

# *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

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# 2017–18 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

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## Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Lorraine Dresch

“It Was Because I Was Playing Double”: Conflicted Whiteness in the  
*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

## Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Sarah Hovet

“Edges”

## E. Nelson James Poetry Award

Michael Laudенbach

“Questions About Depthlessness”

## Herbert Hughes Short Story Award

T.G. Messina

“The Man with No Name”

## Elizabeth Holtze Creative Non-Fiction Award

DeAndra Miller

“Too Black”

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## Judges for Writing Awards

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Poet Laureate of Kansas (2017-2019), KEVIN RABAS teaches at Emporia State University, where he leads the poetry and playwriting tracks and chairs the Department of English, Modern Languages, and Journalism. He has nine books, including *Lisa's Flying Electric Piano*, a Kansas Notable Book and Nelson Poetry Book Award winner, and *Songs for My Father: poems and stories*. Rabas's plays have been produced across Kansas and in North Carolina and San Diego, and his work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize six times. He is the recipient of the Emporia State President's Award for Research and Creativity and is the winner of the Langston Hughes Award for Poetry, the Victor Contoski Poetry Award, the Jerome Johanning Playwriting Award, and the Salina New Voice Award.

DENYS VAN RENEN is an associate professor at the University of Nebraska, Kearney. He teaches eco-criticism and long-eighteenth-century literature, specializing in the work of Aphra Behn, Daniel Defoe, and Dorothy Wordsworth. His book, *The Other Exchange: Women, Servants, and the Urban Underclass in Early Modern English Literature* (University of Nebraska Press) appeared in spring 2017, and a co-edited (with Maria O'Malley) volume of essays, *Beyond 1776: Globalizing the Literatures, Cultures, and Communities of the American Revolution*, will be published in 2018 (University of Virginia Press). His current project is an edited edition of Wordsworth's *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*.

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Poetry



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# Edges

Sarah Hovet

As blossoms laced the cherry branches, I ate  
a chocolate pillow cookie for the first time in  
four months, since the *Reader's Digest*  
instructed me on how to count calories.  
That winter I wrapped myself in blankets  
and bruised easily. I was twelve.  
When I baked cookies, I washed  
the dough off my hands. I put  
brownie bowls in the sink  
without licking clean the edges.  
My edges bruised purple like  
crocuses spearing bulbs in the February soil,  
skin cold like a chrysalis that died.  
I had started my periods, an early bloomer  
but they stopped until the daffodils buttered  
the March briskness, until I permitted  
myself to eat peanut butter pretzels  
at recess, not one not two but  
the entire bag. That spring I  
taught myself the flash point  
of pink, the tensile strength  
of blossom, the load-bearing  
of flower edges.

## Tenuousness

Sarah Hovet

April's cruelty felled  
the 110-year-old walnut  
shadowing my childhood house  
through my infancy to college,  
its constant canopy  
leafily shading our transactions:  
they rolled in the piano. Daniel  
graduated speech therapy. We  
euthanized Gracie. I  
walked 250 miles one summer.  
Family dinner on the third  
was the last time I saw it  
living and vertical; in the tradition of  
last times, I didn't know.  
When I saw the air  
it had occupied,  
it felt mirage, photoshopped,  
its roots thrown heavenward  
violent horizontal  
thunked askew  
by a southwesterly tantrum  
and thieving time.  
Then, as stars were born and died  
behind the sky opaqued blue  
by colliding air particles  
and I taught my tongue  
to speak of it in past tense,  
I knew I would grow old.

*Sarah Hovet is a senior at the University of Oregon Robert D. Clark Honors College, where she is majoring in English and Journalism with a Creative Writing Minor. She is the President of her school's Sigma Tau Delta chapter, a staff writer for Ethos Magazine, and has been a member of the UO Poetry Slam Team. She intends to apply to MFA programs after graduating.*

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## Questions About Depthlessness

Michael Laudenbach

The Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory is where Astronauts train  
for weightlessness  
like the kids in the chlorinated August soup.  
What is it about public pools that feels inviting  
with hot pickles, soggy chips, and bagged dream sandwiches?  
Because all that learning  
all those numbers  
all these years weighs you down.  
Is space like a womb  
and do you shed memories like pounds  
on your no-carb diet,  
is maturation like lead  
and can you regain amniotic buoyancy  
as an adulthood amnesiac?

Mothers tell their children: salt water heals wounds, “the sting  
means it’s working.”  
The oldest parts of the ocean floor are 280 million years old, and  
where the pressure builds up enough  
there’s a wormhole  
to spit you back out.  
The Mariana trench is 36,089 feet deep,  
and despite its depth  
there are parts of this pliant planet  
closer to the core.  
So, how to measure depth:  
closer to the center  
or farther from the surface?  
The difference between the pool at NBL  
and outer space:  
space doesn’t have a surface.

What is it about the summer that makes doorways wider, dissolves  
the barrier like  
the thinning thermosphere  
so that being pulled from the pool  
doesn't feel concrete-cold like dead space dust?  
What is it about the embrace of warm towels?  
Wittgenstein wondered if dreams were memories—  
If each night  
the brain fires off rounds that light up our fuse box  
like firework phosphenes or electrified fishing line.  
But the circuit's not completed  
until we're pulled back out and switched back on  
like a splatter painting  
or atmospheric reentry.  
Do our bodies give off heat like towels from a dryer  
to protect us from the bends, bad dreams,  
and depressurization?

Francis Picabia in the 1900s  
painted impressionist landscapes  
from photographs, places he'd never seen.  
Critics said it went against the Monet-Renoir credo  
the "in it"-ness of bored Frenchmen  
back when time wasn't a luxury  
and the process was part of the product.  
Any painting of a postcard is a painting fit for a postcard.  
*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*  
History is the changing of clothes,  
the same men in different contexts.  
In the 1920s he drew machines that were  
stamped into the pages of magazines  
and if Magritte's was no pipe  
why should Frank's doodles be hardware?  
Is there any truth to his angles and lines  
or do they never converge, like a Meno speech  
or light from stars?

---

What's the difference between Orpheus and Armstrong, Icarus  
 and silica,  
 Helios' horse and liquid hydrogen?  
 Is there any truth to angels and lions?

Space has a temperature,  
 residual radiation from the big bang,  
 like scrapes from running on gravel  
 wet with excitement and cold in August's nightlight.  
 Can we reconstruct the cosmic residue,  
 the food for thought, the causal chain,  
 Hume's denial,  
 back to the beginning—at the bottom of the ocean,  
 and could we capture it on a screen?  
 A two-dimensional screen  
 is a canvas swimming pool,  
 a leaking mirror or a glass coffin,  
 water for drowning men.  
 Could we time travel with tv screens—at least  
 a look at what's been and will be?  
 A pixelated past is better than textlessness.

I suspect Wittgenstein suffered from sleep  
 in the same way that bad decisions flare up  
 like ghost-punch ice-water tidal waves  
 of cafeteria chatter,  
 and night would haunt him  
 like leaving the stove on or  
 the lasting effects of zero gravity.  
 He learned how to swim from books.  
 He was bad at swimming because he learned from books.  
 If Wittgenstein were a painter, not a thinker,  
 I suspect he would find himself  
 painting the same kind of transparencies  
 as Picabia did in the late 1920s.

Layer upon layer,  
superimposed with enough angles and lines  
to hide their depthlessness.

*Michael Laudenbach is currently pursuing his MA in English at The College of New Jersey, where he received his BA in English and Philosophy in 2017. He has published poetry in Skidrow Penthouse, Lyric, and his college's literary journal, Lion's Eye. He plans to pursue a PhD and hopes to teach any college literature course that will allow him to incorporate David Bowie in some way.*

---

# Laundry Day

Lauren Bush

It's Tuesday again,  
bring out the washboard,  
and scrub until your fingers  
numb and split apart.

You're bent over the tub,  
knees cracking. He's yelling  
from the other room,  
his bite coming around the corner.

When he appears behind you,  
reach up and pluck the voice  
from his throat, steal the menace  
dripping from his lips, and one

by one, take his teeth out  
to dry with the rest  
of the shirts on the line –  
clouds of cotton floating on the wind.

Wrap the line 'round his throat  
just as easy as his hands  
slide and grip, then slip  
'round yours.

Pull until he can't see  
the lone cicada in the tree  
shaking and heaving apart his ribs  
for the mate who will only leave him

sinking into the vermillion  
sun, as the ground cracks open  
and they all swarm,  
thick and green and silver.



---

# Today I Watched a Cockroach Crawl

Lauren Bush

across the bedroom wall. I shrunk  
down to match its size and followed  
it through my house. I learned  
that the cat will sit and watch before pouncing.  
I learned that the baby will grab anything  
and put it to his slick wet tongue.  
I learned everything I already knew  
but today everything was  
seen through the cracks in the wall,  
of which there are many. I followed  
the sun streaking amber across my kitchen. I watched  
the dream of slow steady time, and then I grew  
to ten times my size, and the cracks got bigger  
and the cat ran away, and the sun turned the same  
reddish brown of the clay at our feet, blocked  
by my left shoulder. I plucked the cockroach  
from the ground and ate it. Afterward, I sat picking the legs  
from my teeth with the bones of the jackrabbit  
that I found, flattened and baking in the desert sun.

*Lauren Bush is a senior Creative Writing Major at Stephen F. Austin State University. She divides her time between the visual arts and the written word. Lauren is Vice President of the Phi Iota Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. After graduating she plans to apply to graduate school to earn an MFA in English Literature. Her work has been featured in CEO Literary Magazine and HUMID.*

## July in Indigo

Quang Vo

To M.

It's Tuesday again,  
Unable to afford  
a decent dream—

I sing July off-key,  
swirling

in the marrows  
of rainstorm grass.

High tide of apricot eyes  
decline adhering to a mind

worth its weight  
in sparrows,

and I forgot my reason  
for knowing

the lapis songbirds  
all by name,

for wanting to share  
the hurricane season

day-by-day.

Tonight,  
my tea is colder

---

than Eurydice,  
and gypsy winds

still pedal  
bruised apricots

strewn

like dreams of you—  
when they can nourish

so much more.

*Quang Vo is an International Studies Major at the University of St. Thomas. A recipient of the Joy Linsley Memorial Poetry Scholarship, he is currently serving as poetry editor for Laurels literary magazine.*

---

## Canvas Man with Glasses

Katelin Loo

I pay for the memorial portrait.  
The framer writes that he is  
“Canvas, man with glasses.”  
Not a father that bounced babies on his knee  
And chattered in high-pitched voice,  
Not a lover who dug his brown feet into phosphorescent sand,  
Or a son that ran the ledges of New York City rooftops,  
But a canvas man with glasses.

I will hang him on the wall  
Above the Dracaena palm  
And next to the ten-dollar mirror,  
Presiding his definite place in the house.

I walk him to the car,  
Frame in reverent upturned hands,  
This canvas man with glasses.  
Will he snap the black bamboo frame  
And unfold his creaking canvas limbs,  
Adjust his black-ink bifocals,  
And join us for Thanksgiving dinners?  
Will his smile turn knowing  
When I tell my husband he’s had enough to drink,  
And he responds that I shouldn’t worry?

He will be the witness  
In an empty house  
When I spill my coffee  
And blurt a four letter word.  
He’ll absorb  
Every gossipy syllable  
I utter to my mother on the phone.

I drive home with this canvas man in the passenger seat.  
Out of the corner of my eye,  
He is relaxed, looking out the window,  
Ankles crossed,  
While my mind is transfixed on  
The infinity of omnipotence:  
A canvas man ever-watching  
Through the sheen of glossy glasses.

Arriving home, in the living room,  
I nail him to the white and wonder  
When he'll descend from the wall  
And help himself to a cigarette  
In a rocking chair on our front porch,  
Sun warming the rough fabric  
Of his skin.

Canvas man with glasses,  
Dad.

## Feast

Katelin Loo

She is there,  
Plucking strawberries.  
Then we are plunging our hands greedily  
Into soft rain-smelling dirt.  
I retrieve cool round river rocks from the yard  
To fill the bottoms of flower pots.

The names of the flowers fill our mouths  
Like plump exotic fruit.  
Azealia, begonia, freesia.  
The spices of zinnia and gazania tickle our tongues,  
The bitter marigold, the frothy buttercup, the savor of the  
hollyhock, icy mint of hyacinth.  
The bark of the paper birch is our entremet.  
A colander of water-glazed strawberries  
And two love-worn mugs of sage-colored tea  
Mixed with spoonfuls of honey  
Are our dessert.

We languish on the porch  
Sunburnt, exhausted.  
We sleepily mumble our post-feast tête-à-tête,  
And our generational dreams take root  
Somewhere between memories and future.

*Katelin Loo graduated summa cum laude from Wichita State University in May 2017. She majored in English Literature and minored in Spanish. Katelin currently resides in Tampa, FL, where she plans to continue her education and to teach at the secondary level.*

---

## Subic Bay, Philippines, 1953

Taylor Lewis

Sometimes freedom takes a killing, sometimes  
Only the ocean holds your freedom back.  
I taste my destiny each day with lime,  
Ordered by the doctors of a sea, black,  
Slowly churning outside of a steel "O."  
Beneath these fathoms, we are all brothers.  
But, what manhood costs makes the blood run cold.  
The thought of death stalks like a green lover.  
Green like the Philippines, green like Effie.  
Navy is the color of this new dream.  
The possibility of dignity  
Makes me drunk with its layered meanings.  
Down on the islands, women with brown arms  
Call me a man, despite everything.

*Taylor Lewis is a senior at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA. She is committed to the ideal of restorative and healing liberation through the written arts. This particular poem, however, honors the singular legacy of her grandfather.*

## Carol, I know, Carolina: Thoughts on Being a Maybe Southerner

Miriam Moore-Keish

My aunt Carol once hung up the phone on Coretta Scott King. When Carol called her back, Coretta was in the kitchen with Harry Belafonte.

Carol, I know, is scattered on top of the Carolina mountains where my cousin makes dilli beans and ambrosia and sweet “tatuhs” and collards.

Carol, I know, is settled on the floors of Georgia lakes where my family sings Sacred Harp songs to a God I never met. Where my family picks huckleberries we called hucklebabies when we cane-pole fished barefoot and where the Baptist church is painted white and waves a confederate flag over the sign that says, “Jesus loves you.”

Carol, I know, had a daddy who was a Baptist preacher. He stopped a mob from lynching the black woman who killed his daughter. He said he forgave her.

Carol, I know, lived on a commune where she followed her husband who marched on Bloody Sunday with Dr. King. Their daughters got bullied for being friends with black boys and girls while Carol made them dinner in the kitchen where Habitat For Humanity started. Made them dinner from flowers she picked.

We scattered her among those flowers.

My communist aunt Carol, I know, has been gone for what my aunt Janet calls, “a lawng tahn” but I heard my family’s twang for the first time this Appalachian fall when sweet tea was just too sweet and not tea enough for me.



My sister makes dumplings and grits for her girlfriend and tells her she is proud to be from the South.

In the shadow of Mount Mitchell, I tell the rhododendron that I do not know where I am from and the rhododendron curls up like my hair and like rhododendron does when the temperature falls below forty degrees Fahrenheit.

## Collarbones

Miriam Moore-Keish

Your collarbones are held up  
as if by invisible strings  
like the ones choir directors  
tell the pill-bugged singers  
to imagine, pulling their  
spines to heaven,  
God's marionettes.  
And my fingers  
uncurl like petals  
when spring opens her eyes  
and breathes her first breath  
and sighs, "begin."  
My fingers glissando  
along your collarbone like  
they never could in piano lessons,  
keys kissing callouses.  
Every muscle extending  
to reach the strings  
that lead them heavenward,  
raindrops sliding down spider webs,  
dripping heaven onto earth.

