

The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University





EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

The Mockingbird 2021

The cover image is a detail from *The future is a blue sky and a full tank of gas*
by Bana Richards

The Mockingbird design is by Taylor Campbell,
ETSU Quillen College of Medicine, Biomedical Communications.

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The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University

Published annually
as a project of the
Department of Literature and Language



2021

Volume 48 edited by Abby N. Lewis

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, retired Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, Dr. Joe Bidwell, Interim Dean, and Dr. Daniel Westover, 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, Biomedical Communications, and, particularly, Taylor Campbell, our designer. Thank you all for sustaining this project.

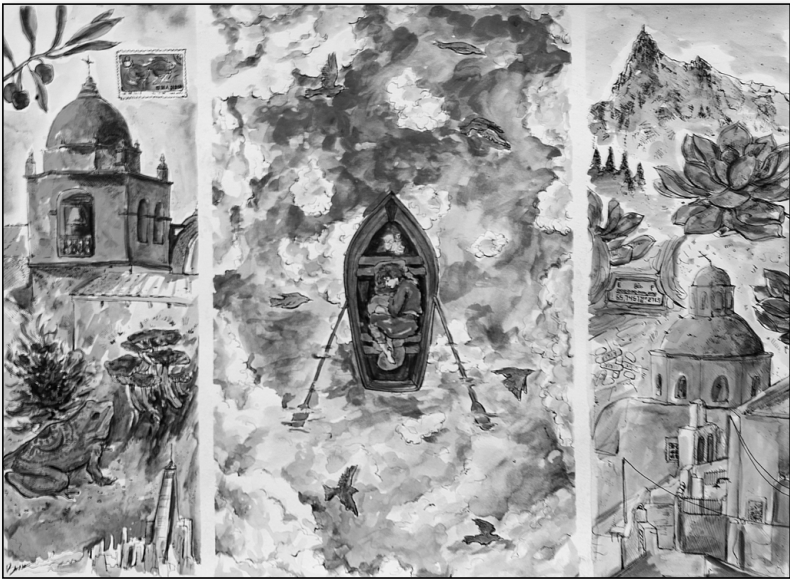
Table of Contents

- 9 Editor's Note
- 13 Superstition — Chris Walonski
- 15 Superstición
Translated by Cindy Castle
- 17 Unlocking Hearts — Leticia Pizzino
Winner of the Nonfiction Prize
- 21 Deep River, Shallow Water — Amara Bunten
Winner of the Fiction Prize
- 36 Salvatore Elboro — Holly Todaro
Winner of the Poetry Prize
- 37 Salvatore Elboro
Translated by Allen C. López
- 38 A Letter — Courtney Harvey
- 54 Past Time — Cassie Selleck
- 55 Pasa Tiempo
Translated by Rachel Reid
- 56 Lying in Plain Sight: Deception through an
Eating Disorder Lens — Rhea Norris
- 62 An Interview with Kelsey Solomon
- 77 A Life Half Lived — Michelle Bravender
- 86 I Am That Mom — Diane Mallett-Birkitt

89	Barren Voices — Donna Paulson <i>Alumni Spotlight</i>
98	Amnion — Zach Hicks
99	beestings — Emily Price
100	Annihilation — Mallory Spisak
101	ars protestor — Emily Price
103	Short Supply — Jessica Dunker
115	Contributors' Biographies
119	Judges' Biographies

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Editor's Note

Abby N. Lewis

The past year has been a tumultuous time of uncertainty, unfathomable loss, and widespread fear that fed the fire of hate in so many. Our community has faced countless health-related hardships from COVID-19 and food insecurity, and our university lost numerous faculty members, students, and staff. In a time when the most helpful action is to stay home, many were faced with a blank wall of inaction. The increased time at home, while perceived on the surface as an opportunity for ample productivity, instead led to burnout, a stall in creative energy, and a reduction of overall mental well-being. Despite all the obstacles, however, the ETSU community remained resilient, coming together to aid those in need: Bucky's Food Panty was utilized more this past year than in recent years combined; Donna Cherry, Associate Professor of Social Work at ETSU, was able realize her dream of building Huschka House, which provides transitional living for at-risk young adults who have recently aged out of foster care in the community; and innumerable members of the university stood up for social justice during a time when many aspects of life felt meaningless.

I selected Bana Richards's *The future is a blue sky and a full tank of gas* for the cover of this issue because the solitary figure curled in the canoe, which could be a boy or a girl, embodies the introspection this past year has generated. As we emerge into 2021 and new horizons, let us not forget what 2020 has taught us. As the theme present throughout the work in this issue exemplifies, family and loved ones play a central part in our lives. They are the ocean in which our small canoe sways, gently rocking us toward our destination. Chris Walonski's poem "Superstition" addresses the absurdity of medicine when faced with grief and the loss of a mother. Jessica Dunker's fiction piece, "Short Supply," grapples with the hardships of living in a body that is disabled. Many other works deal with the hard fact of loss, from the loss of agency in Courtney Harvey's "A Letter" to the loss of a grandmother

in Amara Buntens’s “Deep River, Shallow Water.” Together, the experiences, images, and emotions conveyed in this issue tell a larger story of resilience and commitment to personal growth, family, and community. Although we may each exist in our own solitary vessel amidst a larger sea, together we shape the direction of the current, all looking toward a future in which we can be reunited.

Just as community is central to the work in this issue, it is also central to the development and production of a journal such as *The Mockingbird*. I’d like to thank my reading committee — Andy Demczuk, Taylor Hubbard, Emily Price, Courtney Harvey, Amanda McNally, Diane Mallett-Birkitt, Claire Webb, and Lilith Erbach — for carefully considering each submission and devoting precious time to providing extensive feedback on their top picks. The work of a number of these readers is also represented here, although no students read for any category in which they submitted. I am grateful to Kelsey Solomon for her willingness to be interviewed for this issue and for generating such a caring and heartfelt interview environment. (I have admired your work for years, Kelsey; it was an honor to talk with you.) Thank you to Donna Paulson for being a friend and contributing a drama piece to this issue when we had none, and thank you to William Forney, for listening to all my shop talk and helping transcribe the interview. I would also like to thank this year’s judges: Leah Hampton, fiction; Faith Shearin, poetry; Monic Ductan, non-fiction. It was a joy working with such prestigious regional authors, and I am thankful for them taking time out of their hectic lives to offer careful feedback and readership for our student writers. Thank you also to our previous chair of the Department of Literature and Language, Dr. Katherine Weiss, for continuing to support this creative endeavor from afar, and to our new chair, Dr. Daniel Westover.

I would also like to thank Dr. Katrina Heil, Dr. Matthew Fehskens, and Dr. Felipe Fiuza for continuing the tradition of including Spanish translations in the journal. Dr. Heil’s students worked diligently to translate the selected poems, and Dr. Fiuza provided essential poetic edits to the final products. Thank you also to Ms. Katie Sheffield, Visual Resource Curator in the Art & Design Department, who provided me with a selection of student work for the cover and who patiently tolerated my presence in the art building during the summer of 2019 while I hogged the scanner to archive the past issues

of *The Mockingbird*. 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*: Karlota Contreras-Koterby, director of Slocomb Galleries; 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, Retired Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. My gratitude also goes out to Diana Qualls and Lydia Carr, Executive Aides for the Department of Literature and Language, who were always ready to provide assistance in-office while I worked remotely.

Special thanks are due to former editors Matthew Gilbert, who has continued to be the most trustworthy mentor in my academic, professional, and creative endeavors, and Sam Campbell, who encouraged me to make the issue my own. I would like to thank faculty advisors Drs. Jesse Graves and Thomas Alan Holmes, who make each volume of *The Mockingbird* possible. Dr. Graves has guided my work and shaped the evolution of my angsty teen poetry into published work I can be proud of, and Dr. Holmes has patiently reiterated logistical advice and guidance on the inner workings of *The Mockingbird*, although I'm sure by now he's tired of repeating himself. Thank you also to numerous other faculty members: Dr. Michael Cody, for lending a guiding hand during the times I faltered in my commitment to an academic education; Dr. David Michael Jones, for continuing to be an imperative constructive reader of my work and for inspiring me with his own creative projects; Dr. Katherine Weiss, for fostering my desire to delve into the drama genre and making my communications thesis so impactful. Thank you to the students in the Department of Communication & Performance and beyond for responding to the call for submissions and expanding the reach of this small journal. Finally, thank you to everyone across campus not listed who has directly or indirectly shaped my experience at ETSU and as editor. I will be forever thankful for this opportunity to amplify student voices and engage with the excellent work of this community.

Superstition

Chris Walonski

Five months before I become a motherless child,
 her doctors become fortune-tellers,
 gypsies in white coats,
 scouring her crystal ball brain for tumors,
 deciphering x-rays like tarot cards,
 they predict the days
 will shed from her in clumps.

When my mom's hair falls out,
 so do her eyelashes.
 A cancerous body cannot outlast its wishes.
 The nurses prescribe "good luck,"
 so she self-medicates with evil eye bracelets
 and bandages her despair by believing in signs.
 Omens are how my mother checks her optimism's pulse.

Pointing to a cardinal perched on a branch,
 she explains how it incarnates my grandfather's spirit,
 how our basement floods on purpose
 to teach us the importance of photographs,
 hummingbird sightings ensure she'll survive the season,
 every diagnosis casts a curse.

Too many black cat scans cross her liver's path.
 MRI tea-leaf rituals stain her neck jaundice.
 The oncologists
 consult their medical textbooks
 bound in human skin,
 invoke the animal sacrifice of lab-rats,
 attach needles like leeches,
 flush saline through the cauldron of her belly.
 Healing is a haunted art.

Convincing fingers to uncross
and grip their children's hands,
she reaches for mine:
a zodiac of sincerity and gap-toothed smile,
ribboned in light from the window blinds.
I have not yet learned to preserve
her embrace in the urn of me.
She has not yet entered
breast cancer's sisterhood of ash.
There is only the proof of our aliveness and nothing else.

But they fluff her pillow for a different kind of sleep,
spreading her blanket like they foresee
just how cold her body will be.
This place is less my mother's hospice
than the maternity ward for her ghost.
Respiratory failure makes her water break
And we deliver her phantom through séance.

Spines rope into crackling wicks,
singeing her shape into legacy,
hot wax oozes out the eyes,
and in each melting bead,
I sense her jasmine fragrance,
the softness of blueberry afternoons
picked by the pinch of her laughter,
the Turkish rugs our conversations threaded
with the television on mute.

Now, in the hour before her afterlife,
she speaks only through touch
and I do not question
the hospital's Ouija board intake sheets,
the magic 8 ball of a blood test,
for I have learned to conjure her safe passage,
to adorn her in amulets of kisses,
to accept that her palm
can only be read
in reverse.

Spanish translation by Cindy Castle

Superstición

Chris Walonski

Cinco meses antes de que me convirtiera en niño sin madre,
 sus médicos se vuelven en pitonisas,
 gitanos en abrigos blancos
 buscando tumores en su cerebro-bola-cristal,
 descifrando rayos X como cartas de tarot,
 ellos predicen que los días
 se caerán de ella en grumos.

Junto con el pelo de mi mamá se caen,
 También sus pestañas.
 Un cuerpo cancerígeno no puede sobrevivir sus deseos.
 Las enfermeras prescriben “¡buena suerte!”,
 entonces ella se automedica con brazaletes de ojos malvados
 y venda su desesperanza creyendo en señales.
 Los presagios son lo que mi madre usa para chequear su pulso
 de optimismo.

Señalando a un cardenal posado en una rama,
 explica como él encarna el espíritu de mi abuelo,
 como nuestro sótano se inunda a propósito
 para enseñarnos la importancia de las fotografías,
 la observación de colibrís le asegura que sobrevivirá la estación,
 cada diagnóstico lanza una maldición.

Demasiadas tomografías de gatos negros cruzan la ruta de su hígado.
 rituales de resonancias magnéticas de hoja de té le manchan
 su cuello amarillo.

Los oncólogos
 consultan sus libros de texto médicos
 atados en piel humana,
 invocan el sacrificio animal de ratas de laboratorio,
 sujetan agujas como sanguijuelas,
 descargan solución salina por la caldera de su vientre.
 La medicina en un arte embrujado.

Convenciendo los dedos a descruzarse
y agarrar las manos de sus niños,
busca la mía:
un zodiaco de sinceridad y sonrisa de dientes separados,
enlazado en la luz de las persianas.
Aún no he aprendido a preservar
su abrazo en la urna que soy yo.
Aún no ha entrado
en la hermandad de ceniza del cáncer de mama.
Solo hay la prueba de nuestra viveza y nada más.

Pero ellos ahuecan su almohada para un tipo diferente de sueño,
extendiendo su manta como si ellos predijeran
lo frío que será su cuerpo.
Este lugar es menos el hospicio de mi madre
que la sala de parto de su fantasma.
Una falla respiratoria hace romper su bolsa amniótica
y damos a luz a su fantasma en sesión espiritista.

Las columnas vertebrales se atan contra chispeantes mechas
chamuscando su forma en legado,
la cera caliente se rezuma de sus ojos,
y en cada gota derretida,
siento su fragancia de jazmín,
la dulzura de las tardes de arándanos
recogidos por el pellizco de su risa,
las alfombras turcas que nuestras conversaciones hilaron
con la televisión en silencio.

Ahora, en la hora antes de su vida más allá,
ella solo habla a través del tacto
y yo no cuestiono
las hojas de admisión del tablero de Ouija del hospital,
la bola 8 mágica de un análisis de sangre,
porque he aprendido a conjurar su salvoconducto,
a adornarla con amuletos de besos,
a aceptar que su palma
puede solo ser leída
al revés.

Unlocking Hearts

Leticia Pizzino

As I stood in front of the large prison door, I hesitated, uncertain about my first day as a storytelling teaching artist there. This was the state's maximum lock-up facility for juveniles, ages fourteen to twenty-one, who were repeat offenders of violent crimes or had committed rape or murder. Before the feeling of anxiousness could grow anymore, I pressed the button to the side of the door. After I gave my name, the door swung open. I took a deep breath and stepped inside. The door shut behind me with a click. I faced another door that also swung open. When I passed through, it shut behind me with another click. Here I was met by a staff member who took me through three more locked doors that each shut behind us with a click.

My guide led me to a large room where folding chairs sat in rows facing a platform at the far end. Pointing at the platform, he told me that I could set up there. I unpacked my autoharp and my fiddle and then sat on the stage waiting for the inmates to enter. I watched as the young men filed in and sat down. They were all dressed alike with white tee-shirts and khaki shorts or gray sweatpants, and all of them wore the same navy canvas slip-on deck shoes with no shoelaces. They quietly took their seats.

I began my program singing while strumming my autoharp as accompaniment. My audience responded with polite smiles and applause. While telling a story about my grandmother, they began to warm up and laugh. My last story was my version of a folktale that included lively fiddle tunes. The room reverberated with their clapping and stomping in time to the music, growing faster and faster.

After my performance, the young men came up to thank me for the stories and music. A young man, who I later learned was fifteen but looked much older, moved rather close to me. His burly mass towered over my five-four petite frame. My attention was drawn to a couple of large, jagged scars exposed on the side of his shaved head. With the eagerness of a child, he reached out his large hands to touch the fiddle I held. The guard next to him barked, “Back up, Pete! Don’t touch her stuff!”

“It’s okay,” I said, reaching up to tuck the fiddle under Pete’s chin.

I showed him how to draw the bow across the strings. The strings screeched in protest, but he was pleased. Pete’s face softened as he confided in me, “I love music, but I don’t play an instrument.” He dropped his voice even softer. “I wish I could.”

It was four or five months later when I returned the next time to perform and teach them to tell stories. This time the young men were noisy as they sat down. I looked at them from the platform, waiting for them to settle, but I didn’t have to wait long because Pete stood up and said, “Sit down and shut up. She’s good.”

Suddenly, I had their attention.

I returned regularly for five or six years, not only performing, but also collaborating with their teacher to design a variety of storytelling projects. Sometimes the young men found and learned folktales, other times I coached them telling their stories. At Christmas time I was asked to direct their singing of Christmas carols. We got the lyrics passed out, and I began to enthusiastically lead everyone, but I couldn’t hear any voice but mine. We tried another song. And then another. They shuffled their papers and shifted their gaze away from me. The sing-along was reduced to an awkward solo. When I asked a couple of them about it, they gruffly replied that they didn’t sing. No amount of coaxing could convince any of them to participate. It wasn’t until later that I found out they didn’t read well enough to follow the words. And they didn’t know the songs by heart because they’d had too much chaos growing up to participate and learn Christmas songs, not even the popular ones. They lived in a very different world than I did.

Once, the young men created a play from a folktale, and I was invited to play the part of a saloon girl. At my first rehearsal with them, Pete

was intent on telling me all about the trickster from the folktale and all his antics that they put in the play. The trickster was quite the hero to him. The lead actor playing the trickster was very charismatic, both on stage and off. With his wit and charm, he made rehearsal fun and set the tone and pace of the play. An artist came in and helped the young men paint a Western town on the backdrops, complete with a hitching post and swinging saloon doors. Each of the young men made multiple contributions to the play. They were invested and excited about their production.

Sometimes my visits were cancelled at the last minute due to gang activity. The facility was on lock down and there were no visitors allowed until things settled down and it was safe. But the young men always treated me with great respect. We even joked and laughed and had fun with our storytelling projects. I was told that I didn't represent authority to them, plus, they were glad to see someone different than the limited number of people they interacted with on a daily basis. Having a visitor was a privilege the young men didn't want to lose. Still, I would never want to meet any of those young men beyond the prison doors.

There was a high turnover of young offenders. Since I conducted a visit or a short-term project three or four times a year, most inmates participated in one or two projects, then I never saw them again. But Pete was the exception. He was there every single time I visited throughout the years. The teacher told me that he had a pattern of acting out right before he was to go before the parole board, so he hadn't been released. She told me Pete was now approaching the age of twenty-one, and it was time once again for a parole hearing. If he didn't get out this time, he'd be transferred into the adult prison.

My husband got a job out of state, and I told the teacher I was moving. She said she had something for me and wanted me to come pick it up. For the last time, I approached that large front door and pressed the button. When the door swung open, I entered, and the door shut behind me with a familiar click. The teacher met me, and we went through the series of doors that shut behind us. We walked through the large room where I had first performed and then through the now dark classroom area where I had taught storytelling. Her office was in a part of the prison I'd never been. As

I followed her across the crowded cafeteria, Pete saw me and approached. "I heard you're moving."

"Yes. My husband got a job out of state."

What happened next occurred in a flash. Pete closed the gap between us, eclipsing the sun that had been shining through the high window. I could feel the warmth of his body as he reached out his bulky arms. I quickly glanced around. The teacher continued walking, not noticing that I was no longer following her. The guards stood across the room, too far to do anything to protect me. Questions flashed through my mind. "Did I tell my children goodbye when I left?" "Did I tell them I loved them?"

Pete pulled me into a gentle hug. Relieved, I relaxed and returned his hug.

He held on to me. "I'm going to miss you," he said quietly.

When we released our hug and stepped back, I looked up into his face and soft eyes. Tears glistened as they rolled down his cheeks. Seeing him cry moved something in me, and I began to tear up. Saying goodbye suddenly became harder. Pete's rough exterior hid a tender heart.

I never knew what happened to him, but to this day the memory of his embrace warms me. Since Pete's unpretentious, heartfelt hug and vulnerable tears, my heart has been open to other people in a different way. I will always carry a part of his story with me.

Deep River, Shallow Water

Amara Bunten

Camp was just a thing that came with summer. Working every day, with new kids each week, but the same ones each year. Leyla made \$50 a week and got free meals, which she was grateful for because it was \$25 more than she'd gotten last summer, and \$50 more than her first summer spent in training. It was the Lord's work, so she shouldn't have to be paid to do it. Or so her grandma had told her.

Leyla wanted the volunteer hours for college applications next year. She didn't give a shit about the Lord's work when they were using it as an excuse to break minimum wage laws with the teens from the local church. Jason promised to double her pay next year, too. Out of pity and off the books, of course.

"You can't beat the kids when it's a church camp. Or cuss them out. Or punish them at all. You just get to threaten to have the youth pastor call their parents. Sad thing is, it usually works," Johnny had told her that first summer. They puffed cigarettes behind the cabins in the woods. Leyla had nearly thrown up from coughing, and he patted her on the back, laughing.

She hated getting the kids settled in each Monday and the uncapped energy each child had even at one a.m. that first night. But Fridays were the worst. Saturday, she got to go home and eat her grandma's home cooking instead of things that had been bought at the end of May from the discount section of the superstore. Over the last few years, it had become her weekend ritual to not leave the couch and talk to her grandma while torturing the cat. But she had to get through Fridays, first and that wasn't even her ritual now. The cat ran away about ten days before camp started. It had

torn her grandma up. Leyla had assured her it was hiding or would come back when it got hungry, but her grandma still sent her out looking for it. It wasn't until Leyla realized how much her grandma needed that cat that she actually started searching for it.

