

arden

2018





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Editor's Note

You can't predict the future. You can't control the past. You can't erase the circumstances of birth, time, economics, and politics into which you were born. And contrary to popular wisdom, most modern science (and the lived experience of billions) suggests you can't even circumscribe the effects these circumstances will impress upon you. By all means, try. Inbibe. Meditate and pray. Attend therapy, and follow your doctor's orders. These are all good things, and the struggle should be celebrated in proportion to the work required to wage it.

But after all these eventualities and the footprints they leave behind, please write it all down. Or film them. Scratch them on your skin. Paint them on a canvass, or a brick wall. Your art is the people's history of your life, and it belongs to us as much as you. Don't steal.

Justin Briley
Editor-in-Chief

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The Good Seed, by Rebecca Hinzman

Autumn 1999

by Lauren Miley

A bushel of leaves on the craft-table,
currant, russet, ochre.
They're just-fallen,
not-quite-brittle leaves.
There's still a waxiness to them.
I trace the shape of a tree,
its trunk and limbs;
cut, decoupage, and festoon
the milky paper with foliage,
trim the lobes of an oak—too close.
Jagged child-proof scissors slice
my flesh easy, like pumpkin purée,
exposing dermis, inflamed and pulsating.
I finger the flap of dangling skin, numb,
and watch the sap congeal
on the lustrous magenta leaf,
blood on blood.

Batman's Bridge

by Lindsay Allday

When I was a little girl my Pa told me a lie that I've never forgotten. In my small, country town "Pa" is what you call your grandfather. Yes, just like *Little House on the Prairie*. Except we aren't surrounded by nosy neighbors and cornfields, but by sawmills and pine trees. Lumber City, Georgia, is a town so small you wonder how it ever even became a town in the first place. The river is the one mainly to blame, I reckon. It flows along at a nice pace toward the Savannah coast, drifting right through our little town—making it the perfect place for steamboats to pass through.

Around the turn of the century—though the exact date is much debated amongst the locals—it was decided the then-booming town of Lumber City needed a bridge for the train to pass over the river. But not just any bridge would do, of course. Lumber City needed a trestle bridge that would allow both the steamboats to sail through the river and the train to speed over it. A large metal structure was built, complete with a little house-looking building on top for the watchman to swing the bridge around when a steamboat came through.

The trestle is still used for the daily train, but hasn't swung around for a steamboat in quite some time. The moist and humid river air has ridden it a brownish-red color—almost the color of dried blood. As a little girl I always wondered about that bridge and the tiny little house on top. One day, when I was about six years old, I finally asked my Pa just who thought themselves important enough to live in that tall, old house. That's when he told me the lie.

We were driving in my Pa's old Jeep—the one he bought with his bonus money that year—on our way to our weekly Thursday night destination: Livingston's Family Restaurant in Lumber City. Some years later my momma married one of the Livingston boys. It was a simple wedding, with a big white cake covered in real flowers picked right from Mrs. Robbie's rosebush that very morning.

Livingston's Family Restaurant was just about as down-home and country as you could get. Mounted deer heads lined the walls of the dining area, while old donated copies of *Field and Stream* sat on the counter, desperately waiting to be discovered again. If the décor and atmosphere didn't reel you in, the food certainly would. The specialty at Livingston's was their juicy and tender hamburger steak, cooked lovingly by none other than Bryan Livingston—the one Momma married.

Pa's Jeep hadn't had air-conditioning in quite some time, and the

September heat was cooking the black leather seats as my sweaty legs stuck to them. As we neared the trestle, I decided to distract myself. Pa was always good for a story, so I knew he'd have a fun answer for my question.

"Pa," I said assuredly, "who lives in that house on top of the train bridge?"

"Well," he began just like I knew would—as if his mouth needed to prepare itself for the words it was about to speak. "Nobody really *lives* there. But it's a pretty important house. That building up there," he pointed just as the Jeep passed the trestle, "that's where Batman changes his clothes."

"What?!" I demanded, now utterly bewildered.

"Yeah," he continued thoughtfully, "Ya know how when Clark Kent needs to become Superman, he jumps in a phone booth and changes clothes?"

"Yep!" I confidently replied. "He takes off his glasses and everything."

"That's right. But Batman can't use a phone booth if Superman's using all of 'em, so when he needs to become Batman, he uses that building up there where can't nobody see him."

"Really?"

"Yup. Really."

I went to school the next day and informed my friends to be on the lookout for the Batmobile the next time they went to Lumber City. Eventually, though, I stopped looking. I started thinking more about homework, about boys, and about my future. The fun little lie my Pa told me drifted away like the steamboats in the river all those years ago.

It all came flooding back after Noah was born, though. After marrying the Livingston boy, Momma was soon pregnant with my baby brother. I was none too thrilled about it all at the time. I was twelve, for goodness sake, much too old to become a big sister! I had to worry about getting my first kiss before high school, steering clear of the worst teacher in eighth grade, and keeping my over-developed breasts under wraps. I didn't have time for a little brother.

A few days after Christmas, I made time. Noah was born in the middle of the night, while the hospital still had their Christmas decorations up. Glittery snowmen waved at us from their places on the walls, while a miniature St. Nick graced the nurse's counter.

"Y'all wanna see him?" My stepdad Bryan (whom we'd affectionately termed 'Bubba') wore an expression on his face I still can't quite name—a mixture of fear, joy, excitement, and anxiety. I led the way to Momma's room where perfect little Noah lay nuzzled in her arms. Momma had already promised I could be the first of the family to hold him, and I was more than ready. I sat down on the pink, plastic chair as Bubba gingerly placed the baby in

my arms.

Noah's jet black hair peeked through the blanket, resembling an ink stain. That hair was the first thing I ever noticed about him. No one in Momma's family or in Bubba's family has hair that dark. I've never known where it came from, but it sure suits him. From that first meeting, when his little hand reached out and grabbed ahold of my finger, I was hooked. He had my whole heart.

As Noah and I both grew, our family began to notice some differences between him and other kids his age. Noah had not yet started to speak, he rarely waved or interacted with other children, and he always seemed to be in his own little world. The doctors started saying words like *delayed*, *challenged*, and *special needs*. A year or two before I left for college, they finally started using the big one: *autism*. The word we were all fearing inside, the one we didn't understand and didn't want to believe. Pediatricians and child psychologists and behavioral therapists all told us that Noah may never talk, that he may never be a "typical" boy, that he may never be able to live successfully in our world.

We all took the news differently. I read as much as I could on autism—from Temple Grandin to Kanner and Asperger. Pa didn't really understand it at first. He wanted Noah to be a "normal" grandson who he could watch NASCAR with and throw a ball to. Momma went straight into activism mode. She checked out books from the miniscule local library and was quick to educate anyone who gave Noah the side-eye at the Walmart checkout. As difficult as the autism can be, I wouldn't change Noah for anything. And he sure proved those doctors wrong—about the talking, anyway. The boy started talking overnight and hasn't stopped since!

Car rides have always been difficult for Noah, especially when he was younger and still stuck in a car seat. Those straps and fasteners and cushions overstimulated his little brain and made him thrash about dangerously. Before I got my own car, I usually wound up sitting in the backseat with him while my mom drove us to the nearest Walmart or Burger King (Noah's favorite to this day) in the nearby town of Hazlehurst. I often had to tune out his screams and cries because there was simply nothing else to be done.

One rainy day in April, in the backseat of Momma's Honda next to Noah screaming in the car seat, I was thinking about the history paper I needed to write for Mr. Walker's class. The Industrial Revolution has never been a topic which brings me much joy, but it was a welcomed reprieve from Noah screaming helplessly in the tentacular car seat. As I watched the rain hit the window and slowly slide down, my thoughts drifted to what Mr. Walker had

told us in class the day before, "Boy, those steamboats sure made life easier for the folks back in the day. They were much faster and could near 'bout glide on the water."

What I wouldn't do for Noah to be able to just glide right now. I thought. Just glide through all this pain he feels, glide through the next few minutes.

Momma's car hit the little bump, indicating we were just over the river with the trestle bridge to our right. *I wonder how long it's been since that old thing has seen a steamboat, I thought. I can't believe I used to think that little house was where Batman changed his clothes. Batman.* Noah's current fixation was superheroes, specifically Batman. He would run around the house echoing every single line to one of those cheesy cartoons. He carried around a Batman action figure and ran his thumb over the cape when he was anxious or overstimulated. *I might as well try, I reasoned as I repositioned myself around my seatbelt to see Noah's tear-streaked face.*

"Hey, Noah," I nearly whispered. It always helps to speak quietly when he's overstimulated. I gently placed my hand over his red and flailing arm. "Hey," I whispered again, this time rubbing his arm a little with my thumb. After a few seconds, he stopped crying long enough to glance up at me, his sweet face covered with tears and snot. "Hey, buddy, you wanna know something cool?" Noah nodded his head ever so slightly, almost as if to inform me that it had better be very cool, whatever it was.

"You know what that building up there is?" I pointed just as the Honda passed the trestle. Noah shook his head. "That up there is where Batman changes his clothes." I noted a faint, half smile—the one he does when he doesn't want you to know he's smiling. "Yep," I continued, "since Superman's using up all the phonebooth, when Bruce Wayne needs to save the day, he hops up to that building over there and puts his cape and stuff on. I bet if you look real close, you might could even see the Batmobile one day." Noah's eyes noted the sudden shift in his mood as they quickly changed from the sullen, pupil-filled fountains to those dark and watchful orbs. As he sat straight up and looked around and back at the bridge, I saw Momma flash a relieved smile in the rearview mirror. We made it through another meltdown. We could breathe for a moment.

At twelve years old, Noah has made some amazing strides. He doesn't strip off his clothes at the sight of one rain drop, no longer eats from the same limited menu as he once did, and has even learned how to pour his own apple juice. But some aspects of his childlike nature remain. He still leaves cookies out for Santa and prefers shoes that light up. And sometimes, when he thinks no one is watching, he looks for the Batmobile as we pass the trestle bridge.



Anxiety, by Vivian Duncan



I-185, by Joshua Hand

Blood and Mud

by Renee Simmons

The clock watched her like a guard dog, its glowing red numbers burning into her vision. 3:39 AM. Clammy skin stuck to hers and the flat pillow smothered her with sour sweat and dried drool. She peeled the blanket off her body, and damp air whispered over her skin. The bed shifted as she stood, stirring a mumble and groan from the unconscious man she'd embraced in lust an hour earlier. She dressed, pulling on her faded OutKast t-shirt and blue jeans. The full moon gave peeks of dirty laundry and a calendar with a woman wearing a whipped cream bikini, cherries on the nipples. She pulled on her boots and turned back as she shut the door to see the deflated condom hanging from his equally deflated pecker. The tiny waste receptacle gleamed in the moonlight, sticky with watermelon flavored lube.

Outside, Sage crunk up her '87 Dodge Dakota and the local late night station greeted her with a buzz of static. Uncle Jerry Wayne would be up making breakfast by now. He'd never been able to adjust to a normal sleep schedule after he'd stopped working on the construction crews. 4:00 AM was breakfast time, and always would be. The truck shifted smoothly into reverse and crunched the gravel as it carried it her home.

She'd moved to East Alabama when she was fourteen, after her parents were killed by a drunk driver. Uncle Jerry Wayne and Aunt Peg filed for guardianship, and won, but Sage's sister Dallas wanted to stay behind in Georgia with their grandmother. Fraternal twins born under a harvest moon, Sage and Dallas had been close, until they stood in front of the judge in the small county courthouse and announced they wanted to live apart. They'd been fighting, teenagers tangled in the little things, and it was like lightning striking the tree they'd been a part of, splitting it and setting it to flame

She'd been thinking of Dallas when she'd driven into the city earlier that night to find a bar with a good band playing. She'd pulled into The One Trick Pony, a local bar with tailgates mounted on the walls, serving double duty as décor and seating. As she'd pulled her parking brake, the band was finishing up a punk style cover of Britney Spears's "Oops, I Did It Again". The building was older than she was, and the back lot was bare red dirt, fenced in by corrugated steel, giving it a Thunderdome-like feel. They had a deck centered around a mechanical bull, and gave free rides to top heavy women and supremely drunk men, mostly for the entertainment of the operator and bystanders. They had theme nights to draw in different crowds and over time it had become everyone's favorite. She'd walked in just as the band started on

a cover of Marcy Playground's "Sex and Candy". She'd ordered her usual, a tequila shot and a Natty Lite. The tequila was well and the beer was like water, but it did the job and it was cheap; that's all she needed. The crack of cue balls breaking on green velvet topped tables had snapped through the loud chatter of the small bar as she'd pushed through the wall of bodies. She'd made it out to the back lot just in time for the first chorus, joining in with the rest:

"I smell sex and candaay, yeah, mmmMmm, who's that lounging in my chair, mmMmmm." The group congregated in front of the stage were in a world of their own, belting out the lyrics and swaying in time to the music.

The stage was set in front of a huge oak tree wrapped in string lights. Two of its limbs rode along the ground opposite each other, and folks leaned or draped their drunk friends over them. Sage had been waved over to join some familiar faces before listening to the band's cover of Sublime's "Santeria". One of her friends had given her purse to her husband before taking Sage's hand to dance in the front. They'd sung along and powered through their beers in a few minutes.

"I'll grab us a couple more. You want a shot?" Sage had playfully prodded her friend, not waiting on an answer before taking off to get two of each.

She hadn't returned with those after seeing her high school crush at the bar. They had taken the shots and stood in the back trying to catch up. Beers went fast, and before Sage knew it, she was driving to his house. She'd felt guilty in those minutes before, thinking of how Dallas had had a crush on him too.

Sage hadn't seen Dallas in years. Dallas had come to visit a few times in those early years after their parents' deaths, but eventually her visits stopped around the time they turned eighteen. Sage remembered Christmas, and how she had gotten Dallas and herself matching shirts as a gag gift. She thought it'd be funny to think of the times when their parents dressed them alike.

The road was empty, and the cool night air filled the truck's cab as she drove home. Her hair whipped her face and eyes, like a self-imposed punishment from her subconscious, and she wished she hadn't forgotten her hair tie. She passed empty fields, newly tilled, and grassy pastures dotted with sleeping cows. She turned onto Uncle Jerry Wayne's driveway, a small dirt path cutting through a wooded field, and held on as the truck bounced and swerved over tree roots and sharp turns.

Uncle Jerry Wayne shuffled around the trailer's cramped kitchen as bacon and eggs popped in a cast iron skillet. Sage strode in the back door, inhaling the familiar smell, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. His tanned

and weather beaten face crinkled when he smiled and his blue-green eyes contrasted the age in his face with a youthful presence.

“Good mornin’ early bird. What’re ya doin up so early for?” Uncle Jerry Wayne smiled, gesturing with a greasy spatula.

“Just couldn’t sleep.”

“Me neither. Got plenty of breakfast cookin. Wash your hands and set the table. I ‘spect the boys’ll be along in a minute.”

Sage’s boy cousins were no longer boys, and had grown into men years ago. The oldest, Hiram, stomped through the door a little while later, a tree of a man, gray at the temples.

“Mornin, I see ya’ll been gettin your beauty sleep.” He winked at Sage, who shot him a dirty look before pushing back from the worn vinyl topped table and hugging him tight.

“Oh hush. Sage had a touch of the insomnia last night.” The greasy spatula worked to flip the bacon, spitting a spray of hot oil in protest.

“You know what they say cures insomnia, right?” Hiram slapped Uncle Jerry Wayne on the back as he watched the pan. They stood there whispering over the hissing eggs chuckling between them. Sage grabbed the Donald Duck orange juice from the refrigerator and her mouth watered, remembering the sour and tart shock of the bright orange fluid.

The rest of the crowd trickled in, Laura Jean, Kaitlyn, Lane, Matt, Abel, and Noah. Sage and Kaitlyn were only a few months apart in age, and had bonded when Sage was small. Their families had been close, with both visiting the other frequently during the year and sending cousins over for the summer. Everyone crowded in, grabbing plates and complaining when someone got a larger helping.

“Whatch’ all gonna be doin today?” Lane, the second youngest at thirty-five, hovered over his plate, biscuit in hand as he asked.

“Gonna finish diggin that pond out at Laura Jean’s place, and maybe we can start on tillin the field after that.” Hiram looked around as he said it, looking to each sibling for an affirmative nod.

“Naw, you said you were gonna build me a corral for Elvis after we got finished with the pond.” Laura Jean was the oldest of the bunch, and her fifty years on this Earth showed in the deep lines around her eyes and mouth.

“We told you we couldn’t do the corral without the wood, and we ain’t got no wood to build it.” Lane shook his head over his plate as he said this, and gulped down the last half of his orange juice.

The lack of objection settled the matter, and Uncle Jerry Wayne piped up.

"I'll be glad to be rid of that dern calf. Y'know his milk's expensive as all get out. Don't make no sense why he cain't drink regular milk. Comes from cows just the same, but the vet said he's gotta have that special stuff. You need to bring some more of that over here, Laura Jean. He's already gone through what you left last time."

"I'll bring ya some tomorrow when I get done helping John." Laura Jean said as she pushed her chair back, grabbing her plate and glass and heading over to the sink.

The boys looked at each other as they worked to finish their plates. The day hadn't started yet, but the Alabama sun would roast them if they didn't get moving. They'd all had enough time in the sun, each one sporting a dark tan a young teenage girl would envy. A rooster crowed outside, but the clatter of dishes into the sink drowned it out.