*Miriam Moore-Keish is from Atlanta, GA; Southern Pines, NC; Louisville, KY; Hamden, CT; Bangalore, India; and all the other places she called home. Pursuing an English Literature Major and minors in Psychology and Arabic, Miriam attends Macalester College in St. Paul, MN, and drinks a lot of tea. She released her first book, Seeds, a collection of poetry, in November 2016.*

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# Uneven Endings

Teresa Francom

I wonder at the word  
    closure  
A stopper keeping  
    the memories  
        from spilling  
    out  
        and pooling  
            stains of devastation  
        on my thoughts  
But life is a slow  
    leak of relationships  
        we mistakenly think we can contain  
yet it still escapes in uneven  
    seeping lines  
    because sometimes relationships end  
        in the middle  
            of a sentence  
The sloppy  
    crinkled  
        balled-up  
    spit-out workings  
of a strained hand run out of words  
    just as I have run out of feeling  
Alive but  
    suddenly  
        so  
            empty  
life can be broken  
    battered and blemished

No pristine  
    fragments  
        pieced  
            together  
    to give me exact endings  
Life is not a story  
    meant to be concluded  
with perfect  
    pretty  
        periods.  
    Instead dotted sporadically with semi-colons  
as we start on another untouched  
    creaseless page  
        where words cannot be erased  
So we keep our shattered hearts safe  
    and flip quickly through pages  
        we want nothing more  
            than to eliminate  
Because we keep going  
    we must keep going  
Long  
    after  
        that someone  
                                is gone.

*Teresa Francom is a senior at Christopher Newport University, where she majors in English with a concentration in Writing and minors in German and Digital Humanities. She is a writer for the on-campus blog Her Campus CNU; she helped teach English to young girls while studying abroad in Salzburg, Austria; and she has interned with Homeland Security doing work in communications and public affairs. She hopes to continue using her writing in her work once she graduates.*

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## The evening of Oct. 16, 1834

Lauryn Shockley

*“Turner paints the burning of the House of Commons  
while civilians in London are fearful and distraught”*

Fire scorching apricot  
in its wake trembles  
Pleasant now, yet thermal  
Embers are a natural  
beauty.

I discover elegance  
in this bittersweet inferno  
and watch its smoldering  
smoke seep deep into my  
canvas.

Bristles, white-hot,  
Brush over iridescent  
sapphire to create the flames,  
which swim over water

divinely

dancing.

Stonework blistering,  
bridge arches aching,  
Parliament an oxidizing  
nightmare...

I, the voyeur  
admiring this red-yellow  
instant in rapture, feel  
flushed for painting,

for capturing this moment.

My forehead is sweating,  
my glowing gold desire burns,  
my awe intensifies like the unsettled  
ashes before me.

I have found  
    the  
        real  
            Sun.

*Laurn Shockley is a senior English Major at Christopher Newport University with minors in Writing and Medieval Renaissance Studies. Currently, she works for a non-profit organization to further her experience with children. After graduation, she will continue her studies in the Master's of Teaching program at CNU to become a teacher and aspiring writer.*

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# Fertility

Alexis Sikorski

1.

if I could from my body  
pluck  
its uterus and  
discard it in the gutter on  
the way to a co-workers' team-building luncheon  
I would.

2.

(as a woman:)

am I  
more than a body,  
than a womb?

a womb, wounded  
wanted, body wanting,  
unwanted  
by a river,  
abandoned  
until  
demanding:  
I (must) bear them a child,  
or drown.

*Alexis Diano Sikorski is a polyamorous Filipino-American studying English and Psychology at Texas Woman's University. Her work has appeared in Pour Vida Zine, Mistress, Enclave, The Regal Fox, Bombus Press, Queen Mobs Teahouse, and Sea Foam Magazine.*

## Mother to Daughter

Rita Michelle Rivera

well, M'ija, I'll tell you:  
life here ain't going nowhere  
it is too corrupt  
the second most violent  
*shush*, women are required to stay silent.  
Dream.  
*Mamá y papá trabajan para ti.*  
Make it work.  
Make it worth.  
sometimes goin' far away  
means that you'll be closer to our dreams.  
M'ija don't turn your back.  
don't forget your people's *gritos*  
*destruye los muros*  
don't quit now  
I am with you,  
*estoy contigo.*

Rita Michelle Rivera is a senior at Palm Beach Atlantic University, where she majors in English and Psychology and minors in Spanish. Rita Michelle is originally from Honduras, and she serves as Co-President of PBA's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. She is currently working as a writing coach in PBA's Center for Writing Excellence and as a Spanish tutor for PBA's Student Success Center. After graduating, Rita Michelle hopes to continue her studies in both English and Psychology.



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## Lily Fenne in Cary, NC 1903

Evan Humphreys

I.

*Monday, 7:12 am*

The bay windows, agape in toothless  
awe, breathe in the sough of pine and willow  
while spotted doe hoove the woodland roots.

The willow arm's copper chimes murmur  
octaves, like falsetto hymns sung as dusted prayers.  
A chattering of starlings claw for worm and seed.

II.

*Monday, 2:32 p.m.*

I rest in springtime air.  
my tender head kisses the oak  
headboard, palms aimless and wan.

I crane forward, my neck a crescent, my  
freckled shoulders numbed by oval pills  
worth a day's toil of pick-ax to coal to cough.

My heels linger on the scarred chest of candles  
and bridal lace, lavender among cream,  
wick among stitch, pre-war memories.

*Evan Humphreys graduated from Lee University with a degree in English Literature. He recently taught English at a private school in Bogotá, Colombia. A proud alumnus of Lee's Language and Literature Department, Evan warmly dedicates this publication to the faculty and staff of the Vest building. He especially thanks his poetry professor and friend, Dr. Woolfitt, an upstanding man with poems as rooted as Spruce Knob's evergreens.*

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## What She Could Do

Madison Haefke

Force a Persian rug into a carry-on suitcase.  
Cook *chelow kabob* for five families  
(and the friends they brought along).  
Bend to pray on swollen knees  
three times a day. Coax  
four-leaf-clovers from the ground.

Learn English from the *Young*  
*and the Restless*; understand it  
better with the sound turned off.  
Knit a woolen scarf and hat,  
never looking at her hands.

Show her daughter the wrong way  
to parent; teach her granddaughter  
how to make amends. Mend  
holey socks. Reign as queen  
of the card table. Walk proudly,  
spine curved with time.

—with apologies to Elizabeth Holmes

Madison Haefke graduated *summa cum laude* from Baker University in 2017 with a BA in Music: Vocal Performance and minors in English and French. While a student, she had poetry and prose featured in *The Watershed*, Baker's annual creative writing publication, and served on the editorial committee. She plans to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing and use her love of music and writing in Christian ministry. Madison and her husband are new parents, and she's finding that motherhood is her greatest adventure so far.

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# Warm Halloween

Olivia Hornbeck

*On a painting by Jamie Wyeth, oil on canvas, 1989*

We are formed by the unsteady hands  
of happy children. Sliced by scalpels,  
we are hollowed out—our insides  
no longer belonging to us. Triangular eyes  
become unrecognizable as the sun  
shrivels our edges. The holes  
where our noses should be  
breathe the stench of decay  
from untimely death.

The corners of our carefully carved mouths  
sink with gravity, artificial smiles  
distorted. Our sorrows escape us  
as silence, our suffering  
a secret. Our faces turn  
toward tragedy. We collapse  
into ourselves—still connected  
to the vine that birthed us, but never united  
with the world that turned us.

*Olivia Hornbeck is a senior at Baker University, where she is pursuing a BS in Psychology with minors in Creative Writing and Studio Art. She is the editor for Watershed, her school's literary magazine. She recently spent a semester studying abroad in Europe, which led her to discover the beauty beyond comfort zones and sparked her desire to seek greater heights in everything she does, especially as a writer. She hopes to attend graduate school to further pursue her dreams as a successful writer and to encourage others to chase greatness, no matter how daunting it may seem.*

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# Homesick

Teresa Northcraft

austere graphite, my new address  
in three careful lines. your  
right hand: tremors, a—a  
translucent skin, determined scrawl—  
nagymama, this letter,  
“szeretlek cica...”  
in an envelope-sealed kiss shipped  
across two indifferent states—  
I close my eyes  
and I see you. white  
light, the teal armchair,  
folding gum wrappers and your  
clicked, gaping accent— letters,  
spaces, caverns enough  
for wayward *unokák* like me  
a—yes, if I fold myself in half and  
press my cheek against the pencil-widths  
of your trembling voice, I can  
fit there, in the envelope—  
*isten aldjón, nagymama, hiányzol,*  
I’ll come home to you.

*Teresa A. Northcraft is a junior studying English Literature at The University of Toledo. She serves as a lead tutor at the Writing Center, and she spends her summers working abroad for the military. After completing her studies in Toledo, she will continue refining her work in graduate school.*

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# Since

Madison White

I haven't washed the sheets  
since he left two months ago.  
The silence blooms here  
pressing its tongue into  
the corners of the room—  
coating the walls in a sour film,  
the dust clings to it. The hum  
of it multiplying. I have lost  
track of the time-  
line of stains. Which are his  
beer, my blood, us  
wiped from the hands of the other.  
The days spilling over  
my hips, the moon  
outside dissolving—  
into a silver eyelash. I move  
the sheets up to my chin.  
I sleep better knowing  
things have happened  
since.

*Madison White is a recent graduate of Wichita State University with degrees in Creative Writing and English Literature. She will begin her MA in September 2017 at the University of Manchester, UK. She served as Treasurer of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter and was recently awarded the High Plains Regent Scholarship. Her work is forthcoming in The Passed Note and Panoplyzine.*

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## Essay on Restoration

Melanie Brega

The wood grain is warm, solid oak.  
Legs strong, but if I'm honest, one wiggles a bit.  
Scars. A cat's claw. A wine stain. A heat mark.  
A water ring from a lazy hand.  
I rub the worn edge of the table.  
Cross the sea on the Arabella  
Passed from my mother's mother  
to my mother.  
Finally, to me.

//

Restore: to bring back; reinstate.  
Restore: to repair or renovate.  
Restoration: the action of returning something to a former owner,  
place, or condition.  
Middle English: from Old French *restorer*  
From Latin *restaurare*  
To rebuild, restore.

//

The internet lists the way to restore,  
offering advice: without stripping, with vinegar, without sanding.  
And YouTubers shower us with tutorials.  
But what exactly demands restoration?

//

Should we strip away only to replace it with something new?  
How much should we replace before the thing we are trying to  
restore becomes the new?  
I could turn away from the table's flawed grain

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and rewrite the passage of time  
Or I could chose to embrace my Puritan past  
Restore, Erase, Preserve, Renew

//

Perhaps a simple tablecloth would do?

*Melanie Brega is a recent graduate of Sam Houston State University, where she received her BA in English with a Creative Writing Minor. She is the 2017 recipient of the William C. Weathers Memorial Prize, and her fiction and poetry have been published by poets.org and Beacon. Currently, Melanie is enjoying her first year as a junior-high English teacher.*

# Creative Non-Fiction



# Too Black

DeAndra Miller

High school is the beginning of everything, or at least that's what people tell you. "The beginning of the rest of your life," that's the nonsense they spout because they hit their peak then. Now they sit in a cubicle, tearing up, remembering the times someone cheered them on from the bleachers of a packed football stadium, but I digress. High school is not the beginning or the best of your everything, or at least it wasn't for me. Entering high school was interesting to say the least. I've always had too little confidence paired with too much sarcasm, which tends to combine for the right amount of self-deprecation required to not survive high school. My freshman year was where I tried to find myself, or at least that's what people tell you should happen. I'm not quite sure if that happened for me.

## *Ninth Grade*

I remember being proud that I had finally put on weight. I had been tired of the "so skinny you turn sideways and disappear" jokes that usually followed me in hallways in middle school. I was a creature of comfort: my distressed jeans revealed a summer of wear while my loose-fitting shirts billowed in the punishing, Florida, breeze—if you could really call the hot, heavy air a breeze. My face, freshly washed, glistened with sweat in the heat. I, unlike many of the other girls who rode my bus, was not afraid that my body functioned as it was supposed to. It was the first day of high school. The girls on my bus fanned themselves vigorously with their spiral notebooks, afraid that the sun might betray the caked-on layers of makeup they applied before they made their appearance at school. I glanced over at the girl next to me, whose name I did not know, and watched her panic play itself out in a compact mirror. She frantically tucked fly-away hairs into her taut bun, held down with goopy hair gel that left dandruff-like flakes across her scalp. Her right eye was dripping charcoal tinged tears, as she distressed over her eyebrows that had started to come off in the sweltering air; so

much for waterproof makeup. I contained my laughter, rolled my eyes, and went back to staring out of the window, happily letting the sweltering air blow over me without care.

For the rest of the day, I saw squadrons of girls just like my new bus buddy with the painted-on eyebrows. They gathered their troops and spread out to conquer the school. I knew no one, and I was unconcerned. While these girls staked their claims on bathroom mirrors, I quickly rushed to my first hour class, Geometry. This was where I could excel. I was happy to be in a classroom where my only concern would be the numbers on the whiteboard and the equations in the textbook. It was in this class that I came across one of the girls who made me “find who I was.” While sitting at my desk taking my books out of my bag and waiting for class to begin, a girl walked past me and yanked my hair. I jumped and rubbed my scalp in surprise and glanced in her direction. She was already sitting down at her desk and laughing with a group of girls while looking at me and pointing. Her latte colored skin was highlighted and bronzed in all the right places with what I assumed was the most expensive make-up. She had long hair—no, long weave—that hung like a thick curtain down the length of her back. Her blood-stain-red lips widened in amusement as she laughed at my disbelief. She stared at me through unnatural purple contacts, eyes alight with humor. She had caused me pain, enjoyed it, and I didn’t even know her name yet. She whispered to the girls around her, I finally took notice of them and saw that they were almost carbon copies of the hair-puller. They began to giggle again while glancing at me, and I decided to just look down at my desk. I wasn’t prepared for that kind of confrontation. Class soon started and I sat at attention, looking ahead and never to my left where the group of girls sat. I could feel their eyes boring into me as class dragged on and I wondered what I had done to gain their negative attention. I reached again for my head, massaging my scalp, and began to lightly work my fingers through my hair. My fingers got caught regularly in the many spirals of my hair. My hair was long then, past my shoulders, and it spun out in many directions. I wore it in its natural texture, something I had long been proud of. I wondered idly if

maybe my hair looked unclean or messy and that's what caused the girl pull my hair.

I learned her name was Rose from the roll call and throughout the class I felt her eyes on me, judging. I just didn't know why. It was not until the bell clanged loudly at the end of the period and she quickly got up and walked past me that I understood.

"Comb those naps, slave. You're looking real black." she said, snickering loudly with her friends behind her. She tapped her knuckles on my desk as she passed and filed out of the room with her cronies behind her. That was when I realized that high school was where you found yourself, but you might not be okay the way you were.

### *Tenth grade*

Another year, same concerns. I watched the same girls I rode the bus with last year fret over the same issues as last year, but at least they all had new compact mirrors. I rolled my eyes and let my mind wander for the bus ride to campus. When we arrived, I got off of the bus and done as I had learned the past year, I made a beeline for my Biology teacher's classroom, head down, avoiding eye contact with anyone. This was where I spent most of my freshman year. I learned that it was safe. I ate lunch there, spent mornings waiting for the bell to ring there, and hid to avoid the relentless teasing of Rose and her clones.

When I arrived in the class, Mrs. Doughty rose her head in surprise at my abrupt entrance and raised her eyebrows at me. I could tell she was waiting for an explanation, but I was not ready to give her one. I had her as a teacher again for my sophomore year, but this time it was for Chemistry. I felt her eyes on me, asking questions she had not voiced, but I did not want to face her judgment yet. As it got closer to the time when the bell for first period was going to ring, more people began to file in the room for first-period Chemistry. I heard the whispers around me; the air was full of everyone's silent questions, their inquiries weighed on me like an anchor. I ignored the stares and whispers and took to studying the featureless, black lab table in front of me. That was until I felt a

presence behind me and I looked up to see who it was. Rose stood, domineering in her stance, and looked down at me with interest in her eyes. She seemed to be struggling to say something.

“I didn’t know you had hair like a white girl? That’s cute, though. Moving on up into the house, huh slave?” she said. She said it in a way, however, that made it seem okay.

For the first time that day, I reached up to my scalp. My rollercoaster was gone. The spirals, the curves, the twists, all gone. I had relaxed my hair a week before my sophomore year began. My hair was now straight and almost paper thin. It hung to my waist, and shone as my head shifted in the light.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief knowing that I had gotten Rose’s acceptance. I had finally done what I needed to avoid her constant torment. I believed that her acknowledgement was all that mattered at that time, but things only got better from there. Everyone acknowledged me. Random girls I had never spoken to complimented me in the hallways, teachers noted how professional and beautiful I looked, and administrators commented on how much more mature I appeared. Being the girl with the “white hair” made me more popular than I could have ever imagined.