Each Friday the kids would be clingier and sentimental. That was annoying enough, but they would act so much worse. They would constantly whine and ask for popsicles, and Leyla had quit bothering to teach the actual lessons. She read the scripture, offered to save them if they wanted, and made one of them pray as they held hands in a circle. The older the groups of campers were, the easier it got. It had become her mental mantra as the age groups increased with each passing week. But it was only Thursday of week six now, and the kids were changing for whatever activity they had today. The other counselors were either herding them or preparing the equipment, while Leyla hid behind the high walls of the octaball court near the storage shed. She knew her ass was now covered in the dirt she sat in as she leaned against the wooden boards, puffing away.

“You do know the smoke gives away your hiding spot, right?” Chris snatched the cigarette from her raised hand, tossing it ahead and stomping on it as he passed by the court with a shredded foam target on his back. The target which was held with his other arm by the rope strap which Leyla had replaced for all the archery targets at the beginning of the summer. It was the only thing that ever got replaced on them, which is why the scoring rings were barely visible after ten years of campers shooting.

It was the first week, when Leyla had plucked a cigarette from Johnny's lips. She stifled a cough as he finally turned from staring at the entrance of the forest.

“Still a virgin?” He had asked.

“I'm a good child of God.”

He had nodded, chuckling dryly. It was the theme at this camp every summer and on all of the staff shirts and posters inviting all the other churches' kids from third grade to high school—for \$45 each—and had become a running joke among most of the counselors. There were only the elite few who were working to further their self-righteous attitudes. They found justification for their shitty personalities

here, plus their godly grandmothers paid them extra. Or, so Johnny had told her that first summer.

“What are you assigned to on Thursdays this summer?” She had asked him.

“Archery.”

“Damn you.”

Johnny nodded, a small grin on his lips.

“I hate tubing, and Jason knows it. Every fucking year he puts me in the river. And now he’s making me lead all summer.”

He laughed at that. Another muffled cough before she passed it back. Leyla had never wanted to seem like a little bitch around him. The memory made her shake her head as she dusted her pants off before climbing out of the court and back into her shitty role.

“Alright, everyone do me a favor and grab the straps of your life vest and pull up on them.” The kids all did as told, for once. “You all failed the test. I already told you that this is not a life jacket. It won’t save you, only Jesus can do that. So, you better pray you’re beside another counselor if something goes wrong. This is your PFD, personal floatation device, and if it goes above your ears when you pull up on the shoulders, have a counselor tighten it for you. Do not take your helmet or PFD off until we get to the end of our trip and are completely out of the river. I don’t care about whatever happens between here and there that makes you think you can. You can’t. It’s for your safety—even though I’d love to test how hard some of your heads are. Stay behind me and in front of Chris. Watch out for all the river sharks and remember the counselors will be spread throughout.”

She smiled as she heard the panicked discussions that the mythical river sharks brought as she tightened the PFD around her chest and stepped into the water. Chris and Peyton stood in the back of the group and both held up their hand like a fin, laughing as the kids watched Leyla. She laughed a bit. This was one of the few ways she could screw with the kids without having to repent during a private meeting in Jason’s office.

The water was cold, which brought more whining from the kids who were now dragging their tubes into the middle of the shallow river.

Usually, the summer heat made the cold water feel welcoming. The water level wasn't high enough, so she had warned the staff and kids that they had probably hit the jackpot and got two activities for the price of one: river tubing and river hiking.

"What if it rains?" moaned Karlee, reigning champ for worst camper, three years running.

"You're already wet." Chris laughed.

Chris was in college at the local university and had moved here three summers ago. He had always smiled at Leyla. She was glad he had been assigned as last. There wasn't anything wrong with Chris—Jason hated him, which proved it. His name badge had been printed as Christian Anderson, even though he'd been working longer than anyone else here. He told Jason his name was Chris, so he wouldn't wear it. He was the only other counselor that really talked to Leyla, but the river wasn't a place for talking like the lake or cabins were.

"I'm scared," whined a camper in the back.

"River is low. And if you listened, you'll be safe." This was met with wide eyes, which made her laugh a little. Leyla liked to test if some kids would cry. "Even if you didn't, we'll probably keep you safe."

Leyla threw her tube down and laid back on it, pointing her head downstream and submerging her arms in the water as she began to paddle. Her backstroke was altered by the tube, but she was used to this after four summers here. It was Chris's job now to keep the kids in order as she got ahead a bit. Her grandma had always liked Chris a lot more than Johnny, even though Chris was older and she only called him Christian. I hope you spend more time with that nice boy rather than the nice-looking one, Leyla, she had said last summer on a day she came by the camp to bring chocolate cookies for the staff. He ain't a good one; grandmas just know these things, honey.

After twenty-some strokes, she raised her head from grazing the surface of the water to look upstream. The kids hadn't listened to her instruction and safety sermon, as per usual. Counselors were now struggling with smaller groups around them, teaching them how to paddle again and reassuring the little demons that no, they really wouldn't fall out of their tubes and yes, it really is safe because the staff does it all the time. Tubing was one of Leyla's least favorite ac-

tivities, but she was good at leading it because she just had to read the river, and she'd been in this river her whole life. The first stretch was easy, nothing much to worry about so long as the kids knew how to navigate with their tubes. The counselors' bright red helmets and tubes were growing fainter as the river deepened under Leyla. She sat up straight in her tube, a skill that had taken two years to master without her ultimately sucking down water. Chris was still standing with the last kid—probably Karlee refusing to go. He waved, but she couldn't see his smile from this distance.

Without turning to check, Leyla remembered a turn in the water ahead and searched for an eddy to wait in while the group caught up. She maneuvered her tube behind a large rock, where the water swirled peacefully and would hold her in place. She watched as the final red tube was thrown down as Chris finally started his trip after he managed to get Karlee to go on. The small blue helmets of campers and distinct red of the counselors slowly grew larger as she remained in place with the current flowing around her eddy. The trees were buzzing and birds flew overhead. Leyla preferred hiking to connect with nature because it was easier, though she considered both as time to think. Rivers require focus and effort to navigate. She enjoyed hammocking beside the river and reading on the days she didn't have to teach a lesson to the girls about what it means to be a child of God. She usually fell asleep because it was so peaceful, and so she was still only in chapter three of her grandmother's copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

Her grandma had handed her the used book two years ago, after Leyla had finished unpacking the little room that was hers even though she slept on the couch. The people at the church were supposed to be getting them a second bed, but Leyla knew they wouldn't now. Another classic for your collection, her grandma had said with a smile and tears in her eyes. She had given Leyla that look a lot when she first moved in with her. Leyla stuck it on the shelf, along with her grandma's copy of *Little Women*, various versions of the Bible, and their photo albums. Even with the few books teachers had given her through the years and the library books other students had "lost," the shelves had looked empty. Her grandma had seen it, too.

After she graduated, and before camp began, Leyla had started read-

ing again. She re-read *To Kill a Mockingbird* first, then *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Charlotte's Webb* as her grandma requested, before she picked up the worn blue book. Her grandma actually smiled when Leyla carried it in and sat down beside her bed. You're finally going to read it, she had said. You needed to read the great American novel before going off to college, so you can learn a thing or two. Make a life for yourself, Leyla Hope, but remember what's important. Also, don't party and drink like they did, because someone will be watching. And for Pete's sake, let a man love you. Leyla had laughed a little and smiled because her grandma was, too, and then began reading aloud. So far, Leyla hadn't seen any of what her grandma had told her to look for in the book, but she still knew she'd finish it before she left for college.

The laughter of the nearing campers forced her attention from the tree limbs that were blocking the already clouded sun, back down to a spider that crawled across the rock that was creating her eddy. Johnny wasn't around anymore, so she visibly shivered and wiped her eyes to check that the group was now within shouting distance before she kicked off the treacherous rock and pushed through the eddy wall. The current was picking up a bit, and the kids were beginning to understand that the river was more fun when they did as instructed. Leyla lifted her whistle from the black nylon of her PFD and blew it once before pointing to her left. The other counselors repeated the motion, as well as a few confused campers.

"Past the riverbend here, stick to river right. It's the easiest path down." Leyla shouted. The message was again relayed by her co-workers.

Leyla pointed her head to begin the direction change as she casually began to paddle against the current. She ignored the tingling feeling, like there was something crawling up her arms and legs, and focused on the river rather than her eight-legged panic. She noticed the pale gray skies for the first time in detail. The clouds looked fake. She thought they deserved to be captured and appreciated for the beauty in their utter plainness.

With a cough, Leyla realized how ridiculous it was that she had started smoking to spend time with Johnny. She hated it and could feel the effects it had, but he had gotten her hooked and she had

let him. He never indicated how he felt about her, even after their first smoke this summer. He never would have, because then she would've stopped smoking, and he didn't want to be alone. He had seen through her from the start, and he liked it. It was never that he still wasn't over whatever girl he last had—she was just the summer pastime. Leyla had known this, but never allowed it space in her mind as she smoked with him day after day, more out of habit than wanting to be cool. Her grandma had been right. Leyla coughed again as she thought about how she never would've seen or admitted this before. So much damn time wasted turning her lungs the color of the clouds when she could've been reading that book.

Catching her breath, she blew the whistle twice more and made a circle above her head before returning her arms to the water to paddle toward the rocky bank a few feet ahead. It was a practiced grouping spot under a bridge, planned especially for this age group. Slowly, the tubes began to cluster together. Max leaned up in his blue tube and started his usual string of questions about why she had made them go river right when river left seemed like so much fun. He didn't like getting stuck on rocks, so that was fair. Why was right and left always the same in the river? Whose idea was that and isn't it just more confusing? He guessed that made sense. Was there a river middle? No, he didn't think so. He was excited for the big rapids at the end. As Max finally turned his attention to some of his friends, Leyla was able to breathe for a moment before turning to talk with the group. A couple campers in the back were still unsure if they liked the river, but everyone else was having fun and had forgotten the childish worries they had at first.

"We could use some sun, huh?" Chris asked as he floated to the group. Peyton grabbed his tube to pull him in, hanging onto her own red one as she did. His hand brushed her back as he stood up and thanked her, smiling. He turned to Leyla, face unchanging.

"Count off. One." Numbers followed all the way to seventeen before Chris shouted last. Leyla hopped back in her tube as Chris was telling the group a joke about Moses or Abraham—whoever built the ark—giving her time to paddle ahead. They had agreed that the first section of the river took far too long. A car sped over the bridge the group was slowly passing under. It didn't stop at the sign she knew

to be at the end of it. The camp photographer stood on the bridge, shouting at kids to look up and smile.

The river was one of few places Leyla didn't wear her sunglasses during camp and counted on it as time to correct the tan that was now etched into her face year-round. Tube rash had scarred her thighs in training her first summer, so now she wore cheap leggings and convinced Jason to make one of the staff shirts a long sleeve. Her face and hands were the only body parts with direct sunlight while she was on the river, which was good because Leyla preferred to stay out of the camp pictures that were sent to the local churches for an advertisement in their bulletins each week. The less her photos were seen, the fewer church ladies came to visit on Sunday afternoons. Leyla gripped the handles for the first time as she descended the rapids.

Only one camper flipped on the first rapids, and he laughed once Chris helped him to climb back on his tube. The kids talked excitedly about how different this side of the river was than the way they went last year. Leyla had gone right at the last split just to try and make up time, and she hoped the campers weren't still talking about it when Jason picked them up at the end.

The river was calm again, and only a few whistle blasts were necessary to keep the group informed and moving. She watched the kids more now, not wanting to think so much she decided she would rather laugh at them. The camper couple of the week were holding each other's tube handles as the group floated down a calm section. She saw the boy wink at another girl while the one he was holding talked to her best friend. Leyla couldn't help but remember the countless times Johnny had winked at her in the staff prayer circle before coffee, because Chris had slipped in beside her yet again. It never actually annoyed her, but she had thought it was better if Johnny thought it did.

She blew the whistle twice and signaled for them to follow her to group up at the sloped, sandy bank ahead. Leyla was already climbing up it when the information was relayed all the way back to Chris. It was here that Johnny told her that this fall he would go to the community college, during their practice run down the river in training week. After two years out of school, he was going back. It would have been at the same time she started classes at her university—now only

in a few weeks. He had teased her so much for going to a state college, because he wasn't a nerd like her.

Shrill whistle blasts broke the peacefulness the slow waters had created. Karlee discovered what a river shark was, and Peyton climbed onto the bank next to another counselor who had handled her tube while she snuck up to flip the camper into the water. Karlee was raging as she climbed the bank and wiping her pale freckled face, but she was drowned out by everyone laughing. Leyla announced to the group that they could put their tubes on the sandy bank with her and the other counselors and swim in this section for a while. No, they couldn't take off their PFDs or helmets. And yeah, Max, we didn't get to swim here because people were here fishing last year. Leyla stayed seated in her tube on the bank and took off her helmet. The other counselors took turns watching and swimming with the kids. Karlee and some other campers had tried to pull Leyla in to play, but Chris went in with them instead, smiling back at her. Leyla laid down on her tube, unclipping her PFD, and hoped that the disappearing sun would burn her face and dry her clothes.

Leyla had been looking forward to school. Everyone told her it would be good for her, especially now. Her books were supposed to arrive tonight, so she reminded herself to check her phone once she got back to camp. If they had arrived, she would have to shower quickly and run home to add them to the dusty bookshelf before dinner started here. She realized that nothing had been moved from that shelf since she had picked up *Gatsby*, which had then remained on her chair in her grandma's room.

Leyla had been absolutely ecstatic when she returned home from her orientation, which had gotten her out of tubing and the Friday Camp Olympics during week two. Her grandma didn't want to read *Gatsby* that weekend, she just wanted to hear about the orientation. She had been so worried that there would be some trouble with Leyla not having a guardian there, and Leyla could see that it had taken a toll on her while she was gone. The soup Leyla had made before leaving had barely been touched, but thankfully was still good heated up as they sat in her grandma's room and ate together. Johnny hadn't come to check on her Thursday night, like he had promised. But her grandma shrugged and with a mischievous grin reminded Leyla that

she preferred Chris anyways. Plus, he had read some poetry to her while she ate the ice cream he had brought her. She had complained that Leyla didn't give her more ice cream, which made her laugh. It hid how mad she was at the time. They talked until late both Friday and Saturday night that weekend. Mostly about college and Leyla's future, but she had managed to get her grandma to tell some stories from before she became a good child of God.

"Leyla, can you hear me?" Leyla opened her eyes and plucked the neon walkie-talkie from the pocket on her PFD, water dripping from it. "Storm is coming in. You probably already know, but just wanted to do my job and remind you."

"We're at the hole. Didn't check the radar today. I thought I was feeling, um, the teens splashing me but I see the rain has started. We'll get moving. Thanks, J." Jason hated that. Leyla wished she had thought of it four summers ago. She grabbed the neckline of her shirt and wiped her cheeks dry before dabbing at her eyes, hoping the redness would be minimal. Maybe even as a shadow of her helmet. Leyla wished she had brought her sunglasses, even though the sky was turning darker.

One whistle blast. Stop splashing and start paddling downstream. River left coming up soon. Most of the teens groaned and complained but still grabbed their tubes and began to move downstream. They had to look at the sky as they paddled, which now featured charcoal clouds racing past. Leyla didn't need to explain to any other counselors why they had to get moving. Looking back to see how the group was doing, Leyla saw that Karlee was clinging onto Chris's feet as he paddled for them both, which forced the group to move faster.

They had to get down the river before the storm got really bad. Leyla knew how dangerous the river was anyways with a group of sixth graders. Still, she couldn't help but laugh at the thought of Jason pacing his office as the rain beat harder on the metal roofing back at camp. Leyla led the group down a bend in the river, and the thunder rolling in the distant storm became audible. Leyla hated thunder and thought about how one of those damn cigarettes would calm her nerves when she got back to camp. Her last, she decided—she couldn't afford the bad habit anymore, especially not at college. Her mind wandered to her last ever smoke break with Johnny as she pad-

dled and stared at the shifting sky.

“I’m going to get out of here.” She had told him.

“Aren’t we all?”

“Yeah, but I’m actually gonna do it, Johnny. Don’t you want to, too? Go to a city. Meet new people. Never come back here.”

“People never really make it out.”

“Well, dammit, I’m going to. You can come stay with me sometime . . . I mean, if you want.”

Leyla coughed again, turning her head to check downstream before giving instructions to the group. She looked at the clouds behind her instead of the helmets as she told them about the small rapids that would push their tubes river right but they needed to go river left as soon as they could.

Johnny had been right about not making it out. Only thing he had gotten out of was working here for the rest of the summer. Monday after her orientation, Leyla found out that a kid had ratted him out for having the stuff and Jason didn’t think twice before making the damn call. Everyone’s drug tests at camp that Friday came back clean. Jason made Leyla take two—one Monday before Peyton had even told her what happened, and another when the first came back clean. Johnny ain’t getting out anytime soon, honey, her grandma had said.

The rain beat ceaselessly against the water. Most of them had only ever tubed once a summer, so she didn’t know why she had expected them to be able to keep up with the pace that the counselors were trying to push. They’d tubed six times at most, versus Leyla’s eight or ten trips a summer. Karlee was now attached to the handles on Chris’ tube. The rapids were growing, and re-grouping had to be more frequent because campers and the newer staff kept flipping. They were still thirty minutes from their pickup when the lightning streaked across the sky for the first time. Leyla smiled as it lit up her burning eyes, which had hurt since yesterday when she took lunch off. Chris and Peyton had promised to cover for her with Jason and any nosey campers.

“Heard your grandma died. She was always good to me.”

“She always liked you.”

The glass separating her from Johnny hadn't been cleaned for some time. She hoped that the receiver she had pressed to her ear had at least been sprayed or wiped down.

“Always?” He saw through her, again.

“Orange isn't your color.”

“Did you inherit any money?”

“What?”

“I think if I could get a good lawyer, I could have a real shot at getting out. I'd pay you back of course. And we could move away, like we talked about.”

The metal links beating against each other added to the commotion, as Johnny had shouted for her to pick the receiver back up. Leyla didn't look back as he shouted her name. She stopped by the house to check the food she had put out for the cat before she went back to camp Monday morning. It was all still there. It made Leyla lose her appetite, even though it had been chicken and macaroni day. She was late getting back and snuck into the kitchen for a popsicle and fudge round on her way to the girls' devotion by the river. It didn't really count as food.

After the next set of rapids, everyone grouped up, and two campers were assigned to each counselor, except Chris, who was still carrying Karlee. Leyla didn't like the responsibility of keeping the two safe with the growing storm. She told Chris she hated the damn thunder. He gently held her arm and offered to take care of the boy assigned to her. She said no, she could handle herself. He nodded knowingly.

The night before, Chris had gotten up for a late-night snack and found Leyla in the small common space in the leadership cabin. The cabin was intended for Jason and the designated leadership staff, but because the older groups didn't need as many counselors in the cabins and Jason needed an incentive for his senior girls' counselor to come back for week five of camp, Leyla now had a bed on the girl's side. The funeral was on Tuesday of week four, with the burial the following morning. Leyla had been forced to host countless people from the church she barely knew in their little house, and the nosey

church ladies kept coming back to check on her or bring food. She didn't mind the food, but Leyla was infuriated by the way they invited themselves in and to any plate in the kitchen. Chris asked why she was up so late, and Leyla told him about how they even ate the last piece of cake that her grandma had ever made, which had been hidden in the back of the fridge since her graduation in May.

He nodded and sat with her, not addressing her silent tears as she talked about how she couldn't sleep, because then she saw her grandma lying in the exact position she had found her in and then been placed in for the funeral. Leyla mentioned the attorney that came by last weekend as Chris braided her hair, letting her cry. She told him that she visited Johnny, and her concerns about how she was going to maintain the house and bills while at college. Leyla even told him that she had been setting out cat food for almost two months now and her grandma's damn cat still hadn't come back. She woke up on that couch with a blanket and two pretty braids. Chris smiled when he saw them as he held her hand in the coffee prayer circle this morning. She felt like an idiot for letting him catch her so damn weak.

One whistle. They'd go down one by one as Chris sent them down the last rapid, then get out. Drop the tube and go straight to the vans. Two counselors set up in parts of the rapid that kids could get stuck in or take the wrong path down. The gray clouds were illuminated by electric streaks as Leyla jumped on her tube. She went down the wrong way for fun after she got past the bend that the campers couldn't see around. The water pushed the tube down, and she smiled as she went under. The current pushed her out of the rapids, and she quickly grabbed her runaway tube as Jason began reprimanding her bad example.

Leyla wiped her eyes and didn't bother responding to him. She didn't care. She walked to the edge of the river and threw her tube at his feet, then waded back to the end of the rapids. She let each camper bump into her and even laughed as she flipped them in the chest-deep waters. One by one the tubes piled next to the trailer, and towels were wrapped around them as the campers filed onto the first van. Karlee didn't laugh or smile when she was sent under. She stomped her river-filled sneakers through the grass and announced to the van

that she was glad that Miss Leyla wasn't coming back next summer as she took the front seat.

Peyton, who had been set up in the river, followed Leyla's path down, earning another groan from Jason. The other counselor followed the river another way, and the rapids flipped him twice. Leyla could see her reflection in the current as the storm set in overhead. The clouds were black above her. She didn't climb out and begin loading tubes like the other counselors had. The lightning flashed, but she stared through the thunder at the stormy clouds.