Sage grabbed the scrap bucket they kept under the sink, and hauled it out to the pigs they kept in the back by the woods. The pigs were adorable from afar, but stunk like shit. They'd just had a litter, and the babies were old enough to be separated from their mama. Sage wasn't surprised to see the mama had jumped the divider they'd made from some old pallets, leaving the pen holding the other adults. She was a particularly difficult pig. Pigs were a stubborn bunch and quick to bite when cornered, so she'd leave that for Hiram to fool with, they were his anyways. She dumped the bucket into their trough, and heard the slosh of the gummy pink fluid that had collected in the bottom. The adults rushed the trough, eager for breakfast. Mud sucked at her shoe as she took a step back, and she heard the mama pig squeal, catching a glimpse of the huge animal jumping the divider again. The pig landed on her side in the mud just behind the adults, and they scattered, running to the opposite corner to hide. Sage watched the mama pig struggle in the thick black mud, and saw one of her front legs hanging at an awkward angle. The pig squealed again, a cry of pain.

Abel had heard the squeals and was heading in Sage's direction carrying a shovel. The sun was starting to rise, and the rooster crowed again.

"What's goin on over here?" He threw down the shovel and stopped next to Sage. He was already sweating.

"She's broke her leg, I think. She jumped the divider when I dumped the scraps." Sage shrugged and put her hands on her hips. Her heart pounded and she took in a lungful of airborne fecal matter.

"Well, she's done trampled one of her youngin's too. That one over there's dead."

Abel nodded at the pen with the little piglets. They stood as a group looking at them with interest, but just off to the side, one was nearly camouflaged in the black muck. It looked flattened, with only the top of its head retaining any shape. The mother had most likely crushed it and through the night it had been stamped into the mud. The mama pig squealed again in panic and pain, sending the piglets into a worried race around the pen.

"She's gettin' em all worked up. I'll see what Deddy wants to do about it." With that, Abel left her.

Sage walked the small distance to the willow by the back steps, choosing to leave the stench of the pigs in favor of a fresher breeze. She could still hear the grunts and squeals from the mama pig as she thrashed on the ground trying to stand. The sun cast long shadows on the piles of stuff Uncle Jerry Wayne kept around the yard. One pile was old farm equipment that needed repair, while another was made up of a few little plastic kids kitchens with peeling stickers. Small pots and pans were scattered around, missing handles usually, while a bartered-for trampoline sported a torn net around it and a bent leg. The kids usually used it for a slide, but sometimes got pinched by the springs. The yard was a maze of scavenged items, a wonderland for kids with the right imagination.

Sage flipped open her box of Marlboro Gold 100s and pulled out her lighter and a half smoked joint. She flicked the lighter and held the flame to the joint's tip, inhaling deeply. She coughed, the smoke pricking her throat, and she took a second drag. The rooster crowed again, its small cage faced her and she saw its bright red comb jiggle as it strutted back and forth. She took another deep drag before putting out the roach and placing it back in her Marlboro box.

Abel and Uncle Jerry Wayne came down the back steps and started toward the pig pen. Sage fell in with them, trailing behind a few feet. The mama pig had stopped squealing, and she lie defeated, shiny with the new layer of mud. One side of her face showed, untouched by mud, the fleshy pink a strange spot in the deep black surrounding it. They watched her try a few times more to right herself, her useless limb flopping against her huge body. Uncle Jerry Wayne sighed and ran his large hands through his hair. "I guess we'll have to put her down. Them babies is old enough to eat without her." He looked to Abel, who nodded in agreement.

With that, Abel and Uncle Jerry Wayne walked past Sage and back into the house. Sage stayed with the mama pig, unsure of what to do. They returned a little while later, Uncle Jerry Wayne carrying his revolver at his side. "Watch out, hun, you don't wanna see none of this."

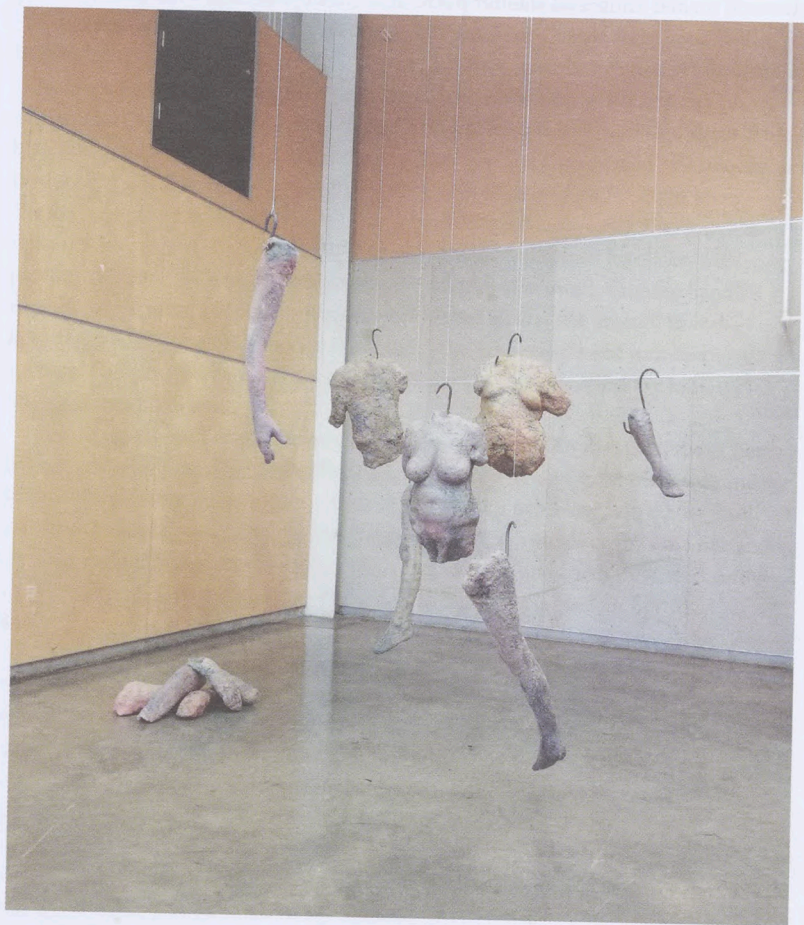
He spoke to Sage as if she were a little girl again, uninitiated into life.

“I wanna stay.”

She said the words before she was sure. He nodded, and they went into the pen. Abel held his shovel out to keep the other pigs cornered, and Uncle Jerry Wayne approached the downed animal. The mama pig struggled more as he came closer, and Sage could hear him shushing the frightened animal. Her stomach turned knots and she felt panic flow through her nervous system.

“Now, y’all cover your ears.” Uncle Jerry Wayne warned them. He pointed the revolver and squeezed the trigger.

Sage felt the sound of the gun, and saw the pig go limp. The pig’s head held a small blossom of flesh at the entry point, and the mouth went slack, oozing blood.



Untitled, by Tyler Hiroms

Rue and the Wolf

by Rachel Mockalis

I.

There was a wolf in Rue's stomach. It was growling and biting at her insides, and she was afraid it was angry. She went inside the pantry, closing the door behind her. Her brown eyes looked through the darkness. Rue liked it; she could see things her father couldn't in the dark. She found a few jars and a burlap sack, but they were all empty. She left the pantry and checked the cabinets. They were empty, except for a single spider. She thought about eating it—if it were poisonous, maybe it would kill the wolf in her tummy—but then realized she could get sick, too.

She climbed off the chair she'd used to reach the cabinets. She looked around for a minute, then saw her father outside, through the open door. He was sitting by the creek and drinking something out of a small, leather bottle. His hair was the same as Rue's—long and curly and black—but he was much bigger and had more color in his skin. He sat on this tree stump and stared at the creek almost all day.

"There's no more food," Rue told him.

He took another drink and stared at the running water. Or maybe the forest on the other side? Rue couldn't tell.

"I need money to buy food."

He didn't seem to hear her.

"There's no more money, either."

The wolf in her belly growled louder than ever, but her father didn't seem afraid of it.

The wolf was getting truly angry by the time night fell. It was biting and thrashing around in Rue's stomach, but there was nothing to feed it. It wouldn't let her sleep, so she rolled out of bed and climbed out of the loft. Her father was asleep at his bed in the corner, by all the tools he never used anymore. She didn't know how he could close his eyes with a wolf in the house. Wasn't he scared?

Rue wandered outside, hoping maybe the wolf would be nice if she took it for a walk. The moon was bright. She walked along the creek, passing her father's stump. She saw little, silvery shapes darting through the water. The wolf in her stomach wanted to lunge at them. Rue wanted to make the wolf happy, so she did what it longed to do.

The water was cold, and the fish were slippery. She shouted with

frustration as they squirmed out of her hands, but one jumped onto a rock in the middle of the stream. She pounced, and held it against the stone. The wolf knew what to do next. Rue picked up the fish with both hands and bit into the fish's back as hard as could. It squirmed and slapped her face with its tail. She adjusted her grip, then twisted her head hard and fast and heard a *snap*.

Rue knew she should cook the fish, but the wolf was impatient. She bit into the fish's belly and started chewing. She chewed and swallowed, and the wolf wagged its tail as the fish fell to where it sat. Rue climbed out of the creek and sat amongst the reeds. She shivered in the cold and her wet clothes clung to her skin. The fish tasted strange and felt squishy in her mouth. But the wolf grew nicer and nicer the more she ate. Soon, she didn't even notice the strange taste anymore.

II.

The people in the village said the forest was dangerous. Rue didn't mind that so much, not when it had such interesting things to say. She sat on the ground just outside the shadowy woods, the creek behind her and her house just beyond that. It was talking to the wolf in her stomach, promising rabbits and squirrels and things more filling than fish from the creek.

The wolf wanted to step into the brush, follow trails until they found something, then bite into it so blood sprayed in Rue's face and the thing stopped moving. But she hesitated. She didn't believe the forest; she'd been sitting at the edge for a while and nothing in the forest had moved. It seemed like every whisper died amongst the trees. The creek was always flashing with the silvery shapes of fish, but she hadn't seen one sign of prey in the forest.

The wolf must've told the forest how she was feeling, because it produced its proof. A bush rustled, and the forest showed Rue a scraggly rabbit. Rue went still, so it didn't notice her at first, and the forest encouraged it to take a few hesitant steps forward. It was within her reach before it noticed her, and she lunged at it before it could get away. She grabbed its neck and pinned to the ground. It kicked, scratching her arms with surprisingly sharp claws and twisting its head like a squirming fish, but the wolf told Rue to hold tight...*tighter*.

Eventually the rabbit's struggling slowed, then stopped. It closed its eyes and went to sleep. Rue held on a little longer, to make sure it would sleep forever. The wolf wanted her to bite into it right away, but she'd fed it that morning. It could be patient enough for the rabbit to cook.

The smell of cooking flesh made the wolf in Rue's stomach mad

with impatience. It clawed and bit at her insides, growled wildly to get her attention, but her thoughts were back by the forest. She wondered if the forest had lots of rabbits. Maybe even things bigger and more filling than rabbits.

When she was done cooking it, she ate the rabbit quickly. When the wolf was happy, she made her way back across the creek and towards the forest. It whispered to the wolf again, and the wolf wagged its tail. The wolf told Rue about running through its trees, chasing down prey, and plucking blackberries off bushes. The wolf told her that it would be angry less often, and she'd have more food.

Rue listened, and stepped into the forest.

The forest led Rue deeper into itself, down a narrow, twisting path. The forest was dark, but nothing like the dark in the pantry. This darkness moved, had a force all its own. The forest's shadows danced for her, showing her all the lovely things no one else could see—a deer's skeleton curled around a young fir, insects skittering under rotting logs, sprawling spiders' webs. The forest's wind blew delightful scents into Rue's face—the smells of winter, pine trees, and stale blood.

Finally, the path opened up to a clearing carpeted with brown and gray pine needles. There were five trees surrounding the clearing, evenly spaced and larger than the other trees in the forest. Sitting in the shade, against the tree directly across from her was a beautiful woman with pointed ears and the stench of death.

Rue cocked her head and looked at the corpse curiously. She had such pretty, long hair...Rue was grateful the forest wanted to show her this. She stepped slowly forward. She turned her head and craned her neck to look at the corpse from several different angles. The corpse held a holly bough in one hand and a long, curved sword in the other. Rue noticed the pack wedged between the dead woman and the tree, as well.

The wind blew, moving the corpse's pretty hair in the breeze. The forest invited Rue to look closer. Long, light hair...perfectly straight...And just past that head of hair, something carved in the tree's bark. They blended into the patterns in the bark so well that she hadn't seen them at first.

They were letters. Words. Not like the ones she saw in the village sometimes, but words the wolf in her stomach could read. Things older than Rue, older than anything. She looked around, and the forest pointed out the letters on the other four trees, too.

This place was special to the forest, she realized. It had trusted her with this.

There was a large tube in the dead woman's pack. When Rue opened it, she found it packed with papers. They were all covered with the same sort of writing on the bark, but newer and cleaner. Rue dumped the papers on the ground around her pored over them one by one. The wolf and the forest read them to her, told her how to pronounce the words. The knowledge fell into her skin and mixed into her bones like rainwater falling in the creek. She felt like a flood, bigger and stronger than ever before.

She thought about being a flood, and felt the corners of her lips curl upwards.

III.

There was a wolf in Rue's stomach. It paced along her insides, but it was quiet. She laid in the middle of a clearing, with her eyes closed and her hands on her belly. She could feel the rise and fall of her breathing, feel the wolf's patience.

The people in the village said the forest was dangerous. Rue supposed that made her dangerous, too. The forest talked to her, talked to the wolf in her stomach. Told her interesting secrets, taught her how to calm the wolf.

She talked to them both—the wolf and the forest—but there were things she didn't understand. Things she wanted to learn, things they wanted her to do. But these words didn't fall into her skin like rain into a flood, they rolled off of her like droplets on waxy, green leaves. She could feel them soaking into her roots, but she couldn't hold on to them.

Something was stopping her.

Rue heard footsteps. Her eyes snapped open, gazing up at pines reaching towards a gray sky. She turned her head and saw her father standing on the edge of the clearing. He looked at her for a moment, his face as blank as the gray sky.

The wolf whimpered. It reminded Rue of a time when her father had smiled at her, lifted her above his head and laughed. When he'd make silly faces so she'd laugh. When her father would shape wood into boxes for corpses, and go into the village for food. The wolf remembered that, but Rue remembered everything after. How he'd tuck her in at night, then cry when she thought he couldn't hear. How he'd cry out a name Rue couldn't remember anymore. Rue remembered tears, and then silence.

She turned her head back towards the gray sky and reaching pines. "Did you know there's a wolf in my stomach?"

He was silent.

"It likes it when I come here and listen to the forest."

Silence.

"It teaches me where to find food."

More silence.

"It talks to me."

Awful silence.

"The forest talks to me."

In the corner of her vision, she saw her father turn and walk back the way he came. Suddenly, Rue understood. She walked into the shadows, to the rotting corpse with the long, beautiful hair, and gingerly took the curved sword from her grasp.

When Rue returned to their house, her father was sitting on the stump by the creek. She promised the forest she'd return soon as the wolf in her stomach paced with more urgency. It was growing impatient.

Her fingers curled around the handle of the curved blade. She stepped through the icy creek—her knuckles turning pink around the grip—then into the reeds and towards her father.

She looked at him for a long moment, and he looked past her. She sat down in the grass next to his stump. She waited. The wolf in her stomach urged her on, but she wanted to hear him say something.

There was only silence.

Then, Rue spoke, "The forest tells me that everything balances." She pulled her knees into her chest and looked at the silvery shapes in the creek. "There's never too much or too little of anything, because the big animals eat the little animals, and the little animals eat the plants. Do you understand?"

He was silent.

Rue continued, "When one thing dies, another thing gets to live. Isn't that nice?"

He said nothing.

"...The forest and the wolf in my stomach say you need to die, so I get to live. They say...that we're out of balance. But I can fix it." She stood up and turned towards him, the blade in her hand. "I wish they were wrong, but they aren't."

He turned to her and finally spoke, "I wish things could've been different."

"But they aren't." She raised the blade over her head, and watched him close his eyes. She swung, and the wolf in her stomach howled.



Resting Roper, by Eliza Daffin



Artemis' Grief in Bloom, by Ashley Clark

Sarasota

by Olivia Ivings

On the east coast the bloated moon hangs,
An ornament in the sky, and *Polaris* winks
Through a veil of clouds.
The night covers Earth—an afghan,
Comprised of distinguishable strands,
Violet, blue, white and black.
All the lonely stars have estates
Decorated with dream catchers.
Planet-dust relaxes on the outskirts
Of the Milky Way and looks at Earth,
While I stare up to that cosmic beach
And glimpse the stars from the sugary sand
That cloaks Siesta Key. Over the folding waves,
I hear clicks from creatures burrowing in sand.
Those hustling crabs, a multitude of moons
With tiny legs, granted to them by evolution,
Seem to point up to *Iota Cancri*,
The dimmest of thirteen constellations,
And scuttling across my foot
As Cancer skims the strand above.

Intruder

by Steven Reynolds

I say a prayer on every rung
of this wobbly wooden ladder
I've summoned from the ceiling.

Behind me stands the tree—
lights strung, Keepsakes hung—
missing only the angel from above.