For the rest of the year, I enjoyed the attention. I felt pride at the hair that had caused me embarrassment my entire freshman year. My hair was now something of power, something that other girls envied, and something that other girls wanted. I reveled in that power, allying myself with the same girls who called me a slave. I somehow made myself understand their judgment. I understood why they called me slave. I saw everything wrong with my curly hair, taking up space, looking unkempt and unprofessional. I saw everything wrong and I was so happy that I did so I could fit in. I was more than happy to make myself fit in.

### *Eleventh Grade*

Remember how I mentioned being happy to fit in? Well, I was happy; I was ecstatic. That was until I went to the hairdresser. It was the first time I had gone to get my split ends clipped in a few months and I was happy to have my hair be admired by all the

women in the salon. I was craving to get the same attention from them as I did in school.

At the hairdresser, my stylist Nita examined my hair after the wash. She started to making noises of disapproval. I wondered curiously what was bothering her.

"Honey, how many times have you processed your hair in the past year?" she asked.

"About every three months, why?" I responded.

"Why would you do it so often? You know, your hair was thin already it can't handle too many chemicals . . ." she said slowly. "We have to clip the dead hair away today, you know that right?"

I nodded, that was what I had come for. "I know, go ahead."

"The thing is after all the processing from the relaxers your hair is badly damaged. I mean, truly damaged . . . At least half of it has to be cut today."

I stared at her in shock. I had no words. I felt the tears well up in my eyes and spill over. Heavy raindrops from a weak cloud.

"Isn't there anything you can do to save it? I don't understand."

"It's the processing. Your hair cannot handle all of it. I mean, you had so much growth before when you wore it as is, I don't understand what made you change it in the first place."

I wanted to explain to her about the teasing. I wanted her to understand my entire freshman year. The days of being called slave, the hair pulling, the harassment. I wish I could tell her about all the times Rose and her friends threw things just so it would get caught in my curls. I wanted to show her the drawings they made of me with mops and brooms as my hair. I wanted her to hear the times they told me I belonged at the back of the bus with Rosa Parks. I wanted her to understand. I willed the words from my subconscious but I couldn't utter a sound.

I knew why I relaxed my hair so much and so often. I knew how badly I just wanted to fit in and be acceptable. I knew how much I wanted people to just get to know me instead of obsessing over the way my hair grew. The thing with high school is once they decide who you are, it is hard to change.

I looked up at Nita earnestly, asking many questions without speaking, needing her to save me, needing her to save my hair.

“What can I do? I don’t want to ruin all of it,” I whispered quietly.

“When was the last time you got a relaxer?” she asked.

“Around three months ago.”

“You should have quite a bit of growth then, right?”

“Yeah, almost two inches,” I responded.

“Well, we have to start over from there.”

I hung my head, devastated at hearing that my need for acceptance led to me having to get rid of what I was proudest of in terms of my appearance. I didn’t look up, didn’t speak. I simply nodded and closed my eyes. The sharp snip of the scissors reverberated in my ears. The sound carried the pain I felt all around my body, bouncing around, alerting my senses to all I was losing. The entire time Nita cut, I never looked. I kept my eyes shut, hoping the tears would stop if I provided a dam from the water supply. I was wrong.

When she finished, I looked up and saw a new person. It was not someone I liked or wanted to see. I avoided my reflection knowing that this was my own fault. I did this to myself. I decided that having people like me was more important than liking myself. I decided that having “black-people hair” was not something to be proud of. I decided that there was pride in looking like a “white girl.” I was called slave and I believed it. I loved my hair before I started high school, until I decided that Rose’s perception of it was more important than mine.

I hung my head, light without the protection of my mane, and sat in silence. I looked up and out of the window and wondered how tomorrow would be. I thought of what Rose would think, then I stopped myself. What she thought couldn’t matter anymore. My hair was starting over, so I had to as well. I had to purge Rose the way I purged the relaxer from my head and cut her negativity out. I couldn’t be processed anymore. Society would no longer process me the way they wanted, the way they processed my hair. I would just have to be me. With my hair that was black; even if it was too black for anyone else.

*DeAndra Miller is a junior at Minot State University, where she studies English Education. She is Vice President of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter and Student Advisor for the Society. DeAndra is also a wife and mother to three boys who never stop moving. After graduation, she endeavors to receive an MFA in Creative Writing.*

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## Catalog of Mourners

Marina Morreale

Jatona and Jimmy Lee Looker moved to East Slope Cemetery when I was three years old. They tend to the twelve acres of gravesites and play a role in the way their tenants are mourned by loved ones. My grandfather is careful to avoid mementos left on headstones while he is cutting the grass, and my grandmother retrieves the mementos that fall victim to his lawnmower. People leave all sorts of things: flowers, letters, stuffed animals, decks of cards, lighters, packs of cigarettes, six packs missing a beer, empty whiskey bottles, etc. These items are eventually disposed of, but only after they have served their time and purpose or have worn down. Occasionally, Jatona will stumble upon something that appeals to her sentimentality and she will collect it. For instance, there is a fifteen-inch pink flamingo on a stick perched on their back porch that she swears reminds her of me.

\* \* \*

The two have hosted funeral services for people of all ages and occupations, and each person leaves behind loved ones that grieve in their own ways. Recently, a Clay County sheriff's brother was murdered during a break-in. His service was large and lovely, and at the end his buddies each took a turn shoveling dirt onto his lowered casket before the professional gravedigger finished the job. This is a practice commonly noticed by the Lookers, but when all was said and done, their gravedigger noticed something was missing. The usual dozen chair covers, used to disguise service lawn chairs as something more sophisticated, were only adding up to eleven. They scanned the place to check if the wind had carried the missing thing off, but it was nowhere to be seen. It turned out the men had taken a chair cover with them. Every night the group goes out to the bar, they use it to cover an empty chair so their buddy can sit with them in spirit. My grandparents never considered asking for it back.

\* \* \*



Jatona and Jimmy have a beautiful view of the whole cemetery from their office chairs, which allows them to keep a catalogue of mourners. They are also able to maintain a connection with those buried on their land, as they often come to know the people that visit them. There is a four-year-old boy right outside the office window who always has an extravagant arrangement on his grave. He died of an asthma attack lying on the floor next to his mother, who desperately tried to revive him with his inhaler, but he was never able to catch his breath. His grandmother is a nurse who visits every day on her way to or from work, leaving flowers in his vase and little toys on his headstone.

Some grieverers are as consistent as her. There is a man my grandparents affectionately refer to as Grandpa who spends up to an hour at a time knelt by his wife's grave. He has done so every day for the last four years. Every once in a while his family will send him on a trip to California to visit some of his children, and in his absence he sends his local daughters. They drive as close as they can to their mother's grave and speak to her from the car for a while. Without fail, this woman always has a visitor.

\* \* \*

When my grandparents first took over the place, a woman in her mid-twenties died of a heart attack. I was fascinated with her headstone because it had a picture of her and her husband in the center. I spent a lot of time by her fresh grave, and eventually my toddler brain got to work on brewing potions for her. I mixed water, rocks, grass, and anything else I could fit into an Ozarka bottle, danced around, and then poured it onto her grave. I repeated this ritual daily until Jimmy finally stopped to ask what I was doing. "Making a potion to protect her babies," had been my spooky reply. A trip back to the office would reveal that she did indeed have three daughters, ages five, two, and six months old.

The father of these young girls works night shifts as a wrecker, and after the sudden death of his wife, he sent the girls to live with their grandmother. He provided the old woman enough money for an early retirement so she could be home with the girls while he was working. While he may not have had the time to single-

handedly raise his daughters, he did make time to visit his wife. Once every other week, around ten o'clock at night, he would come and shine his headlights on her grave. This man is the reason the Lookers never set visiting hours or lock up the place.

The three daughters, now adults with children of their own, still visit their mother at least twice a month. They come and talk for a while, leaving plastic toucans and frogs, strange vibrant flowers, or letters and pictures on her grave. My grandparents have watched these girls grow up through the years from their office window, and they seem to be doing just fine. Who can really say whether or not my toddler-made potion had anything to do with their success.

\* \* \*

There are people whose visits do not warrant such pleasant emotions. For instance, there was a couple who purchased a joint headstone with both of their names on it. While making their post-death arrangements, something struck the Lookers as strange about the two. The man died first and was buried beneath his side of the joint headstone at the top of the hill. Weeks passed before the lady came to visit him, and when she did, she spent a good amount of time there. At first, Jimmy didn't think much of it, but after an hour or so, he took a closer look. The woman was bent over the headstone with a chisel in one hand, a hammer in the other. She had been chiseling her name out of the stone. Jimmy locked the office. He later recounted the story to Jatona and when she asked why he hadn't tried to intervene, he told her, "Toni, there was a crazy lady holding two weapons. If she wants to deface the stone she paid all that money for, I'm not gonna stop her."

\* \* \*

It is in my grandmother's nature to help mourners in odd situations. There is a popular grave belonging to a man who overdosed in his mid-twenties. His name was Short Change, or at least that's the name given the most attention on his headstone. His birth name is written much smaller just above the quote, "Legends never die." There is also a shirtless picture of him revealing he had "Thug Life" tattooed across his chest. His headstone is fun. Friends often drop by to leave him cigarettes, flowers, and coin change.

The woman he dated for thirteen years comes to visit him with their child's blanket in hand. She once laid the blanket out on his grave and fell asleep there in the sun. When Jatona went to check on her, the lady said she was calling around to see if someone would give her a ride and that she wanted to stay by Short Change a little while longer. An hour and a half later, the girl had fallen asleep again and caught a crimson sun burn. Jatona helped her down the hill and into the office to wait for her ride. It turns out, however, the girl had been making calls on a plastic child's phone. She later thanked my grandmother for her kindness in a dark time, and still brings their child's blanket to visits with her deceased lover. Sometimes she will forget the blanket, and Jatona will retrieve it, fold it, and leave it on the front porch for her to come back and collect. Other times, the woman will leave a plastic money sign she has coated in glitter for Short Change on his grave.

\* \* \*

East Slope is in Riverside, Missouri, one of the few places that allows people to legally buy massive quantities of fireworks. One of the men responsible for this novelty is buried in a treeless section of the cemetery. It is important to note the lack of trees around him, because when he receives visitors, they will shoot off fireworks from his grave. My grandparents find this to be an important tribute to the man, and enjoy watching the show.

\* \* \*

Memorial Day is a big event for the cemetery. Every year, Boy Scouts come out and help my grandparents line the main road through the place with American flags. The fire department comes through on one of their red engines and the firefighters all file out in their dress blues. The group stops at the graves of their fallen to perform a brief ceremony and say a prayer before setting up a wreath on the headstones. There are at least three firefighters who receive this treatment every year.

The veterans also come out to show their love and respect for their fallen in a different way. For the last couple years, Jatona has noticed they will leave a single penny on veteran graves. This

phenomenon remains unexplained, despite how many people my grandmother has asked. The vets are usually the ones to come back later in the week to help my grandparents take down the American flags. Before doing so though, a few of them will stand at attention by each veteran grave, say the soldier's name aloud, and salute.

\* \* \*

Jatona and Jimmy Lee Looker work to preserve the final resting places of almost two thousand bodies. They keep consistent watch from the office window, always there to order headstones, arrange services, or tend to mourners needs. At the end of each day, the cat takes my grandfather's place at his desk as the couple locks the office. Jimmy moves through their bedroom and down the spiral staircase to his armchair to watch reruns of old Western shows, while Jatona struggles to keep the dog from chasing groundhogs on their walks. After dark, the two lounge in the living room and listen for the sounds of visitors: the hum of trucks, the crack of fireworks. Their considerate natures allow them to connect to the cemetery's tenants and visitors. They've made a life of respecting the dead, and enjoy their cozy home that sits happily among rolling hills of flowers.

*Marina Morreale is a recent graduate of Stephen F. Austin University, where she majored in English and minored in Creative Writing. Before receiving her degree, she served as the Secretary for Sigma Tau Delta's Phi Iota Chapter. She is currently working on her MFA in Creative Writing at Texas State University. Some of her work, including poems and non-fiction pieces, has been featured in HUMID.*

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# Sarah

Kimberly Weaver

*Sarah, I will always love you.*

*No matter how many times you scare me to death or how many times I'm upset because you might be gone, I will always love you. No matter how many times you attempt, even if you succeed, I will just go reread our text messages of supportive hope and listen to the songs you recommended to me and reflect on all the happy memories you gave me and I will think about you and I will love you.*

*And never ever, ever, even when you tell me to, will I ever forget about you.*

I sit in the shower. Close my eyes. The stream falls all around me, pools beneath my bunioned feet and curled legs. Poetically, I'd like to paint the scene a watercolor masterpiece, the pitter-patter of the droplets against the pale blue shower curtain and some warm, comforting mist that envelops.

Except my heart is too unsteady for all that elegance. Tonight, showering is an exercise in not drowning. I lean my head back and find cool tile where the spray doesn't reach and inhale as deeply as possible; it's a breath with all of the gusto required to swim to the bottom of a kiddie pool, but a breath nevertheless.

At some point previously, tears were falling. I'm not sure when they stopped, or if the absence of their salt now somehow makes the water surrounding my body any more or less pure. It doesn't matter anymore. I lost control of those ducts, their blockage or their overflowing.

I've lost something more important tonight, too.

My last words to her: *I love you.*

And she said, *"I love you, too, but the Prozac pills got me high enough nothing matters."*

And she said, “I love you, too, but the voices in my head bring me low enough I can only hear the devil. God didn’t create me this way, so I’m pretty sure Lucifer’s my maker. And it’s time I join him.”

I’d opened my mouth to say it didn’t make sense; if hell burns hot, bodies shouldn’t go cold. Heaven, rather, is skyward. But then heat rises, and before I could figure out my own paradox, she said, “I love you too, but I don’t need any love tonight. Don’t waste it on me, okay? You have given me more than I know what to do with.”

And she said, “Listen, I love you always.” And the line went dead.

I’m still listening.

I imagine all of the ways she might have done it.

*Slit wrists.* Red overflowing the bathtub. In my visualization, I first try to color it crimson, ruby, scarlet, like all the famous poets do. But in reality, even in this confused and shell-shocked state, I see it only for what it is. *Red.* All the way across the Atlantic, she’s gone both down the pale street and across it and all it is is red.

*Hanged.* From some rafter in her house perhaps she now dangles, feet swaying gently where she kicked away the chair as sharply and violently as the howling winds outside. She won’t have socks on—even if she did, they would be mismatched. I try to think back to what I’ve learned from crime dramas, unsure of whether or not toes turn blue as a result of asphyxiation. I imagine hers to be so, blue and chubby and painted with chipped black nail polish. Rope-burn rubbing red rash and purple bruise over the soft skin where her boyfriend usually leaves hickeys.

*Overdosed.* A cocktail of rainbow pills that represent her shaken mental health. Tossed back handful by handful, perhaps arranged by color or pill size in the palm of her hand. That would be the best scenario. I read once on a poorly made mental health site, it was the one that would most likely lead her to survive.

Probably not the one she went with, then. She *really wanted* to die.

My mom is sitting on the bed in her room when I emerge

from the white sterility of the bathroom. She usually doesn't read me so easily—and I'm a pretty boring book besides—but even she knows something is wrong. "Who were you talking to on the phone earlier?"

"Sarah." My voice is flat as my barely pubescent fifteen-year-old chest underneath the towel I'm wrapped in.

"What about?"

"Sarah." I don't elaborate; elaborating would mean thinking through what tense to use to refer to my dearest friend, and I don't have the strength for that right now. I walk through the master suite past her to my own bedroom where I pull on a pair of leggings and a hoodie I can hide in.

Despite my cold shoulder, my mom leaves ice cream downstairs on the dining room table for me. The spoon has a metallic taste that lingers like blood on my tongue the first and last time I bring it to my lips, so I leave the dish to melt while I reread the farewell note she sent to me and the group of our closest friends.

In part: *"There's a poison in me. I apply faux solutions to unexplained behaviors, but there's something wrong with the controller in my brain. There's a spirit in my skull that drives me; my body is a shell and inside there's no soul. I've never felt in control. My mind doesn't belong to me, and I can't remember if it ever did. I'm just another fucked up kid who's too stupid to become anything other than dead. And I just want to go home."*

I wonder where she learned how to write poetry like that and whether or not it always needs to be stained in blood in order to be beautiful.