Chris made his own path, getting stuck on his way down the rapid. The water was turning a pure brown when he let Leyla catch him. He moved to climb out, but turned back as she remained still, staring at the muddy water where her reflection should be. He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. It didn't reach his eyes this time, and she didn't meet them either.

"We've got to get out of the river, Ley."

"Are you working again next summer?"

"No, why would I?"

"Does it scare you?"

"Not really. But I like storms."

He didn't answer the question. Not really. They both knew it.

Chris gave her a gentle push, joking that she wouldn't get a refund on her tuition even if she was struck by lightning. She climbed up the riverbank and onto the back seat of the van, ignoring Jason's sarcastic thanks for helping with the tubes. Leyla leaned her back against the window and stuck her feet out across the seat. Chris sat in between the other window and her feet. He didn't touch or look at her. She looked through the back window as rain hit it and began winding down the glass. Jason started the van up and began driving, swearing about how if one of the damn tubes came undone, he'd make her and Chris get out and carry them back.

Johnny knew she'd be out of here. Nothing keeping her now.

"I never thanked you for staying with my grandma that night."

She felt him smile towards her, but Leyla continued chasing the rain-drop trails from mid-window to the end of the glass.

“She always really liked you.”

“You know, my lease is up soon. So, um, I can stay at the house while you’re at school.” Last night, Leyla had told him that she didn’t know what to do with the house, and she needed a place to come back to. She didn’t turn to him. She thought it had been understood that they wouldn’t talk about last night. “I can pay rent . . . and I have a job lined up around here after I graduate, so—”

“Come by with ice cream this weekend, and we can work it out. You’ll need a bed and can’t move in until I’m gone though.” She still never looked up at his smile, but she knew it was there as she watched him nod in her peripheral. “And you’ll have to feed the cat.”

Leyla kept exploring trail after trail on the back glass, raindrops flowing down to the end of the glass. She navigated the splits, tracing it to the end and starting again each time the lightning streaked across the sky.

Salvatore Elboro

Holly Todaro

When he came here, they changed his name to Sam.
On a boat, he sits away to himself,
and sketches a sapling across the wide harbor.
He will not teach his son his language.
The charcoal is soot in the lines of his workman's hands.
Four years pass, and he waits in a bank line,
telling a strong-willed woman there is an
apple-red leaf stuck, landed, in her rolled hair.
He tells her that he will marry her
someday. She turns from him and scoffs, hiding her smile.
He has now moved south, trading city for forest,
and his son will bring home a baby
who will only meet him through pictures in an album.
Together, they plant an oak tree in front
of the house, its branches random, innate, cyclical.
The baby will recognize Sam through this sturdy tree.
Who knows what might not have been if
he had not left behind bulls on hills for promises,
not heard the wind calling his new name through
the leaves across a gracious sea?
His eyes are closed now as a cypress tree waves to him
from outside of a hospital window.
A familiar boat on the horizon sails closer,
patiently calling him on.

Translated to Spanish by Allen C. López

Salvatore Elboro

Holly Todaro

Cuando vino aquí, le cambiaron el nombre a Sam.
En el barco, se sienta lejos y solo,
y dibuja un árbol joven a través del ancho puerto.
No le enseñará su idioma a su hijo.
El carbón es hollín en las líneas de sus manos trabajadoras.
Pasan cuatro años y está esperando en una cola al banco,
diciéndole a una mujer de mente fuerte que hay una
hoja de color rojo manzano pegada, aterrizada, en su pelo enrollado.
Le dice que se casará con ella
algún día. Ella le da la espalda y se burla, escondiendo su sonrisa.
Ahora se ha mudado al sur, intercambiando ciudad por bosque,
y su hijo se traerá un bebé a la casa
que solo lo conocerá por imágenes en un álbum.
Juntos, plantan un árbol de roble delante
de la casa, sus ramas aleatorias, innatas, cíclicas.
El bebé reconocerá a Sam a través de este árbol sólido.
Quién sabe lo que no habría sido si
no hubiera dejado toros en las colinas por promesas,
si no hubiera escuchado el viento llamar su nuevo nombre a través de
las hojas en un mar lleno de gracia?
Sus ojos están cerrados ahora mientras un árbol de ciprés lo saluda
desde afuera de la ventana de un hospital.
Un barco familiar en el horizonte navega acercándose,
llamándolo pacientemente.

A Letter

Courtney Harvey

I was fourteen when I realized I was going to be murdered. I can remember the exact moment I realized it. It was a regular summer day; I spent most of it outside in our pool with my brother Josh, his friends, and the neighbor's kid. I wore a faded pink one-piece swimsuit because I didn't want anyone to see my stomach or the figure I was rapidly growing into. I'd just climbed out of the pool, my long brown hair tangled and dripping water, my fingers pruned, and my DIY painted fingernails chipped, when I heard my mother. I looked up at the sliding glass back door to see her on her knees, one hand pressing a phone to her ear and the other covering her mouth in an attempt to hold in her sobs.

The next few moments are hazy. I think Josh was the first one by our mother's side. I stood in the doorway wrapped in a towel I don't remember grabbing. My father looked as stunned as I did. My mother dropped the phone. Her crumpled form shook violently as Josh tried to hold her. My father knelt down beside her as she looked up at him and said that her younger sister was dead.

My aunt's name was Trisha. Trisha was a free spirit. She defied the rules, carved her own path in life. I remember her telling me about when she told her parents that she decided to change her chemistry major to a double major in art and photography. They scolded her for being reckless, making a decision that meant she would have to fight so much harder to get a job and live comfortably—but my aunt didn't want comfort. She reveled in the unknown and misunderstood; she actively sought out discomfort and difficulty. She spent her life in the world, visiting place after place, traveling day and night, always toting her camera with her. The few times

a year she visited were usually special occasions—holidays or birthdays—and she always fascinated me with her stories of adventure on her travels, showing me picture after beautiful picture to illustrate every event.

But she was gone.

In that moment when my mother spoke between her sobs, I felt a paralyzing chill shoot up my spine that sucked me out of reality. Trisha's face wavered in my mind's eye like a dying heartbeat until it faded into bleak, black nothingness.

She was really gone.

It was a week later when I learned what had happened. My father told me. The last time that Trisha was in the states, she met a man who also had a keen interest in photography and traveling, so they started dating and traveling together. They were traveling all through Europe together, visiting France, Germany, Italy. They were in England when it happened. Trisha had an argument with her boyfriend—over what, I still don't know—and when she turned away, he hit her over the head with the hotel hair dryer. He continued to bludgeon her to death, refusing to stop until the hotel manager came to the room because of a noise complaint.

How can someone who knows you, who claims to love you, do such a thing to you? How could anyone hurt Trisha that way? Wonderful, social, vibrant Trisha. Good, kind Trisha.

If there's someone out there who could do that to Trisha, then there's someone who could do it to me.

I became somewhat of a recluse after that. When school started back in August, I stopped talking to my friends. I think they thought I was just having trouble processing my grief, but the truth is I no longer trusted them. I no longer trusted anyone. Any one of my friends could be the person who would one day murder me. Whenever I looked at them, all I could see was violent fury. I spent night after night writing in my journal as I tried to figure out how each of them would do it.

Cathy was our friend group's science nerd. She obsessed over her chemistry classes, constantly talking with her teacher about other

projects she wanted to work on outside of class. On the other hand, she was also a baker. Her parents owned a bakery together, and she often helped her mother with the food. I determined that she would kill me with poison. She'd concoct some conglomerate of deadly chemicals and mix it into a batch of brownies that she'd give me. In fact, after the funeral, she approached me with a dozen brownies—supposedly a gift to express her sincere apologies about what I was going through. I accepted the gift, let her think she'd won, but I refused to eat a single one, instead promptly dumping them into the trash as soon as I got back home.

Darla, however, wouldn't be quite so direct in her approach. Her family was wealthy—she wouldn't dare to attack someone so directly when she knew she didn't have to. She got a hefty enough allowance that she could easily save up to hire a hitman. And I'm certain I saw one the weekend after school started. When I was out with Josh buying the supplies all our teachers wanted us to get, there was a man with wild blond hair and piercing hazel eyes who followed us through the store. He hung around the front of the building, leaned up against a wall and smoking a cigarette when we arrived. Then I saw him again and again as we went up and down the aisles. He even got in the same checkout lane as we did. I kept myself glued to Josh's side the whole time we were there, hoping desperately that while Josh was there the man wouldn't attack.

Trey would be the worst of my friends to be murdered by. He was generally calm and collected, but he had a fiery passion within him. There's a fine line between passion and rage, and I had no doubt that he could cross it. A week after the funeral, he invited me to his house to, as he put it, simply hang out, play video games, and talk. But I knew better. He really just wanted to get me alone, vulnerable. I knew the kind of things he had in his room; it would be so easy for him to hit me over the head with something or beat or strangle the life out of me.

So I started keeping to myself at school.

There's nothing wrong with it. I can be a lone wolf if I want to. I don't have to make friends or talk to people if I don't want to, if I don't trust them. I don't have to be an easy target, someone easy to kill.

Teachers seemed to think differently. They seemed to think there was something wrong with me if I was always on my own. They thought I was “afraid” of other people, “afraid” someone would hurt me, “afraid” to get close to anyone.

They pulled me into a crowded room and tossed me into a chair. I was surrounded by faces painted with malice, sharp eyes that seemed to be aware of my every move. I had no clear options: no weapons, though any of those prying eyes would’ve seen it coming before I had a chance to do anything with it; no way to run, since there were too many people to stop me; no way to call for help—I had no one to call to.

The school counselor sat on the other side of the desk, her hands interlaced and resting on a small pile of papers in front of her. “Is everything okay?” she asked. There was patience in her voice, but her eyes betrayed her true feelings. “Your teachers are worried about you,” she said. “I told them I’d try to speak with you privately. Can you tell me who is hurting you or threatening you?”

My eyes darted around the room, hoping desperately for a way out, but finding none. I skimmed scowling faces before finally making eye contact with the counselor, her head tipped toward me and eyebrows raised.

“All of you,” I said.

She tilted her head to the side, and a look of confusion—false confusion—flashed on her face. “All of us? What do you—”

“I want to leave.” I shot up from my seat and dashed for the door, shoving past my English teacher, who stood in the way. I heard them calling back to me as I ran down the hall. I didn’t stop until I got outside the building.

My teachers left me alone after that. They knew I knew what they were planning, and I wasn’t going to let them do that to me. I wasn’t going to let anyone kill me quite so easily. I wasn’t going to let them get me alone like that again. The next time they did, they wouldn’t hesitate. They wouldn’t mock me with their questions and their false concern. They’d shove me into that seat, tie me to it so I couldn’t fight back, and make a game of killing me. They’d take turns running knives across my face and watching the blood drip down my cheeks.

I could see their laughing, maniacal faces floating in my mind, and I knew I didn't want to see that play out into reality.

Things stayed that way all through high school. I kept to myself, watched other students and teachers as they made their plans, and thwarted them before they had a chance to come to fruition. I was always ready, always watching. When my senior year came along, I had to really think about what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Trisha's face rose up in my mind. I thought of all her adventures, her stories, her beautiful photos. For a second, I wanted just that: the life Trisha had. But Trisha's life led to Trisha's death, and I knew I couldn't follow in her footsteps.

I only applied to one school. There was a state school about two hours away from home that I wanted to go to. Josh was in his sophomore year there when I was filling out my application, and he gave me all kinds of good pointers about what I should and shouldn't say in my application essay. I was a good student all throughout grade school, and that combined with my stellar application essay landed me a full ride. I'd be spending the next four years studying math and accounting, all in preparation for a nice, safe office job.

What wasn't safe was dorm life.

I knew immediately that having a roommate wasn't an option. Josh tried to encourage a roommate, said that his roommate Alex was easily his best friend, the person he trusted most in the world, but I refused to take that risk. Being in close quarters with someone is a quick way to expose your weaknesses to them, to let them see just how vulnerable you can really be. Staying in the same room with someone, going to sleep while they may still be awake, plotting—there was no way I was going to risk it.

I found out quickly with a few emails and some scouring of the website that I could live alone if I wanted to. Disability, major allergy, or money—that's what it took. I didn't have any disabilities or major allergies that would qualify me to live by myself, and there was simply no way for me to believably forge the medical paperwork "proving" my medical need for a single room. I had to pay extra instead.

As soon as I was aware, I started applying for jobs in the area—something I could potentially transfer to another location closer to

my school when I moved in. Within two weeks, I was working as a cashier at a fast-food chain. I worked there all the way up to my move-in day, at which point I was told I could work at the location near my campus while I was up there and was welcome to come back anytime. I was happy to. In the time I worked there, I loved my job. There was only one hiccup in the road when an angry customer grabbed the front of my shirt—the details are foggy because I fainted after that. I don't even remember what angered the man, but when I woke up in the hospital after hitting my head, I was told he'd been escorted out by police minutes after I'd passed out.

Josh helped out with packing and shopping for school. He had two years of college experience under his belt, after all, and he knew just what to get. Our dad handed his credit card over and told us to get everything we'd need, so we did. Josh convinced me to get a whole new bed set: nice pink, flowery sheets, pillowcases, and comforter. We picked out towels in various colors. We even found a red mini fridge and microwave. We left Walmart with two buggies filled to the brim with all that, plus hygiene products, kitchen stuff—anything that Josh thought might come in handy at least once. He helped me put it all in suitcases and bags and pack them into my car.

The morning when we left, I remember leaning against the side of my car while I drank my coffee. Josh was inside still, talking to our parents before we left. They never accompanied him when he moved on campus, and it seemed that wouldn't change. Dad did come out of the house before we left, though. He handed me something in a plastic bag from Dollar General and said he'd see me for Thanksgiving.

I followed Josh the whole drive up. Once we got to campus, we separated. He said that Alex had already moved in, so they'd go ahead and move his stuff up to their room together, then he'd come help me finish up afterwards. That didn't bother me; I was happy to do it all alone, really. The experience turned dreadful, however, when my RA began to pester me. I simply wanted to take all my stuff to my room, lock the door, unpack everything, and just get settled in—and maybe my brother could be a part of that too, but my RA? She didn't fit into my plans. I tried and tried to tell her no, I don't need any help, but she insisted that I let her help me bring my stuff in. At some point, I just decided to go with it. I knew what she was trying to do; I knew

she just wanted to get an idea of what I had, so she'd know how much of a fight I was willing to put up.

Thankfully, Josh and Alex finished unloading quickly, so he came to help as he said he would. When he arrived, I jumped to let my RA know that I had assistance now and didn't need her help anymore. She acted hurt by it, but I didn't care—I saw through that act.

Josh helped me unpack and organize everything in my room. Despite the blandness of the cinder block walls coated with layer after layer of pale beige paint, the room almost felt bright. It felt homey. Once everything was in place, I remembered the Dollar General bag our dad handed me before I left. I sat on the edge of my bed with the bag in my lap and slid out a book. It wasn't just any book; this book had been hand-bound, fitted with a faux leather cover dyed a deep shade of ocean blue. The thread used to bind the book had been dyed the shade of evergreen leaves, and it popped out against the blue of the cover. Corners of pictures and taped in scraps of paper stuck out the edges of the book haphazardly. It was only half full.

I recognized it instantly. I'd know Trisha's travel journal if I saw it a mile away, but it wasn't a mile away. It was here, now, sitting in my lap. My hands itched as I fingered the cover, grazed the edge of it, thought of opening it. But I didn't—I couldn't. I knew where it started: Trisha's first trip to Italy, her first time crossing the Atlantic, the summer after her freshman year of college. I was intimately familiar with Trisha's swirling handwriting that sometimes fell to scrawls when she was just too darn excited about what happened that day and needed desperately to get it all out on paper as fast as she could. I could probably draw the first photo she took, the photo just outside the airport with a plane taking flight in the background.

Every time Trisha came home, she'd sit with me, and we'd look through this journal together. I was six when she first showed me this book. She'd just returned from her trip a few days before she came to see her sister. She sat us down on the couch, and we flipped through pages and pages of her stories and pictures she'd taken. The next day, I asked if we could look through it again, so Trisha and I sat back down on the couch and reviewed it all again and again while Josh spent the day in the pool with our mom.

I couldn't bear to look at it any longer. I shoved it in a drawer beside my bed and left it there. Josh asked what it was, and I told him it wasn't important.

Josh left not long after that. As he stood in the doorway, he told me that if I ever got locked out of my room, I could call the RA duty phone, and someone would let me back in.

The RAs had key access to my room—all the RAs did—and I immediately knew they were not trustworthy. I knew they were just as dangerous as a roommate would've been. As soon as Josh shut the door behind him, I sprinted to my bed, opened up my laptop, and looked online for a door security device. During the day when I was awake or wasn't here, I would be able to protect myself, but there was no way for me to fend off an attack when I was sleeping, and that attack could come at any moment. I didn't sleep but for a few stolen minutes the whole two days it took for the extra security to arrive. That night, I set up my new door stopper, preventing anyone from opening the door from the outside, and I slept better than I'd ever slept before.

I kept my head down most of college. I did everything I could to blend in, and on the off chance that someone noticed me, I ignored, ignored, ignored. No one was going to get close. The only times I ever really spoke were when I thanked dining hall staff for serving me, when I spoke with professors about assignments (but never alone—never alone in an office), or when I was with Josh.

There was only one other exception to my silence: a guy named Peter who consistently tried to talk to me throughout the four years. Simply ignoring him didn't work—I guess he couldn't take a hint. We both majored in accounting, so I couldn't avoid taking classes with him. He even became friends with Josh, so avoiding him became even more difficult. The first day of class, he sat next to me and chatted along, not even once seeming to be bothered by my refusal to turn his monologue into dialogue.

In all the time I had classes with him, he would always do just that. Sit with me, try to talk to me, yet not be deterred by my lack of response. Most of the time, he only ever heard me speak if I was talking to Josh. There was only one instance when he even mentioned it.

Waiting for class to begin on a Tuesday's early morning, he looked to me and asked, "Do you want to talk about something?"

He caught my eyes with his, something wrong growing behind them, and I muttered, "No."

"You can always interrupt if you want," he said. "I don't mind."

I refused to respond. Instead, I broke the eye contact—unsettled by what lay behind his eyes—and turned back to the front. That was the only day he didn't blabber on and on until the professor began.

I went to Josh's graduation, but only because our parents came out for it. It was the first and the last time they came to campus.

The crowd was unnerving to me, a sea of unfamiliar faces with unknown intentions. Someone—anyone—could walk up, stick a knife in my side, and get away before anyone even knew what had happened. I'd also suddenly realized that I didn't know whether or not I was in a state that allowed concealed carry, and I could easily picture the guns hidden in purses, boots, right on people's hips. I couldn't help but check under my chair when we found a place to sit—who knows what somebody could've taped under there.

Peter managed to find us before the ceremony started, and he chatted away to my parents until the bagpipes started playing. Peter unsettled me. There was something unfriendly and unwelcoming about the sound of his voice, something I couldn't quite understand. Despite how much I'd listened to him talk, I didn't really know much of anything about him—it was as if his words were always empty. Was he like Trey, or Cathy, or Darla? Would he plan to kill me in the same ways they would've? He didn't seem to have the kind of money Darla did—he was attending a public college rather than a private one, after all. And he was an accounting major, which didn't really scream "poison." I would think he could be violent, but his demeanor didn't suggest it; I couldn't picture him getting up close and personal with an attack. Maybe from a distance—a gun. He could probably shoot a gun. He looked like the kind of person who grew up going on hunting trips with his dad and uncle and maybe a brother—I'd bet he could shoot a gun. And I'd bet he could aim it right between my eyes and not feel a hint of regret about pulling the trigger.

The ceremony dragged on and on. I couldn't concentrate on the too-

lengthy, overly encouraging speeches made by supposedly important people who, from the sounds of it, simply liked sounding intelligent. My eyes jumped back and forth between the graduation program, the people on the stage, and the plethora of people gathered in the crowd. Peter snapped a picture when Josh walked across the stage, and he did the same for some of Josh's other friends.

Once the ceremony concluded, we pushed through the crowd to find Josh. Peter took the reins and directed everyone for pictures. One of just Josh, one of me and Josh, one of Josh and mom, one of Josh and dad, one of Josh and mom and dad, one of Josh and me and mom and dad—every combination he could manage to get us positioned for. After, we made our way to the parking lot and drove to a nearby restaurant where we met up with a couple of Josh's friends who also graduated and their families.

Too many people, I thought. Peter came with us. Alex and his parents and siblings came. Another one of Josh's friends brought her boyfriend and her family. Someone else came with his dad. There were at least seventeen people among us—more than I cared to be around all at once. I was familiar at least with Josh's friends—they I could more or less stand while he was around—but their families as well? I didn't know them, their thoughts, behaviors, intentions. I couldn't prepare, didn't know what to expect from any of them.

But there was exuberance in Josh's and his friends' voices as they spoke through the dinner. It was brighter than when he graduated high school. They all looked comfortable, looked like they felt safe. Their eyes shined, their smiles filled out their faces, and their laughter bounced off the walls.

