographies

### ***Matthew Derby—Fiction***

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Matthew Derby is the author of *Phreaks*, an Audible Original scripted audio narrative launching in Spring 2020. He also co-wrote the Gimlet scripted podcast “Sandra,” and *The Silent History*, the first digital novel written and designed specifically for the iPhone, later released as a print edition by FSG. His first book, a short story collection entitled *Super Flat Times*, was published in 2003.

### ***Jonathan Johnson—Poetry***

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Jonathan Johnson is the author of five books, most recently the memoir *The Desk on the Sea* (2019) and the poetry collection *May Is an Island* (2018). His poems have been published widely in magazines, anthologized in *Best American Poetry*, and read on *National Public Radio*. He migrates between his Lake Superior coastal hometown of Marquette, Michigan; his ancestral glen in the coastal Scottish Highlands; and Eastern Washington University, where he is a professor in the MFA program.

### ***Dr. Derek Davidson—Drama***

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Dr. Derek Davidson teaches playwriting, theatre history, and dramatic literature at Appalachian State, and previously taught at Carnegie Mellon, Ashland University, and East Tennessee State. He is Artistic Director of Boone's In/Visible Theatre, was an Associate Artistic Director for the Barter Theatre in Virginia and Barter's Coordinator for the Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights. An internationally produced playwright, Davidson received commissions from An Appalachian Summer Festival for his works *Mauzy* and *Without Words*. *Furrow*, his most recent solo piece, was presented last October as part of the New Works Festival in New York City.

### ***Nathan O'Donnell—Nonfiction***

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Nathan O'Donnell is a writer of fiction and non-fiction. His work has appeared in *The Dublin Review*, *gorse journal*, *The Manchester Review*, *3: AM*, *New Irish Writing*, *minor literature[s]*, *The Tangerine*, and *Southword*, amongst others, and he is one of the co-editors of an Irish journal of contemporary art criticism, *Paper Visual Art*. For the past two years he has worked at the Irish Museum of Modern Art as a curator and researcher. His first book is forthcoming from Liverpool University Press. He lectures on contemporary art at Trinity College Dublin and on art writing at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. He has been awarded bursaries from the Arts Council of Ireland and Dublin City Council, as well as artist's commissions from the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin City Council, the Arts Council of Ireland, and South Dublin County Council. He will have his first text-based exhibition at the Illuminations Gallery at Maynooth University in March 2020.

<http://www.etsu.edu/cas/litlang/mockingbird/>