Ashley calls me an hour later; from the tightness in her voice, I can tell she hasn't stopped crying since it happened. Mutual friends in mutual misery, hers louder, but mine just as deep. Her words are incomprehensible, shaky and slurred, but they resonate deeply with something in me. My stomach churns, curdles the teaspoon of milk sitting in my stomach from my ice cream. I want to be sick, but the walk to the bathroom seems too gargantuan a task. I swallow it back, go silent, stare off into space empty as the void Sarah is slipping off into.

If love is standing by someone through the hard times, what is living too far away and having to suffer the distance?

What is being unable to see if they're okay?

What is being unable to hold their hand as they slip away?

And what is left of the world if they're no longer in it?

In a few years' time, this will become ordinary. Sarah will go to the hospital; Sarah will be admitted to a psych ward. Sarah will have her stomach pumped; Sarah will have her thigh stitched up; Sarah will be comatose for three days.

Sarah will pull through, even when she doesn't want to. I have a dozen half-written eulogies I've scribbled out in Word documents and restaurant napkins, written by the light of full moons on dark nights when Ashley and I look to one another and say, *This is it. This is the night we lose her.* Sarah grows accustomed to the feeling of jumping into death's arms like a warm embrace, and I grow accustomed to the cold and bitter wind where I stand reaching out to her on the ledge.

(Add that one to the list of possible demises: *jumping from some great height.* Organs burst and bones shattered from the force of the impact, hair matted from the blood seeping out from beneath her. I hadn't thought of that, then, but I now learn to think of it every time, pray she chooses another option, if she has to choose one at all. It's too public a spectacle for the private matter of taking one's own life.)

And I will always love her. No matter how many times she attempts, even if she succeeds. I will just go reread our text messages of supportive hope and listen to the songs she recommended to me and reflect on all the happy memories she gave me and I will think about her and I will love her.

And she will say, *"I can't stay. I don't want to leave you but please be happy and forget about me and have a great life. Because you are worth so fucking much that I can't show you. I hope I was good while I was around."*

And I will say, *Sarah—you were the best.*

*Sarah—you still are.*



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## The Fire of 2006

Victoria Randall

Sometime in the summer, a silver-bearded prophet came to my house. He discerned pain here, he said, staring into my mother's eyes. The prophet spoke softly about the peace of God until Mom told him about her nightmares, about how she was a Christian woman but lived in pain and slept without peace. A smile stretched his beard open, showing stainless white teeth. He rolled back his starched sleeves and strolled into the living room, laying a stack of cards across the coffee table. These divined the sources and meanings of dreams, he said as we sat on the couch opposite him. He arranged the cards in a way that made my mother cry. For Satan roamed freely through the house, the cards showed, through witchcraft in the books.

We didn't read Harry Potter, Mom replied.

There's where so many Christians were fooled, the prophet declared. I leaned over to see the cards. With half a glare in my direction, he swept them into his hands and returned them to his bag. He defined witchcraft as infinitely more than broomsticks and spells. It was the divinations of the Greeks and the bonfires of the Druids. It was the gods of half-man and half-goat, and animals that spoke after God silenced them in the Garden. Literature and film carried modern, demonic disease. Worst were these, he proclaimed pointing to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, sitting on our shelves, as if they spoke for God. These carried the strain of pagan infection, daringly disguised as theology. The Bible says dark texts and their owners should be burned, he said, nodding at the fireplace behind us. Witchcraft gave demons the right to torture Mom's mind, but fire would provide deliverance.

Acts 19, the prophet explained as he grasped my mother's hands, tells of magicians who renounced their practices by burning scrolls. The final burnt offering of the New Testament banished strange fire and saved souls from the Devil. And here was the divinely sent prophet. For the home to be safe, witchcraft had to be scorched, as in the book of Acts. The only hope for escaping fear was sacrificing fairy tales. We had to repent.

I told the prophet of my dream about riding Aslan's back to save my family from a meteor, but this became another example of dark contamination. I was a child; impressionable and naive, but guilty. He didn't look at me, but I understood that I needed to repent, because I read the entire *Chronicles of Narnia* once a month. Because I told Mom that I loved reading *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* more than doing my chores. Because my friend often told me secondhand stories about the *Eragon* series, and I would not stop asking Mom exactly why I could not see the movies. Mom should understand that her daughter did not prophesy in tongues like other anointed children because fantasy bewitched me. These stories, the prophet declared, grieved God's heart and gave strength to Satan. He told Mom that we needed to get rid of everything, especially the Lewis heresies. From his pocket, the prophet withdrew a white candle lighter. If we withheld anything, he warned, we risked our family's spiritual safety.

*Screwtape Letters* burned first. I never read it, but Mom guiltily admitted the story of two demons; one taught the other how to ensnare Christians in misery and sin. She laid it in the fireplace and tried to set the fraying edges aflame, but it was too strong to ignite whole. We tore the book apart and spread its pages over the fireplace floor. Soon the old book seared into ink and ash. I watched my mother inhale astringent smoke and mutter prayers with the prophet over the disintegrating book.

The prophet took *The Magician's Nephew* and began to tear it. I thought Aslan was a metaphor for God, I ventured, holding *The Lion*, *The Witch*, and *The Wardrobe* to my chest. We could not mix the profane and the holy, he denounced, tossing small stacks of pages into the flames. Aslan was an illusion designed to distract from the true Satanic message. I began to ask what message that was. I wanted to understand, but the prophet began praying loudly. He prayed that the fire would burn strong, that the entities would feel its heat as they returned to their disgusting realm, that God would stop the Serpent from challenging my mind with doubt.

Each book of *The Chronicles of Narnia* followed suit. Their spines were broken and the pages ripped away. The books shriveled from the advancing lines of fire, shivering black ash that cooled and fluttered up white. I could never think of Aslan again, the

prophet told me. I could not think of Jadis or Diggory, or the Pevensie children. I did not cry. I only asked whether it was possible to remove a story from one's mind. We could burn the physical copies, I said, but the story would stay with us. The prophet, still not bothering to look at me, said the memories would fade from my mind as I embraced God and shunned evil. Mom retrieved last year's Narnia movie and threw it into the fire as well. She repented of demonism and paganism and collusion with Satan as thick plastic and iridescent metal dribbled into the ashes. We burned the rest of the Lewis sorceries—*Mere Christianity*, *A Grief Observed*, *Abolition of Man*—as the prophet said they were all contaminated by the sordid tale of great witches and scheming fauns. The books burned into a hill of gray ash and black, clotted plastic. My mother raked the embers for book fragments, ensuring nothing escaped.

The prophet finally turned his gaze to me. His eyes, unnatural, ice-blue, peered into me and saw something. Smiling thinly, seeing sin, he reiterated the need for demons to be banished from the house. My mother offered to get my books from my room, but the prophet placed a hand on my shoulder. His grip fell heavy and cold. Not breaking his stare, he said that I was old enough to know God's will, and sent me to find my repentance.

I left the living room and proceeded down the hallway, a canopy of gray smoke wafting over my head. My bedroom was in the back of the house. Entering my room, I shut the door behind me and stared at my bookcase. A white armoire with shelves built in, to hold the amount of books gathered from used book sales and homeschool conferences. My godmother hand-painted it with pink and violet orchids. Inside were playbooks and anthologies, collections of tribal fables, children's novellas, young adult novels, and biographies. There lay books about every kind of animal, insect, and bird, books on geology, ecology, and oceanography. Dearest to my heart was my fantasy section, and I stared at each book, trying to think of what to do.

I took the fantasy books out, one at a time, and put them on my bed. Modern versions of Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty made a stack on the mattress.

I saw why the silver-haired prophet wanted each of these to

burn, but why wouldn't he let me see the cards? Why wouldn't he even look at me until I was supposed to sacrifice my books?

*East of the Sun and West of the Moon* was my favorite book, and rife with Nordic mythology. I placed it gently on my pillow as my stomach began to churn.

I would have believed him, but he never answered my question.

*Grimm's Fairy Tales* told story after story of witches and warlocks and demonic monsters. *The Artemis Fowl* series made light of a demonic world. *The Princess and the Goblin* held its guilt in its name. Book after book built a tower on my bed. I didn't even know if I could carry them all. The prophet said the books were the mark of Satan's presence in the home, but I had never felt closer to God than when Aslan taught Lucy to heal, and now my door to Narnia had incinerated. I picked up the last book, *Heir Apparent*. The story of a girl who saved a kingdom from a fire-breathing dragon. Something flared in my chest and surged through my body. My mother called me from the other side of the house. I called back that I would be there soon.

I knew the classic fairy-tales by heart and could stand to lose them. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* was too thick to hide anywhere, so it must go. I knew if I did not appear with *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, my mother would ransack my room until everything was embers. Holding the large book in my hands, I tried to commit as much of the story to my heart's memory as I could, and added it to the pile of books to burn.

But I pulled the plastic jacket off of *Heir Apparent* and slipped the book into the space between the armoire and the wall. I pushed the jacket into the bottom of my trash can and shoved a pile of clothes and toys against the book's hiding place. Only owning the first two of the *Artemis Fowl* books, I shoved them between my mattress and the boxspring spaced apart to avoid suspicious lumps. My mother called again. Looking wildly around my room, I tried to rationalize if any other books might be missed if they didn't come with me, but it was time to leave. As I went, I caught my reflection, my eyes, in the mirror by the door. They asked why this was happening, why my mother's nightmares about strange men meant I had to burn my worlds away. I dimmed that angry, doubting

light, concentrating on copying the same look of penitent fear that my mother's eyes had. Carrying that pile of books, ones named and ones forgotten, I returned to the living room.

The man stared into me, searching. He looked right in my eyes as he asked me if that was every demonic book. I said yes, letting tears surface in my eyes to blur his ice-blue gaze. Finding nothing in me, the man looked away. The books I had chosen to destroy curled and crackled in the fireplace. Guilt for lying boiled in my gut. A colder, denser feeling sagged in my chest, but I kept my eyes on the fire, and I made myself forget books, burning or hidden.

After the fire abated, the prophet prayed for us, holding our hands in his cold grip. He blessed us with a stenching oil wiped in a cross shape on our foreheads. We were congratulated on our victory over Satan. The man prophesied the end of my mother's nightmares, and the beginning of my anointing under the Holy Spirit. Then, he retrieved his lighter and left.

At first, I did not read anything for two months. Afraid of being discovered, I kept the books hidden until they were gradually forgotten. Every day, I did my homework mechanically, I finished my chores in an hour, and I went to bed on time. Then I read every book in the armoire, three times or more. Before I knew what it meant, I memorized "The Hollow Men." I can still recite the biography of Florence Griffith Joyner. Every short story written and illustrated by Joni Eareckson Tada feels branded in my mind.

When I finally cleaned my room, I found *Heir Apparent*. I stared at it for a while, in its hiding spot. I held it to my chest and smelled the pages. I decided to relocate it to my bed so I could read it later that night, which is when I found the two *Artemis Fowl* books. I read all three, cover to cover, overnight. Then I returned them to their hiding places. I did this at least once a week until my mother forgot what those books were about, and then I placed them in the science section of my library. My mother says she has not had a nightmare since.

The prophet died the year that I went to college. After that, my mother forgot why she "banned" the *Narnia* books. A giant version of all seven books in the series sits on the coffee table in our new house. My sisters read it, but I haven't. I have not re-read anything that burned.

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## How to Run a Household: Thoughts about America during Premarital Counseling

Patricia Schlutt

*How will you manage your home?*

Eric's first thought is, "What does it mean to 'manage a home?'" We have hashed out the roles of dishwashing, vacuuming, budgeting, and meal planning in the years before this premarital counseling session, yet everyone tells us we've barely begun to learn what it takes. Outside the office, the rain pelts down the windows, washing the church with the kind of domestic zeal that my mother never had. My childhood could be measured in accumulating layers of dust. To excavate my brother's room from the cobwebs, dust, and grime, my mother eventually took a week off work and armed herself with paint scrapers, rags, dust masks, and a host of organic spray cleaners. My father never helped with the cleaning and my mother worked full-time and raised children full-time. She wasn't domestic. Neither am I.

The counselor returns to the question. How will you manage your home? Who will do what? What kind of roles do you already practice, and what do you still have to work out?

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Earlier in the day, at the Mukala apartment: Neva—mother of six and a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo—has scrubbed the kitchen floor and it shines, but there is trash on the counters, dishes in the living room. Her three-year-old, Lizy, is coloring on the carpet. It is a bright spring morning, but all of the curtains are drawn and it is 86 degrees inside the apartment. Getting the children and Neva ready for the green-card clinic takes nearly an hour.

Neva has scrubbed the floor, but most of the household is run through the twelve-year-old, Miryam, because she can speak English. Miryam pays bills, schedules meetings with social workers, applies for insurance benefits, and translates everything for her mother. Miryam manages the Mukala home.



I sit on the couch with Miryam as the family gets ready to go to the clinic. She tells me about the world where she can be a twelve-year-old: about her school friends, her teachers, reading Harry Potter to her sister.

I want her to live in this world as long as possible. But at the end of the day, if they miss a trip to the food pantry or the electricity is shut off, it is Miryam, with the magical curse of English, who will blame herself, and Miryam who must negotiate a solution.

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*Sometimes I worry that my future spouse does not listen to me. One of you marked "sometimes true."*

And neither of us can remember which one of us marked it. We make faces at each other; we explain how one might say that could be "sometimes true."

"Everyone doesn't feel listened to every once in a while," Eric notes. I shrug.

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Eric is right, but I swear there are moments that I hear everything. I hear Neva's daughter's name in Kinyarwanda: it's Nirimugishu. It means "Queen" and stands out like my own name does among chopped-up foreign words. Her mother calls her Queenie when Lizy is being especially sweet. Sometimes Lizy comes up to me and smiles, says the words there are always room to hear: "I love you, teacher."

The challenge isn't to hear the name Nirimugishu or "I love you" or "teacher," but to hear the difficult things. Neva's raised voice as she calls for Miryam to translate. Her tears as she talks about her son, still in the refugee camp they came from. Her frustration at not learning English quickly enough.

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These difficult things demonstrate why Eric and I can be so hard of hearing. Love is hard and full of landmines. Step too heavily and you'll break something. It will end in fire, in tears, in loss. I tread with care around Neva. I tread with care around Eric. I

speak and listen as well as I can without breaking or being broken. I do not speak about Neva's husband, killed in the Congo. I do not speak about her son, still there, or her other son, in jail in the United States. I do not mention epilepsy or hospital bills.

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*Can you adapt to change?*

Eric does not like last-second decisions. When we get into the car, he wants to know exactly where we are going.

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At the green-card clinic with the Mukala family: Neva is sitting at a long table with attorneys and a Kinyarwanda translator. As she sits in one place, the entire world is changing around her, and she does not know it. Policies are becoming stricter; my coworkers murmur about clients' applications being denied. Neva tosses anxious glances over to where four of her children sit, playing with blocks and doing homework with me.

We sit on the floor. Lizy builds a crown out of blocks with which I coronate her as she beams.

Neva doesn't have a choice but to adjust to change. Her country and her world as she knew it is gone. She has chosen to survive. She scrubs the floor, works through her ESL homework, goes to English class, tries to find work, takes care of the three-year-old, lives with her memories, laughs with her children, makes do.

We all are making do, in some way, if "to make do" means "to manage with what is available."

As I understand it, that's one part of what marriage is. Two different worlds, two childhoods and histories, never come together without smashing in places. We manage with our available history and we share our experiences and ourselves. In the end, it is a beautiful mess, like the Mukala family's new life in America.

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## The People are Fighting Back

Katie Haas

They ride in on a van purchased by the National Council of Churches of the Philippines. The ones who had sent them here. They halt in the rural country community of Barangay Mapalacsiao. This place is so much different than Manila—where they had just ridden out of. Manila is a paved city: dirty and polluted unlike Mapalacsiao. Mapalacsiao is open, surrounded by tall stalks of sugar cane stretching as far as the concrete walls lined with barb wire and glass would allow these plants to extend. Their stalks eked upwards to the sky, reaching out to something they could not quite touch. These brown and green, hardened, soon-to-be commodities are the life and death of those who live in the community enclosed by them.