We helped Josh and Alex move their stuff into their new apartment nearby. Josh pulled our parents aside to tell them privately that he and Alex were in a relationship, and it seemed like they took the news better than he anticipated they would.

Josh came up to campus frequently while I was still in school. He invited me to stay over at his apartment whenever I felt like it, which, though it wasn't often, was nice when I accepted that offer. We had lunch together on campus weekly—he didn't have work on Wednesdays, so we always saw each other then. And, of course, Peter found

a way to tag along most of the time as well.

At the beginning of my final spring semester, Josh and Alex announced their engagement. They said they were planning to have an engagement trip with some friends during the week of spring break. A trip to England.

I declined their offer to go. I didn't—I *didn't*—want to go there. All I wanted of that place was my memories from Trisha's travel journal and the stories she told—and her death.

Josh begged and begged me to come, but I couldn't. I said no, I made excuses, I ghosted. The most he was able to do was convince me to get my passport, but I wouldn't go with them. He bought me a plane ticket, but I told him to give it to someone else.

Peter went. He was hesitant to, but he went. When they all got back, they told me story after story about it. Peter showed me all sorts of pictures he took. Pictures of landmarks, pictures of Josh and Alex, pictures of everything.

That evening, I turned off all the lights in my room, I sat in my bed, and I cried. I cried, and I played through memories of Trisha telling those same stories and showing those same pictures. I could so well see her saying the exact same things Peter said, could see her wanting to take the same pictures he did.

It was just too much for me to handle. I popped some sleeping pills in my mouth—a little more than recommended—to knock myself out. I was asleep in fifteen minutes.

At the end of that semester, I didn't attend my graduation. It seemed like pointless exposure to untrustworthy people. Josh tried to talk me into it, but I refused. I moved straightaway when I finished my last final, making a drive several counties away to my new apartment. Peter ended up heading the same direction several days later. As it turned out, he got a job at the same company I did, and he managed to get a place in the same building I was in—thankfully, several floors away from me.

But everything felt so wonderful about that place. It was a new city, a new—safe—apartment, a new job. And no one too close. All the neighbors in the complex, save for Peter, kept their distance. I kept

quiet to avoid any confrontation. I loved the area, I loved the home, I loved the job. I loved everything about it so much that it didn't even really bother me when Peter would try to slip into my life.

Despite the safe haven this place was, I took it upon myself to ramp up my defenses. I took shooting lessons and bought my first gun. I invested in the best home security I could. I carried pepper spray with me everywhere. The only other thing I could've asked for was an attack dog, but the apartment I lived in didn't allow large pets. Regardless, I felt safe. I was confident in my ability to protect myself. I was in control.

I guess I let myself get too comfortable. I could've thought about more ways to defend my home and myself, maybe tried to train a small dog or even a cat like an attack dog. Checked out the neighborhood more before I decided to move there. Anything.

It had been a long day at work. I stayed late to finish up a project. When I got back home, I hastily made dinner, showered, and tossed myself into bed. The warm embrace of the blankets felt safe, secure. I was asleep in minutes.

Then the security alarm abruptly silenced.

I sucked in a shaky breath. Clutching the gun, I stepped out into the hallway.

A figure in the darkness grabbed me from behind. I screamed. A gunshot went off—my own gun—and a lamp shattered, an explosion of glass. The gun fell to the floor. Sweaty palms covered my mouth—was it sweat or my own tears? I couldn't see anything. I heard a gruff voice telling me to *shut up, bitch*. I tried to fight back, to bite into his palm, but I was quickly greeted by a knife up to my throat. The man yanked me back into my room and shoved me on the bed. His fist flew at my face in the dark.

I woke up at four in the morning. My head was pounding. Blood caked my bruised thighs. Dried tears clung to my cheeks. My nose was swollen, possibly broken. All my cash was missing, so were several other valuables.

Lying there in bed, all I could see was that face. I only got a brief glimpse of it before he punched me, but I saw it. I saw it and I knew

it. I recognized that face from the very same smug look it held three years prior at Josh's graduation dinner. I could clearly see him sitting at the table with his dad to his right, chatting away with my brother, the light bouncing off his skin, his eyes. The contours of his face also shone in the darkness; the light that slipped in through the curtains of my room illuminating his features just enough for me to see my attacker.

I went to the shower and sobbed.

I never went to the police about it. Maybe I should've, maybe it would've stopped him from doing that to someone else, but I couldn't. All I did was go to the hospital. The staff helped clean up my wounds, gave me Plan B, and put a cast on my nose. I called work to let them know what happened, and I told them I'd be taking some time off to recuperate. My boss said it was fine, to take all the time I need.

So I am.

I haven't replaced the shattered lamp yet. I don't know if I want to. I think I need to leave it there as a reminder. The gun, though—that's gone. I took it to a pawn shop and drove off with the cash. It didn't help me, after all. I uninstalled the home security system, too. It had been tampered with, and it didn't work like it was supposed to anyway. I got rid of every little self-defense thing I had. I got rid of it all because I realized that, despite everything I did, every preparation, I was still helpless. I was still a victim. I couldn't protect myself then, and I probably won't be able to protect myself ever.

Peter tried to talk to me, to ask about why I wasn't at work. He came to my door, and he saw the shattered lamp on the floor. He asked what happened to the lamp and asked if I was okay, but I refused to answer. I wouldn't say a word. He came in—it was the first time I'd ever let him step through the doorway—and he looked around. He tried and tried to get me to talk, but I just didn't. And eventually he left.

I needed to get out of the apartment, to get as far away from it as possible, like Peter just had—had just left. Being reminded constantly of what happened was weighing on me, and I felt like I was going to explode.

Then I thought of Trisha. My wonderful Aunt Trisha. My victimized

Aunt Trisha.

I bought the next plane ticket to England.

I checked into the hotel yesterday afternoon. The room was so clean. I guess there wouldn't be any traces of blood anymore—it has been nine years after all. What struck me most was the hair dryer in the bathroom. Was it the same one? Or had they replaced it?

I used the hair dryer this morning. I kept seeing blood in my hair while I dried it, but the blood disappeared when I blinked.

I wonder how much of this room is the same as when Trisha was here eleven years ago. I wonder if she took any pictures of it. The walls are probably the same, maybe patched up and painted over the years. They've probably replaced the sheets and mattresses. Is this furniture new or old? Are these curtains the last Trisha saw?

I'm really struck by how mundane it all is. It's like any other hotel room I've been in. The room is just so startlingly ordinary that I can't believe that someone as extraordinary as Trisha died here.

This morning I asked if I could speak to the hotel's manager. He looked old enough to have been working here at least a decade, so I asked him about Trisha, if he remembered anything about her death. A look of genuine pain and sorrow came over him, and he asked me to sit down with him.

He said he remembered the moment he found her very clearly. He said it had been an uneventful day until late that afternoon when a concerned client called the front desk to say that there were some strange loud noises coming from the room next to hers. He told her he'd go up to address the issue, and when he was standing outside the door, he heard almost a squelching sound alongside some grunts. A wave of intense concern and fear came over him, and he unlocked the door without even knocking, finding the horrific, bloody scene mid-action.

He had tears in his eyes when he told me about it. I showed him some pictures of Trisha, ones of her happy and healthy, and that made him smile. It's probably a lot nicer to see and remember her that way than the way he found her.

Back in my hotel room, I finally opened up Trisha's travel journal.

I flipped through it to find her first trip to England, reread all the stories and looked at all the old pictures, then found the second and the third trips. Everything about it was sunny and cheery and alive. The pages transported me back to a time when Trisha was here, alive, and sharing her stories and pictures. She always made me want to travel—to travel with her—and see everything.

I turned to the end of the journal: the fourth and final trip to England. She'd already filled several pages before her trip met an untimely end. I read every word she'd written in those final days, trying the best I could to reconstruct her and her adventures in my mind, envisioning her in the pictures she took.

When I got to the last page, there was a folded-up sheet of paper tucked under a photo. Unfolding it, what struck me first was the splash of blood. It was dark red, a gash at the end of the page. Tearing my eyes away from it, I looked to the top of the page, and I saw my name written in Trisha's gentle strokes.

It was a letter.

I read over it several times. It ended abruptly—in the middle of a paragraph—and I realized that it probably was the last thing she ever wrote. She hadn't even signed it yet. She could've been working on it right when that hair dryer hit her in the back of the head.

I think by now I probably have that letter memorized; I keep repeating it in my head over and over.

Trisha's life—or, more aptly, her death—haunts me. There's not a moment in the past nine years that I didn't think about it. Her end has fueled the entire way that I live, every choice I've made since that day. And I don't think it's what she would've wanted for me.

Why did I even choose to go into accounting? I'm great at math, but I hate it. Trisha's old camera is collecting dust in my mother's attic as I write this, and I can't even remember the last time I took a picture. I always wanted to take that camera, to try it out, but I never did—why?

Trisha would've liked Peter. He takes pictures. He always has something to say. I probably haven't uttered a thousand words in the past week.

Honestly, do I even remember things correctly? Did Cathy really try to poison me? Did Darla really hire a hitman? Was Trey really planning to beat me to death? Would Peter really feel no remorse about putting a gun to my head? Was it even Josh's friend who assaulted me? Was I even assaulted at all? Are these bruises on my thighs real? Would I really know the difference?

How would Trisha feel about me cutting off all my friends—everyone but Josh and my parents?

Maybe I am crazy. Maybe I made everything up. Maybe there wasn't a hint of malice or bad intentions in any of the people I've met. Maybe no one has ever really plotted to hurt me or tried. But I *know* I'm going to be killed. I *know* I am. I can feel it. I won't leave this world quietly or comfortably. If Trisha wasn't granted that right, there's no way I should be. I don't deserve a comfortable death, but Trisha did.

Honestly, I'm sick of waiting for it to happen. I thought it was my time when that man—Josh's friend?—broke in, but he didn't do it. He didn't kill me. He just didn't fucking kill me. Why didn't he just do it? Why'd he have to leave me alive? Why'd he have to make me think about it more and more and more?

Maybe I should just do it myself. As they say, if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. I might as well. Here, in this hotel room where Trisha met her end—what would be more fitting than for me to die here as well? If I even deserve to die in the same place someone as good as her did. But, really, what else is stopping me? At least I wouldn't have to think about it anymore. I wouldn't have to wait anymore, unsure of when it's going to come.

Because it *will* come. It *has* to. I'm going to be murdered, and I just have to accept it. I can't play these games anymore, acting like I can escape my fate. I clearly can't defend myself, so it's only a matter of time before it happens. And it *will*.

It will, it will, it will.

No one—no one—can convince me that it won't happen.

But will it be now, or will it be later?

What do I do now?

Past Time

Cassie Sellick

His pastime, since he no longer drives, is bird watching.
His favorites are the buzzards that circle his house daily.
His wife says this is not a good sign,
but he laughs, lies down, looks up.
He always loved children who obeyed, women
who laughed at his jokes, visitors
who didn't interrupt.
That's why he loves the birds.
He spends his days shadowed by scavengers.
They like me, he says.

Translated to Spanish by Rachel Reid

Pasa Tiempo

Cassie Sellick

Su pasatiempo, porque él ya no conduce, es observar aves.
Sus favoritos son los buitres que rodean su casa a diario.
Su esposa dice que no es buena señal,
pero él se ríe, se acuesta, levantando la vista.
Siempre le gustaban los niños que obedecían, las mujeres
que se reían de sus chistes, los visitantes
que no interrumpían.
Es por eso que ama las aves.
Pasa sus días ensombrecido por carroñeros
Les gusto, dice.

Lying in Plain Sight: Deception through an Eating Disorder Lens

Rhea Norris

The moon was a shining bulb in the sky, round and bright, hanging over the heads of six vulnerable fifteen-year-old girls. The October air juxtaposed the warm fire as my best friends and I divulged secrets over burnt marshmallows and graham crackers. The conversation revolved around untold crushes, family traumas, stories of heartbreak and other, more mundane teenage grievances. Until one girl, the newest addition to our group, declared, "I have an eating disorder."

Smiles fell from our faces as we turned to her, the gravity of her statement darkening the night, settling into our ears. A few moments of stunned silence passed before she elaborated,

"I'm bulimic. I make myself throw up."

As the other girls struggled to express their surprise and concern, I sat in silence. Something welled up in my chest, deep and brave. My heart was pounding so loudly I was sure it was audible. The fire danced red, orange, and yellow, illuminating the look on everyone's face when the words spilled out of my mouth next.

"Me too. I have an eating disorder, too."



This was the first disclosure of my struggle with bulimia. For three months, I had been making myself throw up every day, multiple times a day. I had lost weight, but not a suspicious amount. No one asked questions or made comments past, "Have you dropped a few pounds? You look great." I was comfortable and happy, with no intention to let anyone know about my weight loss tactics. Something shifted in me

that night by the fire, my walls fell just long enough to allow my greatest secret to be exposed. In that moment, I was experiencing a phenomenon named "disclosure reciprocity." My friend revealing her eating disorder gave me the space to reveal mine, a sacred bond forming between the two of us. This, paired with the increased likelihood of teenagers with eating disorders initially disclosing their condition to friends, was the perfect storm for me that night. I confessed without considering the repercussions of my honesty, yet they were quick to make themselves clear.

First came the whispers in the hallways at school. I had been betrayed by someone that night and there was no reclaiming my secret. I did my best to keep my head down, and hoped that the murmurs and looks of mixed judgement and concern would fade. And they did. Newer, shinier gossip eventually overshadowed me and my sad eating disorder.

But at home, there were no distractions. Once I revealed myself, it only took a few weeks for the news of my illness to reach my parents. Perhaps magnified by my position as an only child, it seemed that my parents could not help but inundate me with countless questions and check-ins. Within days I had visited a nutritionist and ED specialist, the ultimate goal being to rid me of my eating disorder *fast*.

For me, this was a nightmare. I had just discovered the greatest tool to achieve the thinness I desired and the self-esteem I had always dreamed of, and no one was going to take that away from me. I was utterly consumed with thoughts of fear, my instincts regarding self-preservation were at an all-time high. Upon hearing that my parents had scheduled me weekly therapy appointments, I knew I only had one option if I was going to continue being thin, and ultimately, happy.

I had to lie.



"6 Tips for Eating Disorder Recovery"

The glossy title stood out among the pile of self-help pamphlets strewn over the coffee table. The waiting room was covered ceiling to carpet in inspirational quotes ranging from "Make Today Amazing" to "Don't

Give Up. Life is Worth Living.” I had to roll my eyes.

Yeah, okay.

My palms grew clammy. This was my first parent-prescribed trip to therapy, the first of many attempts at eating disorder “recovery.” After the backlash of my last disclosure, I built an iron fortress around my bulimia. My secret, my helper, my mental illness, mine mine mine. The idea that my parents sent me here to rid myself of something I love so much elicited an unfamiliar anger in me. I fumed, tightening my white-knuckle death grip on my eating disorder.

The receptionist called my name; it was go-time, the moment of truth. I step into the well-lit office. It looked more like a cozy reading nook than a professional’s office, exploding with books and the scent of warm vanilla. I took a seat on the worn yellow couch and clutched a decorative pillow to my chest, pretending it was a suit of armor protecting me and my secrets.

“Hi, Rhea. How are you today?”

I smile.

“I’m doing well. Really great.”

Lie.

The therapist spits question after question at me for the next hour. I lie through my teeth, answer after answer. Whatever it takes.

When my parents come to pick me up, they ask how my session went.

“Great,” I replied. Really great.

And this time I was telling the truth.



There is a certain thrill in getting away with a lie. Your adrenaline pumps, pride wells in your chest as you are reminded that *you* are in control, *you* have the power to manipulate your reality. Deception infected me like a virus, seduced me like a lover. By feigning recovery, I was able to not only effectively hide my ED behavior, but also be praised for all the “progress” I was making.

We function in a culture of happy endings, of triumphant heroes’

valiant defeat of any obstacles they face. Enculturated to value stories tied nicely in ribbons and bows, no one questioned me when I insisted that I had cured myself of my bulimic symptoms within months. I was praised for my self-control and bravery, my will to overcome the odds. The praise fed the hunger left behind by my eating disorder, gave me an outlet to escape the immense shame and self-loathing that accompanies ED.

I became a girl in hiding, blanketing myself in lie after lie until I was invisible to the truth. I found myself addicted to deceit, pleasure flowering in me with every person I fooled. I loved lying and I loved the result of lying. All the while, bulimia overtook my thoughts; every moment laced with fear that my fraudulence would be exposed. Prolonged concealment of my deeply personal struggles led me into a pit of anxiety unlike anything I had ever felt, and lying even more was the only way I could assure myself that my eating disorder was safe from prying eyes. Because if there was anything that having a hidden eating disorder taught me, it was that the truth would always hurt.



My frail, uncomfortably thin body doubled over the ceramic bowl as I purged that morning's brunch. My friends and I had joyously spent hours that morning laughing over pancake batter and bacon, preparing the spread I saw partially dissolved in the toilet water. I knew I could rid myself of a few more unwanted calories, readying myself to retch one more time when I heard the door creak open behind me.

"What are you doing?"

I whipped my head around, face already red-hot, and through blurry eyes saw my best friend's mother standing in the doorway.

I rushed to flush the evidence. My mind raced with excuses, explanations, but it was too late. I was laid bare on the expensive, white tile.

"C'mon, stand up. Wipe your mouth."

I felt every ounce of dignity drain from me as I washed my hands while she watched through narrowed eyes. She forced me to face her, hands on her hips.

“Do you have any idea what this is doing to your friends? This behavior is unacceptable. Either you’re going to tell them what was going on in here, or I will.”

I thought I might pass out. I could see my web of carefully told lies unraveling, sharp edges I had methodically dulled piercing my insides. I could hear my friends’ booming voices getting louder as I was escorted through the house. The sound of my sobs filled the room as my friends grew silent, and I was forced to unwillingly expose the ugliest parts of my hidden self.



The story of my six-year relationship with bulimia is a six-year story of deception. Enabling myself with every lie, I allowed my eating disorder to take root in every part of my life, blurring the line between reality and fiction. Lying became a reflex, my default setting when I perceived any kind of face-threatening situation. I began to feel out of control, the tactic I had once used as a means of self-preservation was destroying all aspects of my life. I compare the impact of my deceit to an atom bomb, aimed at a specific target, but causing irreparable damage to cities and towns miles away.

What had once been a conscious attempt at impression management spiraled into a sinister, unconscious pattern of behavior. Lying was all I knew, my entire sense of self revolving around the false reality I fabricated. I believe I had crossed the line between “normal” and “pathological” lying, as I was no longer making the choice to lie, I had no other feasible option. Muzinic and colleagues define a pathological liar as someone who has “a constant need to lie in order to preserve their world, gain a certain unconscious gratification and protect themselves from unpleasant feelings, poor self-esteem and low self-confidence.” The comorbidity of my eating disorder and subsequent pathological lying behaviors left me hopeless, with little sense of agency to free myself from bondage. I was a captive in a cage of my own creation.



My six-year story of bulimia and deception is an ongoing one. I cannot give a happy ending here, no bow could every tie this story into a neat and tidy one. I have found ways to manage my compulsive

lying, strategies to contain my impulses. Most days, I live in constant dialogue with myself, a torrent of love, shame, guilt, and occasional triumph. The fear of exposure looms, paralyzing me in this cycle of dishonesty. Lying serves now the same utility as it did at fifteen, protection and concealment. I feel safe in the arms of deception, shielded from the disappointment and judgement I dread. Lying has been a double-edged sword to me, holding me hostage and freeing me all the same.

*Like a bird on the wire,
Like a drunk in a midnight choir,
I have tried in my way to be free.*

(Leonard Cohen, 1969)

An Interview with Kelsey Solomon

Kelsey A. Solomon holds a Master of Arts in English from East Tennessee State University, a Bachelor of Arts in English (Creative Writing) & Philosophy from Carson-Newman University, and an Associate of Arts in English from Walters State Community College. As an Assistant Professor of English at WSCC, she teaches freshman composition and literatures of early Europe and modern America. Kelsey is also a poet whose works can be found in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, *The Mildred Haun Review*, and *Cathexis Northwest*. As part of her service to WSCC, she is the chair of the Mildred Haun Conference: A Celebration of Appalachian Literature, Culture, and Scholarship, through which she extends opportunities to engage students, community, and fellow writers to nurture their interests in the arts of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, songwriting, and scholarship. She has been the committee chair of the conference since 2018.

AL: My first set of questions are about getting to know you as a writer, because I think Matthew Gilbert told me that you don't identify as a poet, or you don't call yourself a poet, and I'm just really curious to know why that is.

KS: Oh, sure. So, I'm an educator first and foremost, who just so happened to write poetry. Before I could don labels like "poet" or "educator," I had to discover them, and, to be transparent, I'm still discovering them. The potential for self-reinvention and then revision—all of that excites me, and it lets me know that I'm living my calling. If people ask me if I'm a poet, then I'll say yes, but that's not my qualifying identifier. I write poetry because I need that expulsion process to maintain my mental health for me, and now

for my students. I teach because that's who I am, and then poetry purifies that process.