I wonder if there's dust in heaven
as I sneeze and weave through trusses,
walk the plank that spans the pink sea,

follow the beam of my penlight
to the lone tote against the gable wall,
beneath the circle of vent slats

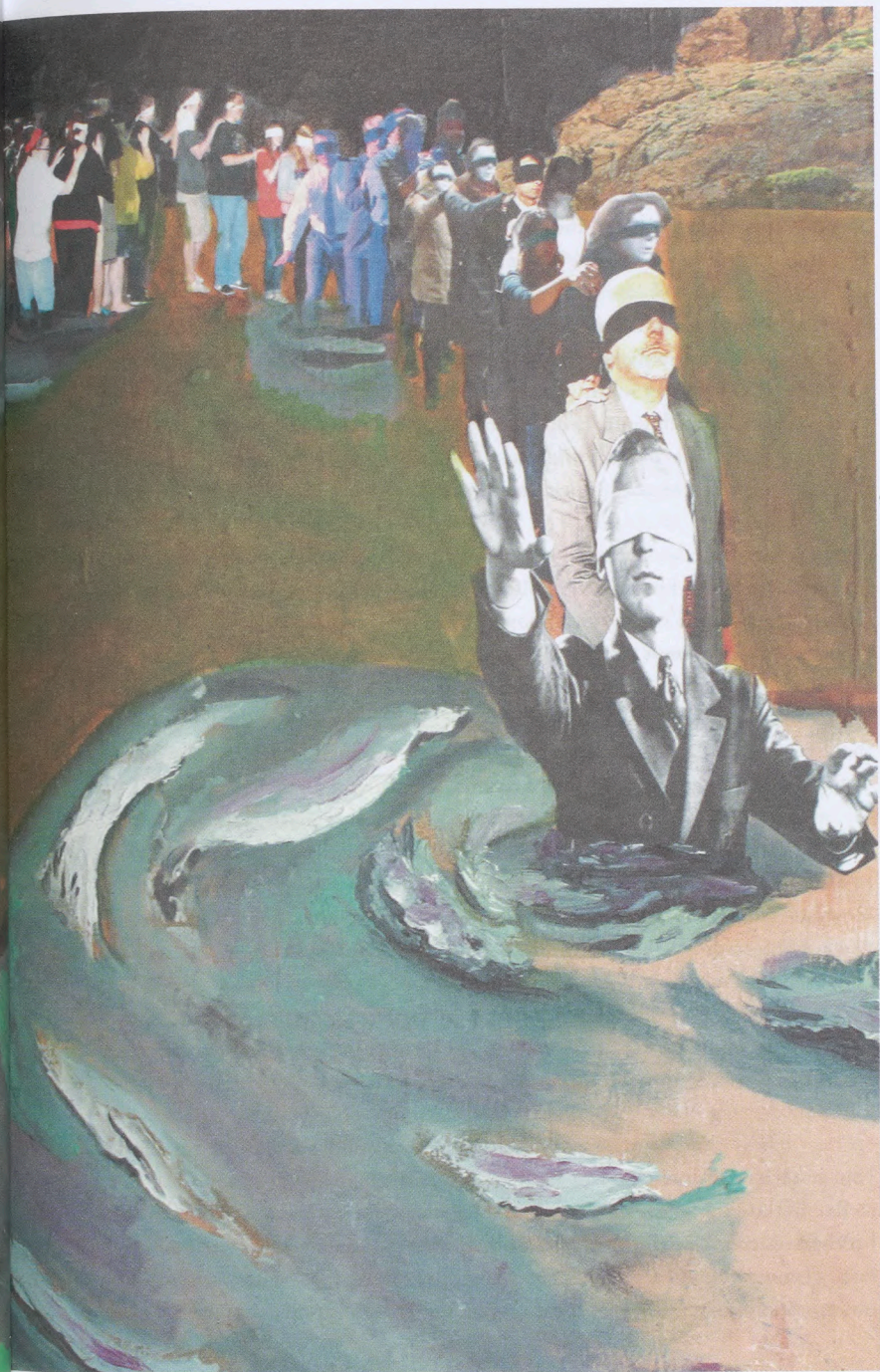
and the tiny sleeping bat
whose notice so sudden is
it almost makes me curse.

Shush now, she's awake. I'm frozen
by tiny onyx eyes glistening
in the unwelcome spotlight; I'm

hypnotized as she unfurls. Deliberate,
graceful. She hangs, still. Inches
between us. An angel inverted,

guarding her plastic kin,
insisting I leave their realm
and return to what's below.





Mother

by Toni Stauffer

As a curious 4-year-old, I looked in the dresser drawers, pawed through your undergarments. I loved the smooth, silky feel of your slips, the rough texture of nylons, and the smell of you—menthol, cigarette smoke, and perfume. And then I found the bottle of amber liquid with the colorful label. I had just begun to read enough to sound out some of the letters... W-----H-----I---when you snatched the whiskey bottle out of my hands and put it back in the top drawer. You picked me up, but I don't remember what you said. You were never angry, even when you were. I got that from you, the quiet simmer and calm, cool detachment. Even when you gave the babysitter a black eye for switching my little brother, I imagine you being stoic as you took and gave the blows, doing what was right, because no one was going to hurt your babies... except you.

Two years later and we were at my grandma's house in Alabama, the little two-bedroom house my grandfather built with his own hands. In the kitchen, green devil's ivy grew all long the top of the cabinets and draped gracefully down, green tendrils curling up at the ends into near-white, folded leaves. Above the sink, a cutting board my grandfather made—a thin, wooden board in the shape of a pig covered in pink Formica. On top of the fridge, there was a coin bank in the shape of a church. I watched her make jelly out of the big, purple grapes she grew in the backyard. Grandma made me waffles for breakfast. I don't have any memories of you, Mother, in the kitchen there.

You sat in the living room on the green sofa, a small coffee table in front of you and in the center of the coffee table lay a King James Bible. Grandpa had been a Nazarene preacher and grandmother a Sunday school teacher. You took out the photo album and I point to a picture of you as a child. We look so much alike that I think you are lying when you say it is you and not me. We were so much alike in many ways, except I have had the benefit of seeing your mistakes and not repeating them---well, most of them. No one ever talked about your drinking problem; there were not any family interventions.

I didn't know until I was older that your alcoholism was the reason your boyfriend, "Uncle Bill," broke your finger during your fight and we had to flee in the back of a police car. And the reason I never saw my two older brothers. Alcoholism put my little brother and I into an orphanage when the state deemed you unfit. Alcoholism is why I was molested, beaten, and raped during nine years of hell in a foster home. Alcoholism is why I was molested

by men in your life. Alcoholism was why I grew up without a father and why you lied about him, telling me he was a hero who died in the Vietnam war. You were a champion liar, the way you added details, the way you cried as you took another drink.

You called me not long after you were forced to move into a retirement home. You hated it there. You told me you were sleeping on the couch because a demon kicked you out of the bed. For a moment, I wondered if you were drinking again, but after 20 years of sobriety I refused to believe you would succumb. Besides, except for the improbable demon story, you sounded lucid. I suggested we call the priest, but you said no. You were afraid you would be called crazy and locked up.

So, I called my little brother, who said you were just being you and not to worry about it. He lived near you. I lived eight hours away, and I trusted his judgement. Besides, my little brother, your favorite, adored you and visited often. If something were wrong, he would know, wouldn't he?

You demanded that I not call a priest, so I called a paranormal agency and explained the situation. I asked them to burn some sage and pretend to clean the apartment. I was reminded of when I was seventeen and you showed up at the girls' home, that once was the orphanage. You were hallucinating from withdrawal and believed the Devil chased you. I'd never seen you so scared, so completely unhinged, in fear for your life. I convinced a nun to let me borrow her bottle of holy water under the condition that I not open it. And so, pretending to spray Satan with holy water and convincing you that I had brought you onto holy ground, I managed to get you inside where the adults studied my mother the lunatic after I left for school.

The paranormal society called back. They told me they didn't handle demons. A few days later I got the call from my little brother that you were dead. He found you lifeless, sitting on the couch with the phone on the floor at your feet. I couldn't afford to help with your funeral expenses. I couldn't even afford to go to your funeral. My husband and I had parted ways; I had transformed from a housewife with access to a six-figure income to a broke college student. I cried for your loss with the comfort of my children, who will someday know the loss of me and will hopefully be comforted by their children.

I am not the best mother and I wonder if the perfect mother even exists, but I am comforted by the fact that I didn't give up, give in to the darkness. I am always there for my kids. I sacrifice for them. I emotionally support my kids, and I'm involved as much as they will allow now that they are all adults. I taught them independence, honesty, and kindness. But I am

also sad that they didn't get to spend time with you except for rare trips. Even with your flaws, you were wonderful. You made people laugh. You were intelligent and witty. You loved country music and folk art. And I knew I was loved, even if you didn't always show it. When I miss you, I think about you and what you would probably say--I hear you call me "sister" as you always did. Even after everything you did, everything you didn't do, the bond between us was never severed. Even now I protect you, leave out details too painful, too controversial—too damning.

My little brother called to tell me he had your ashes. You wanted them thrown into the Mississippi. He couldn't bring himself to do it and felt guilty for breaking his promise. I knew how you had loved the river. I remember the many months you were gone on river, working as a barge cook. You would take me down to the docks. I held your hand as we walked across the cobblestones to the water's edge and listened to your stories. I saw friends greet you warmly and you belonged. I remember the distant look you would get, your half-smile when the barge horns echoed off the river late at night. The river brought you peace. But my brother had no need to feel guilty. You are dead and only the living can feel pain and their solace is what matters.

My share of dust still waits for my return, for that last trip to the river where I can finally say goodbye.

Untitled

by Arianna Marealle

I was raised on "sex sells" and

Bollywood

I confess to all those times I sat alone and on fire, sneaking

Glances at brazen Hollywood women

Watching as their bodies writhed beneath the flexing buttocks of a man

Lips opening in an O of contrived climax [fade to black]

But my bibi paid extra for satellite TV so the voices would sound familiar

At her house, we sprawled on toshaks to watch shy Bollywood sweethearts

Black hair bound like a rope down sareed back, flirtatiously fleeing capture

From a whiskered rajah

Playing coy

All the while succumbing to chaste surrender [no fade necessary]

[my disappointment palpable]

Am I not the daughter of clashing cultures?

My friends had boyfriends

I had daydreams

Imagine me

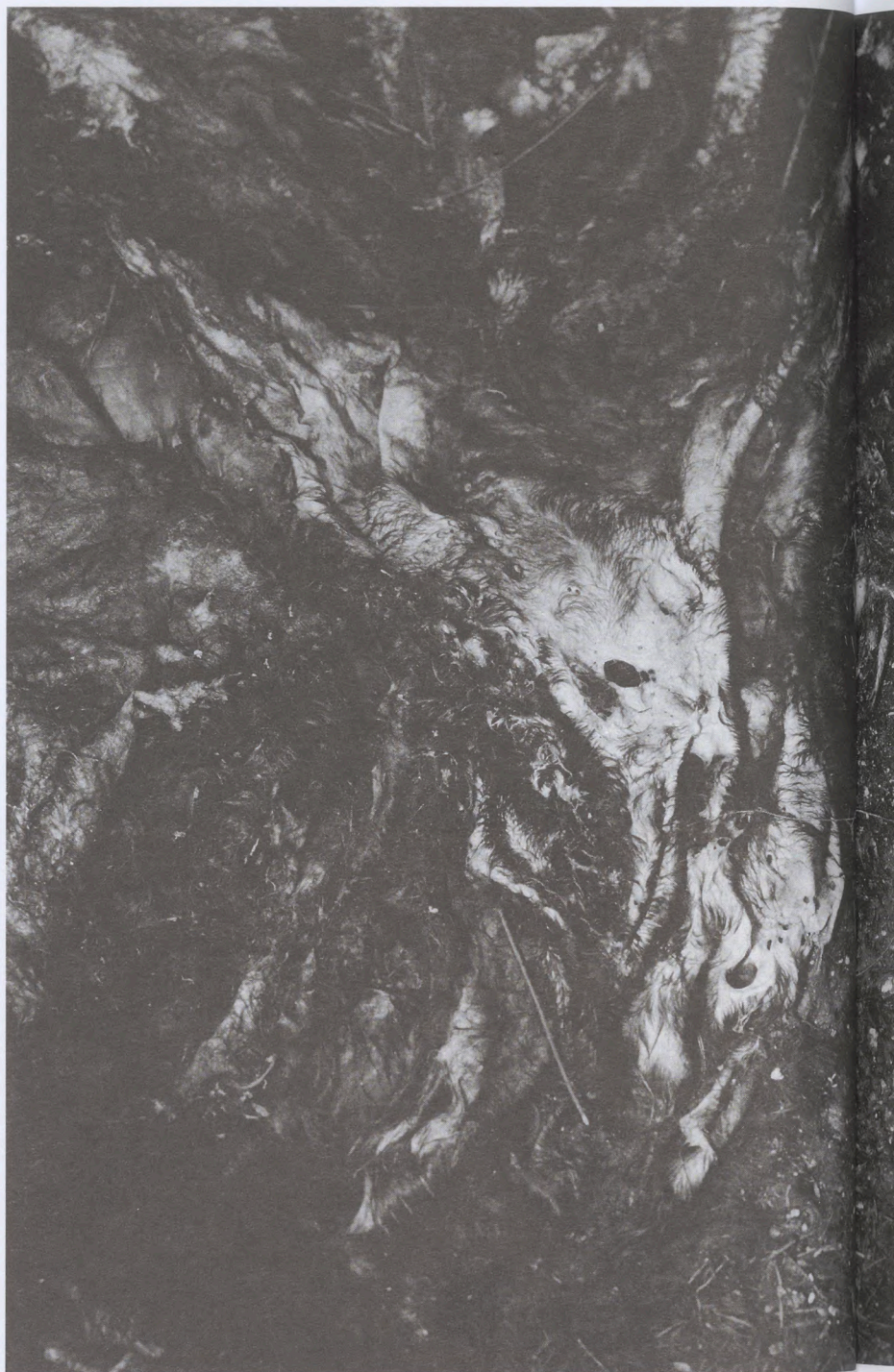
Young and curious

Welcoming clandestine kisses

Imagine me

Forehead pressed to a prayer rug, ashamed of it all

Like a young mistress straddling two lovers





Eliza Daffin

On The Head of The Head of State

by Najee Fareed

I didn't ask to be here at all.
Of all the suburban beauty supply
Stores in the whole world, I am unlucky
Enough to work in the Oval Office.

This isn't the fun old blowjob days
Of the 90s either. We don't have to debate the fact
That jet fuel can't melt steel beams.
Only history being made is on twitter.

44^{1/2} out of 45 isn't bad,
You guys sure know how to vote.
I understand this is violent knee jerk
Reaction to that raisin in your stick of butter.

Up until 1919, you guys really
Held all the power. But hell,
If we're talking numbers, 1919 did
53% so y'all looking pretty good.

Or so you thought. This isn't the white
Supremacy you were promised.
Niggas still running the streets for their
Rights. No billion dollar walls are in sight.

Tensions between North Korea and USA
Remain thicker than the head I rest on.
I have no dog in this fight. This head sits high
Regardless of how many die. Here is what I want:

I want to be left out of this charade.
Stop taking non-auspicious photos of me
When my tracks are showing, this job is hard!
I wasn't camera ready those days.

I'm very sure I'm unphotogenic.
Still probably even worse in reality.
A crusty old piece like me is not built for the spot-
Light. Let alone the presidency...*sigh*.

For the record, I tried to save you
All. I flailed on TV so often, prying
At your eyes, but you guys, the silent majority
Spoke too loudly to listen, feel, or see anyone else.

I wish I knew what was going on in
The head of our fiery carrot-tanned
POTUS. I'm just here to make him look good.
Never do. Should have lost on that alone.

Not counting:

- the pussy grabbing
- the racism
- the sexism
- the xenophobia
- mocking the disabled
- being completed inexperienced
- not knowing what climate change is
- additional sexual assault charges

The descent into madness continues. 2 more years.

Scenes From A Coffee Shop

by Taylor Aspinwall

The heat of the latte radiates into my fingertips. I sit in the corner booth, alone, and stare at the intricate leaf design floating at the top of the latte. I hear the barista talk about you, and my stomach drops; I want to disappear. If I could, I would submerge myself into the hot liquid, leaving this coffee shop without drawing attention to myself. You seem to make her happy, for now at least. I wonder if she knows that you flirted with her while you were still with me.

The smell of roasted coffee beans saturates the air. I trace the top of the mug with my finger, around in endless circles, a habit that I realize you started. I stop, and I picture you sitting across from me, coffee always in hand; a goofy grin plastered to your face, but somehow, there was always a hint of judgement behind your mocha-colored eyes, like I would never be good enough for you.

The clock on the wall read 4:00pm. You would have to leave soon to go study for a Chemistry test, but we had already spent most of the day together. I listened as you told me all about your marching band competition that you had coming up. We weren't able to meet for coffee in the afternoons anymore because you had band practice that lasted longer than it usually did. I was ecstatic about the theatre competition that I had coming up as well, but I didn't mention it. You would think I was trying to take away from your competition excitement. I listened and nodded at all of the appropriate places. For a while, I couldn't tell if the warmth I felt inside was from you or the latte. You finished a story about a friend of yours during practice one day, and the laughter it caused spread across your face and reached your eyes. You were always happy when you were talking about your life. I'm curious, looking back on our time that we spent together, whether the fact that I was a "pity date" to you crossed your mind during our coffee dates.

I reach out and grab the warm beverage, bringing it to my lips. The taste of chai and Christmas fills my senses, and I picture the caffeine rushing through my veins. Christmas. We had just started dating. I handmade you gifts. You gave me a poster of a band I had never heard before. You told me I would learn to love them. That poster sits in the back of my closet somewhere, collecting dust.

I take another sip; it's colder now. I push through to finish the remaining half of the drink. I notice the barista take out her phone and smile. It is a familiar feeling, but like the latte, those texts eventually become colder.

I grasp the handle and smile at my reflection in the black ceramic.