Avery slides off of the van and hears her feet *clud* as they hit the dirt road beneath her. She is struck by the crispness and cleanliness of the air—the kind one can only inhale from an area untainted by man’s modern pollutants. The twelve of them shuffle towards a house for yet another few days in a new community as they simultaneously try to absorb their environment. The one-story houses are small and close together. The people move about them in such a way that it feels like they are familiar with one another. The water trickles through their handmade gutter systems which line the edge of what was probably the road. She soaks everything in as she had done before. Moving about was something they—meaning she—was used to at this point. They haven’t stopped moving in the Philippines since landing here about a month ago. They move from place to place, city to city all in the effort to live in solidarity with those surrounding them. They were not here to fix the problems of the people, but to listen to them as they told this missions group about themselves. At least, that is the ideal. They have come to listen, but do not do as the other missions’ organizations have done. They do not paint houses or build products for the people, but they sit down and have them tell their stories. Avery wasn’t entirely too sure why this approach had to be the ideal. She still feels the urge to move, but move in such a way that fixes, not listens. She hears the

stories of these people, sees their suffering, and wants nothing more than to provide for them what she believes they need. But this is not the way in which she is supposed to work.

Not long after arriving, they are ushered into a few separate host-homes where they set down their miscellaneous, foreign crap. Without a pause, they shuffle in a herded unison towards a different house where their group plus an uncountable number of farmers cram together. Should-to-shoulder and side-by-side, they sit with one another as the farmers begin to speak. They begin to tell them their story.

"We are non-violent protestors, seeking better wages for a better life," one says as their translator rapidly speaks in what feels like only a millisecond of delay.

Despite being overwhelmingly close to some friends Avery had made only one month prior, she begins to notice how the house has rooms, but no doors connecting them. The only door in the entire house is the one that connects them from inside world to the outside: everything else is open. Maybe this explains why they are all too terribly comfortable with cozying up to one another like this.

"We earn roughly a hundred pesos a week, and after paying all of our dues to the one who owns us, we are left with a little under nine pesos to feed ourselves and our families," another, who snugly fits between his two co-farmers, interjects.

A community that thrives on nothing more than nine pesos per person. Of course, they are going to be comfortable with being so close with each other. They need one another.

"Well, who owns you?" Avery's curious friend eagerly ask.

Silence. The kind that makes tension more noticeable and unbearable the longer it lingers.

"Aquino," one man bravely mumbles, but still afraid of saying the name too loudly for fear of being overheard.

The farmer's voice is so low that if the translator was not there, then Avery would have never picked up on the familiar sounding name.

"Aquino? The president of the Philippines?" she asks again, a little more confused this time than before.

The room remains silent. No one replies, but Avery doesn't

think it is necessary. In silence, her friend receives the answer she so desperately fishes for.

One farmer picks back up the conversation: “We have to be careful. We can’t be too outspoken anymore. Not since what happened here almost a decade ago.”

There it is again. The draw-to-attention tension: silence.

Timidly, one of their members asks, “What do you mean?”

Avery wishes they would stop asking these questions. When could they simply let the conversations die?

The farmer speaks again as his translator scrambles behind him, “We have been non-violently protesting this issue for a long time. This is not the first time we are doing such a thing. But back then, we were ignorant about what could happen to us. *But, not anymore.* We have witnessed actions too tragic to put into words, but have to find some way of talking about them in order for others to hear our stories.”

This dreaded silence once again permeates the room. It turns once crisp air thick and heavy as the weight of what he says begins to dig deep beneath her porcelain skin. Ignorance to intelligence. Innocence to experience. What could have happened to change innocent, non-violent protest to a bold act of courage and risk? She got her answer too soon.

As she hears them speak, the weight of what they say sinks deep beneath her skin. It was once, about a decade ago, the farmers were standing up for this same cause: a better life, a better way of living. They had been protesting, non-violently, as they always do. Some of the university students joined them, as the students always do. They believed in their cause and believed in their people, as her team does. They sat around, refusing to pick the sugar cane which would ultimately have been hauled away from those farmers, along with their hope of a better way of life. Beyond the walls is where the sugar goes to live, but not these people. Once they sign themselves away here, there is no leaving this place until they learn to touch the sky. Many of them learned what the sky felt like that day; because, for whatever reason, their captain was irritated. No, much more than irritated . . . he was furiously blinded by rage. The day was moving quickly, but when the police came, they began to feel like

time suddenly slowed to only a few grueling, broken moments. Shots fired. Fallen friends. Shots fired. Families fleeing. Shots fired. Blood, red, everywhere. Shots fired. Students never leave. Shots fired. They learned to touch the sky. Shots fired. They survived. Shots fired. The rest are left for dead . . .

Ignorance to experience. Innocence to intelligence. The bodies. What ever happened to the bodies? Avery wonders, wouldn't someone come looking for them?

"No one ever came. Other than the ones who burned the evidence. No one ever came for them. Once you pass through the sugar cane, there is no going back until the day you reach the sky. There was no justice on that day, we were only taught a lesson."

He shuts his mouth, looks down, and weeps. Weeps only as one could when something like this happens. That silence once again appears but this time with weeping, painful, unspoken laments for the injustice of the world moving amidst it. And then it hits her. She realizes that she did not—no, could not—bring them freedom. These people have always sought freedom and are still seeking it. Their group—no, she—is not freedom brought to them, they are only people sitting in an uncomfortably small room, too close to one another, with an outspoken, broken individual surrounded by equally broken people who were much better at remaining quiet.

Breaking the silence, another farmer who had been intently listening finally says, "*Ang Tao ang bayan ngayon ay lumalaban*: The people are fighting back. We won't stop. We cannot stop. We have to seek freedom. We have to remain foolish enough to believe that something like freedom exists. Not only for us, but for those who oppress us as well. We are all humans seeking freedom—even the oppressors. We cannot be angry, because they seek freedom too. Where is the justice if we gain freedom only to oppress again? They are stuck in a sick cycle that has been passed down for years. There is no justice in this cycle, and we must refuse to participate in it. We have to seek freedom for ourselves, and for those who oppress us."

The room falls silent again. Love—for the oppressor? An absurd idea that makes perfect sense. No one can claim to seek justice for the world without considering everyone: themselves, the oppressed, the powerful, the poor, the minority, the majority, and the oppressor.

Drying his eyes, the farmer speaks once more: “This is why we do what we do. *Ang Tao ang bayan ngayon ay lumalaban*: The people are fighting back. We protest non-violently, considering who oppresses us but at the same time knowing now how outspoken we can be. We know the boundaries not to cross, unlike before. This does not mean we are never angry, but it does mean we have come to a better understanding. We cannot stop. We will not stop. And your eyes on us and your ears hearing our story is more than we could have ever asked. We are a people unheard and you have listened. So, thank you.”

No one can bring them freedom, but their stories can still be heard. In hearing, they affirm everything these farmers had been seeking and the ways they try to find what they desperately seek. In hearing, they have come to know stories unspoken to outsiders. In hearing, they give these farmers an opportunity to share with the world what their real and tangible experiences are. Now it is up to those who can, to go out and share these stories. To not forget, but to know that listening to another’s story is one of the most powerful gifts anyone may give a stranger. They only want to share, and she too only wants to do the same. Their real and tangible experiences are kept alive in the story. They find a small sense of freedom in the stories.

The next morning, the sun rises, as it always does. Yesterday happened, but the day is new. She slides out of bed and hears her feet *clud* against the dirt ground. She shuffles her way outside to see everyone working and walking through the sugar cane fields—only by the light of the sun which rose again. She walks toward the sugar cane, knowing only a small portion of the story it holds. As their stalks eke up towards the sky, they reach out for the ones who once walked among them.

“*Ang Tao ang bayan ngayon ay lumalaban*: The people are fighting back.”



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# Short Fiction

# The Man with No Name

T.G. Messina

Dark clouds over London held the city in anticipation of its looming destiny. An Old Man in a beige trench coat and brown fedora shuffled by on the sidewalk. Some passersby told him to watch where he was going, but he hunched his shoulders against the chill of their words and hurried on. Old Man rarely looked up when he walked. The people were always the same: Mister Scuffed Black Toe or Miss Squeaky Leather Flats. He never connected the faces to the shoes. Why should it matter? After years of taking the same route through the park to the soup kitchen, he was still a stranger in his own city.

This afternoon, when Floured Apron Lady had tossed Old Man out of her alley again, he decided to go to the soup kitchen early. Schoolchildren had been let out of their classes and hordes of them were milling around on the streets. To avoid them, Old Man crossed the street and went along the opposite sidewalk—a deviant route that he rarely took. The glossy shop windows on this side of the street were an uncomfortable change from the rusty brick buildings he was usually pressed up against.

Old Man burrowed his chin into his coat to stop his wandering eyes from craving the fresh bread in the window. Suddenly, a strong gust nicked his fedora off his head. He charged after it and grabbed it out of the sky.

“Hey!” cried a childish voice below him. Old Man startled and glanced down at a dirty boy, covered in dusty chalk. He had a hole in the knee of his pants and a worn-out cap on his head.

“Watch out, you almost stepped on my ship!” the boy exclaimed.

Old Man cocked his head to the side to observe the picture. The little boy was frantically scribbling the sails of a pirate ship. It had a wide, round mast, a colorful wheel, and detailed cannon holes. Clearly, the boy had been working on this for a few days. Old Man looked to the darkening clouds and then back at the chalk drawing.

“It’s going to rain today, boy,” Old Man said, tapping the tip of his shabby shoe to the edge of the drawing.

"I know," the boy chirped, but didn't slow down. Old Man glanced wearily at the sky and then back to the pavement.

"Then why are you working so hard on that?" Old Man grunted.

"The rain takes the drawings to Neverland, mister, and I wouldn't want Peter Pan to be disappointed with this ship. He's got to have something to fight against Captain Hook." He said it like it was a perfectly logical answer. Old Man chuckled, told the boy to stay out of trouble, and continued to the soup kitchen.

That night, the rain cleared the streets of any chalk drawings and left a fresh scent in the air. Old Man had been shoved off the front steps of Mister Shiny Suede Shoes apartment and was once again heading to the soup kitchen when the children were released from school. Old Man was nearly run over by bicyclists with training wheels so he crossed to the glossy-windowed side of the street. Not surprisingly, he found himself looming over the same little boy, scratching the first marks of a treehouse onto the pavement.

"Hey," the boy squinted up when Old Man's shadow crossed over the drawing. "Oh it's you. What do you think of the Lost Boys' fort?"

Old Man glanced at the picture. Then he bent down, picked up a piece of chalk beside the boy and added a lookout tower to the top of the tree.

"Say, that's pretty good, sir," the boy chimed. "Maybe I'll add a telescope too!" he exclaimed, taking the chalk back and adding the detail. Old Man nodded, told the boy to stay out of trouble, and continued on his way.

For the next few days, Old Man took this new route to the soup kitchen. The boy, who was called Johnny by the biking kids, began to expect his new friend. Old Man liked to add a flag to a ship or a feather to a hat. Every time, he stayed longer and longer, until eventually he sat down on the sidewalk and drew all of Skull Rock. Johnny was thrilled, since he didn't know how to draw a face without eyeballs.

After that, the pair were always seen at the glossy street corner, working away at their masterpieces. The window-shopping locals began to throw pennies into the brown fedora. Fast-Paced Sneakers even threw them five pence as he jogged by, which Johnny gleefully used to buy more chalk. The crowds were especially curious

right before it rained, when the pair were scribbling frantically to finish their pictures. It was on one of these days, when the clouds were darkening overhead, that Old Man noticed Johnny's cough. The boy never complained, though, so Old Man shrugged and continued on his teepee sketch.

Johnny did not come to the street corner the next day or the day after or the day after that. A week passed without Johnny and Old Man began to worry. When the children skipped by him, he stopped a boy in overalls and asked him if he knew anything. The Overalls Boy shook his head and ran off, but a shy little girl with strawberry blonde pigtails approached him.

"Johnny will be happy to know the Indian camp is almost done," she said smiling at the picture. Old Man looked up in surprise; children rarely spoke to him. He recognized her lacy socks and petite pink flats. She had tossed them ten pence once when they were drawing the mermaid lagoon a few weeks ago.

"How is Johnny?" Old Man asked, covering his toothless mouth with his hand.

"He's very sick. He's in the hospital down on Whitechapel Road," the Pigtails Girl said. Old Man's face fell.

"Oh," he paused for a moment, "Could you do something for me?"

She nodded eagerly. Old Man picked up a green Peter-Pan-colored piece of chalk and placed it in her tiny hands.

"Give that to Johnny and tell him not to worry about Neverland. I'll finish Tigerlily's teepees and the crocodile rocks for as long as it takes." He closed her fingers around the chalk: "Tell him Peter won't be disappointed."

"Why can't you tell him?" Pigtails Girl wondered.

"Oh, they don't let people like me into the hospitals," Old Man sighed. "Can you deliver it?" She nodded and promised she would.

Another lonely week passed, but Old Man was busy with his promised projects. He was sketching a fierce crocodile with a scared reflection of Captain Hook in his eye, when he heard fast pitter-patter footsteps.

"Hey Mister!" cried a childish voice. Old Man whipped around, but his face fell when he saw it was only Pigtails Girl. She was running toward him, waving something in her hand.

“Quick, I have to get back before mother knows I’m gone, but this is from Johnny.” She said shoving the hard thing into his hand.

“He says he hopes you understand,” she called as she took off in the direction she had come. Old Man unwrapped it and found that it was a letter curled around the green chalk. His hands shook as he opened it. Scrawled in very poor handwriting, the message read:

Deer Mistr Frend,

You can stop sending draaings to Neverland. Its not a reel place. Peter isn’t reel and neether are mermads or faires or pierates. The rain just washes the chak away and it doesn’t go anywher. I’m leeving town tonite. I’m very very sick and the docters are sending me to another hospitel in London. Thank you for the chak games tho. I had fun even if it was fake.

~Johnny

Old Man stared at the letter and dropped the chalk onto the pavement. It broke in half and rolled into the gutter just as a light drizzle started. Tears welled in Old Man’s eyes as he crumpled the paper and tossed it away. He left the rest of the chalk on the sidewalk and headed straight for the soup kitchen. He waited there until the doors opened, then he ate his soup and found a quiet alley to sleep in.

The next day, he did not leave his spot until after the children had been released from school. He crossed the street on the brick side of the road and waited in line for the afternoon soup. On his way home, he stared at the pavement like before, but he noticed something strange. Little chalk drawings sprouted out of the cracks in the pavement. He followed them about a block and then turned the corner.

“There he is!” a group of children chimed and suddenly he was surrounded by them.

“Get away!” Old Man scowled. He had hoped those were Johnny’s drawings, but it was just a hurtful trick. Johnny wasn’t coming back. Old Man tried to push past the children, but they were all jumping around so excitedly and it was hard not to step on their toes.

“Please mister, don’t go. Won’t you sign our school

newspaper?" Pigtails Girl pleaded. Old Man paused and glanced at the picture in the paper. He and Johnny were hunched over the pavement, their bums in the air, solely focused on their art.

"You're famous mister!" the children cheered.

"Can we have your autograph?" Overalls Boy begged, holding out the newspaper and a pen.

Old Man was stunned. He pinched the newspaper from Overalls Boy and held it close to his nose. For the first time in a while, he noticed how ragged he looked. His skin was pale, his beard was straggly and his clothing drooped off his body. Then his gaze rested on Johnny with that dimpled grin splitting his face. Old Man chuckled at the matching chalk smears on their knees and elbows. What did it matter if Neverland wasn't real? What did it matter if he knew the pictures washed away after they were done? Wasn't the joy just from creating the pictures with Johnny? He covered his toothless grin with his hand.

"What's so funny?" asked Overalls Boy. Old Man shook his head.

"Do you believe in Neverland?" Old Man asked, reaching for Overalls Boy's pen. A few children nodded, but some shook their heads as Old Man scribbled.

"Well, I don't know if it's real, but I'm going to keep drawing." He said triumphantly and handed the newspaper back to the children.

"Hey mister, that's not an autograph, it's a ship!" said Pigtails Girl.

"Yea, what's your name?" asked Overalls Boy.

"I am the man in the photo. Whoever the article says I am is who I want to be."

The children leaned in and read aloud, "The Chalk Man?"

He nodded: "That is who I am."

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## Stacey's Crow

Stephanie Ramser

Cathie watched her husband, Elmer Park, turn his coat pocket out to get at the crushed box of cigarettes inside. He selected one slender stick and unceremoniously returned the box to his pocket. The top flap of the box stuck out of the fleece lining. Cathie thought it resembled the talking box from those insurance commercials—if that talking box were screaming or being scalped. *Now that's a bundle I could get behind*, she decided, letting a smirk curl on her narrow lips. She continued watching her husband through the lace curtains over the kitchen sink as Elmer milled about on the sidewalk leading up to their apartment complex.