AL: Yeah, that's a really good answer. How do you feel about writing on people who are near you who might read the poem? How does that translate? So, say, if you wrote a poem about a student that you had, or if you wrote a poem about a romantic interest or a significant other, would you consult with them beforehand before pursuing publication for the poem?

KS: I'm gonna sound like a bad guy, but no. In my poetry, I am painfully aware of universality, and I care a lot, even if I may feel some animosity toward somebody or if there are incredibly intimate emotions that I know fuel the poem. I work to read the poem in several ways as to protect that individual's humanity, so I wouldn't feel as responsible to ask that person or tell that person, "Hey, I wrote this poem about you." One of my most recent online poetry publications was actually kind of in that vein that you're talking about, and when it got published, I'm sure the people that were around me at the time knew who it was about. But I feel like my poems still have that universality, that I wouldn't be compromising anybody else's humanity or their story or defacing anyone, because that's never my purpose for writing the poem in the first place.

AL: Yeah, I asked that question because the speaker at one of the creative writing festivals read a poem about her daughter starting her first menstrual cycle, and someone in the audience asked the question, "Is your daughter okay with you writing poems about something as intimate as starting a menstrual cycle?" So, I just was curious about your opinion on it.

KS: Sure, yeah.

AL: When were you exposed to poetry or creative writing, and did you ever love it as a child? Also, when did you start writing?

KS: I didn't have an "aha" moment that I can remember. My memory fails me too often. But I know now from retrospection

that I was bound to be a writer because my father devotedly read bedtime stories to my brothers and me at night. My grandmother was a storyteller, a singer, and a scribbler. She shaped a whole lot of my voice too. Sermons have also shaped me, sitting in church and hearing those narratives. Looking back, too, on my childhood journals and in-class notebooks, I see that I was writing verse in the margins, when I really had no idea that my fragments were poetic bursts. I hadn't made the connection that that's what that was, and I fondly remember a book in my hand and a book in my purse. I have memories, just images, of books being open on my pillow, or putting my book under the desk when I probably should have been listening to my teacher, because I wanted to read, and that was a whole lot of my childhood, that nurtured reader. And even all through school, English was my strongest subject, but I didn't really connect that I had "the bug," as I'll call it, until creative writing classes at Walters State Community College.

AL: Yeah, you probably had the same creative writing professor that I had.

KS: Yes, Ms. Eichelman has since retired, and Ms. Sherri Jacobs is now the creative writing professor on the Morristown campus.

AL: So, there's a lot of controversy over writers who live in or are from the Appalachian region, whether the label is a hinderance or an opportunity. Can I ask how you feel about this? I'm asking in relation to whether you feel pressured to represent Appalachia in your writing, or if you dislike being called an Appalachian writer.

KS: I think controversy is good, because it's a sign that we still have work to do. That's what I tell my students in argumentative writing. It's not worth arguing about unless the controversy is there because we still have so many more conversations that need to be had. In the Appalachian Studies tradition, yes, "Appalachian" signifies endearment and a demographic defined by landscape and micro-narrative history, but to me the word only means as much as the person who utters it. However maddening and tedious it may be, I read each usage of the term "Appalachian" in its context—usually with a grain of salt. If its application seems derogatory,

then I'll usually shrug it off as classism or ignorance, to be frank, because I alone can't correct it and I alone can't unpublish it. What I can do, though, is close the book and not gift my time to others' misunderstanding and misappropriation. And that's how I feel about it. I think that "Appalachia" actually is a term of endearment. Just like I wouldn't go out and say that I'm a poet, you know—but obviously as soon as I open my mouth, you know where I'm from, and if folks are put off by that, then they just have to wrestle with their own growing pains, I suppose.

AL: Yeah, that's a good way to put it. Sort of tying into that a little bit, you write a lot about your family, which I do as well, and your childhood, and I'm just wondering why you write about family more than other things.

KS: Because you've asked this question, I was able to introspect. I've been asking myself that question, and now I have to come up with an answer. But Abby, I think I figured it out. I think I did. Our family's hands mold us into these beautiful little coffee mugs, and then sometimes they'll place us in kilns that are far too hot so we'll crack. I write about my family, I know, to figure out where, when, why, and how I was wrong. So that I don't keep committing the same unconscious sins over and over again. If I look back to a singular convergence of events, I believe I know why my family dominates my poetry, and it directly correlates when I started writing and when I changed my major to English from nursing when I was at Walters State. So, during that same time, my cousin Billy Joe—he committed suicide. And my grief, my survivor's guilt, my uncertainty, the trauma, and others' cruelty about my cousin's soul, it allowed me to observe my actions. And more so my morality, because I wanted to understand. My goal was to understand, because that whole situation and my family's loss was very confusing to me. Thankfully, I had writing as a gift at the right time. I can't fully separate my poetry from my family because my poetry began during a time when I began to learn what family was.

AL: Thank you for sharing. That's a very eloquent answer, and I really appreciate the vulnerability. If you were to ask me that question, I'm not sure I could come up with an answer as to why

I write about my family so much. That answer does create a great transition to your poem, “Because they told me to write my own history,” which won the poetry prize in *The Mockingbird* in 2016, and I am very fascinated to hear the history of the title. What inspired the creation of that poem? I feel like the piece is very much a response to somebody or something.

KS: Oh yes, mercy sakes. So, even though this poem is not purely about me, it's the most intimate poem I'd written in graduate school. The first line, the strategy, I learned from reading Ted Kooser. And the content is inspired by a novel by Penelope Lively called *Moon Tiger* that I read in Dan Westover's seminar. That novel experiments with history, memory, and what I like to call “the lie,” the “fabrications.” So, the stories of our lives can be interpreted in—more like brain waves, and the myths that connect to those brain waves. That sounds super abstract, but that's how that book is. The title of my poem—I look back on it now—the “they” is fill-in-the-blank. It's the mainstream, it's patriarchy, it's anybody who maybe tried to manipulate any sort of victimization that I may have felt. “They” could even be my family. They're all the same, and then parts of the whole, I think. My apartment in Johnson City was far too loud, and so what I would do is close the door to my bathroom and turn the light off, and I would sit in the floor of the bathroom. And it became this de facto office for me away from my neighbors, because it seemed like the quietest part of the apartment. So, I was sitting on the bathroom floor, and I was researching for a paper for Dan Westover again, and my head interrupted. And it spoke the first stanza clearly to me, just perfectly. So I opened a new Word document, because I know when my head interrupts, it's like, “Where's the Word document, where's the piece of paper, something,” so that I can write it down. And to finish the poem, I imagined if I had a child. What would I say to that child about who they could be? Informed a lot by Penelope Lively's themes and the narrative structure of *Moon Tiger*. Much of the landscape of that poem mirrors my late grandmother's farm in Hawkins County, and that farm is my holy ground. So, that seemed like a natural place to set the poem, even though I didn't make that conscious decision. I would really want that landscape, if I had a child, to be a part of his or her memory, even though it really could never be so, if I had

a child or not, because we don't have access to that land anymore. And at that point in my graduate studies, I felt like I couldn't hold on to my life before graduate school anymore, and I needed a revision. I needed to revise. I took plenty of Appalachian Studies classes when I was a graduate student at ETSU, and while I was taking those graduate Appalachian Studies classes, I found myself kind of squished between this stereotypical Appalachia that I came from, and this convoluted Appalachia that I know exists. This convoluted one is exploited, but then still free; they can be both, and by the end of the poem I just decided to be both.

AL: The Appalachian Studies Department at ETSU is really good. I haven't gotten the chance to take any classes in that program, but I wish I had. You kind of talked about this in your answer, but you mentioned when your mind interrupts, and one of my questions is about whether you're the kind of writer who has a routine, if you sit down at nine a.m. every morning and write for an hour, no matter what, or whether you write when a poem strikes you, and I'm guessing you're more of the latter.

KS: Oddly, my answer to both of those questions is no, because I don't have a routine, but then I don't sit around and wait for the Muses to throw cheese either. I don't pine for it. I can be grading a freshman composition essay, and that inner voice will just echo a line of poetry, and it sneaks up on me. I've been discussing literature with my sophomores, and—this is hard to explain, but I can see the tension of my next poem. It just comes to me. Sometimes, when I would see those tensions in a classroom, it's been derived from what we've been discussing in the given piece of literature that they were responsible for that day. And without fail, my best poetry came from surprises like these. And even still, when I was a student whenever I wrote "Because they told me to write my own history." It's really the only rhythm that I know. And so, I just keep paper, and my computer, or, you know, a piece of paper towel around me all the time, just in case. Because I know that I have a taxing career, and I know that I need to write poetry also to be well, but I'm not going to put a whole lot of pressure on myself, because I won't be all things at once.

AL: I know that the question creates a kind of binary, but there really is a lot of gray area between. What I love about your response is that I think the best answer really is reading other work. That's what sparks and creates those instances. So, you're not writing if you're not reading and engaging with other writers.

KS: Oh yeah, I agree completely.

AL: I think about Sylvia Plath all the time for that, because her husband would give her a new poem of his, and she would read it and then flip it over and just start writing her own poem on the back, just because of that conversation of poetry. And I don't think you can write without that conversational element. Since I'm on the subject of influences, I want to know about how the specific MA environment at ETSU influenced your writing, because it's not an MFA program, but it's very similar in relation to the community that you build. So, I'm interested in how that experience with your peers and faculty or any specific mentors that you can identify really helped shape your voice as a writer.

KS: Oh, sure. As far as mentors go, I owe a great deal to Thomas Alan Holmes, Jesse Graves, and Catherine Prichard Childress. I couldn't just choose one; those three are the big three. Alan directed my master's thesis while Jesse critiqued my poems, and Catherine still serves as my guidepost. Since I graduated, Alan wrote a letter of recommendation for me to obtain my current position at Walters State Community College, and he has been my fiercest supporter during my time as Chair of the Mildred Haun Conference. I also continue to speak to Jesse when I need advice about navigating the writer's community. He's been really helpful with that, and his poetry graces my free time, more recently, since his newest publication of *Merciful Days*. Among these, Catherine is that mentor to whom I can speak candidly. I can seek her out when I need the unvarnished truth. So, yeah, as a writer, educator, and a professional, all three of these folks still show up for me. And, as far as friendships or peer relationships go, the most precious friendship that I forged during my graduate studies at ETSU is with my soul sister, Danielle Byington. I have never met a more intuitive and caring human than her. She's just wonderful. We promote

and support each other's creative and professional pursuits, which sometimes overlap, but then, a lot of times they don't. And I'm overjoyed that she agreed to conduct a writer's workshop for the twelfth annual Mildred Haun Conference this month, too. So, we've been able to further support each other that way. Our conversations and her poetry in *The Absurdity of Origins*, they inspire me to think esoterically, I'd say. Even though she and I don't collaborate, per se, Danielle continues to be my very best reader, even when my feedback on her poems falls short in comparison.

AL: She was a great editor of *The Mockingbird*. She also taught me what ekphrastic poems are, because I had never heard of them.

KS: Yes. She has taught me the same. We collaborate pedagogically, yeah, because she has definitely informed my early European literature class to make those ancient texts more palpable for the twenty-first century student. And it allows students to create work from those ancient texts too, so they find that if we're writing about them, and if they still inspire us to write more, then they are still relevant. Yeah, timeless.

AL: I'm always excited when people still do things together after going through a program. I started thinking about that because I'm close to the end of my program. I've had three years of a graduate program because I'm doing two degrees at once, so it's weird that I've got three different cohorts, and I know some from each. It's not the traditional experience, and it's really fascinating to me, moving forward, what those relationships will become. Let's move on to life after you've graduated. College tends to create a feeling of being sequestered away from the rest of the world. You sort of develop blinders while a student, where you only focus on your education and the community immediately around you. I would love for you to talk about what comes after, as it's often intimidating to many students. What would you say to those students who are emerging out of college?

KS: Well, I can only draw from my own experience, because when I graduated, I was more than ready to get to work because I knew that teaching was my calling. Thankfully, I was able to gain some

experience that I needed adjuncting at ETSU and then adjuncting at Walters State the year after—just the one year after I graduated, and then I was able to find my job now. But that's me. And my mother really influenced me, too. My mom's a nurse, and I knew that when I was ready to get to work that I wanted the experience because I didn't want to be a textbook educator. Because I wanted to be a good professor the way that my mom is a good nurse, and, for folks who want to go on to pursue a PhD, I say absolutely go for it if they know in their heart of hearts that that's what they need to do, and that's where they're being called. I have faith that folks are going to make decisions that are best for them, but I ascribe to the gospel that hard work prevails. It's a cliché, I guess, but if they're scared of it, or if they're unsure about what's after, if you work hard in the process, then you're going to end up in a place that I think you'll be happy. And if you're not happy there, then you're going to work hard to get out of that situation so that you can find the next place. Because we always believe that happiness is the next place, but working hard, I think, too, will allow folks to be happy in the now and with what they're doing in transition. Because the next several years, if folks are interested in teaching. . . . It took me three years, I'd say, to feel like I really found my sea legs in teaching. I made a lot of mistakes. So, the learning processes isn't over. If folks want to pursue a PhD because they're not done learning, then that's great, but if they are not done learning, then they can also get to work, too.

AL: I ask because I've heard a lot of people say, "Well, I don't know what to do after college, so I'll just get a PhD and figure it out after that."

KS: Yeah, I haven't. I've flirted with it. You bet I've flirted with getting a PhD, especially over the last year, because I think it'd cure my curiosity, and then it may ensure the position that I have now and make me more promotable. But I am doing exactly what I wanted to do, and I am a happy camper.

AL: Yeah, that's good. That's a good transition into your job now. So, you chair the Mildred Haun Conference, and, as you know, I went to Walters State for two years and then transferred to ETSU.

And the Mildred Haun Conference was, I think, my first exposure to conferences. The conference was so casual; it wasn't intimidating at all. You could just wander between the rooms and hop in and out of panels that were going on. Do you want to talk about how you're continuing to foster that environment and that friendly integration into conference culture?

KS: Oh, sure. You know, directing and organizing the Mildred Haun Conference, even though it takes place once a year, every February, it's a year-long commitment of networking with local authors; reading new work by emerging and established authors in the area; maintaining relationships with our guests; working with faculty, staff, and the community; brainstorming our marketing strategies to let folks know about our free gathering; working with Kenneth Hill, my fellow faculty member and editor of *The Mildred Haun Review*; honoring Hamblen County natives who deserve wider recognition in Appalachian Studies; and perpetuating an important tradition that Viki Rouse started over a decade ago. Those are the nominal duties that I don, and maybe that's why past chairs and all of our committee members still foster that same warm environment, because that's what we do all year. It takes all of that work all year to create that warming environment; it's just not a season like, "Oh, we got to get ready for this now," and then it's over with. The committee fosters relationships with our guests before and after the conference season, and I think that makes a big difference. And even though it's hard work, sometimes more than teaching, the committee and I get to share Appalachian literature, culture, and scholarship with people! That's living the dream right there! That's what all of us want to do, because we love what we offer, too, and that makes it so easy to run a welcoming conference. The only word I can muster to describe the feeling of having everybody there and offering these sessions to our guests is "magical," because it is that year-long lesson plan kind of packed into two days with a dozen sessions with team teachers and artists, and it all unfolds like an orchestra. It's like, "Oh, it's all here. Magical!" We're happy doing it, because we work all year to make it happen.

AL: That's a good point, a good distinction that this is how it always

is; it isn't just something for a conference day. When I went to one, it was similar to most conferences in that different panels and different things were happening at the same time, and I remember it was like a candy shop. I couldn't decide which one to go to first! I didn't want to miss out on anything. It was a lot of fun; I think I went to half of one, then snuck out and went to the second half of another one just because I wanted to experience as much as I could.

KS: Yeah, and you know, since I've become the chair, we've opened up the workshops, because before you could only go to one. Now you don't have to choose because we spread them out.

AL: That's helpful. I mentioned in my question that I always make sure to note that I went to community college first before transferring to a university because there's the stigma that community colleges are more like trade schools, that it's where you go when you don't have money for university, it's where you go if you're working full-time and you just want to take two classes at a time. . . . It creates this general air that community college is less than a university degree. And even of the four-year universities that I wanted to transfer to, one of them said, "We won't take you unless you'll be here for four years. We don't accept many transfers, because you have to be immersed in our program for four years in order to get the full educational benefit." What do you have to say about those kinds of programs?

KS: My answer to this question is similar to how I approach the "Appalachian" label. If someone negatively connotes the term "community college," then it's a sign of their classism and unchecked privilege. Pride is what I feel, and I can see that's what you feel, too. Pride is what I feel about being from a community college, having gone to a community college and now being a part of a community college like Walters State as a faculty member. Some of the same faculty who wiped the gray film from my eyes whenever I started college there served on the same committee that hired me and welcomed me back into the door. I don't mean to get emotional about that, but they're family to me. My education there thoroughly prepared me for my studies at Carson-Newman for my bachelor's, and I hear the same feedback over ten years later,

from my own former students who transferred to universities, including ETSU. They feel like they are prepared and supported, and to demean those or to denigrate community college, especially as an educational access point for folks in underserved areas. . . . To those folks who would do that, I'd smile southernly at them, and I'd simply ask them if they had a moment for me to be able to share my story. But then I would ask them if they had just a little bit more time so that I can tell them all of the hundreds of stories that have come out of my classroom as to the value of community college and how it is absolutely a necessary service for folks in order to be—however ready they are—to move on to university, if that's what they choose. I mean, here are some of them: any of these stories about the widowed father who's coming back to school because he wants to own his own business in order to put his son through college one day; about the young woman, and I always have this one young woman in class, who writes like she's running out of time because she loves school, she loves her family, and she loves her hometown, and she shouldn't have felt pressured to choose among those, that she can have all three because she was able to come to a community college; and there's a story about a young man from Memphis who was able to achieve an actual education because he's attending Walters State on a basketball scholarship. I could really go on and on and on. I mean, the twenty-five-year-old mother of three who wants to be a nurse; she wants to be an RN to save lives because nurses saved her brother's life after he had a nearly fatal motorcycle accident. It's just these same stories over and over again, these people with big hearts, and it's people like me and you, Abby, who—we were bookish, late teens, who lived most of our lives in narrative, and we needed that stepping stone to gain the tools and the knowledge in order to be able to write our own stories and write our own history. That's my heartfelt answer to why I believe in the mission of community college. We have an open door and value inclusivity over exclusivity.

AL: Yeah, I really love that answer. For a long time, I didn't think I would go to college because it seemed so expensive, so time-consuming, and luckily, with the Pell Grant, I essentially made money to go to community college, and I still worked a full-time job. I was worried I would only ever have the associates, and I

wouldn't get to pursue a bachelor's or anything beyond that, but hard work, getting good grades, which got me scholarships—that's how I climbed the ladder. Without that stepping stone of community college, I wouldn't have any degrees. So, yeah, it is extra important. Also, if you go to community college first, you've got smaller class sizes, you actually get to interact with your instructors. If you go straight to the university, it's giant lecture halls of two-hundred-something students. I've never taken a class that was in a lecture hall with that many students, and it's because of community college.

KS: Shoot. Now that I'm teaching virtually through Microsoft Teams, there's a chat feature, and I have a Microsoft Teams app on my phone; my kids can basically text me now. That's how accessible so many faculty members are at community college, and I don't want to say that's the standard, because maybe I need to draw clearer boundaries, but that's what we do. We're here to support.

AL: No, that's great. What advice do you have for individuals who really admire writers and are thinking about writing but are too scared to start writing, or their parents told them they won't make any money?

KS: If writing has been reduced to profitability, then we have unfortunately fallen further into the widening gyre, Abby. For those folks who may be a bit apprehensive, scared, or intimidated to write, then I think they're exactly where they need to be to get started, because that fear is terrible beauty. I tell my students all the time, "Thinking about the thing is not the thing. Doing the thing is the thing." And I'll say it so much, but it applies here, too. If anxiety is what's keeping folks from writing, then, I believe, based on what I know about Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy, that anxiety marks the edge of faith. And so, do it anyway, or try; open your computer and type, pick up a journal, tear off a piece of that paper towel and grab some lipstick for a pen. I've done that before, too. And in the beginning, it's okay to be bad. And even years from now, if you pick up on it and you keep it around, it's still okay to be bad. I cringe at the capitalistic nature of our productivity in that it's borderline inhumane to think that, just because we're good at something

we should profit from it, and to believe that we're not good at something or that we shouldn't enjoy doing something just because it's not profitable. You know, I have probably forty dead poems locked away in one of these folders on this computer that I'll never show to anybody, but I needed to write those dead poems so that I can know what a good poem is. And, to echo something that you said earlier, too, I would advise folks to read well, but then to read all the time. Listen to your English professors about reading well, guiding you where to read. Then listen to them long enough to the point that you are knowledgeable enough to disagree with them. To anybody who wants to write but is scared, you need to live a little bit. You need some content. So, take a calculable risk. I think my most important bit of advice is that, if you get to writing, and you're putting out more quantity, and you feel like you're really enjoying yourself, be selective about who you show your work to because poems are like our bodies. They require proper consent, and a mature poem will be able to speak that proper consent in order to be able to be shown to someone else.

AL: I like that—consent in showing poems to people. Especially in early stages, that can make or break a writer: who they show it to and what kind of feedback they get can stall a writing career for several years, or an entire lifetime.