There is an aftertaste of cinnamon. You hated cinnamon, and I can't get enough of it. You were right when you said that we weren't good for each other. I drink the remaining few sips and gather my things. I bring the mug to the counter, smile at the barista, tell her that I'll see her tomorrow, and open the door to leave.

*

The brisk winter air whirls in behind me as I close the door to the coffee shop. She greets me from behind the counter. "The usual?" She knows my order by heart. I nod, as I lug my laptop over to my corner booth and spread everything out. Indie Christmas carols play over the loudspeaker, filling the space with child-like anticipation of the season. You broke up with her for another girl named Sarah or Samantha. She acts like she's okay with the fact that two days after the relationship was over your status on Facebook changed yet again, but her eyes tell me that she's struggling to stop herself from crying.

She brings the latte to my table and sits down in the booth with me.

We are the only ones in the street corner café. The heat from the inside fogs the windows, forming a barrier between us and the outside world. Our meetings became a routine: every Sunday at 7pm; she'd bring me my latte, and we would talk for hours.

We played soccer together as kids, but we drifted apart as we got older. The rivalry on the field would transform into a rivalry over you once we reached high school. You were also the factor that brought us together; we bonded over dating you, and I listened to her complain about you for weeks. She hides her pain behind a smile because she dated you for a lot longer than I ever did. I remember hiding my pain behind a fake smile, like she does, but mine quickly turned into a real one when I realized that I was better off without you.

I stay until she closes, and it is an unspoken agreement that we will meet here again next week.

*

The door chimes as I bring in the spring humidity with me. I go the corner booth as a deep, male voice greets me.

"What will you have?" I am so startled that when I whip around to look at the person behind the counter, my bag knocks over the sugar on the table. She is not standing in her usual spot. In fact, she's nowhere to be seen. I glance at my watch; it reads 7:30pm. The gruff man behind the counter stares at me like I've lost my mind. I laugh it off, tell him that I'll clean the sugar up, and search my bag for my wallet.

"Can I have a medium hot chai latte, double steamed?"

"Absolutely, that will be ---"

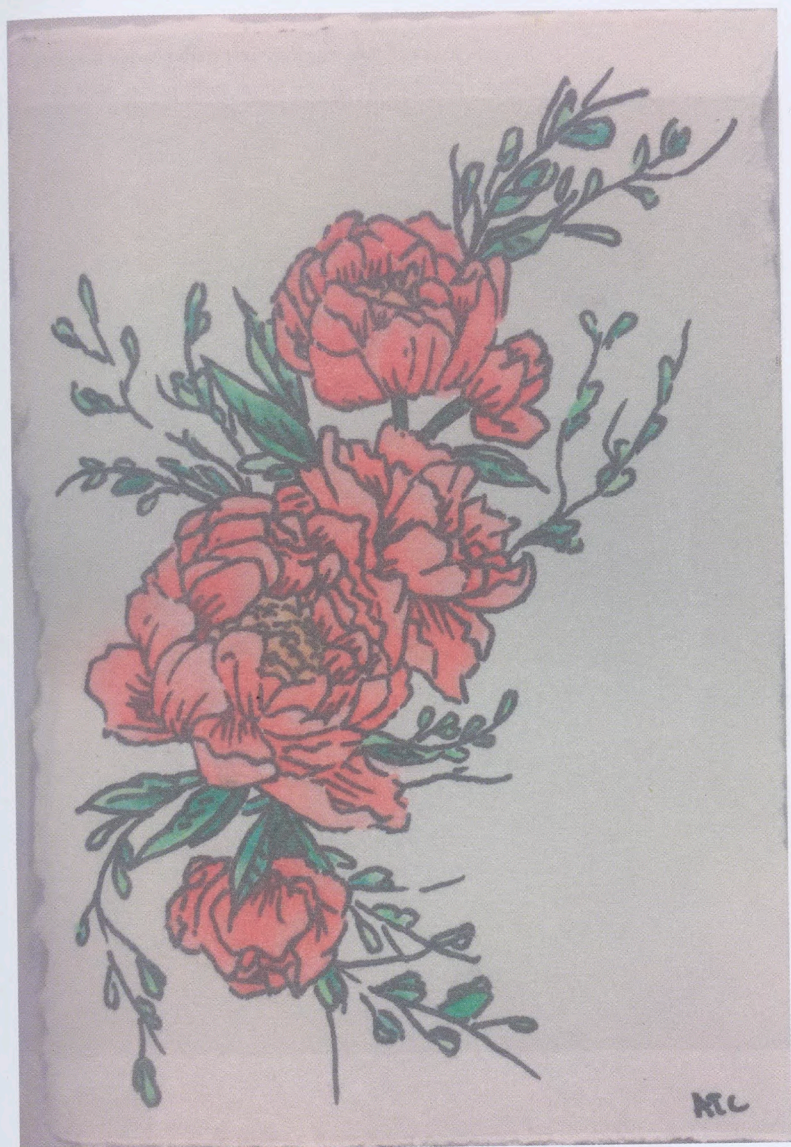
"\$4.69" I interrupt his statement and grin. The man doesn't make eye contact, but he lets out a muffled laugh.

"I'll have it out for you in a minute." He turns around and goes to work. I pull my phone out of my pocket. Her name runs across my screen. *Sorry, I forgot to tell you! This new guy I've been seeing is taking me out to dinner tonight, and he told me to ask off last minute. He's so sweet!* I send a quick *It's okay! Have fun!* and put my phone away.

I sit in the corner booth and drink my latte alone in silence. Occasionally, I make eye contact with the man behind the counter. He does a lot to act busy, but we don't talk.

*

I went to the coffee shop every Sunday at 7 for a few more weeks. Greeted by the male barista, he learned my order by heart. I saw her less and less until our meetings stopped all together. She seemed really happy with this new guy, and I started focusing on college. She is off to college somewhere out of state, and you joined the military. I've found a new coffee shop. The chai lattes aren't as good; there isn't enough cinnamon.



Blumengasse, by Ashley Clark



Boarded up Shotgun with Brick Wall on 10th Street, by
Christopher Gass

Morning Ghazal

by Najee Fareed

I need you most when the sunrises. All alone, I am
sure of that. Altogether, here lies the paradox of the AM.

Without you, my mourning would only be a morning.
I hate it, but no one will miss you more than I am

Missing you right now. I only miss you in the morning, I wish it
was sunset all the time, alas you live in the AM.

I love the sunset. All night you are sealed in my dreams so
when I awake, you live as my first thought in the AM.

It is not even yesterday yet,
But I feel as though you have forgotten who I am.

I am lost without you rising with the sun behind us. Do you know who I am?
No? I'll tell you. I am Najee, all the time. Even without you, I swear I am.

Being Poor

by Justin Briley

means being lied to by Moseses
who know there's still water in your stone.
Being poor means taking a punch
and punching back someone
somewhere very far away.
Being poor means you're a Stoic
because wing-beating panic
will get you fired.
Being poor means never quitting
a life striking and stroking
one out to the smooth, round curve
of long, hard
steel between your teeth. You come
because you imagine eating a bullet.
Being poor is lawyer's work,
file away your own case pro bono.
Being poor means, when the call comes,
(which it will) your first fear is how do I pay?
For the ten years that just disappeared,
buried beneath the frothing body on the floor,
fuck the funeral.

Being poor means your mother just died
in front of you
and your dad got home too late
as always.

Being poor is a gash wound up
behind a mask with cracks in it leaking
into a pillow
just like him.



Donors & Bearer, by Steven Bardon

Marlboro Man

by Lauren Miley

Paw-Paw started withering away the summer I turned sixteen. He stopped eating, sleeping, and leaving his home altogether, but it wasn't until he missed my birthday party that I realized he wasn't just getting older—he was getting sicker. By September, he was emaciated from drinking Ensures and eating granola bars, prone to coughing fits so violent that I once expected him to cough up fragments of blackened lung mass into his Kleenex. He was dying of cancer and he knew it—but he refused to go to the hospital until Daddy and Aunt Wendy practically dragged him by his bony arm to Charlie Norwood VA Medical Center in Augusta.

I stayed at home with Mama, anxiously awaiting updates on Paw-Paw's condition: he was doing fine and joking with his nurses, they were just waiting on some test results. But after two days in the hospital and a failed biopsy, he was on life support. Daddy came home, his round and youthful face drawn and pale—a face so like my grandfather's—and gray speckled the black hair around his temples. When I saw the pained expression on his face, I knew that time was running out. We packed up the car with snacks and water, and Daddy turned the car back towards Augusta.

I've never seen Daddy drive so recklessly as he did the day Paw-Paw passed. I realized somewhere between Jackson and Monticello that Paw-Paw wasn't going to make it through the night. We drove through one small town after another and I watched dry pastures, scorched from another unforgiving Georgia summer, flash by my window at 100mph. It should have taken three hours to get to the hospital. We arrived in one hour.

The hospital: tasteless, manufactured artwork cluttered the hospital walls; fluorescent lights bathed everything in a nauseating, industrial glow; a sterile, sour smell lingered on everything I touched, from the vinyl chair in the hospital room to the Styrofoam cup of cheap coffee I drank to stay awake through the night.

When I walked into my grandfather's room, I barely recognized the comatose man lying in the bed. Paw-Paw was a small man, but he looked shrunken tucked into the heavy, hospital-grade blanket. The lines in his face looked harsh, like deep crevices in a canyon. His prominent cheekbones sharp and jagged beneath his Native skin, now ashen under the unflattering glare

of the fluorescent lights. I traced the tangle of tubes sprouting from his nose, mouth, and wrists to a monstrous machine that fed him oxygen and fluids.

I reached out to touch his hand, but there was something so unfamiliar about this man that it felt like an invasion of privacy. I hesitantly placed my hand on his arm and touched waxy skin and brittle bone.

The day dragged on and the room grew crowded as relatives and family-friends dropped in to offer support, cry it out, and tell stories about my grandfather. They spoke about his childhood antics, his service in the U.S. Navy, his role as a husband and father, the delicious homemade doughnut recipe he'd perfected, his time playing music in honky-tonks around Georgia, and his quiet, gentle smile that earned him the nickname Smiley Miley.

The mood in the hospital room was changeable—one moment it felt like a family reunion, with jokes and chatter all around, the next moment everyone was crying and dabbing their eyes—but we did find some comfort in telling stories about my grandfather to keep his memory alive.

Paw-Paw leans back in a metal folding chair on his dock, a fishing pole gripped between his calloused hands, a pack of Pall-Malls, a smoking ashtray, and a can of Budweiser sit on the cooler beside him. He watches the brown water ripple, waiting for a bite. A few wrinkles frame his mouth and the corners of his eyes from smoking cigarettes since adolescence, but he's still quite young—only in his mid-fifties. His face is smooth and clean-shaven, his black hair combed neatly to the side. His sharp cheek-bones protrude from his skin, darkened from hours repairing cars and spending time on the lake—two clear indicators of his Native-American heritage, only his soft blue eyes hint to his Irish ancestry.

I sit on the dock beside him, my skinny legs hanging over the edge of the gnarled wood, a Little Mermaid fishing pole in my tiny hands. Daddy sits on the other side of me, showing me how to properly hold a fishing pole.

Gnats and mosquitoes bounce along the ripples of the water, looking for someone to bother, but we're coated from head to toe with OFF bug spray and the tangy smell of the chemicals mingles with the rancid smell of lake water. As the sun beats down on us, we sweat and sweat and sweat. My grandfather takes a sip of his Budweiser and lets out a satisfied "Ahhhh." A strong whiff of beer tickles my nose, I feel my mouth water as I wonder what the forbidden

elixir tastes like.

Later, I'll climb into the motor boat tied to the dock with Daddy and Paw-Paw, armed with a plastic bucket to fill with fish. Paw-Paw will man the boat and we'll speed around the lake, leaving behind massive ripples in the water that coax the fish to swarm towards our boat. Life is simple—it's just me, Daddy and Paw-Paw on the lake, enjoying the spray of muddy lake water on our faces. We'll stop the motor boat in the middle of the lake and try our luck in deeper water. By the end of the day, our bucket is filled with flopping fish, gills contracting as they struggle for oxygen in the dry sun.

Paw-Paw once had a cow named Billy who was a skilled escape artist. Billy was a plump black cow with spindly legs, a doltish creature who learned how to escape the small fenced field next to Paw-Paw's house. He wandered neighboring yards until my grandfather's neighbors grew tired of Billy's way-faring nature and threatened to call animal control. Imagine their shock when they woke one morning to find Billy the Cow munching on their petunias.

Billy was a staple of my childhood, but looking back now, I wonder if Paw-Paw bought the cow to entertain his grandchildren instead of its more practical use.

A memory: I'm all legs and arms, a skinny seven-year-old who can't quite decide if she's a girly-girl or a tomboy. Paw-Paw takes me by the hand and leads me through the field of knee-high grass to pet Billy. I match my grandfather's pace, taking broad steps through the field in my dainty, pink dress. We reach Billy the Cow and I rub my hands across his sleek black hide, soft and prickly all at once. I feed Billy some grass, jumping as his mouth encloses my palm and leaves behind a trail of slobber.

"Ewww," I scrunch my nose and look up at Paw-Paw. The crow's feet in the corners of his blue eyes crinkle and a smile breaks across his solemn face. He laughs hoarsely and pats Billy's head. I turn my attention back to Billy and gaze into his plain face, noticing the lush, beautiful eyelashes which fan out from his pure, brown eyes. Billy blinks and I see some understanding there.

After Nanny passed away in the 1980's, Paw-Paw chose to live a secluded life by the lake. His trailer was always dark, surrounded by a barrier of trees which kept the light from penetrating his fortress of solitude. The trailer remained trapped in time, unchanged since he lost Nanny, and it smelled

strongly of stale cigarette smoke and beer. Amidst the ghosts of the past, it was cluttered with an assortment of unusual objects that filled me with wonder as a child: western paperbacks sprawled across the coffee table, a statue of a hound-dog who guarded the door faithfully, a few stray guns propped against the wall, and guitars and microphones from Paw-Paw's performing days.

The most interesting thing at Paw-Paw's was a bizarre, decorative piece nestled on a bookshelf in the living room. The base of the figure was carved out of a dark, gnarled walnut wood reminiscent to the "natural" aesthetic trend of the 1970's, but sprouting from its base was the most unnatural, fibrous material ever created by modern machinery: a wiry synthetic hair that frizzed in every direction and covered two beady, brown eyes in the center of the creature's face.

Browned by cigarette smoke, I could practically feel the resin build-up as I ran my fingers through the fibers. Paw-Paw told me its name was Mike, so that's what I called him: Mike. The strange knick-knack became my favorite plaything at Paw-Paw's, but I never found out where Mike came from or how he ended up on my grandfather's bookshelf.

Once I was too old to play with toys, I forgot about Mike and left him abandoned on the shelf. I wouldn't think about Mike again until after Paw-Paw passed away, but when I returned to the trailer to help my family pack up his belongings, the first thing I searched for was Mike. I found him in the same place. On the bookshelf, covered in a film of dust and ancient cigarette smoke.

Most of my memories spent with Paw-Paw took place outside because his trailer smelled overwhelmingly of cigarette smoke, but when I wasn't outside petting Billy the Cow or fishing on the dock, I was inside with my parents and Paw-Paw, talking over drinks in the dark living room. Paw-Paw drank Budweiser, while my parents and I drank sweet tea.

The cigarette smoke left a film on everything in the trailer, even the freshly-washed drinking glasses. After every sip of tea, the smoke left a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. Sometimes I would cough dramatically, open the front door, and hang my head outside while taking big gusts of air, hoping that Paw-Paw might crush his cigarette in the ashtray, or maybe chuck the whole pack in the trash. But he would just smile at me, his eyes crinkling as he let out a wheezing chuckle that turned into a cough.

When it was time to leave, I would hug Paw-Paw goodbye and smell

the stale aroma of Pall-Malls and Budweiser cling to his shirt, lingering on his breath as he kissed me on the cheek. With a slow, drowsy smile he would say, "See you later, alligator," his voice slurred ever so slightly over each syllable.

"After a while, crocodile!" I responded, concluding our ritualistic goodbye.

As he hovered between the mortal world and the afterlife, Paw-Paw's wheezing breath whistled through the breathing tubes and provided a hideous soundtrack to our anxiety. He stopped breathing a few times and a hideous sound emerged from his throat, but he remained in a comatose state.

His heart rate spiked throughout the night. Each time this happened, I held my breath, gripped the arm of my chair, and stared at the heart rate monitor, willing him to live just a little longer. Then, once his breathing and heart rate stabilized, I exhaled and settled back into the chair. Another false alarm. After the tense aura in the room dissipated, I watched Paw-Paw like a soldier on guard duty, protecting him from Death's clutches. In the end, I couldn't protect him from the inevitable. Death came for him around midnight on September 9th, 2010.

The chatter had died down and we were barely holding up. The revolting hospital coffee I consumed earlier that day had worn off and left behind a queasy, leaden feeling in the pit of my stomach. We encircled the hospital bed as if preparing for a ritual and watched him uneasily until it happened.

The rapid beep of the heart rate monitor warned us first, then we heard the terrible, choking sound again. I watched his sunken chest rise and fall rapidly as he gasped for oxygen; it felt like he struggled to take those last breaths for hours, but it couldn't have been longer than fifteen seconds. Then, his body stilled and a silence settled in the room. The spike in his heart rate petered off into a straight line and the chilling wail of a digital beep reverberated off the faux stucco walls.