Cathie wished he would stop that awful habit he had picked up when his twin sister, Stacey, was first diagnosed with cancer. When she asked him to stop, he said he was just too damn stressed, and why couldn't she just leave him alone? And that was that. She resigned herself to watching him like a hawk through their window whenever he went outside to smoke, which was often, and became more frequent the worse his sister's condition got.

Cathie liked to keep the window cracked in the fall to get the smell of fresh air in her home before she would be forced to lock down for winter. Because Elmer wasn't smoking on the bench outside the kitchen window today, but was idling about on the path in front of their ground floor apartment, she was able to push the small window up even further without getting smoke inside.

It was such nice weather today, clear skies and not too cold. She could hear a crow's caw in the distance and wondered what her husband must look like from above—maybe like a bull's-eye target with his growing bald patch on the back of his head; maybe like a figure that might be placed on the side of a person's hobby-train-set scene—*probably like a dumbass for smoking; he's going to kill himself just because Stacey is dying*. Cathie rolled her eyes and dipped her arms up to her elbows into warm soapy water. It felt like silk against her skin and made her think of how alive and warm the inside of a womb might be for a child. It made her wonder about the child she



couldn't have because Elmer was too preoccupied with his sister to fully start a family.

They'd put off a child for five years now, and Cathie wouldn't stay young forever.

When they had first gotten married, Elmer had always been willing to go the extra mile for Cathie—he'd bring her things; a perfect leaf he found on his walk home from the factory, one of those flowers that looked like a miniature daisy to leave on her pillowcase. He even attempted to cook dinner for her once in a while. He used to smell sweet like freshly turned soil from their old farmhouse, but now he just smelled like smoke. His hands were rough, and he never asked about her day anymore. On the rare occasions he did speak, it was only to talk about things he and his sister had done when they were growing up, and Cathie felt she knew Stacey better than she knew Elmer now, and she'd hardly met the bitch outside of family dinners.

A cough brought Cathie out of her thoughts. She saw that their upstairs neighbor had joined Elmer out front, his hands tucked in his jean pockets. Even from the window, Cathie could see the neighbor had deep bags under his eyes. "Nice day out, in'nit, Elmer?"

"Nice day, Royce," Elmer agreed. He flicked the ashes from the end of his cigarette. "How's it going?"

"It's goin', yea. I heard about Stacey. Heard from her, actually."

"Oh. What did ya hear?" Elmer's back stiffened. He may or may not have come near dropping his cigarette.

Cathie was surprised, too. She didn't know Royce was still in contact with Stacey, because what she'd last heard from Elmer was that Stacey was refusing to see anybody but immediate family in the hospital. Royce and Stacey had been coworkers, though Cathie suspected they'd been fucking before Stacey quit her job at the dental practice.

Cathie wanted to hear better, so she pulled her hands from the soapy water and pressed her palms flat against the far edge of the sink. Her face was inches from the open window now, and the breeze was just right to carry the conversation to her.

The crow overhead was loud. *Damn bird. Damn Elmer.*

"I heard Stacey is dying." Royce pulled his body around to face Elmer, but looked up at the sky, like he was considering it for some deeper meaning. Maybe he cared for Stacey more than just a fuck buddy. Cathie watched his chest expand and contract a few times before he spoke again: "Nice day out, in'nit?"

"Nice day."

There was a long pause. Neither of the men moved, and Cathie was almost afraid that breathing might interrupt them. That one of the men might turn and see her snooping and that she'd get a "Damn it Cathie, can't you let me do anything in private around here?" But she knew she wouldn't be able to say "*All you've wanted is privacy 'Mer. I want my husband back.*"

Elmer had been so removed from Stacey when Cathie first met him. He used to be bitter about her leaving the family for the city, until she got sick. The few times they had met, Cathie thought Stacey was too loud, wore clothes that showed too much, and talked too much. Stacey was always the center of attention when she was around, and now she was the center of attention when she was away, too. Cathie couldn't win.

She held her breath until it burned and tried to unsee Stacey's features from Elmer's face.

The crow broke the silence with a drawn out *caaaaaw caaaaaaw*. Cathie thought it sounded more like "ha ha." Did Elmer think the bird was taunting him? *Haw haw, your sister's dying in the hospital. Haaaaw haaaaaw*. Cathie wished they still lived in Kentucky where she could shoot the damned bird. She missed their farm. They'd sold most of their furniture and all of their guns when they got the call about Stacey's diagnosis. Elmer "needed" to be closer to his sister, so he got into contact with some of Stacey's friends online, and eventually Royce got them in touch with their landlord.

Stacey had denied she was really sick at first, and fought through treatments as well as she fought with Elmer over the phone. Any time they argued, Elmer would mope for days, sometimes not even leaving bed. And Cathie would have to leave him there alone, needing to go to work.

One day Cathie had gotten so fed up with Elmer's reactions

that she called Stacey, who *really sounded sick*, to tell her to get her shit together and to stop taking things out on Elmer. The disease had gotten to her brain by then, so Cathie didn't know what Stacey knew and what Stacey *knew*. Maybe she knew the end was getting close for her. Cathie made sure she knew she didn't like how her sickness was affecting Elmer.

Cathie watched the crow land on the telephone wire across the street from her husband and thought about how easy it would be to kill the damned bird. One clean shot through the head, no pain. She smiled as she imagined it dropping to the ground in a flurry of limp feathers. She wished Stacey could go at the twitch of a finger, but too bad hospitals wouldn't do that to people with terminal illnesses. *A bullet to the side of her head, that's all it would take*, she thought. She wished Elmer weren't in pain watching Stacey die.

Royce kicked a pebble into the gutter and it clinked a few times before falling silent. "Do you think she'll let me see her?" He pulled his hands from his pockets and ran one through his hair in a fluid motion.

*The poor bastard loves her.* Cathie gripped the edge of the sink hard enough to make her fingers hurt.

"Stacey?" Elmer sounded startled.

"Yea, do you think she'll let me see her before—Uh, yea?"

"Yes—" a long pause. Elmer took a deep drag from his cigarette while he considered the question. "Maybe."

"Yes, yes," Royce looked down at his feet, seeming suddenly relieved of something. Cathie decided it was some sort of guilt he felt rid of.

She couldn't hear the next bit of their exchange, but she was almost positive the last thing Royce said was a muttered "thank you."

Before she could turn her ear towards the window, the phone rang. It was to her right—an ancient installation on the wall from before they'd moved in. *Ring riiiiinnnnng. Caaaaw. Caaaaw.*

Cathie picked up the phone with both hands and held it to her ear. The words went straight through her without fully registering. The voice on the other end spoke again, prompting Cathie for any sort of response.

Elmer came into the kitchen shortly after, reeking of smoke, aftershave, and coffee. Cathie smiled at him and held out the phone. He took it from her and brought it up to his ear without tangling the cord.

"Hello?" His voice was raspy from smoking.

Cathie watched Elmer's eyes glass over. He answered the person on the other line as if he were talking to his mother, in a string of yeses and okays.

"I'll be there soon." Elmer's voice cracked at the end of the frantic string of words. He almost seemed to have aged five years since the moment he had taken the phone. It showed in the lines on his face, in the deadness of his eyes.

The phone slipped from his hands and Cathie was too slow to catch it. It bounced against the wall a few times before it finally hung still.

She reached around him and pressed against the clicker, just to make sure.

"Cathie, get my keys," Elmer told her. He was shaking, running his hands over his head, through his thinning hair.

Cathie shook her head and put her hands on her hips. She wanted to put her arms around his neck instead, but needed to put them somewhere out of the way.

Elmer lurched forward like a falling tree. He was like a power line falling over from the weight of too many crows landing on him, and Cathie wondered how many crows it would take. Ten? Twenty? A hundred?

Just Stacey.

His fall was short, interrupted quickly by Cathie's body. Elmer caught himself at her hips, pressed his face against her neck, sucking in a deep, shuddering, desperate breath. This was the closest he'd been to her in months.

"It was such a nice day, Cathie."

*If not for those damn crows spreading death everywhere, she thought. The crow mocked them again. Haw haw Stacey died.*

"It is." She pressed her lips to his receding hairline. "It is."

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## The Boring Twin

Evan Doran

The phone rang at 7:55 p.m., five minutes earlier than usual. I looked up from my chair, where I had been reading for the past hour. The angry red light on the answering machine flared to life with each ring. I wondered if there was a way to turn that off. I'd spent six years using the same home phone system, and I had never thought of that.

I had a cell phone, of course. But I had never told the person on the other end of that line what the number was.

*The person you are trying to reach is unavailable. After the tone, please record your message.*

Was it wrong of me, never picking up? My brother kept calling nevertheless, and he always left a message. Even if I never responded.

The machine buzzed.

\*\*\*

I suppose I should explain.

Up until the time we were twelve, my brother Tim and I were inseparable. Born identical (or so everyone, including us, thought), similar interests, similar names—Tim and Tom Hartford—even the same friends. You couldn't find one of us without the other, and neither of us had a problem with that. People said that we even breathed in sync, and they were probably right.

The summer after our twelfth birthday, on a camping trip with our parents and our little sister Tara, we were playing on the edge of a river. It had stormed recently, so our parents had warned us away from the river, but they otherwise trusted us. We were kids, but we were generally responsible.

They probably should have realized that although we were generally responsible, we were kids.

My brother, sister, and I were playing hide-and-seek. It was Tim's turn to find us, and Tara and I were looking for hiding spots along the riverbank. My sister was more athletic than Tim

and I combined, so she climbed the trees while I snuck around the underbrush. Tim and I had asked her to stop on multiple occasions, had told her it was dangerous, but she continued up so fast that neither me nor Tim could catch her. Earlier that day, we'd decided just to accept it.

Just before dark, Tara's tree broke. I heard a snap behind me, a short cry of surprise, and the sound of someone hitting the water. My heart froze for an instant, and I raced to the riverbank. Tara was struggling in the swift water, paddling with little effect against the current.

Tim burst from the trees behind me, and, seeing Tara, laced his fingers behind his head with a sharp intake of breath.

"Tim! Tom! Help!" My sister cried and we both sprung to action. Tim and I kicked off our shoes, and I dove in. I waited for Tim to dive in too, but instead heard another cry—this one his. I looked up, and Tim was hovering a foot or so above the water.

"Tim!" I shouted, and he flailed around in the air for a few seconds before righting himself. He looked at me in terror, then our sister screamed again.

I started trying to swim toward her, but Tim soared over me, reaching her before I could get a few feet away from the riverbank.

"Tim! How—"

"I—I don't know! Just—grab my hand and I'll pull you out!"

Tara grabbed Tim's hand, and he flew back with her to the shore. I struggled back myself, and we all lay panting on the riverbank.

Our parents arrived half a minute later, called by our screams, and saw the three of us drenched—Tara and I with water, Tim with spray and sweat. They asked us what happened, but none of us could figure out how to tell them.

We were all grounded for a month.

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After that, the three of us—Tim, Tara, and I—tried to figure out how Tim did what he did. Within weeks, he had figured out how to fly.

To Tim's credit, he realized that if he could do all these

wonderful things, I should be able to as well. I tried everything he said worked for him, but I remained on the ground.

That fall, things began to get a little different between us. We had both been good students—he got A's in science and math and B's in everything else, while I got A's in history and English and B's in everything else—but he started to understand concepts quicker, excelling and becoming top of the class within months. All the teachers sung his praises, and our parents told him to keep up the good work.

Though they never said it, I understood they thought I wasn't trying hard enough.

Our parents had also shoved us onto the cross-country team, and we found that whatever had happened to Tim, it had also made him faster. He became the star of the team, whereas I brought up the rear no matter how hard I tried. He slowed down in a few races, but I told him off afterwards. It wasn't fair to him if he didn't give it his all.

His muscles started to develop, and we both started lifting weights. There, too, I realized that he was pretending to have more difficulty than he actually was, and I gave up.

By the time we were sixteen, he was top of the class, a state champion runner, and had the body of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator*. I was in a few AP classes (but not nearly as many as him), had barely made the JV team, and had all the musculature of a wet noodle. He and his girlfriend were Prom King and Queen, and I was lucky to find a date.

When we graduated, he paraded off as the triumphant valedictorian with a full ride to Stanford, and I went to a decent state school my parents could afford after some student loans and some scholarships. I felt better there, for a while. Without Tim's perfection hanging over me, I expanded my horizons, making friends here and there and discovering my passions.

That first fall, I came home having made the Dean's List. When I told my parents, they left off their usual criticisms and celebrated. It had been so long since that happened. I cried that night, feeling years of disappointment wash off my shoulders.

A week later, Tim came home, bringing a notification that



he had made the President's List. I smiled and congratulated him, feeling it fully for the first time in years. He gave me a hug, and I could feel him relaxing, too. Then Tara turned on the television.

A news report came on about a masked man stopping a robbery at Stanford. Apparently, this mysterious vigilante *flew* when he took the criminals to the police department.

When they heard the news, my parents went into the living room and started watching. I only turned around, seeing Tim lacing his fingers behind his head and fighting a gleeful smile from breaking across his face.

"So . . ." he started, and I sighed. As far as I knew, only one person in the world could fly.

"Another thing to put on that overstuffed résumé?" I asked, and the smile left his face.

"What's wrong?" He sounded concerned. I stared at him, then shrugged and turned upstairs. "Tom?"

"I'll be upstairs if you need me."

\*\*\*

After that, Tim and I only spoke when we were on vacation. Even then, we didn't see one another that often. I stayed on campus when I could, while he studied abroad in far-flung countries and attended conferences one after the next. The few times we did see one another, he always looked like he had something to say, but never managed to force it out.

Just after exam week our junior year, our grandmother died. We returned home, finding our parents in grief and soon-to-be-college-bound Tara struggling to come to terms with our grandmother's death.

I tried to avoid Tim as best I could during the days before the funeral. It wasn't hard. There were so many well-wishers that our front door was almost never closed. People came and people went, and Tim was just as busy dealing with them as I was avoiding them. People were already used to Tom Hartwell, Tim's shut-in brother, hiding away from everyone, so this was par for the course.

On the day of the funeral, however, we couldn't avoid each other any longer. The hour or so we spent in the local church

listening to the sermon was one of the most awkward of my life. Tara watched the service go on, stone-faced, while Tim slouched next to me, crying.

Afterwards, I left for a nearby park, taking a book and sitting under a shaded tree. I wasn't able to read, not after everything, but the book gave me an excuse. I sat there for an hour, staring at the cover until I heard Tim approaching.

"Tom!" He called.

"Busy," I said. He was silent for a moment, then came forward a few more steps.

"Tom. Can we talk?"

"Aren't we now?"

"No. I mean, like, actually talk. Without either of us getting upset with each other."

I swallowed a bitter comment and looked up from my book.

"Alright. Shoot."

"I know that you're upset about what I am. I know that you think it's not fair that only one of us can do the things I can. But—I want to be brothers. I want to be a family."

"Okay. And how do you propose we do that?"

"Well, let's just talk. I haven't had a real conversation with you since high school."

"I already agreed to talk, Tim."

Tim sat down next to me and stared out across the park.

"How's college?" Tim asked.

"It's fine. My grades are good. I have friends. I'm part of a few organizations. How's Stanford?"

"It's . . ." Tim trailed off. "Hard. Very hard."

"Well, it is one of the best. It makes sense that they'd work you hard."

"I know." Tim nodded. "There's just never enough time."

"Does that have something to do with your heroics?"

Tim's face reddened and he started to bring his hands behind his neck before stopping himself.

"Something like that."

"'Crime never sleeps,' isn't that what everyone always says?"

"I hate to admit it, but they're right. And it means I never sleep either."

"You probably have some power that helps you catch up on sleep or something, right?" I asked, half curious.

"No. But that would be nice."

We sat in silence for a minute. Cicadas started chirping, their loud screeches drowning out the world.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Tim asked.

"No. I've had a few off and on, but nothing serious. How's Cecily?" I knew Cecily was a high-school romance, but she had seemed really in love with him.

"We . . . we didn't work out."

"Oh? When did that happen?"

"After freshman year." This time, Tim couldn't keep himself from lacing his fingers behind his head. "We both had some realizations."

"Like what?"

"I—" Tim broke off suddenly and looked away. "I realized I wasn't interested in her that way."