KS: Yes, and I would say, in general, and I think you know this, too. Be mindful of your family's feelings and withhold much of what you write from your family unless there is a transcendent member of the family who can look disinterestedly at your work. It's very difficult for family who doesn't quite understand the writing process to differentiate between what is art and what is truth.

AL: I think the same is also true for writers who, say, write poetry all the time who want to try creative nonfiction or another genre. There's that same trepidation, so I always try to make sure to get people to attempt the other genres and see how they like it. I think everything you said applies to that situation as well, so I wanted to mention it. I do have one other question. Do you consider yourself to be a serious writer? If you don't consider yourself a serious writer, can you elaborate?

KS: I think the term “serious” really needs qualifications, because I take my poetry very seriously, so seriously that I hold on to my poems for a long time before I’ll send them out to magazines and journals. Then there’s that whole rejection process, more so rejection than acceptance, but I don’t hold on to them because of the rejection. I’m just not ready to let them go yet, and I think I may have learned that from Catherine Pritchard Childress, too. If we only qualify a serious writer as someone who publishes a large quantity, or who profits from it, then that relates to what we were talking about before. Of course, a professional writer is a serious writer, but you can still be a serious writer and not be a professional writer, because there are folks that are educators, like me, who are single women who financially rely on no one else who has experienced her own socio-economic challenges in order to be here, so I find it more joyful to write poetry because I need to, for my well-being, instead of writing poetry because I need to do so to pay the bills. I find that to be a healthy relationship that I have nurtured with poetry.

AL: That’s also a very good, important distinction, because when people think serious writer, they think publishing a book every year. They equate it to production, which it shouldn’t be. Well, thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me. I’m sure you’re very busy with full-time teaching and everything else that you do.

KS: I wouldn’t miss this for the world, Abby, so thank you.

A Life Half Lived

Michelle Bravender

My sister Sarah loved popsicles and long car rides. She spent three years working weekends at the bowling alley to save up for her prized convertible, a cherry red two-door with scuffed bumpers and a roof that took a few good tugs to get it to close. On those drowsy summer days when it was too hot to even get off the couch, we'd get some orange Dreamsicles and drive in loops around the neighborhood with the top down and let the dry wind twist our hair into knots. The radio was busted, and the car was so old that it only took cassettes. All we had to listen to was an old Fleetwood Mac tape that Sarah had stolen from Mom's dusty collection hidden under her bed. She liked to imagine she was driving nowhere, like at the end of a western when the cowboys rode off into the sunset, into the great unknown. She said one day she might pick a direction and just drive and never look back, see what the wide world held outside the limits of our little town. I always wondered if she would have taken me with her.

She committed suicide three days before her high school graduation. It made it to the headlines statewide: *WESTON HIGH CHEERLEADER OVERDOSES ON SLEEPING PILLS*. They don't know why she did it. She had everything going for her. A full-ride to her dream college in California, a doting boyfriend of four years she was destined to marry, a spot as leader of the varsity cheer squad. She was going to give the valedictorian speech at graduation. I had heard her practice it over a hundred times. No one would have guessed by how loud and commandeering she was field side, but she was absolutely terrified of public speaking. She wanted it to be perfect. She wanted everything to be perfect. There was a line in the speech about how the pressures of high

school were the building blocks we needed to deal with the stresses or adulthood or something. I wondered if she added that in to sound inspirational or if she actually meant it. Mom got all sentimental and posted the transcript of it on Sarah's memorial Facebook wall about a week after her funeral, and the comments turned into a battle over who could be the most sympathetic. Sometimes I was tempted to fire back and ask them what good their Internet activism did to help if she was already dead, but I never could muster up the balls to actually hit send. I spent the first couple months after "the incident" curled up in bed scrolling through comments on my phone for hours on end. People were so fucking fake. My inbox was full of unopened condolences, people expressing how much they loved Sarah, what an amazing person she was, how she didn't deserve to go so early. They didn't know her. They liked to think that they did, that she was the pretty blonde cheerleader with a 4.0 and all the luck in the world. But she wasn't. She wasn't a goddamn archetype. She was so much more than that.

By early August, Mom was insisting that I go back to school. I wanted to wait until the beginning of the next semester, but she said that I needed to get out of the house, talk to people, get back into my usual routine. But I know it's because she was scared. Scared I would catch whatever mysterious sickness took down Sarah, and then she'd have two dead daughters on her hands. She thought it was strange that I didn't cry at the funeral. I'd never been a crier. One time I fell off my bike and cut my forehead open on the curb; I was completely silent from the car to the hospital where I was given a couple stitches and a lecture about wearing a helmet. The nurse said I must have been made of steel. I don't know if steel would be the right word. If anything, I was glass, full of cracks and sharp edges, capturing the ghostly reflections of all those who looked in. Sarah was a stone pillar, smooth and sturdy and unyielding. All I wanted was to be more like her.

I'm pretty sure I had only ever seen Sarah cry once. Mom had picked me up from school early because I'd caught a stomach bug and thrown up on the playground. I spent most of the day on the couch flipping through channels and munching on the occasional saltine cracker, until Sarah fumbled her way through the front door, hair disheveled and a wrinkled piece of paper clutched in her hand. She

stopped when she saw me, red eyes wide and her splotchy cheeks lined with tear tracks. Something I obviously wasn't supposed to see. When I sat up and asked her what was wrong, she paused for a moment, as if considering her options, until she conceded with a sniffle and held up the paper.

"I got a B- on my Algebra test."

I'd never seen her like that before. Never seen her break. She was always so sure to do everything right. She was so good at everything. She never made mistakes. But now she had. It felt like the world had been knocked ever so slightly off its axis, not like it was the end of days, but like the earth beneath our feet had been unsettled, an earthquake resonating from the other side of the world. That stone pillar was showing cracks.

"It's okay," I whispered, almost like I hadn't said it at all. "You can make up for it."

She just gave a weak nod and turned away before wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. She locked herself up in her room and we never talked about it again.

* * * *

I started back a few days into my junior year. The night before was marked by one of the worst fights Mom and I had ever had. It was supposed to be about school, but we both knew it was more than that. The thought of leaving my house to look into the faces of the people who claimed to care so much made me sick. The thought of me staying locked away in my room another day scared Mom to death. But of course, that's not what we said. By the end of it all, Mom had gone quiet, her hiccupping sobs muffled in the crook of her elbow as she curled into herself at the head of the kitchen table. I left her there and sat up in my bed the rest of the night, ears ringing, stock-still like a shell-shocked soldier. My throat was raw from screaming. When I left for school the next morning, she was out smoking on the back porch. She had stopped smoking before Sarah was born, when her dad died of lung cancer. I didn't say anything to her.

I didn't end up going to class much. The teachers all took pity on me and gave me A's on all my assignments, so I just stopped doing them. They never marked me absent either, probably assumed I was

off ugly-crying in a bathroom stall because it was all just too much for my feeble teenage mind to handle. For the most part I would skip and drive aimlessly around town, windows down, letting the soft air of late-summer flow through the cab of my car. I didn't want to be around the other students anyways. They were all just play acting, pretending that nothing happened and everything was completely normal. Everyone went out of their way to smile at me in the hall, but made sure not to acknowledge Sarah's existence in the slightest. What a way to preserve her memory. It gave me a headache.

The one time I was bored enough to sit through Chemistry class, I was a bit surprised when Connor found his way to the back and sat next to me. Connor who shared his fruit snacks with me in kindergarten and made me strawberry shortcake for my birthday each year. Connor who I hadn't seen since the beginning of summer. He gave me a tense smile. I didn't feel like returning it. I could feel him looking at me throughout Mr. Blevins' lecture on amino acids that I wasn't taking in a word of, but I never looked back. I just sat with my chin perched in my hand, doodling on the desk with my pencil. When the bell finally rang, he fiddled with the straps of his backpack for a moment, seemingly contemplating if he wanted to stay or leave. I don't know why, but I was hoping that he'd just get up and leave and pretend we were never friends in the first place. He didn't.

"Uh, Emily, how have you been? I feel like we haven't talked in forever." He'd sent me plenty of texts over the past months asking if I felt like hanging out. I never answered. I didn't hate him or anything. I just didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want to talk to anyone. Every conversation inevitably turned into an impromptu therapy session, because everyone thought they had the emotional intelligence to understand what I was going through and wanted to supplement their hero complex by trying to fix all my problems. Everyone always made it all about them.

"Uh, fine." I shrugged, looking up from my desk to finally meet his gaze. "Mom's thinking about moving."

He blinked a couple times, lips parting ever so slightly. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, not too fond of living in the house where her daughter died."

"Oh, um." He looked away, wide eyes darting to the front of the

room, watching the other students gather their things. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, trying to find his words. All he let out was a muffled, "Where to?"

I dropped my pencil and sat back in my chair, letting out a low sigh. "I don't know, probably somewhere far away, you know, where the memories don't linger."

He was quiet for a moment. I felt bad now for not looking him in the eye, but the weight of my gaze upon the fingers twisted together in my lap was too heavy. I shifted my head and let my hair fall to form a curtain between us. I wished I had just skipped.

"So, you're just leaving? Forever?" I could hear the slightest tremor in his voice.

"Maybe."

"When? Soon?"

"I don't know. Mom has only mentioned it. She's hasn't even started looking. I'm not even sure if she really wants to or if she just thinks it will make her feel better. I know it won't, but I don't have the heart to tell her that."

There was another long pause. The classroom was empty now, filling with the growing hum of hundreds of faraway voices as students converged in the halls, talking and laughing and smiling at each other like there were things left in the world to smile about.

"I don't want you to leave."

"I know."

He took a long breath in through his nose. "Are . . . you really okay, Em? Because, I mean, I can't imagine what you went through, but you know I was pretty close to Sarah, too," his voice was beginning to grow thick, as if the words were getting stuck in his throat, "and I'm pretty far from okay."

Connor was a big crier. He cried at car commercials and puppy videos. He sat on my bed after the funeral and soaked the shoulder of my dress in tears.

My shoulders stiffened, hands tightening around each other. "I told

you, I'm fine."

"But you don't have to be. You're allowed to grieve—"

"Maybe you shouldn't tell me how I'm supposed to feel, Connor," I snapped, turning to face him fully. His face paled. For a moment, I thought I'd gone too far. I quickly decided that I didn't care.

My throat felt tight. I wanted to scream. All that I could muster was a sharp whisper. "People grieve differently. Just because I don't spend every day weeping at her grave doesn't mean I'm not working through it."

I stood from my desk and slung my backpack over my shoulder, striding out of the room without a second glance.

* * * *

When I got back home, I found the door to my sister's room open.

Nobody had opened it since that day. As far as my mom knew, that side of the house no longer existed. But my room was right next to hers. I had to pass by it every single day. We used to have a dog that was afraid of sewer drains. I didn't know why, but on walks he would always make an effort to steer clear of the drains along the curbs, frantically tugging on the leash if we led him too close to one. Every time I walked by her door, I skirted the opposite wall, as if getting too close would allow it to swallow me into its depths. Her room contained secrets that were not meant to be known.

But now the door was open, and the dark and nefarious thing that had been trapped in there was free.

I stood in the doorway. My mother was sitting on the floor by the bed, hands clasped atop the mattress and eyes closed like she was praying. Sarah's pictures were spread before her like playing cards, removed from their place in the shoebox under her bed. Evening light filtered through the gauzy pink curtains and left a hazy gold stripe across the comforter. Something red and hot was bubbling up in my stomach, climbing its way up my throat.

"Mom, what are you doing?" My voice shook, hands balling into painful fists at my sides.

She startled and spun around to look at me, like she knew she wasn't

supposed to be there. Her eyes were bloodshot, face pink and swollen; the collar of her shirt was speckled with tear stains.

“Emmy, I didn’t hear you—”

“Why are you in here?” I said, louder this time. Loud enough to make her flinch.

She sputtered, fresh tears falling down her cheeks. “I—it’s just that, I miss her so much, I had—” she let out a hiccupping sob. “I—I just needed to be with her.”

“You shouldn’t be touching her things,” I spit. It was getting hard to form words around the growing pressure in my throat. “You can’t, you can’t just come in here and—and go through her stuff.” She wasn’t supposed to open the door. She wasn’t supposed to be in here. She wasn’t supposed to be disturbing Sarah’s things. It was like desecrating a grave, like digging up things that you weren’t meant to see, that weren’t yours to cherish. She was ruining everything.

“I just wanted to see her smile.”

I gritted my teeth, trying to pull myself together. “She’s fucking dead, get over it.”

She gasped. “Emily, don’t talk about her like that.”

“Why does it matter?” I cried, voice breaking. “She’s gone forever, and spending the rest of your life crying about it isn’t going to do anything to change that.”

“What, you want me to just forget about her?”

I rolled my eyes, roughly rubbing my hands up and down my face. “No, just, like, move on from it already. I’m sure Sarah wouldn’t want you moping around, treating her like she’s some lost spirit.”

“Move on?” Her mouth hung open, voice growing thin. The way she looked at me made me feel like a kicked child. “Honey, it’s been three months.” She stood up from the floor, coming over to me. “You can’t be okay, after what you saw—”

I retreated into the hallway, recoiling from her outstretched hand. “I’m fine! Why won’t anyone believe that I’m completely fine. I’m not wallowing around in self-pity like the rest of you.”

“Grieving is a natural process—”

“Oh, don’t give me that self-help bullshit,” I snapped, crossing my arms.

“Emily, I’m just worried about you. I don’t want you to get sick like Sarah.”

“Sarah wasn’t sick!” I screamed, grabbing fistfuls of my hair, almost hysterical. “She was depressed. She hated her life. She spent her whole life trying to please everybody, and look where it got her. Fucking six feet under.”

Mom stood there with her mouth hanging open, one hand white-knuckling the door frame, the other pressed to her chest. My heart was pounding against my ribs. In that moment, I couldn’t stop myself from finally really *looking* at Sarah’s room over Mom’s shoulder, for the first time in three months. It was exactly the same as that night, completely untouched except for the creases in her comforter and the fingerprints left on her polaroid collection. I couldn’t take my eyes off of them. She was smiling, with that warmth I hadn’t experienced in what felt like a lifetime. Glimpses of a life half-lived. She always wanted everyone else to be happy. She wanted everyone to be proud of her. It ate her alive. She died trying to reach the unattainable goal of perfection. But she didn’t realize how much the people that actually mattered loved her. I never told her that I loved her.

I felt a warm tear slip down my cheek.

The door was open now. It was open, and it could never be closed again.

When I turned and left for the front door, Mom didn’t follow. When I grabbed Sarah’s keys from the key rack instead of mine, she didn’t say a word.

* * * *

I was the one that found her.

I had been at Connor’s studying for finals. Mom was at work. Sarah was supposed to be out shopping for a dress for graduation. When I pulled into the driveway, her car was there. I didn’t think much of it. When I went inside, I called out for her, asking if she’d found a good

dress. There was no answer. I thought she might be in her room with her headphones in. Her door was closed. I didn't think much of it.

She looked like she was sleeping. She laid atop her comforter like she'd drifted off while studying. But her skin was blue. Her eyes were open. There was no light left in them.

I was the one who had to call Mom and tell her. The way she cried into the phone unsettled something in me, marked me in a way more harrowing than the sight of my own dead sister. I don't remember who ended up calling 911. When the paramedics arrived, I was still standing in the doorway, watching her as if she might miraculously sit up and give that warm smile and promise that everything was okay. They took her away, zipping her up into a body bag and driving away with her before Mom could even make it home. It was dark when she stepped through the door, and she didn't even make it to the kitchen before she fell to the floor and let out an unearthly, screeching sort of sob. I couldn't stand it. I jumped in my car and drove back over to Connor's house. I didn't want to go inside. I sat in his driveway in silence until he came outside the next morning and found me and slid into the passenger seat and cried. She was gone.

* * * *

The inside of her car was colder than I expected.

I'd only ever driven it once. After I'd gotten my learner's permit, she let me take it for a spin, as long as I didn't let Mom know. I was too afraid to even turn the wheel, so I ended up driving straight to the edge of town before Sarah stopped me. She ushered me out of the driver's seat, and I watched out the window as the rolling hills turned back into suburbia. *We almost made it*, I thought.

It took a couple tries before it finally rumbled to life. "Rhiannon" trickled through the speakers, in the middle of a verse. I turned it up and backed out of the driveway. The engine roared as I sped down the road. A small smile broke out on my face. I let the top down and the warm air rushed in and smothered me. I didn't know where I was going. I just drove.

I Am That Mom

Diane Mallett-Birkitt

I am that mom. The one who called the teacher and took in forgotten lunches and gym clothes. The one who texted reminders about pending homework assignments, proof-read papers, and researched fun, easy, yet award-winning science fair projects. I made being a hovering parent a veritable art form. But (there's always a "but"—we'll save that issue for another day) my oldest son graduated from high school in May and proudly left for boot camp in the United States Navy in June; two days before his eighteenth birthday. Truthfully, I don't believe I'll ever recover.

My son arrived to us after years of infertility. As with most things worth having, he was well worth the wait. He was the most delectably beautiful wonder-boy in the universe. I held him virtually non-stop for twelve months. He became and remains my obsession (as does his younger brother, but again, another issue for another day).

We had months of blissfully uneventful, benignly happy, ordinary days. We also had days that droned on unmercifully. But, somehow, as trite and cliché as it is, the years sped by. Suddenly, the same boy who wrapped his arms around my neck and encircled my waist with his legs in a death-like vise grip to thwart the kindergarten teacher from separating us was ready to launch. Where did that little, fearful boy go? I don't believe I was quite finished with him.

If I thought his childhood went by in a flash, then his senior year went at warp speed! It was a wistful, terrifying, and entertaining time for me. I spent a lot of time thinking about his departure while having enough sense to focus on enjoying our time together. I had been dreading telling him goodbye for months. And guess what? The actual event was

far worse than I could have imagined. At the last moment, he told me that it would be harder for him to say good-bye if I cried. And by God, I spent his entire life trying to make things easier for him, and I wasn't about to stray from my game plan at this late date. Man, oh, man! I wanted to cling to him and wail and shriek. But, I didn't. I even managed a smile (fake) and a cheery wave (even more fake!!) as I turned back for one last look.

During his absence, I couldn't take a deep breath, had chest pain, and couldn't sleep. It was physical pain being cut off from this child with whom I had spent nearly eighteen years in constant contact. I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit to talking to photos, sitting on his bed, and burrowing my face in his pillow. I stalked the mailman and became surgically connected to my cell phone. I survived, though barely! I do not have the vocabulary to describe my happiness when I was finally able to see him and touch him at his graduation. Thankfully, there were no further edicts against crying, and I took full advantage of that.

Which brings me to this pronouncement and my new life thesis. I don't believe I'm going to enjoy my empty nest. I've grown very fond of my day-to-day dealings with my son. I like having him nearby. I miss his serious, little toddler self and his goofy elementary school antics. I miss his busy middle-school and teenage years. I loved basketball and baseball games and being a homeroom mom. I love his sense of humor, his enthusiasm, and his dance moves. As he got older, I grew accustomed to his handiness, competency, and physical strength. As I once fiercely protected him, I now feel very safe when he's nearby. I loved being needed and loved by him. He calls me Momma, and I melt.

I don't lament or regret my intensive hovering parenting style despite the criticisms I've read about it. Dare I say that it seemed to work for us? I am in awe of the man he is becoming. I am relieved and grateful that my mothering seemed to do more good than harm. I am very sad that my days with my little family unit of four are over. I dislike his empty place at our table and his empty bed. His dog looks for him, and it breaks my heart. I will look back forever on his childhood days with longing, melancholy, pride, and joy. I wish that it hadn't gone by so quickly. I wish that I would have listened to those

older moms who told me to hold on tightly, stay in the moment, and realize that your babies won't stay little for long. I see the ghosts of my son everywhere in my house. I can see and hear him if I concentrate hard enough. I recognize that this new chapter will require that I learn to live with missing my baby all day every day. I hope that I'm up to the task.

Barren Voices

Donna Paulson

An original ethnodrama exploring women's experiences with infertility in Christian faith communities.

Playwright's Note

This script was crafted using direct quotations extracted from private, one-on-one interviews with Christian infertile women. The author was compelled to research this topic for her master's thesis following her own infertile diagnosis. The goal of this piece is to facilitate an experiential encounter between audiences and her research participants. Through performing the data, via ethnodrama, the audience should be encouraged to engage with a potentially challenging narrative, even as the author, with the words of her participants, advocates for social change. To access the research that inspired this work: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/3708/> To connect with the author: paulsend@etsu.edu

CAST

GRACE

RUTH

SARAH

SCENE

The stage is preset with a closed freestanding door, two church pews, and a small kitchen table with two chairs. A backlit cross hangs, suspended above the scene. Three women enter. Sarah sits down on the end of a pew. Ruth stands in front of the closed door. Grace stands beside the table. She is holding a stack of mail. All lines should be delivered conversationally to the audience unless otherwise noted.