He was seventy years old when he passed away, which is enough time for a man to feel like he's accomplished enough in life to die in peace. But I only had sixteen years with him, and I didn't feel like I'd been given enough time to get know him as an adult; to see him as more than a sentimentalized figure from my childhood, but as a flawed man who made mistakes. In the months following his death, I had some trouble remembering what Paw-

Paw looked like before the cancer took him. I thought of him every day, but I couldn't seem to picture the same man I remembered from my childhood.

When I was a kid, he was a mythological figure, a quiet cowboy who wore plaid shirts, faded Wranglers, and mud-caked leather boots; who drank Budweiser and black coffee like water, smoked unfiltered cigarettes, strummed his guitar and sang classic country songs by Hank Williams, Willie Nelson, and George Jones. A Marlboro Man, who actually smoked Pall-Malls.

I kept his memory alive by listening to his favorite music, or looking at photographs of us from years earlier, when he still looked like himself. Slowly, I erased the visions of my dying grandfather which haunted my mind and re-stored those cherished memories from my childhood. As I healed from the loss, strange things also started happening: the local radio station played his favorite songs all the time, and I smelled cigarettes at random times throughout the day. When I loaded the dishwasher or carried laundry up the stairs, I would get a good whiff of cigarette smoke that smelled uncannily like his preferred brand. I didn't find these incidences particularly odd, so I just smiled and said hello to Paw-Paw.

I don't know if I was looking for a sign in the months following his death, or if there was a supernatural force behind the sounds and scents that reminded me of him, but once I received those signs, I knew it was time to let go.

Today is August 18th, his birthday. He would have turned seventy-seven. Still, even after seven years, I can't help but think about the what if's: *What if the biopsy hadn't failed? What if he hadn't gotten cancer? What if he hadn't smoked all of those packs of Pall-Malls? Would he be here today to celebrate his seventy-seventh birthday?*

On my way to classes this morning, I pause to observe an old black and white photograph that sits on the hall table. In the photograph, my Paw-Paw wears a stark white Navy uniform, his hair combed back in the style of James Dean, his face full of youthful spirit. He's close to my age in the photograph, perhaps even younger.

I think about the questions I should have asked him about his life when he was alive, questions that I wish I had the answers to now, questions I didn't consider asking him when he was alive because I was too caught up in my own

life to consider the extraordinary life he'd lived: *What was your childhood like? Can you tell me some Navy stories? How did you meet Nanny? Who taught you how to play guitar? Can you teach me how to play guitar? Hey, what's the deal with Mike?*

Sometimes I go to the garage where a lot of his belongings are stored and rub my fingers across the rough leather of his scuffed cowboy hat and gun holsters. If I'm at a party and Budweiser is served (which is rare in the age of craft beers), I pop open a cold one in his memory. On my way to campus, I listen to a playlist filled with country classics he used to perform at the honky-tonks—anything to keep his memory alive.

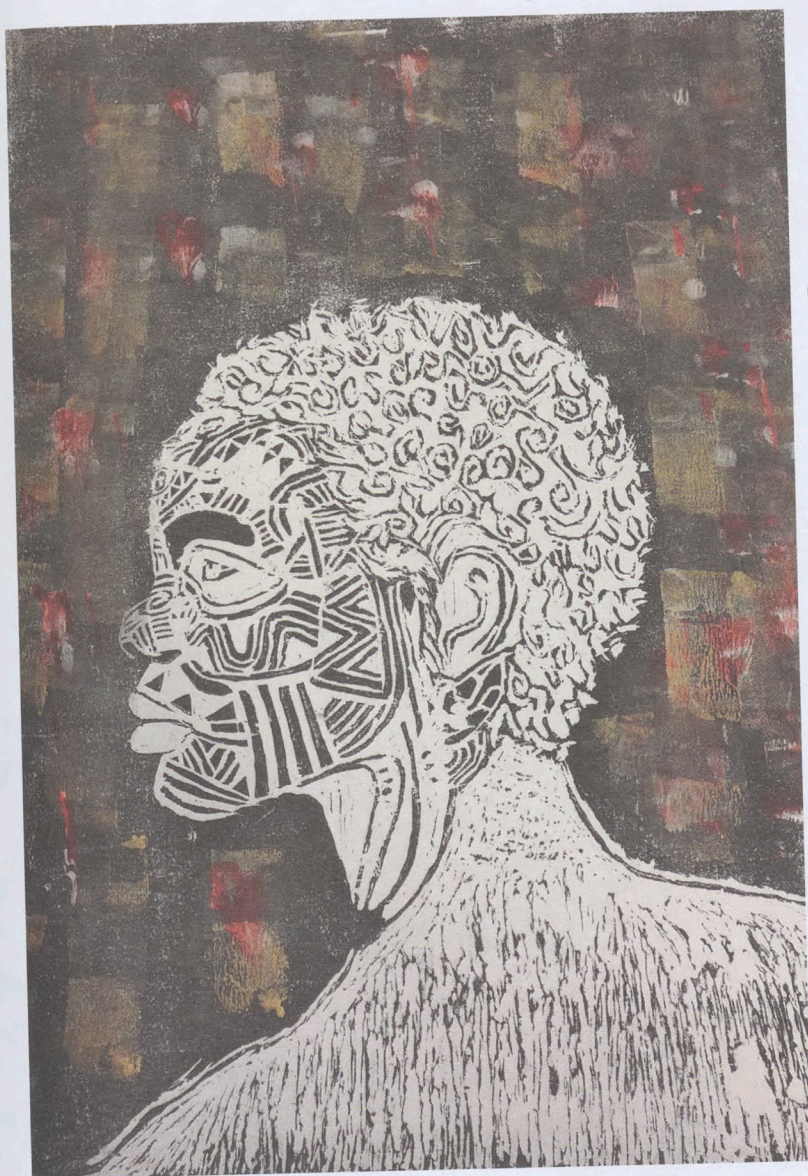


Treecutters, by Diamond Gass

Please Don't Catch Me On Fire

by Vivian Duncan

Don't you know that she is paper?
Don't hold your flame too near
I know you want to save her,
But you must leave her with her fear.
The darkness is all that she owns,
an ink-blotted paper in an abyss.
I know you feel it in your bones,
that something is amiss.
There is no light that you can flash,
unless you immerse her in a flame.
But if you did, she would be ash,
and you would be to blame.



Sistah, by Donedra Williams

Assimilation

by Brea Walker

Characters:

Winn: 25 female. She is grounded, practical, a little cautious towards others and life, but will do anything to protect Tay.

Tay: 15 female. She is mentally young, naive, lives between fantasy and reality. She should be complete opposite of Winn.

Spade: 25 male. He is rugged, looks out for himself above all, he has seen the hardship outside the wall and will not go back.

The Protector: 40 male. He should command a room, menacing. He single handedly runs life inside the compound with strict rules.

Radical 1: 25 female. She is the head of a group of rebels. She should be charismatic and charming but very intelligent.

Radicals and Guards: These groups can be made up of the same set of people. Different ages, sizes, genders. (Run crew could even double as them).

Setting:

Sometime in the future, after WWII. Nuclear bombs have wrecked the earth but inside the wall everything is preserved, pristine, and too perfect.

Scene 1:

Tay standing center stage, night time, she is dimly lit. SL corner Winn is watching from the darkness. A futuristic grey wall is seen in the background.

Tay: Oh be goo long, oh be fe ma ta! [*beat*]. He te fe so lou be [*suddenly a beam of light comes down, moves across the stage as if searching for Tay*]. Fe me too, fe me too! [*The beam moves over Tay. Tay outstretches her arms and looks up at the light.*] Oh be fe me too.

[Winn runs from the shadows, pushes Tay from the light. The beam quickly disappears.]

Winn: What the hell do you think you're doing? Are you trying to get yourself killed?

Tay: I just want to go home.

Winn: This is home. It has been for a long time. Get used to it.

Tay: They almost got me this time. [*continues chant*] Oh be goo lon-- [*Winn covers her mouth*].

Winn: Shut up! They aren't going to take you home. You'll go the Protector and they'll kill you. How many times have I told you that? C'mon Tay we have to go before they find us.

Tay: No Winn, I want to be found.

Winn: You idiot! They. Will. Kill. You.

Tay: So? I'm not living now. You're not living now. No one here is. If I go to the light they will take me home.

Winn: We're trying to live Tay. We're trying to make the best out of this. Don't you remember what happened? Don't you remember the destruction?

Tay: Please Winn stop.

Winn: The bombs.

Tay: Stop.

Winn: The death.

Tay: Please Winn.

Winn: The war!

Tay: Stop it, stop it, stop it!

(Beat).

Winn: We are safe here. A lot safer than we were out there. And we owe all that to The Protector.

Tay: No, no we're not. We're not people here. You're not you and I'm not me. You can't just lock people up inside themselves and say it's for their safety.

(Beat).

Winn: Listen Tay, that light isn't aliens, or whatever the hell I told you it was when you were a kid. Okay? It won't save you and it won't take you home. I made all that up so you would feel better, feel safe. But you're older now, you've got to stop pretending. Now what is that light?

Tay: It's alie--

Winn: No. What is it?

(Beat).

Tay: It's the curfew light.

Winn: Good, and what will it do?

Tay: Alert the guards.

Winn: Who will what?

Tay: Take me away.

Winn: To what? [Beat]. Tay they will take you away to what?

Tay: To kill me.

Winn: That's right. C'mon let's go back to the dwelling before they find us.

[Ent Spade. He is wearing torn, dirty, everyday clothes. The difference between him and the girls should be very obvious upon first look. He is stumbling about clearly weak and unstable. The women have not noticed him yet].

Spade: Do either of you have food?

[Both women jump in shock].

Winn: *[Standing in front of Tay].* I'm sorry but we can't help you.

Spade: *[Creeping closer].* Please, I just need something to eat.

Winn: You'll have to find an official sir. They will be able to help.

Tay: *[Whispering to Winn].* It's past curfew they won't help him. Let's take him back to the dwelling.

Winn: *[Looking around nervously].* Fine, anything to get you back to the dwelling.

[Lights down].

Scene 2:

Lights up on a well furnished room. There should be no T.V, newspapers, or other media based items. An intercom is in the corner. The room should appear too clean, too organized, very sterile. All one color.

Winn: It's past dinning hours but I'm sure we have food in here somewhere.

Tay go and look. *[Tay exits in search of food. Winn turns to Spade very harsh].* Who are you?

Spade: My name is Spade.

Winn: No. Who are you? You're not from here. I can tell.

Spade: You're right. I'm from outside.

Winn: How did you get past the wall?

Spade: I came in through the wall.

Winn: What?

Spade: Yeah through the wall. There's a weak spot, a hole.

Winn: Where? *[No response].* Where?!

Spade: I dunno... The far side. Where all those lights are.

Winn: You have not been assimilated yet. Are you from a strike zone?

Spade: No, not directly.

Winn: Could you be active?

Spade: No, I don't think so.

Winn: You don't think so? You have to be sure. You can't come in here spreading the radiation.

Spade: Look! I just came here for safety. I need food, water. There isn't anything left out there.

Winn: No, no you can't be here. You have to be assimilated. Once you've been assimilated I'll be happy to help you.

Spade: So you're just going to throw me out for the night?

[Tay enters. Sitting down food and a cup water in front of Spade. Spade quickly eats and drinks].

Tay: Don't worry no one is going to throw you out.

Winn: He hasn't been assimilated. He can't stay here.

Tay: [*Ignoring Winn*]. Are you from outside the wall? [*Spade nods yes*]. What's it like? [*no response.*] Please, it's been such a long time since I've been out there.

[During the following conversation Winn is slowly walking away, picks up a phone and begins quietly talking. Lights dim on her and downstage is illuminated to draw attention away from her].

Spade: What do you think it's like? It's bad, okay?

Tay: [*Shaking head*]. Bad? No.

Spade: Yeah. It's terrible. The war, those nukes they dropped, fucked everything up. We don't have any clean water. People are killing for scraps of food.

Tay: It can't be that bad.

Spade: Can't be that bad? I saw a man kill over a can of dog food. Do you know what that's like? [*Beat*]. No. How could you? You're inside this cushy little wall... Look I couldn't take it anymore. Those people out there are turning into fuckin' animals. The radiation is fucking up their minds. People weren't meant to live through that shit.

Tay: So you came inside the wall for protection?

Spade: You're damn right I did. I finally came to my fucking senses. I don't care how much freedom is out there. It doesn't beat the safety in here.

Tay: You don't mean that. [*Beat*]. What are the trees like?

Spade: What?

Tay: The trees. What color are they, how tall?

Spade: Trees don't withstand nuclear blast kid. They're all gone.

Tay: No...no that's impossible. I heard there used to be trees big enough for cars to drive through. [*Beat*]. Well what about the stars? Can you still see them? We can't see them from here. Are there still millions? The constellations they have to exist.

Spade: I... look I'm sorry. I don't know what to tell ya. All that smoke, the radiation fucked up the air I guess, the atmosphere. I don't fucking know. You can't see the stars okay. And if you could you wouldn't have time to look at em.

[Tay begins to cry. Suddenly guards, heavily armed, enter and survey the room. They take up Spade and begin carrying him out. Tay goes towards them but Winn wraps arms around her to stop them. The guards exit with Spade.]

Winn: He had to be assimilated Tay. I had to do it.

Tay: What have you done? They'll ruin him.

Winn: He was already ruined. He was ruined when he chose to stay outside the wall and snuck in. [*Beat*]. This will help and I don't want to hear another word on it.

Tay: He was our chance out of here.

Winn: What do you mean? You heard what he said. Why would you still want to go outside the wall?

Tay: I don't believe him. It isn't that bad.

Winn: How can you not believe him? He's been living out there the entire time. He would know better than anyone else.

Tay: But it isn't what I remember or what I've been told.

Winn: Been told? By who? *[Beat]*. Tay, by who? Who has been telling you about all this?

Tay: The Radicals.

Winn: The who?

Tay: The Radicals. They're a group of people like me. They just want to escape and go back to the way things were before. Their the ones who have been digging into the wall. The ones who probably let Spade in.

Winn: Tay you can't be a part of that. You can't go against The Protector. If you go sticking your neck out, you'll get it chopped off. You're messing with things you don't understand.

Tay: I understand plenty Winn. I'm not afraid like you. I see what could be, all you ever see is what was. You can't spend your life inside a wall, especially the one you've created for yourself.

Winn: Go to sleep Tay.

[Tay doesn't move].

Tay: Winn I'm sorry. I didn't mean--

Winn: Go!

[Quickly Tay exits. Winn sits on the couch center, head in hands. Beat. Stands and exits SR].

Scene 3:

Lights up on the far side wall. A group of Radicals digging away at wall with makeshift tools. All very silent. Winn Enters SL

Winn: What do you think you're doing! *[No response]*. You have to stop. *[No response]*.

Radical 1: They won't speak. They won't stop.

Winn: I'll alert the guards!

[Winn beings taking their tools from them in a mad scramble. The radicals remain uncaring, unphased.]

Radical 1: There is our silent protest.

Winn: This is not a protest. You're destroying the wall. Do you know someone got in here?

Radical 1: What? That's impossible. We are very careful.

Winn: Well he got in and when he tells the guards where, you'll all get reassimilated.

Radical 1: That is the price we're willing to pay.

Winn: Look the hole is big enough. You don't like it here go, all of you! Go! *[No one moves]*. That's what I thought. You're all too scared. You're not protesting, not trying to change anything. You're just trying to cause trouble, get attention. You wouldn't step one foot out there. Because you know it's safer in here, you know how good you have it. But you're putting people in danger. You've been speaking to a young girl yes? *[No response]*. Her name is Tay. And you've been filling her head with fairy tales right? Right?!

Radical 1: We speak to whoever wants to listen.

Winn: Look, I don't care what you do but you're making her believe lies. And I won't let it happen. Don't ever speak to her again. And you have 1 day to fix this or I will alert the guards.

Radical 1: You are one and we are many. What do you think you can accomplish? Do you think your Protector has time to listen to one small lamb? And if he did you could never name us all, you could never prove who we were. But let's say by some miracle he listens and you do single us out, you'd be convicting Tay for the very same crime. There is nothing you can do. It is time to break down the wall and go back into Earth where we belong.

[Radicals cheer. Lights down].

Scene 4:

Lights up on Spade in clear cylinder. A band has been put around his head. Guards with hazmat suits circled around the cylinder. They are checking him for radiation. Sounds of static and beeping should be heard.

Spade: What is all this?

[A guard presses a button. Then a woman's robotic voice is heard over a loudspeaker].

Loudspeaker: Welcome. Right now you are undergoing the process of assimilation. This is going to better equip you for the lifestyle inside the wall. You are in phase 1 or what we call Containment. As we speak you are being monitored for radiation poisoning. This is for your protection and the protection of everyone else. Do not worry this is completely painless. Those beeps you're hearing are just the scanners used to detect your radiation level. Stay calm. You've been through so much already, this is the easy part. Once you hear a succession of four buzzes your scansion will be complete. Then we can continue.

Spade: *[Speaking to the guards]*. And this thing on my head. What is it?

[No response. Four loud long buzzes happen].

Loudspeaker: Scansion is complete. The results show that you've scanned

with Moderate Radiation. Stay calm. That just means you'll have to stay inside the containment cylinder until the radiation can be washed away. Unfortunately this process will not be as painless. The chemicals and pressure used to get rid of radiation are quite harsh but these methods have proven to work. Just stay calm and it will be over in no time. I'll begin counting down and at zero the pressurized valves in the cylinder will activate. Ready? 3...2...1...--

[The 0 becomes drawn out and eerie as the Loudspeaker is turned off by The Protector. The valves have not activated].

Spade: What? What's going on?

The Protector: We do not assimilate criminals.

Spade: I didn't break any law.