"Okay. Why so serious, though?"

"Erm . . . I realized I wasn't really interested in women in general."

"Oh." He was my brother, and I had never noticed. The thought had never even crossed my mind. "Okay. So, are you—"

"Gay. Yes."

"Got it. Right." We both sat there for a few minutes.

"Do you have a boyfriend, then?" I asked, and Tim nodded. "Good for you."

"I haven't told Mom and Dad."

"Have you told Tara?"

"Yes. Yesterday. She understood, too." He risked a glance at me. "She told me to talk to you."

I nodded.

We watched the sun set, and Tim's phone rang. It was our mother.

"I guess that's curfew." I said, and Tim cracked a smile. We both stood and I stretched.

"That was nice," Tim said. "We should talk more."

"We should." I admitted.

\*\*\*

We didn't end up talking more. After that summer, we each returned to our separate lives, the stresses of senior year taking over.

When I went home for winter break, Tim opened the front door of the house. I started. Tim wasn't supposed to be home for another week.

"What—?"

"I dropped out." Tim admitted. As I stared at him, he waved me into the house.

My parents told me not to ask him about it, and by the time I was returning to college, Tim was packing up to move to a big city. He said he didn't have one in mind—that he'd just go to whichever one the first bus was headed towards.

Our parents tried to talk him out of it, but he said it was his decision. He thanked them for all their support, and told them he hoped they would continue to support him in the future.

Within a week, I heard the mysterious vigilante had moved from Stanford to Miami. About a month after that were when the calls began.

He didn't seem to mind that I never picked up. It was almost easier, in a sense. He would tell me about his life. He told me about the horrors he'd seen in his time fighting crime and how much it hurt him when he accidentally injured someone. He told me about how much he loved the city, even when he saw the dark side of it. He told me about the times our parents visited. He told me about his experiences finishing school. He told me about his boyfriend, whom Tim had met when Tara visited and dragged him to bars around town. He told me about how he was happy.

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"Tom? Tom, are you there?"

Tim sounded worried. He hadn't sounded that worried for years.

"Tom, I know I've never asked this, but please . . . just pick up."

I set my book on the table next to me and walked over to the answering machine. I stared at the light, now a solid red.

*“Someone found out. A journalist, I think. She sent me an email and said the world deserved to know who I was.”*

I blinked. Whoever it was, they had to be pretty sharp. Before now, the only people who knew about Tim were me, Tara, and Tim’s fiancé.

*“Mark’s been telling me not worry, but I just—I don’t know what to do. I would be alright with people finding out about me, but you, and Tara, and Mark—if someone thought to come for any of you . . .”*

Tim started sobbing over the line.

*“Tom, please . . . I need to talk to you.”*

I picked up the phone and rubbed my thumb over the answer button. His breaths slowed down over the line, just as mine did.

For a long moment, they were in perfect sync.

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## You Can Call Me Joe

Monique Sammut

“Patrick, there’s nothing more you can do.”

Walk out, move on, live, and forget. I could do that.

No. No, I couldn’t.

I was pacing up and down the emergency room waiting area like a metronome out of control, watching and envying a crying child being soothed by his tired mother. I hugged myself, trying to remember the feeling of comfort, reverting back to my five-year-old self who paced the living room the day my dad walked out on the rest of us, never to return, wondering in vain when he was coming home. I looked down at my cold, trembling hands: empty and helpless.

I wasn’t in any way related to the unfortunate people I’d encountered earlier, who were now gravitating somewhere between heaven and earth. Family members were on their way and there was nothing more I could do but wait for them and hope for answers. My mind raced and my stiff legs tried to keep up.

I grabbed some coffee from a side table and sat down on a seat as soft as a boulder. I leaned back, closed my eyes, and pushed my hair away from my damp forehead. Life had hit me with full force, robbing me of the power I thought I held. Why did I think I could fool everyone into thinking I was perfect? Because I was the only one who helped Mom keep it together after Dad left; because my sisters and brother couldn’t handle it any more than she could; because if they couldn’t be strong—someone had to be. Now, I looked and sounded like a man—but did I act like one? I was popular, but inside, I was as empty as a butterfly net swaying in the breeze. I had cut myself off from everything, including reality, and now, what did I have left? The poor family hadn’t asked for this. I shuddered at the thought that *they* could have been *me*.

A man walked in and I was reminded of Pa. What *would* Pa say if he could see me now? Mr. Rolnik—Pa—was basically my second father, and the seven Rolnik children were a second set of siblings. We met the Rolniks when I was six and they lived in West Virginia

about forty-five minutes away from us. For the most part, I grew up on their ten-acre farm, and they became more like family to me than my own. At fourteen, Hope was the youngest and the only one still living at home. She kept me company when Mom and I visited. Her brown curls bounced when she walked, and she was always humming or singing a song from the many soundtracks she had memorized.

Mr. Rolnik isn't too intimidating at first—skinny, about 5'9" (only three inches shorter than I am now), with gray hair, a scruffy beard, blue eyes, and a penetrating gaze. His expectations though, are higher than the Washington Monument. Good isn't good enough if Pa knows you can do better.

The Rolniks are Polish and friendly, like most farm folk tend to be. Mr. and Mrs. Rolnik even let my siblings and I call them Ma and Pa because those names are easier to remember. My sister Anne thought we'd stepped back in time when we visited for the first time. Ma's coffee made the house smell like hazelnuts, but hospital coffee tasted more like burnt water.

Pa struck a deal with us when we first met them. With a grin, he lowered himself on one knee and in a quiet voice said, "Right now, you all can call me Pa. But one day, you four will be all grown-up and when I give you permission—you all can call me Joe. That's my real name." He tousled my hair, "Do we have ourselves a deal?" We nodded, but I didn't comprehend what he had said until Anne explained it to me a few years later.

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I stood up and stretched, feeling as if someone had stuck a dagger in my right shoulder blade. The pain was inching its way down my spine and my legs were falling asleep. I guess that's what I get for being lost in thought. There's nothing like an accident to make your life pass before your eyes and force you to question whether what you're doing is actually enough.

A neatly dressed girl walked past, reminding me of how my siblings, in order to appear more grown up, were extremely well behaved every time we set foot on the Rolniks' farm. John would make sure his face and hands were clean. Sarah would polish her

shoes and brush her hair until she could run her fingers through it. Anne never tried to impress; she just did.

Pa's deal worked splendidly—for them. However, while the others were on their best behavior, my conduct remained as unruly as my clothes. Between the ages of six and eleven, I was too young to care about Pa's deal. After that, I thought I was too cool to care.

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Sarah and John were eighteen before Pa allowed them to call him Joe. Anne was seventeen. When I turned nineteen this January, I started wondering when my turn would come, and I'd been too dumb to pay attention to what my siblings had done to earn the coveted title of adult. I'd been taking the scenic route on my journey towards manhood, and Pa knew I was capable of better. In the world's eyes, I was an adult, but for my family and the Rolniks, I was still a child.

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During Easter break in late March, when Mom and I visited the farm, I decided to talk to Pa while he was milking the cows. I thought the *barn* smelled bad, but hay and manure now seemed better companions after the harsh smell of hospital disinfectant.

I leaned against a post watching him, never dreaming of helping. Cool people don't milk cows. "Pa, when am I going to be an adult?" He never looked up, but his steady drawl came from behind the cow, "You mean, 'When are you going to let me call you Joe?'" His whiny imitation of my voice made me cringe, but I nodded anyway.

"Son, there's more to growing up than you think. Right now, you think you're the coolest thing since milking machines, don't you?" *Anything* was cooler than *those things*.

When I kept quiet, Pa continued, "Patrick, growing up doesn't mean being popular. You have to get brains in that pretty head of yours, and then supply those brains with common sense and courtesy. Looks don't mean anything without a heart and a brain because your actions speak loudest of all. Growing up means you're one step closer to learning the greatest lessons on earth—how to love



and how to give—how to put others before yourself. When was the last time you did something nice for your mom . . . or anyone for that matter?” I dusted off that section of my mind. I guess telling Mom not to worry about me wouldn’t cut it for Pa. I shrugged. The heat of the barn was stifling, and Pa’s words were bombs hitting too close to home.

“I thought so. Son, I don’t care if you’re thirty before I hear you call me Joe. You’re calling me Pa until you find yourself—and a good dose of manhood too. Many of the answers you’re looking for ain’t out there.” He lifted his head, gesturing to the surrounding darkness. His open hand closed and his pointer finger zeroed in on my chest as he continued, “They’re in there! You weren’t made to be cool, Patrick. You were made to be *great*. Don’t settle for any less! Now, get outta here!” With that, he resumed milking and ended our conversation, while I left to find dessert and something else to think about.

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For two months I daily thought about Pa’s words. The answer was inside of me—but where? I thought being cool was great or at least I *had*. After *that* conversation I didn’t know what to think. Pa had never really been wrong before, but I had no clue where to start! The ER whirled around me as the months played in my mind.

Eventually summer arrived, leaving me with too much time to think. Mom and I usually went at least twice a month to visit the Rolniks, but the last few times I had faked having prior commitments, so Mom went on her own. Soon, it had been a rare two months since I’d been to their house. Hope told Mom she missed me, but I just *couldn’t* face Pa. When Ma invited us for Memorial Day, Mom accepted, and this time, there was no escape.

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Memorial Day, today, started off disastrously—in my perspective. Mom wasn’t feeling well and decided to stay home. I told her I’d stay home too, but she said it wasn’t polite to cancel last minute. So she called Ma, gave her an update, and sent me on my way.

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For thirty minutes I lamented my bad luck. Going was bad enough. Going alone was ten times worse. Not even the prospect of seeing Hope lifted my spirits. I was fifteen minutes away from the Rolniks' when several yards away a dog darted into the middle of the road. The car closest to the dog swerved and must have lost control, because the next thing I knew, the car was in a ditch. It seemed wrong to keep going, so I pulled into the emergency lane and called 911.

I slowly exited my car, fixed the collar of my bright red shirt, and smoothed down my hair. I approached the scene hesitantly, looking for some sign of life. I was met with silence. The police and an ambulance pulled up shortly and I stayed out of the way, answering any questions I could.

Three people were rescued from the wreck and rushed to the waiting ambulance: a man, a woman, and a baby girl. The man's face was pale; the woman was in hysterics. The child was unnaturally silent. Her face resembled Hope's when she was a toddler—tight brown curls and all.

I didn't leave until I'd satisfied the police and some reporters. I really didn't feel like talking since the suddenness and randomness of it all had shaken me more than a horror film. I choked out answers to what felt like a trial, and when they finished, I slowly headed towards the hospital.

By the time I made it inside the ER waiting area, my legs were shaking. Shock had started to seep into my body, and my mind was trying to sort out what had just happened. Now that I'd finally calmed down, I was having trouble keeping myself together.

I called Mom and the Rolniks and briefly told them what had happened, because I was too tired and confused to explain much. When I called Ma, I could hear Hope singing loudly in the background, and as her voice echoed in my ears, the baby's still, silent body haunted me.

A nurse approached with a distraught couple and upon introduction, I realized they were the man's parents: Bill and Mary. Quietly, I told them I hoped everything would work out. Mary

sat down and began to sob as her words came out in fragments. "Patrick . . ." I sat down beside her since my legs weren't supporting my weight. "Is everything all right?" It was a stupid question, but I asked anyway. I had to know. She lifted her face and the despair in her voice sliced into my heart. "Mark and Kate . . . will be okay." I stood up and interjected, "And the baby. What about her?" I hadn't known my voice could sound that high pitched, and I was finding it hard to breath. Fresh sobs burst from the small woman and her words made me stagger backwards.

"Abby didn't make it."

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Eventually, I gave the couple my condolences and bid them goodbye. I stumbled to my car too weak with denial to walk properly. When I finally entered the safety and solitude of my car, I leaned my head against the steering wheel and did something I hadn't done in fourteen years.

I cried.

My head throbbed, my eyes burned, my chest ached, and tears dripped off the wheel onto my lap.

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When I finally pulled myself together, I drove to the Rolniks thinking about Mark, Kate, and baby Abby. Why did she have to die? Hope would still be at the house to tease and talk to. Little Abby was now only a memory.

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When I knocked, Hope answered the door with a big smile. I stumbled backwards in shock, and her eyes grew wide with fright making her look more like Abby than ever. She helped me inside and asked if I was all right. "She looked like you," was all I mumbled.

She led me to Pa who was in the living room resting. She coughed, but he didn't move. I murmured, "Pa?" His eyes opened. He slowly stood up and walked over to where I was standing. "That was something you did out there, son." Reality came rushing back to me so quickly it was nauseating. He must have seen the news.

Hope squeezed my hand and slowly left the room as I mumbled a reply. The pain was too fresh to communicate clearly. Pa said nothing. I looked up and met his gaze—calm, strong, patient. I licked my dry lips. “Pa—I *failed*. I tried to help, but Abby *died*. She died, Pa. And she looked just like Hope . . .” I couldn’t finish. The tears returned, and Pa took me into his strong arms while I sobbed. I saw Bill, Mary, Mark, and Kate. Abby’s silence pervaded my mind as I cried along with all of them.

Pa spoke gently: “Son, it’s not your fault. You did your best, and that’s all you could’ve done in a situation like this. It’s better to fail trying than to have never tried at all.” He pulled me away and gripped my shoulders tightly. “Son, for once, you put aside your selfishness and showed you cared.” His solemn face was broken by a tiny smile.

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Before I left, Hope hugged me tightly and Ma said something I’d never heard before: “We’re proud of you, Pat.” I smiled weakly at the compliment and headed out the door. Abby’s face was too vivid in my memory. Everywhere I turned, I saw her.

Pa came out behind me and I turned to face him. His voice was sincere: “Come back soon, Patrick!” I nodded slowly. “Oh, and by the way, son . . .” He placed his strong, work-worn hand on my shoulder and finished: “You can call me Joe.”

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## Wooden Roses

Abigail Betts

"There's a lot of wood." He surveyed the luxurious office with awe and confusion. "Every surface has inlays that are more intricate than any thought I've ever had. They look like roses, or maybe skulls."

"There aren't skulls on my desk, Jim."

Jim pointed a finger at him. "So they *are* roses. You have giant mahogany roses all over your office. Wow. That is how you know you've arrived. I bought my desk from Ikea. Online."

"Come on. You've done well for yourself."

Jim held up a massive crystal bowl. "Not as well as you have. You can afford this thing." He held the bowl up to his face, blowing out his cheeks and bulging out his eyes. "And I thought only white people liked to buy useless, expensive knick-knacks."

"But you've seen my mother's figurine collection."

Jim pointed a finger. "Yes, but my mother has six different figurine collections. The iconic crazy white woman . . . kitty cats, garden gnomes, unicorns—"

"Would you cut it out? It's not a competition, Jim. And that is an ashtray. It has a very practical use." He set the bowl back on an ornately carved mahogany table.

"It's been a competition since college, Brian—ever since you hip-checked me at the basketball game sophomore year."

"No," Brian chuckled. "It's been a competition since you switched our mattresses while I was in my first class."

Jim shrugged. "I like the top bunk." He wandered over to a shelf stuffed with leather-bound volumes, turning his nose up at the titles. "Why don't rich people ever have bestsellers? It's always these giant encyclopedias that no one wants to read. I know you love John Grisham. I watched you read his books for years. A love like that doesn't just fade, Brian."

"They aren't all encyclopedias."

"Ha! You admit you still have encyclopedias!"

"Google isn't always the best option when you're practicing civil rights law. Everything's changing and erupting too quickly to worry about the validity of online sources."

Jim held up his hands. "Okay, I grant you that. You need

all the ponderous penal codes you can get your hands on. That's fair. But where's your beach reading? Something you read for fun?" Jim pulled a thin book bound in soft, blue leather off the shelf. "Melville. You actually have Herman Melville on your shelf. You read about cranky old men and whales in your limited spare time instead of hitting on bar hags with your best friend."

"That one's not about the whale, it's more about the ships. It's *Benito Cereno*."

Jim winced. "Wow. A discount classic. Why would you read Herman Melville if it's not the one about the whale? That's all you need to know for trivia night at the bar. Speaking of which, let's go to a bar." Jim noticed an elegant silver drink cart with an abundance of dark alcohols in crystal bottles. "Never mind—you have a bar *in your office!*"

"I thought you wanted to catch up?" Brian asked with a grin.