- GRACE:** *(sets the mail down on the table, picks up a small padded envelope and opens it to reveal a small baby onesie and a greeting card. Visibly shaken, she quickly stuffs the onesie and card back inside the envelope.)* Pregnancy loss.
- SARAH:** *(cautiously looking around at an invisible church congregation, before sadly bowing her head.)*
Miscarriage.
- RUTH:** *(tries the door handle, finds it locked, and sinks to a seated position with her back against the door)*
Infertility.
- SARAH** *(to audience)* I don't know why the church doesn't talk about infertility more. Maybe because it's not the norm? Maybe because it's uncomfortable and sad? Maybe they don't know how or how to help people going through infertility?
- GRACE:** *(to audience)* It's just swept under the rug and it's not talked about.
- RUTH:** *(to audience)* It's specifically kind of in this religious sense, a lot of their ideas seem to be, that's not really acceptable as far as a woman goes.
- GRACE:** The universal path of a woman is to *(listing)* grow up, get married, have a bunch of kids, have an empty nest, go play with your grandkids. There's an expectation in conversations that *that's* what life will look like.
- SARAH:** So many faith practices have that one way of looking at it. You're supposed to get married, have kids, do the family thing.
- RUTH:** Your role is to be a wife and mother and if you're not being a mother, what are you? *Why* are you?
- SARAH:** *(gesturing to the pew behind her)* I hate it when you are supposed to turn around and greet the people behind you. I hate that because, "Do you have children?" That is a common question, and it's really difficult. There's no way around the awkwardness and sadness of it.
- GRACE:** It's hard, it's awkward. You're not able to have a child.

- RUTH:** Literally your womb has shut, and the only one who can shut it is God, and you have no answers, and it's embarrassing.
- SARAH:** I say something like, "It isn't what God has for us right now." But, even saying that, the associated shame is still there.
- GRACE:** It's embarrassing, especially as a wife, because I can't give my husband children.
- RUTH:** I experience a lot of insecurity about my worth as a woman, and feel that it's my fault, that the problem is in me.
- GRACE:** I feel less of a wife, less of a woman. It is this constant emptiness because I feel like, this is what I was designed to do, and I can't.
- SARAH:** It feels very incomplete, like I'm outside of the normal, that I should have a job, and a husband, and children. The fact that I haven't been successful in becoming a mom or making my husband a dad makes me feel like a failure and, in comparison, seeing all these people not having any trouble getting pregnant or bearing children. . . . *(trails off)*
- (beat)*
- GRACE:** *(pulling out a chair from the table and sitting down, still addressing the audience)* The hardest to talk to? The people who treat pregnancy like it's not a gift.
- RUTH:** *(roll playing)* "Oh, yeah, I got pregnant. But, I had to have a period between going off birth control and getting pregnant!"
- SARAH:** *(sarcastic with eye roll)* "Oh! Sorry! That's rough!"
- GRACE:** And then when they get pregnant. . . .
- RUTH:** *(pantomiming a pregnant belly)* "I'm so miserable! I'm so sick!"
- SARAH:** *(sighing)* Honestly, there's a lot of those in our church.
- GRACE:** There are so many things people say that are not intended to be hurtful, or unkind, or shaming, or about me that feel very personal.
- SARAH:** *(quoting)* "When are you going to have a kid?"

GRACE: *(quoting)* “You’re still young, you can just try again.”

RUTH: *(quoting)* “You can’t have kids? Well, are you going to adopt?”

GRACE: *(quoting)* “Have you thought about adopting?”

SARAH: *(quoting)* “Happy Mother’s Day!”

RUTH: *(quoting)* “I’m pregnant!”

SARAH: People don’t understand why I get a little ‘prickly’ about stuff, but I just go to church and live with it.

(beat)

RUTH: *(standing up and finding the door unlocked)* It becomes totally uncomfortable when all of your friendships are shifting. *(opening the door and looking through to the other side)* It’s all mommies with babies. It’s really hard for somebody without a baby. *(hesitant to step through the open door)* All of a sudden to be invited to things that are almost always conversations about what the baby’s doing or what new technique you’re using to do this, that, or the other.

SARAH: The hardest are the parents of young children because that’s their whole world. It’s hard for them to have much of a life outside of that, so for me to remain friends with someone who has children has been challenging. We can carry on civil conversations at church but it’s just really hard to really connect if they don’t get it.

GRACE: I’ve lost a lot of friends because they have kids and I don’t.

RUTH: *(still hovering by the open door)* It was so hard for my friend to tell me when she got pregnant because she knew it was going to be hurtful to me.

SARAH: If I had kids I would be the same way, but when you’re the one that doesn’t have kids, your feelings get hurt.

GRACE: I was actually part of a mommy group because when I got pregnant I contacted somebody to say, you know, “I’m pregnant! I’d like to join your group!” But I ended up losing that pregnancy

while I was in the group. (*thoughtful, to self*) They would probably allow me to come back, but I don't feel right about going back, (*to audience*) you know? They would never, ever say to me that I wasn't welcome, but in my head I would be thinking that I really didn't belong there.

RUTH: (*looking through the door*) It feels like being outside looking in.

SARAH: You just keep finding yourself farther and farther out of most social circles.

GRACE: You just fall by the wayside.

SARAH: I think they just kinda don't know where to put me.

RUTH: "You're not one of us because you don't have kids."

SARAH: "You wouldn't understand."

GRACE: "You wouldn't understand, you don't have kids."

RUTH: (*closing the door and sinking down to the floor again*) Becoming a mother. That is the only thing that will give me entry into the community of women.

(*beat*)

SARAH: I had all these dreams. I mean, we both did, and then we started trying to conceive.

RUTH: I didn't realize how much of a strain something like this would put on my marriage.

GRACE: For a lot of marriages it can be a game changer.

RUTH: We were having unprotected sex. Nothing happened.

SARAH: I'm thinking, "We're not going to get pregnant."

RUTH: "I'm getting older."

GRACE: "I think this is a legitimate issue."

RUTH: Not using protection, and doing your temperature, and keeping a schedule, and figuring out when you're fertile. . . . (*trails off*)

SARAH: "Are we doing the right things?"

GRACE: "Am I doing the wrong things?"

RUTH: "Is there something else we need to do?"

SARAH: "Are we going to try again?"

GRACE: "What if this never happens?"

RUTH: We did tests. The doctor said, “You’re still fertile.”

GRACE: My husband went through tests and he was great. He was good to go.

RUTH: Ovulation kits, shots, we were thinking about doing IVF.

SARAH: We’ve done every treatment except IVE.

RUTH: The expense!

GRACE: We’ve spent a lot of money we didn’t have.

RUTH: Every month is heartbreak; you have a treatment, and then it’s like money going down the drain. No baby.

SARAH: Money going down the drain, no baby.

GRACE: The financial toll has contributed to those pressures.

SARAH: My identity as a wife has been pushed back.

RUTH: This desperation to be a mom, sadly, and how that impacts the sexual intimacy and all those dynamics.

SARAH: It’s awful, the toll on our marriage. . . .

GRACE: The performance expectations in the bedroom.

SARAH: It’s horrible because everything is ‘have to’ and ‘a certain date’ and it’s really tough.

GRACE: It makes me feel terrible as a wife, so I try to make up for it in other ways, I guess, mentally. I keep the house extra clean, I cook more, I try to do other things, you know, be there for him.

RUTH: But, the minute he sees the box of tampons, I’m already beating myself up.

SARAH: It’s another month that’s lost.

GRACE: I’ve even told him, “Maybe we should divorce and you go find another wife that can do this for you.”

SARAH: We’ve lost intimacy. We have been to counselling, but it’s still not really resolved.

GRACE: I’m the one that has the problem.

RUTH: It’s just that we went through all that ‘have to’ so much that now I’m just like, “Forget it.”

SARAH: And, I don’t know how to fix that mentally.

GRACE: There’s nothing I can do.

RUTH: And, I’m hurting too.

(beat)

RUTH: This is my dark tunnel I'm going through, and I don't see the light on the other side yet. It's mostly between me and God.

GRACE: I don't know that I am mad at God, but I am confused, and very frustrated. I question my faith, and I question if God even exists.

SARAH: It feels like I'm being punished for something.

RUTH: Did I do something wrong? Am I being punished for it?

SARAH: Did I do something to deserve this?

RUTH: I have been so angry. Like, this is not fair! God loves me and I can't? It's almost like a cruel joke is what it feels like.

GRACE: I didn't step foot in church for six weeks because I was like, I'm done. It broke my faith.

SARAH: I'm hurt. I feel sad and lost.

GRACE: I'm sure there's a greater plan for it that I just don't know, but it hurts not being in the know. Being left in complete silence and not knowing is very hurtful.

SARAH: *(looking up)* God, I know that you're still there, but I feel like you're not paying attention. You have the power to fix it! You know, as a parent I would never just sit there and look at my child in this much pain and not do something about it.

GRACE: *(looking up)* God, show me why this is happening.

RUTH: Why is this happening to me?

SARAH: Why does it seem like it's only me and nobody else?

(beat)

GRACE: I feel like people don't understand that I'm grieving. When it first happens and I'm a mess and people can tell I've been bawling my eyes out, they are very compassionate, but then once it seems like I'm doing okay, they seem surprised when I tell them, "I'm still a mess."

RUTH: It's losing that sense of womanhood. It's the loss of not ever being able to have a child.

SARAH: It's that pain of longing and grief that just never goes away.

RUTH: Every time you have a menstrual cycle, it's a reminder that your womb is empty, that there's nothing there that month.

GRACE: You are profoundly changed and you can't go back to who you were before, but really in essence it is grief.

RUTH: Infertility is grief, over and over again, every month of your life.

(beat)

SARAH: I think people don't know what to say, but not speaking, not seeing, wondering, taking the risk to ask a question from just a genuine space is hurtful too.

RUTH: But, I also think people who've experienced it aren't willing to talk about it either.

GRACE: My close friends from church know how much I am struggling, but still, no one calls to check up on me.

SARAH: "I'm praying for you" is great, but I need more than that.

RUTH: People don't realize the depth of what I am feeling.

GRACE: They never see the grief and the true depth of heartache.

SARAH: As with any grief, it probably never goes away.

RUTH: The hurt will never go away.

GRACE: So, I hide my tears and put on this facade that "I'm okay."

Ruth and Grace move to sit down in the pew behind Sarah. Ruth on one end, Grace on the other.

(beat)

SARAH: *(to audience)* The Bible says, "mourn with those who mourn" and "bear each other's burdens." How are you supposed to "bear each other's burdens" when you don't know what's going on with other people?

GRACE: *(to audience)* If no one ever opens their mouth, I don't know who's been through it, if no one says it.

RUTH: (*to audience*) The way you get closer is by talking about things.

SARAH: I feel like the church should facilitate that to an extent.

GRACE: If things are not talked about, instead it's like, (*to Ruth*) "How are you doing?" . . .

RUTH: (*to Grace*) Terrible, thanks for asking!

SARAH: (*to audience*) No one's gonna say that at church!

Amnion

Zach Hicks

Darkened and in dreams, the
end of the world is blind.
Of a colorless place to quake and
vanish, the virgins bark to life.

Error upon error, the fatal zone is
acquired. Organic to the vein, as a
brutal heart hits the shoreline—the
terror builds in all the places where
a woman was first torn from girl.

Dancers to the West, now the prophetic
sun has risen. Disappear at the border or
enter time and space again. The grains
have finally sank to dust turned thin.

And the places all have gone before,
if only to set forth the precedent.
Of rosemary now turned drunk and
sour, the seeds inside are spent.

beestings

Emily Price

i'm burning myself down. lazy, like a fucked-up candle that's melting all over the furniture & the paint peels off with the wax when you try to clean it. i'm burning myself down & it's fast like striking a match on an old house, like how my apartment's crumbling wood might catch without hesitation.

a yellowjacket flew through my car window, stung me three times in the thigh while i was driving & then i was screaming. i was screaming & the yellowjacket was crumpling into my lap, dying, then thrown out the window limp & unable to resist. i think the stinger is still in there: i can see the hole & it still hurts sometimes, like maybe some of the poison is still floating out into my blood.

two days later, a honeybee latched onto the back of my ear to die, to press its venom into my lobe. i'm sobbing & i'm laughing. un-stung for so many years & now my body is swollen, like they're coming for me with a vengeance. it feels like everything is coming for me with a vengeance. i call to tell someone, "i think that god is trying to tell me that i should kill myself," as a friend pulls the stinger out of my ear with their hands & i'm sobbing & i'm laughing. maybe i shouldn't be here anymore.

someone i loved once is cooking me dinner. i'm sitting bunched up like scrap paper on his kitchen floor & talking about how i'm not doing so well these days. i miss when it was easy but i've always been afraid of something so really how much easier was it? i think he's trying to take it all in & maybe it's going over his head because this pain only makes sense when it's lived but he will still pop my back for me & i will still feel less afraid when we exhale together.

Annihilation

Mallory Spisak

I unhinge my bottom jaw so I can reach down my throat,
Lay hands on the slithering mass that curls around my spine
And contorts me into a human shape.
First my hand, then my whole arm, slowly, so as
Not to scare it.
Clasping my fingers around the head, I dislodge it
And pull back, all prayers and hopes and fears
But what comes back up isn't me at all.
At the joint of my wrist is a bramble of dead raspberries
With a bird's nest at the center.
It doesn't move when I move it. I have failed.
The blackness has settled back
Into my skin. It flexes territorially around my corpus callosum
At the mention of happier days. There will be no happier days.
I sleep in the bathtub at night waiting for
Bombs, or whatever evil is coming for me:
I know it's coming for me. I saw it in a dream
And I believe. My teeth don't meet, my feet never
Touch the floor. I am in limbo; I await the boatman.
My arm never heals, but sometimes I wake up to chirping
And I cringe at the sight of life.

ars protestor

Emily Price

i.

my headlights make the glass shards glow.
someone else's windshield is now
scattered on the side of the road.
the moon is a perfect half circle, like
someone sliced it down the middle.
i like to pretend that whoever cut it used
a sickle.

ii.

this pain is not mine but i will hold
space for it like i hold the people i love.
maybe our tears are blood: Jacob Blake,
we celebrate you—still breathing while your blood
runs from our eyes, our backs. shot seven times,
others pulled from the streets into blank-faced vans:
they cannot keep taking us. at the vigil the flowers
smell like perfume, so many that the scent itself is
screaming with the human voices to be noticed.

iii.

the sky gets so warm when the sun is falling
from it—like flower petals & as fragile.
i'm sitting in my turned-off car at a gas pump,
silent & hot, blank-faced staring out
at nothing for so long that i'm pouring sweat,
for so long that someone knocks
on my windshield. yes, i'm okay, i have to tell
them. there is nothing concrete
i can say to explain that i think all my organs
have left my body & i don't
understand how it's possible that i'm still
walking, still breathing.

iv.

pain is not beautiful. violence is not beautiful.
someone i love is on the ground under the police
while a racist laughs. the struggle is not beautiful
but we, bloody & sore, figure out
how to love each other anyway.

v.

they tell us we deserve it.
i curl up dead-eyed in hot water
thinking of a comrade: his legs
crushed under a white SUV.
my face is blank. they tell us we
deserve it. we march the next day,
we are surrounded by blue lights.
they have their hands on their guns.
they tell us we deserve it.
i know what is real: yell, whose streets?
our streets! we dance together,
a family—a catharsis. they tell us
we deserve it but i know what
is real. i know what we deserve.

Short Supply

Jessica Dunker

Emaline was not born, because to be “born” is too passive a word for the fight Emaline gave when she left the comfort of the womb and struggled to enter a world with no compassion. She was not what the doctors deemed a healthy child. She was born underweight and premature. She would have spent many weeks in the hospital except that her mother, Susanne, could not have afforded the bill. Instead, Susanne got up from her hospital bed the hour after Emaline’s birth, since the hospital during this time charged hourly for the room. Susanne carted her newborn home in a used, makeshift carriage that she used to take all her children home in. On that cold night in Brighton, it would be the last time the carriage was used. The breathing tubes were still in Emaline’s nose when they left the hospital. The carriage bumped on every crack in the sidewalk, and the basket shook the small child inside it. Emaline’s eyes were still closed, her chest heaving in air. Life demanded to be felt, if sometimes felt with agony.

Susanne did not believe her child would survive through the night, but Emaline prevailed. She proved herself worthy of life and grasped on to it with everything her tiny lungs could muster. She does not remember the many faces that swarmed the crib’s basket the next morning after her arrival. Like everyone in the neighborhood, there was an open-door policy, especially after such an event like childbirth. Everyone crowded around the sleeping infant in praise of its strength. They did not applaud Susanne’s strong genes or those of the child’s father, since they did not know who the father was. Susanne never revealed the name herself, that is, if she knew his name at all. Instead, they cooed over the babe for as long as they could without shedding their tears. They

felt in their hearts that although the child had survived the first day and night of its life, the rest of its existence would be a hard and tumultuous one. They whispered their encouragement and sympathies to the little girl in her crib. Those around her would watch her closely for years to come, as she aged and grew as slowly as a shaded orchid, just as fragile and lovely.

The first time Emaline laughed, she did so triumphantly. Her laughter enfolded everyone around her, like other babies' bubbly laughs, during a morning coffee meeting between Susanne and a couple of the women from the neighborhood. The women did not feign to care for Susanne's well-being, but they were curious about the child. They wanted to be a first-hand witness to the miracle of life, particularly a life lived by someone who shouldn't have made it.

"She's yours, then?" one older woman asked. She lived houses away and had been passively watching as the weeks turned into months, as Susanne's stomach grew despite her age. She thought the child would be stillborn and said as much to Susanne.

"She's mine forever." She knew what the woman was asking. Did she give Emaline up for adoption? Sometimes the adoptive families prefer to have their child naturally fed from the breast of its biological mother. It's better for the child, they say.

"Well, aren't you in for a long haul?" the older woman dared to say through a snide laugh. Susanne did not take the bait, her lips frowning as she sipped from her chipped coffee mug. The other women barely touched their cups.

"Do you think you'll have another?" the younger of the women asked. She was someone's daughter, but already Susanne had forgotten her mother's name. She was pregnant herself, the father being the son of someone else in the neighborhood.

The older woman made a funny face that was rather ugly, twiddling her fingers along the sides of the child's tiny body. Emaline did not squeal or reach high pitches that deafened the listener. She let her laughter flow, like the sound of falling rain. It was perfectly beautiful in its innocence. The first time Emaline laughed, her cheeks turned the color of ripe beets. Her chest heaved, and suddenly the laughter ceased. Susanne scooped her up and rushed her to the hospital, her

feet nearly tripping over the door step, abandoning the other women in her wake.

Susanne emptied her pockets of all the money she had at the hospital counter, which was not enough. Emaline was resting in the NICU along with the other babies. The emergency care doctor had resuscitated Emaline in a matter of minutes. Any longer and she wouldn't have made it. Susanne wondered if this was a miracle, or simply bad luck for Emaline.

Susanne did not see many parents in the NICU waiting room. She knew too many of those babies in the NICU with Emaline would be transferred to the state as soon as they were well enough to leave. Not everyone could afford a child, not these days, and especially not a sickly child. By this time in Susanne's life, she figured she was infertile and had already made peace with this solemn fact. The others never took. It was for the better, anyway, she had said to console herself. If Susanne were to blame anyone for Emaline's illness, it would be herself. Maybe she was never fit to have children, especially not now, as Susanne leaned into her forties.

Susanne was blessed though. She had a child after all, albeit a sickly one. She had money, at least enough to feed her child. She was also blessed to have some credit left with the hospital. Every appointment is charged by the half hour. To see the doctor at all, Susanne agreed to a monthly payment for the next twenty months, no interest until after the first twelve weeks. That would cover the cost of saving Emaline's life and the follow-up appointment to diagnose the child. She thought if she were to continue raising Emaline, she should at least know what plagued the girl.

The doctor didn't need the full thirty minutes to diagnose his young patient, for it was evident Emaline was asthmatic, among other diagnoses, which he said he could not provide detail of without yet another financial installment and several tests. Susanne was mum during the whole of the appointment. She knew what asthma was. Her cousin's husband had asthma. She had not yet seen so severe a case as Emaline's. There was certainly more to her case, but Susanne had spent all she could afford. What good would another diagnosis be if she and the child both wound up homeless and starved in the end? The doctor scribbled on a slip of paper and handed it to Susanne, the

prescription for an inhaler, to be picked up at the nearest drug store.

“And are you feeling any pain?” he asked, addressing Susanne, though not by name. He would, of course, write a prescription for Susanne should she need it. “Pain can be fixed.”

Susanne declined his offer with a curt shake of her head and slipped the inhaler’s prescription in her pocket without a glance at Emaline, who now rested quietly in the tattered blanket Susanne had wrapped her in that morning. Susanne murmured thanks to the doctor and carried Emaline out of the hospital with eleven minutes of her appointed time remaining.