The Protector: You snuck in. Damaged the wall. Hide. Fled. Put my residents in harm's way. So by me you broke laws.

Spade: And who are you?

The Protector: I am The Protector. I keep things in order here. I keep the people safe. How did you get in here? *[No Response]*. Look, that device on your head is going to send shocks to your temporal lobe. Normally, we use this for assimilation and these shocks range from a tingle to a slight jolt. But I am not above using it for persuasion. We have the power to crank it up to seizure level. We can fry the answers out of you. So stop playing renegade and wasting my time. Now how did you get in here? *[No response. The Protector motions to guard who is holding a small box. The knob is cranked up and sound of electricity. Spade screams.]* How did you get in here?

Spade: Through a hole in the wall.

The Protector: Impossible. *[Shock is intensified]*. There are no breaches in our security. We take the safety of our residents very seriously.

Spade: No, there is. I can show you where.

The Protector: What is your purpose here?

Spade: Safety.

The Protector: Age?

Spade: 25.

The Protector: Where were you on the day of the first bomb strike?

Spade: Home, with my parents. I was only 15.

The Protector: Did you live in a strike zone?

Spade: No, on the outskirts.

The Protector: Why did you come through the wall and not the main gate?

Spade: I don't know. *[The Protector looks to other guards. Shock lowers]*. It wasn't planned or anything. I saw the hole, made a split decision. I couldn't take it

anymore out there.

The Protector: Get him out of here and throw him back outside the wall.

[The Protector starts to exit].

Spade: Wait! No! Please, don't put me back out there. I'll do anything, I'll go through the assimilation. Please.

[Beat].

The Protector: Intensify the band and begin the shower. Then put him in the dwelling.

[The Protector exits. Lights out. Flashes of light as shock sound gets louder].

Loudspeaker: Ready? 3...2...1...0 *[Sound of high water pressure. Spade screams].*
Stay calm.

Scene 5:

Lights up. Center stage Spade is unconscious. The Radicals are circled around him, Tay is amongst them. He is now wearing the same clothes as the other dwelling member. Bruises can be seen on his body. Radicals are talking in whispers. Spade begins to gain consciousness.

Radical 1: Assimilation has not been easy for you.

Spade: Where am I? Who are you?

Radical 1: You are amongst friends. You're safe here.

Spade: *[Indicated to Tay].* You're the girl that helped me last night.

Tay: Yes. My name is Tay. I'm... I'm sorry Winn alerted the guards. She was trying to do the right thing. You know that right? She was trying to help.

Radical 1: You do not have to speak up for her.

Spade: You're the one who asked about the... *[beat].*

Tay: The trees.

Spade: Yeah. Why couldn't I remember that?

Radical 1: You went through assimilation. Your mind underwent a lot of stress. Don't worry your memories will come back to you. The strong ones always do.

Tay: He should rest.

Radical 1: Not yet, we need answers. What is your name?

Tay: He's name is... *[Radical 1 holds up her hand to silence Tay].*

Radical 1: What is your name?

Spade: Spade

Radical 1: Good. And you're from?

Spade: Outside the wall.

Radical 1: Great Spade. Now listen, I head a group of Radicals, free thinkers. We need to know what lies beyond the wall.

Spade: I already told her [*indicated to Tay*].

Radical 1: Yes, but think harder. We need more details. Are there many people out there?

Spade: Yeah, I think so.

Radical 1: Are people still dying from the radiation?

Spade: The really bad cases already passed on. The rest of us stay away from the strike zones so we aren't affected.

Radical 1: Are their others trying to get in the wall?

Spade: Only a few but more will come when the food runs out.

Tay: [*Whispering to Radical 1*]. He said they can't see the stars anymore.

Radical 1: Will you help our efforts?

Spade: What efforts? To escape?

Radical 1: Not exactly.

Tay: We aren't trying to escape. We're trying to free everyone. Isn't that right? [*Radical 1 nods yes*].

Spade: What?

Radical 1: We are in a movement of weakening the wall. We don't want to leave. We want others in. With them they will bring the truth.

Spade: And the radiation, and the looting, and the killing.

Tay: No. The only way to keep everyone safe is to tear down the wall from the inside. That way people, like Winn, will leave. They need a little push.

Radical 1: That's right and we are giving them that push.

Tay: It's for their own good.

Spade: Do you hear what you're saying? You're going to force people into this and if they don't follow along you'll let the looters, the radiation, kill them.

You think you're doing this for their own good? That's exactly the same reason those bombs were dropped, the same reason the war started. You people don't get to decide what's best for everyone! You're crazy. You're all crazy!

Radical 1: So you are against our efforts? It makes no difference.

[Radical 1 begins to walk towards Spade but is stopped by the intercom system coming on. Over the speaker The Protector can be heard]

The Protector: Hello, Residents. It has been brought to my attention that some of you are unsatisfied with your living conditions. You are going out of your way to demonstrate protest. As you know this is strictly forbidden. Even worse some individuals have been defacing the wall. In case you've forgotten that it is punishable by death. When I find the criminals they will be put through reassimilation if not worse. For the safety of one, for the safety of all.

[Group of Radicals approach Radical 1 with worry and question. Spade quickly exits SL.]

Lights down.]

Scene 6:

[Lights up. Later that night, Winn is in her dwelling. Spade knocks on the door. Winn answers].

Winn: What are you doing here? [Spade barges in the door]. You've been assimilated. Good.

Spade: Look I know you don't know me, and I don't know you but I had to go somewhere. I mean I just go here. I just got to safety and they are trying to take it away from me. From all of us!

Winn: Our safety? Wait, who's trying to take it away?

Spade: The... the Renegades. No, no... the Reformers... no the um.

Winn: The Radicals?

Spade: Yes!

Winn: They are just a few people making a racket. They couldn't do any real damage.

Spade: No. No, they are. They're trying to destroy the wall and let people in. They want to force people back outside. All of us. And those that don't follow them are going to die.

Winn: They could never do that. The Protector wouldn't let them.

Spade: Did The Protector stop me from coming in? Did he stop them from protesting. By the time anything is done it will be too late.

Winn: You think we can just walk over to them and politely ask them to stop. It doesn't work like that, I've tried. So what? We find them and bash their brains in. We couldn't do that either. So what? What do you think we could do?

Spade: I think we know who they are.

Winn: Why do you think I know who they are?

Spade: Because Tay is one of them.

[beat].

Winn: You saw her with them?

Spade: Yeah.

Winn: And she was agreeing with killing people who didn't comply?

Spade: I think Tay is just a confused kid. But we can use that. She's got an in with them. We go find her and then all three of us can go to The Protector. We'll know everyone's names, their plans--

Winn: And Tay will be accused of the exact same thing.

Spade: They'll go easy on her because she helped stopping the group.

Winn: You've been here one day. That's not how it works. The safety of one, for the safety of all. They won't see Tay any differently than the rest of those

Radicals.

Spade: Isn't it worth trying?

Winn: Not if Tay is going to get in trouble.

Spade: Fine. I hope you can live with yourself when you've sacrificed everyone for her.

[Spade ext. Lights down]

Scene 7:

Radicals, including Tay, on stage. Winn ent SL. Radicals being moving to stop her.

Winn: No, it's okay. I'm only here to talk to Tay. That's all *[Tay gesture for Radicals to stand down]*. Tay, what are you doing? I thought I told you to stop this.

Tay: This has to happen Winn. If the aliens wouldn't take me I had to find my own way out.

Winn: There are no alie-- Look what they are trying to do is dangerous. It's more than leaving. A lot of people could get hurt.

Tay: No one is going to get hurt. We're all going to escape.

Winn: Why would you want to leave here, leave me?

Tay: That's the thing Winn, I'm not leaving you. When the wall is broken you'll remember how great it was out there, then you'll come with me.

Winn: Is that the crap they've been telling you? When the wall is broken people could die. Without the wall the radiation and the outsiders will come in. A lot of people don't want to leave.

Tay: Everyone will start over

Winn: Tay we've started over enough. Come back to the dwelling with me. Please Tay. Please.

[Beat. Group of guards break in. In the back of the group is The Protector and Spade. Guards begin grabbing Radicals. The last one grabbed is Tay and she is taken away].

Winn: *[To The Protector]* Please don't hurt her. She's just a child. Please don't kill her. She can be reassimilated. She's young. She has a chance. These people have done this to her. She isn't to blame. Please Protector, please. Promise me. Just reassimilate her.

[Protector nods once. Ext. Winn shoves Spade].

Winn: What have you done?

Spade: The same thing you did to me. It wasn't safe. They couldn't be here. They had to be reassimilated.

[Spade exts. Winn sits down, cries. Lights down].

Scene 8:

Much later that night. Lights up on Winn in dwelling. Spade knocks on door.

Winn: Come in.

Spade: Why did you call for me. I'm probably the last person you want to see now.

Winn: I've been thinking about it for a long time now, and you were right. I let my feelings for Tay cloud my judgement. I shouldn't have been so blind.

Spade: I'm sorry Winn, but you do see why I had to do it.

Winn: Yeah, I know. This is probably for the best. Tay will be reassimilated and then she'll be happier here.

Spade: Will they all be reassimilated?

Winn: No.

Spade: Why not?

Winn: Once you reach a certain age you get deemed a "lost cause". If you haven't adjusted to compound life by then you never will. The assimilation wouldn't work, so they don't waste their time.

Spade: What happens to those people?

Winn: You know what happens to them.

[Beat. Winn jumps up and starts frantically searching].

Spade: What are doing?

Winn: Looking for the photo.

Spade: What photo? *[Winn finds photo and shows it to S].* Is this from before the war?

Winn: Mhmm.

Spade: How do you have it? They didn't confiscate it?

Winn: I hit it when I got here. I couldn't let them take it.

Spade: This is your family?

Winn: It was, yes.

Spade: Your mom looks like you.

Winn: We were told that a lot.

Spade: What happened? The day you lost them I mean.

Winn: I saw the mushroom cloud. We weren't prepared. We lived in such a small town we never thought the bombs would be dropped on it... but they were, two of them. Those who weren't killed directly in the blast, got sick from the radiation.

Spade: And you?

Winn: I got sick, then I got better. I was one of the first groups of people brought here.

Spade: Why are you showing me this?

Winn: I don't know. I guess it's time to admit how happy I was outside the wall.

Spade: So you do think about leaving sometimes?

Winn: Of course I do. I think everyone does. But I also remember how scared I was out there, seeing what man could do when left to their own devices.

[Beat].

Spade: I remember.

Winn: Tay didn't. She was so young when the war happened. I remember her first day in here. She was so scared and alone. I tried to help her. I think because she reminded me of my little brother.

Spade: Why is that? I mean why let us remember? Wouldn't it be easier to just brainwash us. Take away any desire we have to leave.

Winn: They couldn't. They couldn't figure out the science behind it. Strong memories wouldn't go away, not completely. People would forget for a moment then they would be reminded, a blue flower, a word, a similar face. And the mental wall would come crashing down. When that wall falls all those caged memories spilled out at once. People couldn't handle it. They would scream, cry, kill themselves. *[Beat]*. So they decided to let us keep the memories, to keep us sane, keep us safe.

Spade: So that's all we get to have is the memories.

Winn: That's all we need.

[Blaring alarms sounds].

Spade: What's going on?

Winn: Someone has escaped assimilation. Damnit.

[Winn runs out of dwelling followed by Spade. Lights down.]

Scene 9:

Lights up. Tay is seen running across stage. She is trying to make it to the hole in the wall. Armed guards are chasing after her, followed by the Protector. Winn and Spade run on stage, opposite of Tay.

Winn: Tay stop!

The Protector: Acquire target!

Winn: Tay they are trying to help!

The Protector: Don't let her escape!

[Tay is now at the hole. She begins crawling through].

Winn: Tay please!

Tay: I'm sorry Winn. I'll see you soon.

[Tay crawls through the hole and vanishes].

The Protector: Eliminate threat!

[Guard aims over the wall. Lines up shot. Sound of gunshot.]

Guard: Threat eliminated. *[Guard faces Protector]*. For the safety of one.

The Protector: For the safety of all.

[Guards and The Protector exit. Winn runs towards the hole. Spade stops her].

Spade: There isn't anything you can do.

Winn: They'll just leave her out there. She'll die.

Spade: Winn stop.

Winn: She'll die. She'll die. She'll die.

Spade: Winn look, look. She's outside the wall. She finally made it. That's where she wanted to be. She'll be happy.

[Spade ushers Winn away. She is muttering to herself. Lights out].

Scene 10:

Same night. Past curfew. Winn and Spade in dwelling.

Winn: I know she didn't make it.

Spade: She could have.

Winn: Threat eliminated, that's what they said. The guards wouldn't miss the shot.

Spade: Who knows what they shot. They don't know what they're looking at over that wall. It could have been a looter, or some mutated animal, maybe a tree.

Winn: Do you really believe that?

Spade: I have to.

[Beat].

Winn: Do you think she was right? Do you think outside the wall is better?

Spade: No.

Winn: You don't think we're prisoners?

Spade: I think this is the way it should be done. When people have too many freedoms they drop bombs on each other.

Winn: Do you think we're really living?

Spade: I think we're surviving.

Winn: I miss how it used to be.

Spade: So do I.

Winn: I miss the stars like Tay did. When she was a kid and first got here that's all she would talk about. The damn stars. She told me how her dad bought a telescope for her birthday and every night they'd go out and use it, even when it was cloudy. She swore to me once that she saw a flying saucer. You know what I said? I said I'd seen them too and that I had talked to them. I said they came to me once in the dwelling and told me when the time was right they'd take me away from here. It was a story, you know, something to make her smile. But she took it to heart. She never forgot. She tried to make her own telescope, find alien languages, chant to them. And I didn't have the heart to tell I'd made it up until a couple of days ago. Maybe if I had let her believe it

she'd still be here, waiting for them.

[Long pause. Winn gets up and starts to exit.]

Spade: Where are you going? *[No response]*. It's past curfew.

[Winn ext, followed by Spade. Lights quickly fade. Lights come back up. Winn standing center stage, night time, she is dimly lit. SL corner Spade is watching from the darkness.

The wall is seen in the background.]

Winn: Oh be goo long, oh be fe ma ta! *[(beat)]*. He te fe so lou be *[suddenly a beam of light comes down, moves across the stage as if searching for Winn]*. Fe me too, fe me too! *[The beam moves over Winn. Winn outstretches her arms and looks up at the light.]* Oh be fe me too.

Spade: Winn come on get back to the dwelling.

Winn: Oh be goo long, oh be fe ma ta!

Guard voice: Get back to your dwelling resident. It's past curfew.

Winn: He te fe so lou be.

Guard Voice: Resident now.

Spade: Do what he says Winn.

Winn: Fe me too, fe me too!

Guard voice: You've been warned.

Winn: Oh be fe me too.

[The spotlight is directly over Winn. She is looking up, continuing chant. Sound of gunshot. Spotlight out as Winn falls to ground.]

End



Malignant, by Miranda Fortenberry

Beauty Becomes The Beast, or
The Female Gaze in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*
by Edna Robinson

Carol Ann Duffy's *New Selected Poems* features a collection of favorites from her 1999 book of poetry, *The World's Wife*, which reimagines stories from history, myth, and popular culture from a female's perspective, usually the wife of the male character of the story whose role is only highlighted under the male gaze, unimportant and goes largely unmentioned. The "male gaze" is defined as the act of depicting the world and women from a masculine point of view in which the female is a passive role, which usually presents women as objects of pleasure. One of the most interesting themes in this collection is the shift to the female gaze and its commentary on the classic tale of Beauty and the Beast. This can be observed in *Mrs. Beast*, *Queen Kong*, and *Little Red Cap*.

In the original story of *Little Red Riding Hood*, Little Red is a child, delivering a basket of food to her sick grandmother who lives in the woods and is stalked and tricked by the Big Bad Wolf, a beast, who has eaten her grandmother and eventually has to be saved by an axe-wielding woodsman. There are many versions of this tale but those few points remain true through most variations. Duffy turns this narrative in a different direction, making it a coming of age story, which according to Duffy is semi-autobiographical about her first relationship with a male poet (Wood 2005). The opening line, "At childhood's end," indicates that Little Red is leaving innocence behind for the new and unexplored territory of womanhood (Duffy 157). She sees this wolf in a clearing at the edge of the woods and he's reading his own poetry aloud to himself. She is immediately drawn to this bad boy poet and "made quite sure he spotted" her (Duffy 157). This poem is in the past tense, so the speaker seems to be looking back on why she made the choices she did. She says that she essentially wanted him for the poetry, knowing that he "would lead [her] deep into the woods, away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place" (Duffy 157). She's fallen in love with this wolf and after a night together she goes to the woods and captures a white dove, which she brings back to the cave and it flies straight into his mouth. This image seems to symbolize a willing sacrifice of purity and innocence that she is feeding to her wolf poet and after he is satiated and sleeping she goes to the back of the lair where he keeps walls of beautiful books. This is another obvious parallel to the Beauty and the Beast story. She immerses herself in the "music and blood" of the written word and in those words she comes to life (Duffy 158). This is the turning point of the poem where the speaker comments on the folly of

her youth. She says, "it took ten years in the woods to tell that a mushroom stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds are the uttered thoughts of trees, that a greying wolf howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out" (Duffy 158).

Without knowing all of the details of Duffy's first relationship, this is the part that seems most autobiographical, partially because of the specificity in the length of time and also because this is the section that feels the most critical. The imagery of the mushroom stoppering the mouth of the corpse seems like a comment on the failures of the self because she's let herself die off, her own words and thoughts are stoppered from a fungus that she has allowed to grow. Her critique of her wolf lover is essentially that he only consumes the creations of others and regurgitates the same old words year after year and never changes or grows. When she realizes this she picks up an axe, filling the role of the woodsman from the original story, and frees herself after a brief period of destruction where she "hacks up" some of the forest and animals to see how they react. Little Red chops the wolf "from scrotum to throat" and sees the "virgin white of her grandmothers bones" which takes us back to the path of the original story while also making you feel justified in the end of the relationship because of something he's taken from her beyond the literal (Duffy 158). At the end of the poem the speaker is back in the present, "out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone" (Duffy 158). Little Red had to go on a murder spree to get out of this relationship she's outgrown and although she is singing, which would indicate happiness, there is also a sense of sadness in that heavy comma between "singing" and "all alone" (Duffy 158).

The moral of the original story is essentially that a young lady shouldn't talk to strangers because they might hurt you. However, there is more than one type of wolf and more than one way to consume a person. Duffy's allegory ends on a darker but slightly more positive note. The speaker did not allow the wolf to consume her entirely and managed to get herself out of that relationship while still appreciating what she learned from him and looking back on certain parts of the relationship with fondness. According to Duffy, "it becomes the opposite of the original fairy tale, where she fears she will be consumed by the Wolf; whereas in my poem she more or less consumes him. So it's based on my own first love, first relationship. But it also looks at the idea of women in poetry being dominated by the male tradition" (Wood 2005).

Although there have been many remakes of *King Kong*, the 1933 film is the one that launched the character into the pop culture space forever. In the movie a documentary crew headed up by director, Carl Denham, is preparing

for a trip to an uncharted island in the hopes of finding something worth filming. On his way out of town he invites Ann Darrow, played by actress Fay Wray, to play his female lead. When the crew reaches Skull Island, Darrow is kidnapped by the natives and offered up to Kong as sacrifice. Instead of eating her, Kong loves her and wants to protect her from all of the other threats on the island. Ann is eventually rescued and the film flashes forward to New York City where Carl is about to unveil Kong as the eighth wonder of the world. Kong panics when he sees photographers flashing pictures of Ann and busts out of his cage to rescue her. Ann is taken away to a hotel room but Kong finds them and reaches in the window to grab her. He takes her to the top of the empire state building and is shot down by planes. When Denham is informed that the airplanes took Kong down he says "oh no, it was beauty that killed the beast." In other words, Kong just couldn't stand not to possess Ann, his blonde beauty, and his obsessive desire for her was ultimately his downfall.

Queen Kong differs from *King Kong* in more ways than a gender flip. It is somehow both erotic and sad. The Queen says "for me it was absolutely love at first sight" which doesn't seem to be that different than the initial goofy claymation grin King Kong gives Ann, but eventually the Queen's human lover stops screaming and gives in to her desires. The Queen waits outside their tents each night and the other crew members "always send him out pretty quick" (Duffy 180). This moment indicates that maybe this relationship isn't as consensual as the Queen believes because they do not share a language. The lover is sent out quickly each night because there is a monstrosly sized ape creature just outside camp who could potentially smash them all to bits at any moment. This may be a comment on the balance of power in heterosexual relationships where physical size and strength can become the swaying point of compromise. When it's time for the documentary crew to go back to New York the Queen is bereft but allows him to leave. She grieves him for a while but then eventually decides she is going to go to New York to get him back. She makes the journey to the city and peeps in all the windows until she finds him sleeping beneath a picture of her, which could mean that he has been missing her as well. Instead of snatching him out of his window she goes shopping and buys gifts for her little human. She eventually "plucks him like a chocolate from the box" and takes him to the empire state building so he can say goodbye to his city (Duffy 182). He goes with her willingly back to the island, maybe for the good of the city or maybe because he really did love her, and they live together for twelve years until he dies. This poem is an example of Duffy saying that women are just as capable of being beasts as men.

Mrs. Beast is the sum of all parts. The speaker, Mrs. Beast, has a

bawdy, masculine tone and cadence to her voice, which is backed by this quintessentially male image of the boys gathering for a poker game. The opening stanza is essentially a list of the women who couldn't survive beyond their image created by man. Of the Little Mermaid she says "The Little Mermaid slit/ her shining, silver tail in two, rubbed salt/ into that stinking wound, got up and walked, / in agony, in fishnet tights, stood up and smiled, waltzed/ all for a Prince" who would dump her anyways (Duffy 205). Mrs. Beast discusses the Little Mermaid in the way men might be overheard discussing women, sexualizing and belittling her by using such sharp language in reference the female anatomy and taking away her personhood by portraying her as an unthinking creature that would damage herself in such a physical way for the sake of a man.

In Wood's interview with Duffy she says that Mrs. Beast is Little Red Cap all grown up, which makes sense because like in *Little Red Cap*, she goes to the lair of the beast willingly. However, this time she has nothing to lose or gain by putting herself in this position, shifting the balance of power. The beast cannot control her because she has all the means of escape already at her fingertips and so he begs her to stay and does everything she desires.

At the end of the poker game the women make the toast "Fay Wray" to the various female characters who couldn't make it out of their respective narratives. Fay Wray is another call back to *Queen Kong/King Kong*. Fay Wray is the 1930's scream queen who was the object of Kong's affection in the original film. At the end of the night when Mrs. Beast has kicked the beast out of bed and stands on her balcony thinking of "the captive beautiful, the wives," and thinks to herself "Let the less loving one be me" (Duffy 207). This is a sad statement because it speaks to the pain she's suffered at loving men who didn't recognize her as a person and so she's created this hard exterior in an attempt to embrace more stereotypical male characteristics, which could potentially save her from further heartbreak.

Duffy's exploration of the Beauty and The Beast narrative through *The World's Wife* accomplishes several goals. First and foremost she successfully gives a stronger feminist voice to the women in these stories whether that requires a trade in roles physically or emotionally. Secondly she manages to do this in a way that is not dismissive of the male. She does not create infallible female characters at the expense of man, but instead creates female characters that consume them in ways that are stereotypical of men.

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A Lecture on Growth, Delivered in Four Minutes

by L'Anita Heiss

Daily I watch you struggle at the keys;
I note your tortured face, your passionate pleas.
You think your lot is hard, and so you groan
And call me Tyrant with a heart of stone.
Yes, the sun indeed is out today,
And all the other boys and girls do play,
While you consigned to this bench must be
To learn your notes and play with dignity--
Yet lend your ear a moment and you'll see,
My child, why I so much exact of thee.

Shall we not look to Nature as our guide,
To see what lessons she for us provides?
For there our Maker plants His subtle truths
That if applied to man yield fruit for use.
First take the struggling chick within the shell,
Which ere it breathes must pass through mini hell.
If watchful hen in pity intercedes,
She robs her chick of spirit that it needs.
Yet else for this it weakens and must die,
For labor is what gives it strength to fly.

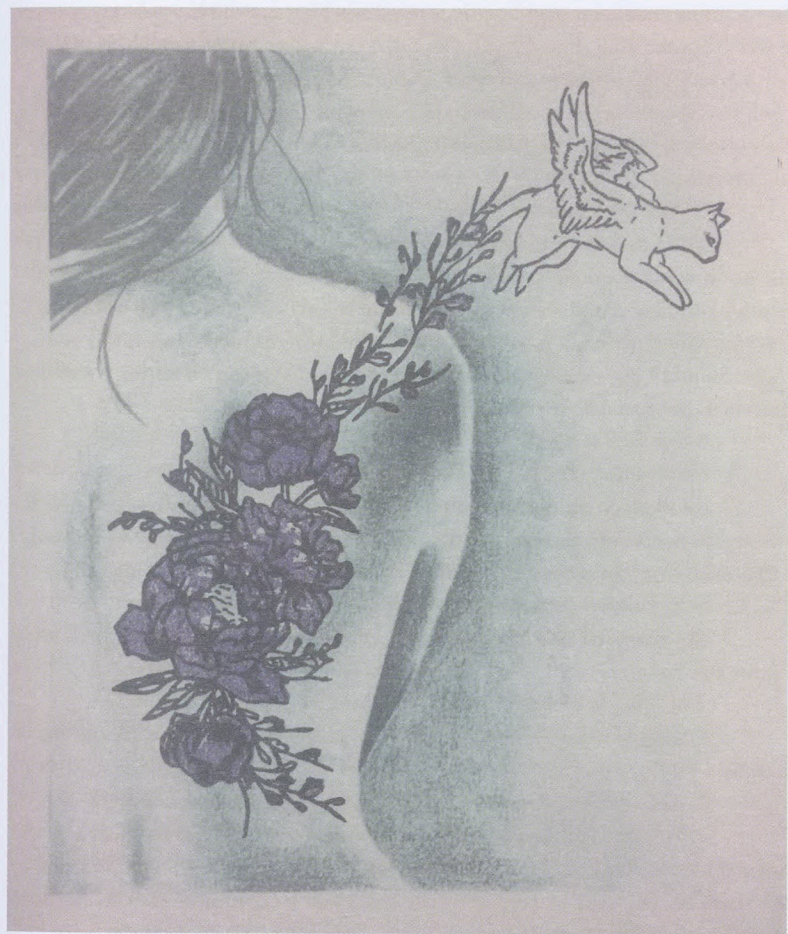
Consider too how sturdy oaks must form;
Roots start as threads but strengthen in the storm.
The more the wind, the surer they will be,
Outlasting those with less tenacity.
It doesn't happen quickly or with ease;
Such mighty trees must grow up by degrees.
Wise the Planter who doth assign their lot
To be unsheltered in a windy spot.
Then, rooted deep in their provided plot,
The storms around can rage, but they move not.

Do you not see, my child, how like a tree
With weak and undeveloped roots are we?
How like a bird that in crucible's heat
Forges the strength for some mightier feat?
Can you not see how through struggle we grow?

We reap no reward but that which we sow.
 If God decrees such lesser works as these
 Must pass through struggle in their infancies,
 Would He assign to us a weaker test
 Who in creation's chain o'ersee the rest?

Nay, tis man's fate holds His full employ;
 Our change and growth provide His greatest joy!
 And so we press on. In trust we submit
 To Him whose design seeks to render us fit
 To one day return and live evermore,
 Since this life is but preparation for
 A Greater which He has laid up in store.
 His purpose clear, He sees our suff'ring sore
 But, with infinite wisdom, doth restrain
 His Helping Hand for our eternal gain.

So now, my dear, you see more clearly why
 Such hard things must our lives be measured by.
 For if no tasks in life demand us stretch
 Beyond our current state as mortal wretch
 How pitiful indeed we would appear
 When brought to stand before our Master dear!
 And so shrink not from duty when it calls,
 Nor tribulation when to you it falls.
 Remember this, that life is meant to be
 A time to prove, and struggle is the key.



Cookies & Peonies, by Ashley Clark

Curious

by Deidra James

She sat there.

She sat there on the park bench, quiet and still. The snow rained down on top of her head; no cold breath escaped her lips, nor did her pale body shiver from the chill. I couldn't really tell from where I was, though. Had her hair not blown against the wind, I would have mistaken her for a statue. Each strand was long and cerulean, like an ocean fighting against the shore. Even in art school, no one had solid blue hair as long as hers was. It was oddly mesmerizing.

"H-hey!" I called out to her.

Not a muscle twitches out of place. My voice wasn't very loud, and the harsh winds seemingly drowned it out. Maybe it really was just a statue. I haven't seen any sculptors working on it during my commutes to work. How long have they worked on her? Her hair looked too detailed to sculpt in one night. Should I get a closer look? Harmless curiosity. If she's a statue, I will marvel in her hauntingly realistic beauty.

But if she's not...

I took a deep breath and made my way to her.

I walked down the steps along the hill, never taking my eyes off her. I wanted to make sure that she wasn't going to disappear the moment I blinked. I tightened my grip around my plastic bag, cursing myself for coming out so late for food. I always forget to eat during my MMO binges.

My heart felt like lead the closer I reached the spectacle. I hope I don't regret this later.

The thought crossed my mind too late.

I stood in front of her, and shoved my hand in front of my mouth to muzzle a yelp.

Naked. Bare. She sat on the bench without distress or concern.

Purple and black bruises lay on her arms and legs. Darker than a normal bruise, like craters on a moon. Her nipples were hard and pink from the sharp air. My eyes averted anymore spots that were unnecessary to stare at for longer than a second. Her eyelids halfway hid her irises as if she were drifting off. Her mouth was a line. Not letting another moment go by, I shoved my free hand in my coat pocket to call for an ambulance. Before I could dial the last number, I stopped. What was I suppose to tell the police when they got here? I found her like this? Why was she naked? Why was she all beaten up?

They will instantly blame me. I shouldn't be out here so late. They would find me suspicious in my coat and hoodie. They would shoot me without

even checking to see if I'm armed.

Should I take her with me? I don't know how she would react if I just grabbed her and ran. She would probably scream, fight back, or kill me. I felt my palms dampen. But I can't just leave her here; I mean, I could but it would plague me forever. I started to chew on my lower lip, thrusting my hand through my messy hair.

She didn't even blink. Was she in shock from all the pain? I finally let go of my lip to say something.

"Uhm...you good?" What a stupid question. I didn't know what else to say. If someone knew what to say to a semi-dead body sitting on a park bench, please let me know. But it didn't matter; she said nothing. Should I touch her? A gentle poke should wake her up. Then again, that could possibly trigger an attack. Ugh, this is annoying. What am I supposed to do?

She's just sitting there.

"Listen, uhm...I'm Ally." I hesitated. I put my bag down and raised my hands in a submissive stance.

Nothing. Even so, I never looked away from her.

"I...I see that you're hurt." I'm an idiot. "But, I wanna help you. I-I mean, I'm *gonna* help you. I-If you want me to, of course." A nerve-driven chuckle spat out of me.

"..."

"I'm gonna take you to my apartment, and uh...try and patch you up. Cool?" I lowered myself to have her eyes look into mine. I backed up at the sight of them. Although I couldn't see them fully, I noticed a crimson tint. Or maybe they were a hard brown. No one has red eyes.

I unzipped my coat, wiggled it off, and wrapped it around her shoulders. I thought that would set off some response, but she remained inactive. I let out a small sigh of relief before securing the coat on her. I didn't bother to put her arms through the sleeves; I was afraid of accidentally touching one of her bruises.

Which brought me to my next dilemma; getting her in my arms without hurting her.

"Th-this may hurt a bit, but...I'm gonna carry you now, okay?" I don't know why I bother asking her permission.

I placed my hands underneath her legs and behind her back and slowly lifted her from the bench. She wasn't heavy at all. She weighed less than my grocery bag. I held her close against my chest, and I grabbed her arm and touched a bruise.

"Oh, sorr--" I reflectively said before I stopped myself.

The bruise was hollow. I let my index finger linger around the hole until I believed it was real. As unfilled as a pipe. What was this? Was she a decaying corpse? Or an unfinished work of art?

I grabbed my plastic bag and jogged towards my apartment building. It wasn't very far, but I was still scared for her life. And mine. Was she already dead? She wasn't moving at all, even as I juggled her around.

"Come on, come on." I cursed myself. This snow wasn't helping, my feet burying themselves into the slush. The wind pulled me back more and more, warning me.

I finally made it to my building, but now I had to rush through the three flight of stairs. I could take the elevator, but it would take twice as long waiting for the thing. Since she weighed so little, it shouldn't be a problem to run up with the mysterious girl. With that in mind, I made my way up the stairs without a break until I reached my door. I was relieved to find no one in the hallways.

When I was in front of a wooden door, I placed the girl and my bag on the welcome matt to free my hands for my keys. Shuffling around for them, all my pockets were empty. Pants. Hoodie. I even checked in my beanie. All vacant. Did I leave them on the park bench in my rush? Did I forget them at the gas station? Did I lock myself out again? Oh wait, they're in my coat pocket.

I glanced down at the girl and saw she was laying curled up in a ball. Had she moved? I don't remember setting her down like that.

I need my keys.

"Ah...don't worry, just need to get..." I trailed off as I leaned towards her. When I reached for them, I felt a small rumble between my fingertips. Snatching my keys from the pocket, I stared down at her in bewilderment. What was that?

I quickly unlocked my door and shoved it open. Throwing my grocery bag on the ground, I picked her back up and ran into the living room, set her on the couch, and hurried to the thermostat. I cranked the heater up as much as I could.

This is insane. How is this happening? What is happening? I don't know what I'm doing or what to do. I don't even know what she is. Is she even human, or alive? I've never felt anyone's skin that had holes in them. Unless she has scurvy. In which case, neither one of us has long to live.

My thoughts were cut short from a screech. It was bloodcurdling, loud and high enough to make a dog's ears fall off. I covered my ears and faced in the direction it came from.

And there she stood.

A bold blue light illuminated between the holes in her body. She shined like a flashlight, her entire body seething with blue fluorescence. Her expression didn't waver as she brightened the room with her being. My mouth ajar, I gazed at her. Her stature was straight. A fiery glow, each shimmered like rubies. Those were her eyes. They met with my dull hazels. Her hair waved high and wild in every direction. No wind nor gravity supported its weight, her hair flew like a bird. Her white lips sealed shut.

I watched. And listened. The thunderous sound slowly dimmed alongside the sky hued holes on her skin. I lowered my hands from my ears as the sound became bearable. Until it was nothing but silence again. Her skin was clear of the cavities, and left it flawless and alluring. Her hair laid flat, hitting her waist. I leaned against the wall to keep myself steady. This girl--this being-- didn't blink as her eyes shot me down. Her glare harsh, uninviting.

"Whoa...!" I blurted out.

"..."

"Th-that was...new." A pathetic snicker followed behind my pitiful one-liner.