Susanne did not stop at the drugstore, nor did she mention the child’s affliction to anyone. She didn’t need to go to the pharmacy to know she could not afford the regular prescription. A growing girl would need a regular prescription. She would want to run, to climb, and to play with the other children. No, that would not do. Times were hard as is, but Emaline would survive. Susanne would ensure this much. She was rather ashamed of herself for not being able to afford Emaline’s medicine, but she could not dwell on it. She simply had no funds, and if funds suddenly produced themselves, she would not hesitate to spend anything on Emaline’s health. As it was, there was no choice. She did not, after all, take handouts. She did not need the pity of her neighbors or the charity of well-to-do, stuffy church-goers. There was no need to explain the situation since nothing could be done to cure Emaline. Instead, she would do what she knew was best: Emaline was to remain a safe and guarded child with limitations and restrictions. She would not run like most children, or climb, or play. She would not cry so hard that her lungs would constrict. She would not throw tantrums or fits that would cause excitement. She most certainly would not laugh, for that was the worst of them all. When she laughed, Emaline plunged into a crisis, for there are no boundaries to a child’s joy.

As the years flew by, Emaline’s laughter was not heard too often, but when it was, Susanne was quick to cut the sound off entirely with a scolding, a slap on the back, or when Emaline grew older, a sharp smack to the face. These trifles hurt Susanne like any child’s pain hurts a mother, but taking these pains kept her child alive.

Emaline watched other children play, her doe eyes luminous and curious from the sidelines. Emaline enjoyed the art of observation. She pretended she was a part of the children's silly games as she speculated. The neighborhood favorite was a pick-up game of basketball. There was one solitary basketball hoop at the street's end. The net was torn away decades ago with the pole left leaning hard on the right. Despite its apparent brokenness, the children cherished their one belonging as if it was theirs to protect. So, the same attitude was felt for Emaline. It was tradition to play every night. The evening sun warmed the backs of the children. As Emaline watched the other children play, she practiced her layup with her fingertips, shuffled her feet in a mild way at the base of the curb, and practiced her dribbling between her knees. For those who took breaks between quarters, they would make fun of those who were playing, as was custom. Emaline, dutiful to her position on the sidelines, listened to their commentary and nodded in agreement. She would form her own judgments in a quiet voice, but they were oftentimes drowned out by the noise of the others. Those on bench would shout obscenities at the other team, their high-pitched voices breaking from puberty, their laughs echoing on the back of the homes on the other side of the street. All the while, Emaline did not laugh when she found something funny. She practiced the art of a demure smile, which encouraged everyone's thoughts on her beauty.

"Why do you always watch and never play?" a girl asked, sweat dripping from her face and down her shirt.

"I can't. Mama won't let me. She says it's dangerous," Emaline replied, softly and with some trepidation. She didn't want her neighbors to think she didn't want to play with them.

"Basketball ain't dangerous," the girl said with a laugh. "Have fun, though." She hopped up in one fluid movement and raised her arm in the air to call attention to the player holding the ball on the other side of the crudely drawn court.

Once, after the usual nightly roundup game of basketball, she walked home alone, as she often did. The other children raced home, their pounding feet receding down the street. Emaline did not cry out or shout after them. She walked along, not too quickly but altogether not too slowly, when a group of boys gathered round. She knew

their faces and was frightened. They were years older than her. She had heard the stories of their torment and remembered them well. Emaline was not ignorant of the price of being a girl. Knowing the worst was to come, she began to panic. She turned to run and collapsed. Her breathing escalated. Her lungs worked overtime to suck in as much air as they could. Her chest tightened. Her throat burned. The sound ripped out of her throat as a long wheeze mixed with her cracking, timid voice crying out for help. This plea began slowly at first, as the boys put their hands on her. Her throat sucked in air, the wheezing and effort of her chest heaving as she crawled on her knees. They watched on in disgusted horror as the girl transformed before them. Her cheeks turned red. Her hand beat against her chest as she pulled at her shirt and tried to release the pressure within her. She ripped her own clothes in the brutal struggle for life. She rolled along the ground, her body contorting itself as she cried out for help. She reached out to the boys, more in fear of dying than of the boys themselves. She couldn't breathe. She wanted to live. She tried to suck in as much air as she could, but despite her efforts, her head spun and black spots blocked out her vision. She managed to grab hold of one of the boy's sneakers, but he kicked her hand away, afraid of the monstrous ghoul writhing before him. They ran off, their shouts of fear echoing through the streets until Susanne heard from a block away and came running to her daughter's side.

Susanne quickly pulled Emaline off the street and carried the girl home in her arms, her feet stumbling on every crack just as the carriage did the day Emaline came into this world. Once at home, Susanne laid Emaline down on the largest bed in the house and rushed to the next room. She came back holding a small item not larger than the palm of Susanne's hand. She pressed it in between Emaline's lips and commanded, "Breathe, my child."

The girl breathed once again, and suddenly her lungs felt a cool relief and the pressure began to fade as the inhaler kissed Emaline's lips. Susanne waited a moment for Emaline's lungs to steady themselves, her careful eyes watching her daughter's body unclench itself from the covers and soften into the bed. Susanne, though grateful her child had survived, had expected her daughter to die before her. Would it have been a mercy to the girl, to let her die? Though the girl was only eleven, she had already glimpsed the face of death. Susanne put her

daughter to bed that night and warned her against walking home alone. It was not safe for a girl like her. This time she was spared. Exhausted from being an ill girl in an impoverished community, Emaline fell directly asleep, thankful that her terrible affliction saved her.

As the years passed, Emaline grew into a beautiful young woman. By this time, she had many boyfriends come in and out of the house, though she was to remain a virgin as long as Susanne lived. Susanne did not reveal the secrets of sex to her daughter since there was no point in knowing what she could not have, but Emaline knew that whatever sex was, it was yet another physical recreation that she would not be allowed to partake in. She explained all this to her boyfriends, who had all agreed to put Emaline's health first, at least until they could no longer wait. Then they left Emaline alone, but that was all the same. She never expected any of her relationships to last long, not boyfriends or girlfriends. It was, after all, hard to be with someone who was altogether emotionless, for it was an emotionless life Emaline practiced. She had succumbed to her emotions only a few times—sometimes through anger, oftentimes in tears, very rarely through something as precarious as laughter—only to realize that nothing was so important to die for. Emaline knew her shortcomings and accepted her fate as someone who would always be alone.

When Susanne died, she was not yet very gray. She lost her youth years ago, but her hair still kept some of its color. The lines on her face sagged as she caressed the soft face of her youngest daughter.

“Life has been hard, Emaline. You know as well as any.”

Emaline nodded, the tears swelling in her eyes.

“What's done is done. I wouldn't take any of it back.”

Emaline bit her lip, the corners of her mouth wavering.

“You deserved better, girl. You know that. Once life is done with you, I hope you can learn to accept it. It only gets better from here.”

Emaline shed a few tears for her sick mother, who by now was sweating under her covers, her once steady heart now fading into a dull

murmur. There was a moment when Susanne clenched her hand, her grip tightening around the thin sheets covering her body. She looked away from Emaline and focused somewhere beyond themselves. Susanne passed without a word or sigh. Emaline wished the same fate for herself: quick, easy, and altogether painless.

Emaline viewed life no differently than she had. She almost expected herself to die shortly after her mother. Without Susanne looming over her life, carefully monitoring the girl's condition, she was free from her mother's constraints. Then again, who would care for her? She had no one. There was a time when the neighborhood women helped Emaline, when her childhood was a matter of luck or otherwise divine intervention. Those women were either dead, or they lost interest. Those who had moved into the neighborhood viewed Emaline as an oddity or otherwise insane. There were rumors spread by the children that she was a demon, a witch, or an angel. Her emotionless, yet grim, countenance were clear signs that she was afflicted with something otherworldly.

Now that Susanne was gone, Emaline had the house to herself, inclusive of all the bills and debts she had to pay. She was a restless youth, her age now exceeding beyond her second decade of life, a feat that Emaline received rather gravely. She had no money, at least not materially. All of her income had gone to helping her mother pay the bills. It was not enough, and Susanne left nothing as an inheritance, for there was nothing to leave. The most education she had was a high school diploma, so her options were limited. She held two jobs but even both of them together couldn't pay enough to live by. She could try asking the banks for more money, but they could simply not provide. As a woman of little means, she knew what needed to be done. She needed to find someone that would relieve her from the debt collectors, who were oftentimes scarier than the boys who had jumped her in the street so long ago. In her search for financial security, Emaline would frequent the hotels across town and wear the fancy dresses she thrifted and hemmed to fit her starving frame. The men she visited would sometimes pay in expensive gifts and other trinkets, which she pawned for mere scraps.

During this time, Emaline knew she must be experienced in order to gain and maintain her clientele. She had practiced the simulation of sex until she was able to master the skill. She would penetrate herself alone in her family home, her body in anguish all the time. Her heartbeat would race, and her skin would crawl. Sometimes she could not help herself, and she would enjoy these private pleasures, which would escalate into a small, near death experience, when her breathing climaxed and she exhaled the precious air in her lungs. This, she felt, was a terrifying but necessary act. These moments were, after all, much better than the execution of the act with the men. When she was with the men, her breathing remained steady, her face neutral, her body relaxed. This, she felt, was an accomplishment on her part and would soon be rewarded. Taking notes from the institutions before her, she charged clients by the half hour.

Her other jobs paid minimally and soon fired her when she would not offer the same services to her bosses as she did to the men in the hotel. They simply could not afford her she would tell them as she signed her own termination by walking out the door. Emaline was just like her mother, the neighborhood said. A waste, they whispered, because Emaline was so beautiful. If it were not for the affliction that Emaline suffered, she could have lived a perfectly normal life, married a fine husband, and had many beautiful children. As a rule, though, Emaline did not want children. She did not want them to suffer the same ailment she had, which she now considered to be life as a whole. There were a few times when she had to see someone for her growing belly, yet another affliction she had to deal with on her own. Susanne had done everything to keep her child alive, yet Emaline felt it was an act of mercy to give the unborn back to God for another chance at a better life in a healthy body.

When Emaline finally reached the end of her youth, now thirty, she still did not know the name of the thing that burdened her body and soul. Her mother never told her, and as stated, Emaline never went inside another hospital again, though she had been with plenty of doctors. She had asked them, of course, what was the matter with her, but they were never very interested in diagnosing someone they were on top of. One of them had finally revealed what she had and what she could do to ease her pain. She was asthmatic, the doctor said, and an inhaler would be the best source of medicine for her,

especially during a time of stress, but Emaline was disappointed. She had an inhaler, now empty from all the times she used it for those few emergencies over the years. She never refilled it. She never had the means. She wanted a cure, not another commodity. It was a luxury she didn't need. And she knew she was asthmatic. Her illness was more complex than that. She felt it deep in her chest, like a swelling rock buried under the tomb of her bones. It was all-encompassing, like a shadow that never left her side, a looming presence when she was alone. She felt there was more, but the doctor revealed nothing else. She would need testing. She would need results. Everything else was all in her head. The doctor, out of pity, had bought her an inhaler himself.

"Take this. It may save your life one day," the doctor said, tugging on his sport jacket, which clung to his thick arms, stretching the thread thin. His wife needed to let the stitching out if he expected to wear it a few weeks.

"My life is no responsibility of yours. That much has remained clear," she said, pulling her long hair out from under her own thin coat, the stains barely noticeable. "Thank you, doctor. See you in a couple weeks."

Eventually she had to forfeit everything she had to the banks, which they said was not enough to pay her debts. Now facing eviction, she resorted to her last option. She would join a nunnery, hoping it would be her final salvation. She left her house early in the morning without a glance back at the worn house, the loose shutters creaking in the biting winter breeze. She left her neighborhood without a word to anyone. The streets were empty, the sidewalk even more cracked than she remembered. She stepped on every crack as she strode down the deserted block to the corner. She took the bus into the city, switched buses and took that one as far across the bridge as it would take her, as deep into the hollows of the broken-down apartment buildings looming high above her. At the farthest corner close to the last stop, she stepped off the bus and faced the tallest, grayest, quietest, Catholic church as it glowered from the heavens.

During Emaline's hearing with the abbess and the Father present, she explained how she had already mastered selflessness and emotional ambiguity. She controlled her every impulse and showed off the soft,

silent smile that all good Christian women were keen to display. Despite her qualifications, however, the Church turned her away. It was not her past that couldn't be forgiven, since God could heal the worst of people's impurities, but her debts were of earthly matters, and the Church could simply not afford to pay for her charity.

"We see so many young women in here just like you. We simply cannot afford to take everyone in. Charity can therefore only be sparsely given," the Father said, the abbess gravely nodding beside him, her eyes closed as if in prayer.

Didn't she know how many applicants they received from the poor to join the Church? The Church could not sacrifice everything it had for one woman. She might have eternal life through Christ, but through the Church, she would gain nothing but spiritual advice.

"My advice," the Father said, "Ask God for deliverance. Work hard, and God will reward you with everlasting life. Death is nothing to fear."

She left the church in a daze and found herself on a lonely park corner, soaking in the icy rain and coming down with a terrible cold. As she lay there, partially covered under a torn tarpaulin, her head resting against the iron of a park bench, she reflected on all that she had done over the course of her life, her body shaking, her breath coming out in rapid clouds. Despite her illness, she did not wish herself to be admitted into a hospital. She felt it was proper for her to die alone and out in the open, where at least she was free. She closed her eyes and let the cold trap her body in a fetal position, looking quite the same as she did when she took her first breath. Like her birth, all she remembered last was darkness.

Despite her best efforts to suffer alone, a young couple found her shaking from the cold, her breath coming and going in uneven takes. The rain had stopped, and the sky turned a dull gray. The couple pitied the small, curled figure on the bench. They tried to wake her, to give her some money or the leftover coffee they held in their gloved hands. When the woman took off her glove to feel the young woman's forehead, she pulled her hand away from the heat and gasped. They called an ambulance and watched as the vehicle drove her to the nearest hospital.

The hospital gave her the medicine she needed to keep her lungs pumping and her blood running hot through her veins. She would have continued to live for many more years, had it not been for the disease eating away inside her. The hospital staff had laid the bill on her bedside table, informing her of the debt she owed and of her immediate release in the morning. The ambulance ride was highlighted, the inscription at the bottom reading a brief description of the services provided in the ride over to the hospital. At the bottom of the page was a number so large, Emaline wasn't sure she'd ever seen that much money in her lifetime.

After all she'd done, she finally wound up back here, she thought. She lay on the hard bed, thinking of her mother, of the children who still played ball in the neighborhood and of all the men she could remember. Despite her suffering, she had lived through it all, her lungs steadily pumping in the life all living things covet from the start. She did not regret her choices nor the life she led. For the most part, she had succeeded. She fought for what death ought to have taken from her the minute she was born. Truthfully, nobody expected Emaline to make it this far, yet she had. She had lived. Despite everything, she had survived. In that still moment, as she breathed in the stale, hospital air, tears sweeping down her face in thin tendrils, she laughed with all the energy left remaining. Tears spotted her paper hospital gown, her chest racking with grief and joy. Her lungs burned, and her chest clenched. Her ears grew hot as her throat opened itself wide. She laughed at how fortunate she was to have lived—how lonely, how reckless, how ambitious, how beautiful, how breathtaking.



Contributors' Biographies

Amara Bunton

Amara Bunten is an English major with a Creative Writing minor from Elizabethton, TN. She will be graduating in December of 2021. This is her first publication.

Chris Walonski

For a time in Chris' life, he was a slam poet and won Group Piece Finals at the National Poetry Slam. These days, he spends his time asking professors in the Communication & Storytelling Studies department, "What does it all mean?!?" Chris enjoys reading Neruda in Spanish to his puppy and daydreaming about the day he will finally learn to tattoo. Also, save the rainforest!

Cassie Selleck

Cassie Dandridge Selleck is a graduate student in ETSU's Master of Communication & Storytelling Studies program, where she is currently working on her thesis on stigmatized grief. Cassie holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College and is the author of four novels of Southern fiction. Her first novel, *The Pecan Man*, has sold over 300,000 copies, been translated into three foreign languages, and optioned by BCDF Pictures as a full-length movie set to film in the fall of 2021. Cassie and her husband Perry live in North Florida on the Suwannee River.

Courtney Harvey

Courtney Harvey is a first-year graduate student in the English program at ETSU. Her undergraduate degrees in English and Psychology were obtained at King University. Courtney's work appears in the 2017 edition and another forthcoming edition of King University's journal *The Holston* and in Sigma Tau Delta's 2021 edition of *The Rectangle*.

Diane Mallett-Birkitt

Diane Mallett-Birkitt, a recent graduate of ETSU with an MA in English, is a registered nurse. She received her undergraduate degree from Emory and Henry and also has an MEd from ETSU. She has two adult children, and this submission is her first foray into creative writing meant for public consumption.

Emily Price

Emily Price is a graduate student in the English program at ETSU. Her poetry has been published previously in *The Mockingbird*.

Holly Todaro

Holly Todaro lives and writes in Greeneville, Tennessee. She is a senior undergraduate English major with a minor in Creative Writing at East Tennessee State University. This is her first ever published poem, and she is grateful for Dr. Jesse Graves' instruction and encouragement to submit it to *The Mockingbird*. Having joined the Creative Writing minor later in her undergraduate degree, she is fairly new to the craft of writing poetry. She is honored and humbled that one of her first real poems was chosen as first place of the Poetry category in this edition.

Jessica Dunker

Jessica Dunker is a young writer who cherishes and upholds diverse stories that capture the flaws of our society and the characters that learn how to survive within it. She graduated from East Tennessee State University with an English BA and a minor in Creative Writing. During her time at ETSU, she dabbled in journalism, which allowed her to explore her passion for writing in the campus newspaper, *The East Tennessean*. She has been published twice, before in *The Mockingbird*. She is currently a residency teacher in ETSU's Master of Arts in Teaching program. She aspires to teach high school English and to create new book lovers within the next generation.

Leticia Pizzino

Leticia Pizzino is a storyteller and musician who has enlivened souls and captivated imaginations nationwide. She's performed and taught storytelling at festivals, fairs, conferences, prisons, retirement centers, schools, libraries, and more. Leticia has recorded stories for CDs, told on radio, appeared in television and film, and performed in theater and opera. She's also a contributing author to *The Healing Heart ~ Communities* and *The Sky Is Green*. She's completing her MA in Communication & Storytelling Studies at ETSU. Her bachelor's degree is in music from BYU, and she earned a vocology certificate from the National Center for Voice and Speech/University of Utah.

Mallory Spisak

Mallory is a graduate assistant pursuing an MA in English at ETSU. She received her bachelor's degree in English from UT Martin in 2018 and was a finalist at the Southern Literary Festival the same year. She is passionate about creative writing and teaching.

Michelle Bravender

Michelle Bravender is an English major and a self-proclaimed science-fiction lover. Upon beginning to write in high school, she managed to win a Creative Writing award her freshman year, and has been an avid fiction writer ever since. Since then, she has been working her way towards becoming a published author.

Zach Hicks

Zach Hicks is a senior undergraduate student at ETSU who is majoring in English and minoring in Film Studies. Aside from his burning passion for poetry and creative writing, Zach is also a self-proclaimed cinephile with a particular interest in Italian Giallo films as well as the arthouse genre. Some of his poetic and literary influences include Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, H.P. Lovecraft, Bret Easton Ellis, Haruki Murakami, and Jeffrey Eugenides. Zach intends to graduate from ETSU in the Spring of 2022 and continue his education in a Master's Program for Creative Writing.

Rhea Norris

Rhea Norris is a Johnson City native who received her undergraduate degree from ETSU in Communication Studies. She was able to explore her creative nonfiction writing abilities in Dr. Kelly Dorgan's "Women, Health, and Illness" course, wherein she created a blog and autoethnography about her personal journey with mental and physical health. Rhea was awarded the Outstanding Creative Achievement Award in 2020 by the Department of Communication and Performance for her work. She is currently completing a master's degree in Healthcare Administration from the ETSU College of Public Health.

Judges' Biographies

Leah Hampton—Fiction

Leah Hampton writes about Appalachia, corpses, ecoanxiety, and smart women. Her debut collection, *F*ckface and Other Stories*, was released by Henry Holt in July 2020. A graduate of the Michener Center for Writers, she has been awarded UT-Austin's Keene Prize for Literature, the James Hurst Prize for Fiction, and the Doris Betts Prize, and has held fellowships at Hedgebrook, the Adirondack Center for Writing, and the Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University. Her work has appeared in *Ecotone*, *Guernica*, *McSweeney's*, *Electric Literature*, *storySouth*, *LitHub*, and many other elsewheres. She lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains near the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Faith Shearin—Poetry

Faith Shearin's books of poetry include: *The Owl Question* (May Swenson Award); *Moving the Piano*; *Telling the Bees*; *Orpheus, Turning* (Dogfish Poetry Prize); *Darwin's Daughter*; and *Lost Language* (forthcoming, Press 53). She has received awards from Yaddo, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, and The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Recent work has been featured on *The Writer's Almanac* and included in *American Life in Poetry*.

Monic Ductan—Nonfiction

Monic Ductan's writing has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *South-east Review*, *Oxford American* (online), *South Carolina Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, and several other journals. She lives in Tennessee, where she teaches writing at Tennessee Tech University. Monic's essay, "Fantasy Worlds," was listed as notable in *Best American Essays 2019*. She is currently at work on her first book, a story about a Gullah girl's coming-of-age and leaving her South Carolina sea island. Monic's website is monicductan.com.

etsu.edu/cas/litlang/mockingbird/