Our eyes were locked onto each other. It wasn't until I remembered how uncovered she was that I torn my gaze from hers and stood up straight.

"Oh! Yeah, uh...wow! I'm so sorry. You're naked."

"..."

Either she didn't understand or didn't care what I said.

"I can, uhm...get you some clothes if you want. You'd probably fit into any of my stuff, so..."

"..."

I turned and headed for my room. I felt my heart beating inside my ears as I yanked a plaid flannel shirt from my closet. Grabbing a pair of underwear in my drawer, and long skirt from another, I put everything in a small pile and headed back to the living room.

She hadn't moved an inch. She was exactly how I left her, her eyes shooting cracks in my skull.

"H-here." I mumbled, holding the clothes in front of her.

"..."

"T-take them. You...can wear these."

"..."

Shaking off my fear of getting maimed at moments notice, I grabbed her hands. For the first time since the screeching, she moved. It was sudden, instant. Her head snapped down to peer at our hands touching. I placed her hand onto the clothes and let go. She didn't think to grip them, which led to

them falling on the floor.

Her head snapped back up to glare at me again.

“So...I’m gonna go out on a whim here and say...you’re not human.” I joked.

“...”

Tough crowd.

“Cool...uhm, I’m gonna put your clothes on for you. Please don’t eat me or...anything. I’m not gonna hurt you. Do you understand?”

“...”

I let out a groan. I pinch a piece of my hoodie and jeans. “Clothes.”

“...”

“Clothes. Are. Good. And. Hide. Your. Boobies.” That was awkward. But come on, did she even know what those were, or how stunning she looked?

“I. Put. Clothes. On. You.” I let go of my hoodie to point at her.

“...”

“I. No. Hurt. You. I. Help. You. Okay?” I end my academy award winning speech with a thumbs up.

“...”

Well, that was pointless. Nonetheless, it had to be done. She didn’t know what was going on, and if I stared at this naked woman any longer, I would have to propose to her out of courtesy. I picked up the flannel from the ground and braced myself. Lifting her left arm, I pulled hers through the sleeve without struggle. I reached across her back and around to the second arm and shifted the shirt across her shoulders.

Easy. Maybe she did understand me.

Her eyes were terrifying as she watched me.

I buttoned up the shirt midway and flipped her hair out from the inside. It was smooth and gentle, like touching a dandelion.

Next was the underwear, then the skirt. All placed nicely and with ease.

“There, you see?”

The being stood awkwardly in the outfit I chose, not knowing what to do. I grabbed her hand again and led her to the mirror in the bathroom. Perhaps seeing herself would help put things into some sort of perspective. Even when we stood in front of the full body mirror, she still kept her eyes fixed on me.

“Look...” I timidly placed my hands on her chin and turned her head to face the mirror.

She stared at herself, her jarring eyes beamed at themselves. Everything was tranquil. She steadily rose her hand and inched it towards her reflection. It was robotic in movement, exotic and foreign.

It shattered into pieces with a single fingertip, each shard cascading onto the purple fuzzy matt below.

"Whoa..." I breathed.

She looked down at the pieces, still staring at herself in them.

"I, ah...I'm gonna clean that up later." I held her hand and led her back to the living room.

Since she didn't seem to know how to do anything other than stare at me, I placed my hands on her shoulders and gently sat her down on my couch again. I sat down next to her and buried my face into my hands. My head spun while recollecting everything that has happened so far. I didn't know how to handle it or understand it, but it was happening. This being--this entity--this girl, is here in my apartment.

Did the government know about her? How did no one else see her all day? Was she placed there by someone? Or something? What was she? How did she get those holes all over her body? Is she a defective model of some sort of robot chain, and someone just threw her out? I watch too many sci-fi films. But I can't deny that this is happening. This girl, empty but filled with life, was sitting centimeters from my thighs.

I could take care of her. I could let her stay here for a while. After all, I found her. She looked almost human. She could work at my art studio and help pay rent. I could introduce her to my friends. I could teach her how to paint and play MMOs with me. I can show her all of my favorite restaurants and make her breakfast every morning. She was otherworldly, but it's a start.

But before all of that, I would need to teach her English. She hadn't spoken at all. Did she not have her own language?

My forehead began to sweat. Was I really that nervous?

Oh, wait the thermostat is on 80. I stood up and pulled my hoodie off, silently thankful for wearing a tank top underneath. I let out a gasp of air and fan myself with my hand.

"I'm sure you're warm enough now, aren't you?" I asked her, her unblinking eyes on me as usual.

"..."

"I'll take that as a yes." Pushing myself off the couch, I go to turn the heat down an octave.

"Ha..." I heard a voice coo.

I turned my head to face the being, completely taken aback. Her

mouth was finally open. Agape, sharp teeth the size of butcher knives hid behind her stoic look. A tongue that lay between her fangs flung out and hit her chin. It was pointy, saliva dripping little by little on the carpet.

“Ha...” She repeated.

Was she trying to say something?

“Ha.....”

“Wh-what?”

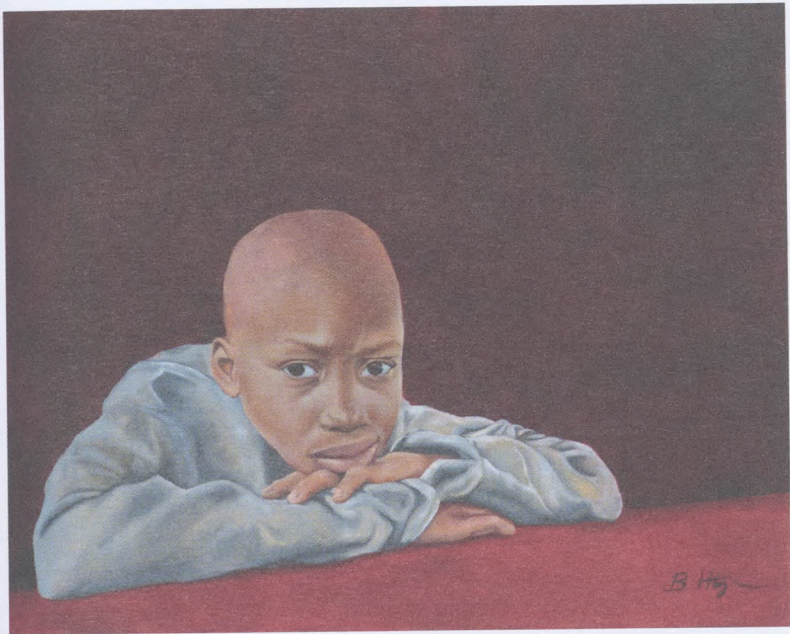
“Ha...Ha...”

A golden smile spread itself along her pale face. It stretched from ear to ear, a tiny hiss floating through her teeth. A grumble bubbles itself inside her stomach as she allows herself one more good look at me. I blinked and she was next to me, her hands firmly on my face. Her once feathery mass were now cinder blocks on my cheeks.

She pulled my head back.

Her teeth pierce my jugular.

I see my walls splattered with a new shade of red. I can hear gurgling and bubbling. My fingers are snapped out of place and snatched out of each joint, the pop and crunch fading out of my hearing. She doesn't give me time to scream. My eyes roll behind my head before I feel her wet tongue slurp one of them from its socket. I take one last breath as I feel something tug each bone from my ribcage. The marrow oozed dirty as I remember something.



Waiting for Supper, Rebecca Hinzman

Ice Cream Altercation

by Kristen Broyles

INT - GABBY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Camera looks at her bed. Light colored. Cute pillows and a plushie.

Camera looks at her desk. Natural light shines in. Many makeup products are set up.

Camera looks at her shoes, in a line. A hand reaches forward and pulls a pair back.

GABBY pulls on the shoes and stands back to view herself in her full-length mirror.

Gabby is an insecure 18 year old student. She is overweight and uses bold style to hide her lack in confidence. She is witty and a tad eccentric.

She sucks in and smooths down her stomach. Makes a sexy pose and winks at herself. Drops the facade and sighs in disappointment, turning and stomping out the door.

INT - GABBY'S CAR - DAY

Loud music breaks the silence. Something bright, possibly Kpop (suggestion Got7's "Just Right"). Gabby sings along while driving, alone in the car, tapping her painted nails on the steering wheel to the beat.

EXT - PARKING LOT - DAY

Establishing shots of a full mall parking lot

INT - GABBY'S CAR - DAY

Gabby continues jamming as she pulls into a parking spot and shuts her car off. Music stops. Gabby checks her makeup and hair in the rear view mirror.

Takes out lipstick to reapply. Nearly smears it all over her face as she is shocked by a knocking at her window.

Turns in surprise to see three skinny, sunny, smiley girls, her friends, laughing at her and waving from outside the window.

Gabby exhales in relief and leans back in her seat with a hand over her heart, causing the girls to laugh harder.

RACHEL, Gabby's best friend, a thin, gorgeous brunette always sports flawless makeup and a big smile. She knocks on the window again and Gabby rolls it down.

RACHEL

(smiling) You're makeup looks fine, let's go!

GABBY

Okay, give me a sec.

Puts the lipstick away and rolls up the window.

Rachel sarcastically opens the door for her as the other girls get out of the way. All girls giggle and link arms, etc. as they head into the mall.

INT - MALL - DAY

Establishing shot of a busy and bustling mall.

GABBY'S

FRIEND 1 75% off all
swimsuits?!

She breaks off from the group and runs toward the store with the giant sale sign, leaving the other girls to follow after.

GABBY'S FRIEND 2

(pulling a bikini off the rack) Omg
wouldn't this be perfect for summer
break? It's only like two weeks away.

RACHEL

Really? I didn't realize it was so soon.
I haven't bought a new bathing suit
since like a year ago.

GABBY'S FRIEND

1 Guys, let's all buy a bikini for
summer break. We can go on a
beach trip together! I'll drive.

Everyone but Gabby agrees enthusiastically.

GABBY

That's okay I already have a bathing
suit.

RACHEL

Come on, buy bikinis with us! They're
75% off. You know you want to.

GABBY

(trying to laugh it off) I think I'm
good.

GABBY'S

FRIEND 2 Fine then, I'll just pick
one out for you. What's your size?

GABBY

(panics for a moment) Never
mind...I do need a new

bathing suit. I'll go pick out
my own.

She quickly walks away from the other girls and begins hunting through the racks before anything more embarrassing can happen. She becomes distraught because the only sizes she can seem to find are XS, S, and M.

She looks at the other girls and see that they each have armloads of swimsuits to try on.

She hunts faster, scanning almost every rack until she finally finds a bathing suit marked XXL hanging dismally on the return rack.

It is a garishly bright tangerine orange bikini with magenta polka dots.

Gabby gives it a disgusted look.

GABBY'S

FRIEND 1 C'mon Gabby
we're going to the dressing
room!

Gabby swallows her pride and grabs the suit, hurrying to the dressing rooms before any other shoppers see her with it.

INT - DRESSING ROOMS - DAY

Gabby's friends all pile into the biggest room and gesture for her to join.

GABBY

(covering for her discomfort at the
prospect of changing in front of them)
You guys aren't that lucky.
(winks)

Her friends giggle at her antics as she locks herself into a smaller dressing room next to theirs.

INT - GABBY'S DRESSING ROOM - DAY

Gabby has changed with her back to the mirror and is tying the bathing suit strings behind her neck. She takes a deep breath before turning to face the mirror.

She harshly scrutinizes herself. It is clear on her face that she is extremely unhappy with what she sees.

She tries several methods to attempt to make the bathing suit look better: sucking her stomach in, moving her hair over her chest, viewing herself from different angles, holding her arms over her stomach, etc.

When it becomes clear that nothing can improve the image, Gabby's chin trembles and she claps and hand over her mouth as she involuntarily begins to cry.

The other girls' dressing room door can be heard opening and then there is a

knock on her door.

RACHEL

Come show us your bikini! Is it cute?

Gabby panics further as her friends playfully tug on the door handle, quickly grabbing her shirt and holding it over herself. She scrambles for an excuse not to come out.

GABBY

(trying not to sound like she's crying)

I...I just got a text from my mom. I have to go. Family emergency.

INT - DRESSING ROOMS - DAY

Gabby emerges from her dressing room fully dressed with sunglasses on, shaking off her worried bikini-adorned friends, and rushes out of the hallway.

INT - GABBY'S CAR - DAY

Gabby gets into her car and quickly shuts the door, immediately cranking it up and reversing out of the parking spot.

When the radio comes on she quickly shuts it off.

She drives down the street until the mall disappears from her rear view mirror and pulls into a random parking lot.

She parks and turns her car off. Her head falls onto her hands on the steering wheel and she lets herself cry for a moment, finally in private.

After a few shaky breaths, she pulls herself together and takes her sunglasses off. She looks into the rear view mirror to fix the smeared black mess that has become of her eye makeup.

After she has wiped the better part of it off, she prepares to continue driving home but stops herself when she looks out the window and sees that she has pulled into the parking lot of an ice cream store.

She considers for a moment before resolutely grabbing her purse and getting out of the car.

INT - ICE CREAM SHOPPE - DAY

The bell jingles as Gabby enters and the employee looks up to smile at her from behind the counter.

GABBY steps up to the counter to order her ice cream. As she looks at the menu, the bell on the door jingles and a group of rowdy young men get in line behind her. She speaks over them to be heard and begins giving her order.

GABBY

Hi, um, can I get the...can I get the mint chocolate chip fro-yo please?

Oh! Sorry, and can I have it in one of
those big waffle-bowl thingies?

Boys behind her snicker and one of them just audibly says "You sure about
that?"

Gabby struggles to hold her polite smile in the employee's direction.

EMPLOYEE

(kind hearted laughter) Sure. What size
would you like?

GABBY

(smiling easily) A large please.

Boy behind her scoffs, spurred on by his friends' chuckles.

Gabby chews her lips, trying to ignore them.

GABBY

(more pointedly) Actually, could I have
that to go please.

BOY

Oh no, I think she heard us. We scared
her off.

Group laughs, leader boy more confident because he has an audience and
knows he has Gabby's attention.

Gabby squeezes her eyes shut and takes a breath before turning to confront
him.

GABBY

I'm sorry, were you saying something to me?

BOY

Oh, me, no, but hey (places a hand on
Gabby's shoulder, earning reactions
from his friends) make sure to save us
some ice cream.

Turns to laugh with his friends.

Gabby stands still for a moment looking shocked. She looks at his hand and
then back at him.

GABBY

Excuse me?

BOY

Hey, I'm just jokin' with ya. You can
eat all the ice cream if you want to.

(holds hands up in surrender) I won't get in your way! I might not make it out alive.

Gabby presses her lips together and gathers herself before retorting.

GABBY

Ok, I'm sorry but that's really rude. I don't even know you and you certainly don't know me. I would appreciate it if you wouldn't berate me for-

BOY

Oh no I made her mad! (to the employee) Hurry, get the women some ice cream before she attacks!

Gabby rolls her eyes and looks up at the ceiling, giving a short, dry laugh

GABBY

Ok. You know what? Never mind let's just introduce ourselves, shall we? (smiles) Hi, I'm Gabby. I am in fact the fat girl ordering ice cream in this fine establishment which just happens to be, oh wait (looks around over dramatically) an ice cream store! Now your turn. What's your name?

Boy starts to say something with a smug grin on his face but Gabby cuts him off.

Oh wait no, I think I have met you before. Your name is something like "Put your spoon down and go to the gym, you slob?" No? Maybe you're one of those "Ice cream is only for those of us who can afford the extra few pounds. Maybe you should try a nice salad." Plot twist! I freaking love salad. I also love ice cream. Stop trying to make me feel terrible for eating. I get it, you probably just pointed and laughed and made fat jokes with all your little friends just loud enough for me to hear because you would literally die if you went a

day without saying something about
a woman's body. Honey, you might
need to see someone about that. I
just came for the mint chocolate
chip.

Boy scoffs and starts to say something but the employee awkwardly clears his
throat, causing all heads to turn towards him.

EMPLOYEE

Your order is ready, ma'am.

GABBY

(huge smile) Perfect! (pulls a ten dollar bill
out of her pocket and exchanges the ice
cream bowl in the employee's hand with it in
one movement.) Will that cover it?

EMPLOYEE

Y-yeah, you're good.

GABBY

Great! You have a lovely day.

She leaves the shop, large ice cream bowl in hand without giving the boys a
second glance.

INT - GABBY'S CAR - DAY

Gabby gets into her car and shuts the door with a blank expression on her face.
She sits in shocked disbelief for a second before looking at the ice cream in her
hand.

She then looks at herself in the rear view mirror.

She looks at herself in disbelief for a second longer before suddenly she bursts
out laughing.

She laughs so hard that she beats on the steering wheel.

GABBY

(barely understandable through her
laughter) (mimicking herself) I just...I
just came for the mint chocolate chip...
(laughter).

Gabby starts to eat her ice cream as she laughs. She cranks her car up and turns
the radio on. The same song from her ride to the mall comes on and she smiles,
happily driving away and singing at the top of her lungs.

Sunnyside ER: 12:14am

by Taylor Aspinwall

Sunnyside ER: 12:14am

You came in to my ER,
Pouring yourself out to me,
Your red river flowing out of you,
There was no end.
Your parents begged me to make it stop.

Sunnyside OR: 12:25am

I opened you up,
Searching for your secrets as to where the river started.
The screens displayed your numbers,
A map of your landscape.
We searched for the spring,
The source.
For a moment,
I thought I controlled the current,
But the dam broke,
The banks overflowing.
Your numbers dropped,
Defining your condition
one number at a time.

Time of Death: 1:16am



Ruminant, by Eliza Daffin



The Great Oak, by Steven Bardon

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