"I do, I do," Jim nodded enthusiastically and wandered around the walls lined with beautifully crafted wooden bookshelves. He grabbed a glass bottle off a shelf and furrowed his brow. "This doesn't seem like an ideal book-end." He held the glass up to the light, inspecting the tiny wooden ship inside.

"Please be careful."

"How much do these cost?" Jim asked.

"I make them, actually," Brian shrugged. "I like ships, and it's very calming."

"It's like a magic trick, right? You don't actually build the ships in the bottle?"

Brian carefully picked another bottle off the shelf and inspected the tiny brown ship within. "Well, sometimes you can build the hull of the ship outside the bottle, then raise the masts once it's inside. But if the hull is too big, you have to build it all inside the bottle."

"Sounds tedious and nerdy, Brian; tedious and nerdy."

"You think you could stop the name-calling?"

"Nope." Jim shook his head. "Not after I caught you knitting sophomore year. You deserve every 'nerd' I throw at you."

Brian laughed and poured them both a glass of scotch from the drink cart. "That was just to impress Michelle Farris."

"Old habits, Brian." Jim held the bottle up to Brian's face.

"So, why ships?"

"Ships have stories. It's *nerdy* escapism for me, but they help

to keep me grounded in my work when it gets too . . . heavy. I've been working on a series of historic slave ships."

Jim cleared his throat and pointed to the little brown ship in his hands. "What's this one's story? I am attentive, interested, and ready to listen." Jim fluttered his eyelashes innocently.

Brian couldn't help but smile. "I really do like this one. It's meant to be the *Zong*, a slave ship from the eighteenth century. It was a dark inspiration for a painting by J.M.W. Turner. It was called *The Slave Ship*—"

Jim made a snoring sound.

"Fine, Jim, let's just go."

"No, no, I'm sorry. Go on. Let's hear about a slave ship. I'm sure it will be very light-hearted and entertaining."

"Well, I personally find this story incredibly interesting. It challenges the limits of lawful behavior—even within the horrors of the slave trade. And Turner happens to be my favorite artist. I have one of his prints in my bathroom—"

"A place of honor," Jim muttered under his breath.

Brian carried on, taking a seat in a plush green velvet armchair. "The *Zong* was travelling at sea in 1781. Back then, those kind of ventures were risky, and the *Zong* carried over two hundred slaves onboard—valuable merchandise. And, as was common practice, the financiers backing the voyage had taken out a significant insurance policy on their venture. Unfortunately, during the voyage, the crew made some navigational errors that caused them to run low on supplies."

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*The floorboards creak overhead. The anxious, urgent clack of fine boots crashes across the wood and echoes throughout the lower decks. These sounds add to the perpetual buzzing of flies. Our senses are overwhelmed and our bodies become abject prisons held under iron shackles and oppressive odors. There is no reprieve, and only the most modest sense of hope.*

*Watching the disappearances in my village, there was plenty of room for imagination and hope. When your neighbor, your brother, your friend, disappears in the night, the only way through the fear is to think of a promising future. I can't imagine something as far-fetched as a good future, but there can be many degrees of hope. The disappearances were often whispered to be taking people to a different land. Maybe the earth in that*

land is forgiving. Maybe water pours across the ground in endless, refreshing streams.

I think about these fantasies as liquid courses across my skin. The hard wood is solid under my back, and yet it feels like a movable ocean undulating underneath us. My modest hope for life outside of this ship is freshness. Hopefully, there will be fresh air, free of excrement or tears. As the ship rolls around the waves, streams of filth flow between bodies, across our filthy faces. Streams of waste and dirt flow unevenly across the floor, sometimes breaking across exceptionally large, dark knots in the wood's grain. The only escape is our community of flesh, pressed close against each other. Slippery hands grasp at warm arms during the violent storms that come and go in the night. Everyone is isolated, but in good company. Even the screams and cries of children are comforting.

I hear boots draw near our stairway below deck. Something is wrong. The crew was exceptionally cruel when delivering meals today. And everything was much less. Our portions had been half the usual amount of bread, without any meat. There had been no water at all. The children had cried after a few hours, and there had been whippings that flung the metallic smell of blood into the air. But still, no one brought us any water.

Members of the crew descend the stairs and wander the aisles of emaciated, shaking bodies. The men are silent, while the women and children moan, and it makes me nervous. I shift my hands and feet within the confinement of my shackles; they feel more restrictive than ever in this moment. Being chained in this ship for weeks at a time is a constant kind of restriction that loses its severity after a while. But being chained under the eyes of the crew now feels like an immediate danger. The crew members are usually bold and loud, reveling in their duties. But now they move slowly along the aisles, quietly murmuring to each other as their cold eyes pass over rows of bodies.

I understand, and feel the coldest fear I've ever known, when I hear the first woman screaming. They are taking the children. They push every young girl up the stairs. They pull young boys to their feet and squeeze the muscles on their arms. The smallest ones are sent above deck. The children's shrieks echo through our quarters, piercing the tense silence at jarring intervals.

I hear murmured prayers in many languages. We had been judged once, when we found ourselves dragged aboard this ship. I used to think about the missing souls from my village, and I always hoped that



disappearing would be the worst thing to happen to them. But now, we are being judged again, condemned to never reach whatever lies at the end of this long voyage.

The thinnest, weakest women are pulled to their feet, shrieking and clawing at the bodies next to them for salvation. Bodies curl into themselves on the cold, ruined floor of the deck, desperate to get away from the touch of the condemned.

I pray to the god of our captors, I pray to the god of my people, and I pray to the very fear that hangs in the air. I am thinner and weaker than I was at the start of this journey. I have been plagued with fits of coughing for the past several days. The crew appraises everyone as they walk the aisles, and I am not as valuable.

Suddenly I am pulled to my feet, and I stagger under the chains' restriction, cursing my body for the weakness it shows. One of the men stretches out my arm and tests the muscle with a cold hand. I am then pulled along without a word, following the shrieking corpses that climb the stairs. Our nakedness has us all shivering and whimpering in the harsh, cold air above deck. We have become accustomed to the dank warmth of our quarters, and we have grown familiar with the warmth of the other bodies that have stayed by our sides for weeks. Even as we stand on the deck, hearing the cries and screams of unfortunates in the night, we stay huddled together, touching each other as much as possible.

The women are crying and clinging to each other, facing away from the side of the ship. I avert my gaze as well once I see the crew toss a young girl over the side. I face back down the stairs, fixing my eyes on the decks below. I can't watch this, not with the growing darkness taking hold of my frightened heart. The dream of freshness is dead. My feet will never touch solid, fertile earth again. All that is ahead of me is the ocean floor, with its soft, movable sand.

My eyes search the stairway leading below deck, trying to make out familiar eyes in the darkness. But if anyone below deck is watching us, I can't see their eyes. Sweaty, grimy hands claw desperately at my skin as the crew throws everyone over the side at a relentless pace. I look around, and realize that they must be ridding themselves of at least half our number. I struggle to understand why they took us from our homeland, if we are just to die like this. There must have been a plan for us. They must be truly desperate. They must be dying, to choose so much death.

As the crowd of dark skin on the deck grows thinner around me, I resent the crew, with their gold and silver weapons hanging at their sides. They could end all this suffering in an instant, but we will be flung

into prolonged suffering in the water instead, for the sake of these men's weakness.

When a cold, dry, white hand grabs my shoulder, the empty peace that had frozen over my heart thaws in an instant, and my heart beats wildly inside my chest. I don't have the time for a prayer, I don't even have a moment to look back at the faces behind me before strong, rough hands shove at my back.

I fall into nothingness for a moment, my bound limbs pointlessly searching for something to catch, but I just crash into the waves. The salt water bites into the raw skin on my wrists and ankles where chains have rubbed the skin raw. I am sure that there must be an abundance of blood in the water from the chains, and from the bodies that had been scourged by whips earlier today.

I can hear screaming and splashing around me, but I can't see where anyone else is. The ship is moving too fast, and they are dispersed too widely to help each other. I quickly feel myself struggling to stay afloat with the hindrance of the chains—

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"Is that true? Damn." Jim bit his lip, and looked at the bookshelves. "Is it true in the way that movies about this sort of thing are 'true?' Or is it *true*?"

Brian heard the sharp crash before he could respond.

"Oh, Brian, I am so sorry," Jim set his glass of whiskey on the polished mahogany surface of a table carved with delicate wooden roses.

Brian looked down at the miniature figure of the Zong lying among shards of jagged glass on the cold marble floor. "It's okay, Jim. You only broke the bottle, the ship looks like it made it out alive."

Jim chuckled sharply and briefly. "Man."

Brian took a sip of his drink. "Yeah. Do you want to see the Turner print? You can actually see the bodies in the waves."

Jim struggled with an unsure smile as he placed the tiny wooden ship on the smooth surface of Brian's desk. "Another time. Let's go get that drink. You're working on a big case, right?"

Brian arched his eyebrows. "... Yeah, I am, but you don't want—"

"Let's go." Jim looked around at the elegant room. "I want to hear all about it."

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# Montgomery Men

ReJeana Goldsborough

The cool wooden spindle of the ancient bannister feels refreshing pressed against Jason's forehead. His older brother Michael squats next to him on the landing of the staircase. Warmth pulses through Jason's cheeks in rhythm with his heartbeat. He can't decide if it's from the adrenaline of sneaking out of his bedroom after bedtime or the anxiety over the conversation below. His eyes dart back and forth from his brother to the shadows shuffling beneath them in the foyer. The shadows' human counterparts are just out of sight in the adjacent living room, cloaked in a soft yellow light and speaking in low, urgent tones.

Christopher, the youngest of the brothers, pokes his head out from their bedroom a couple feet away. "Whaddya think they're sayin'?" he whispers.

"Just stuff about Mom, probably," Michael responds. Then, more to himself than Christopher, he mutters, "She's gettin' real sick now."

Jason glances over at him, his nostrils flaring at the mention of their mother's illness. In the back of his mind he knows his brother is only saying it to get an emotional rise out of him (Christopher's all-time favorite hobby next to being bossy), but it still stings like hell. Jason presses his head harder into the bannister, enjoying its gritty wooden kiss.

Michael, sensing his brother's uneasiness, continues, "You know she ain't well, Jay. It's not like it's a secret." He spits out the heavy-handed words casually, letting them bounce off the dusty oakwood floors like chewed up sunflower seeds. They ricochet in Jason's head.

Jason's fingers tighten around the spindles. "Shut up," Jason whispers, squeezing the bannister like monkey bars.

"I'm just sayin', Jay, we gotta prepare for—"

"SHUT UP!" The bones in Jason's chest vibrate.

The shadows down below freeze. Michael, happier than ever with his brother's outburst, scurries back to the sanctuary of their bedroom. Jason doesn't move. He slams his eyes shut and presses his forehead even harder into the spindles, breathing deeply and quickly

as the sharp edges of the wood dig into his skin. He imagines the banister snapping, sending him toppling over the edge of the landing. He envisions his broken body lying in the middle of the dark foyer down below, surrounded by splintered wood and flakes of old paint, unresponsive and unaware.

The ancient staircase creaks under the pressure of footfalls, but Jason doesn't move. If it is his dad, he didn't want to see him.

His father is not known for his empathy, and often punishes outbursts with a swift smack to the back of the head. A traditional man, roughened by his upbringing as a farmer's son and emotionally hardened by his time in the service, he prefers control. He expects his boys to be just as dispassionate and disciplined as him, and his own father, and all the other men in the Montgomery family tree. While Jason's brothers manage fine at being level-headed, Jason's emotions always get the best of him. His mother calls him a lover, a sweet term she whispers as she cradles him at night. But his father calls him a baby, a term he yells as he unbuckles the clasp of his belt after Jason slips up.

Jason knows, with the footsteps getting closer, that at this point it's better to just keep his eyes shut and try to stop the tears.

A hand gently clasps Jason's trembling shoulder and he sucks in a gulp of air. It's not him.

"Jason, honey." His chest deflates; it's the warm, honey-smooth tone of his mother. Jason still doesn't dare open his eyes, however; he doesn't want to look at her. No matter what he calls her, this woman is *not* his mother. She's a stranger now.

She has been unrecognizable for months. Where there once was a rosy woman with light, curly hair and a vibrant smile, there is now a withered and translucent ghost. She no longer wears her iconic, lively-patterned dresses or colorful eyeshadow with red doll lips. Now, she outfits herself in shapeless, earth-toned muumuus and wraps her bald head in tattered scarves. She drifts through their home like a withered Gypsy.

But what Jason finds worst of all now is her smell. Before, she always smelled of warm, citrusy flowers, the scent of her favorite orchid perfume. It clung to her clothes, sticking to everything she touched. But now her hugs smell of a sterilized hospital room, lathered with antibiotics and the chilling scent of death.

Her cold, bony hands caress Jason's face as she sits down

beside him on the landing. "Let's get you to bed, dear," she coos. He leans into her, accepting her antiseptic affection, eyes still shut.

"Where's Dad?" Jason asks softly, burying his face into her sunken chest and dirt colored dress. He feels her body stiffen at the question and she sighs, running her hands through his hair.

"He had to run out. He'll be back in the morning."

"Ok."

They stay embraced on the landing, cloaked in the silence of the old Indiana farmhouse. Jason rubs the faded brown fabric of her night gown between his fingers, wishing it were purple silk and smelled of white orchids and jasmine. An uncomfortable tightness creeps up his throat and Jason burrows his head deeper into his mother's chest. As the sobs break out in waves, she clutches him closer.

"Such a lover," she coos, holding him like a baby.

Between cries he thinks once more about the banister collapsing, except this time, it sends them both over the ledge to the foyer below. Still clutching to his mother's breast, he imagines them falling, landing crookedly on the wooden floor, broken and still as night. In his fantasy he sees their gnarled bodies entwined together, forever. And he sees their eyes. Their empty, hollow, eyes, void of any more feeling, far away from whatever is going to happen next.

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"You boys gotta be strong. No cryin' today." His father's stern voice pools into Jason's head in thick drops, condensing into a murky brain soup. *No cryin' today.* The words slosh around. *Be strong.*

Jason stands between Michael and Christopher in the small foyer, all of them dressed in their formal black suits, hands tucked deep into their pockets. Their father kneels in front of Michael to fix his lopsided tie and Michael shoots to attention like a soldier: back straight, eyes forward, just like they'd been taught. Jason keeps his head down, staring intently at his slightly worn black Oxfords. He examines the small scuff mark on the heel of his right foot, wondering how it got there. He only ever wears these shoes for church services and funerals.

"You're Montgomery Men," his father declares, lips pressed into a thin, stiff line. The phrase seems to echo off the walls of the house, vibrating the soup in Jason's head. The rough old man has thrown their last name around as if it were a badge of honor ever

since Jason can remember. It's as if "Montgomery" is a synonym for strength and resilience.

Whenever the boys got too angry or too upset, their father would grab them by the collars and demand that they remember the indomitable nature of their ancestors: "You're a Montgomery Man, act like one, for Chrissake!" Jason's heard it the most out of all his brothers, but today, for the first time, it sounds more like a plea than a threat.

His father finishes straightening Michael's tie and moves on to Jason. Out of habit, he stands up straight and looks forward, making eye contact with his father's coal colored irises as he kneels to get a better angle. His dad quickly adverts his gaze. The light powdery blue of Jason's eyes are too familiar still.

He begins fixing Jason's tie. "You're men today, boys," his father reiterates. "We're Montgomery Men."

Down the line he continues, positioning himself in front of the youngest. Christopher straightens up, and their father sighs at his mangled knot. He kneels down and hastily begins working at it.

"Dad?" Christopher speaks innocently, cautiously treading the thin line between their father's tranquility and rage.

The weathered man finishes what he's doing and looks up at his youngest. "What is it, son?"

Christopher teeters slightly, fists jammed into his pocket, and stays silent for a beat too long. Their father stands, exasperation and exhaustion mixing on his face. "Speak now, boy."

Christopher, still swaying, waits a beat before barely whispering, "What's gonna happen now?"

The words hang in the air like a sticky fog on a humid day. A tightness grabs Jason's chest and he struggles to exhale. The soup that has been brewing in his head seems to drain out though his ears like an emptying septic tank. The numbness he has been feeling for the last three days is replaced with a surplus of awareness. He feels *everything*.

He has tried so hard. He has tried to be a man. He has tried blocking out everything going in and out of his brain unless it was a response to a day-to-day function, just like his dad. He tried to be just like his father. Even at night, alone and awake in bed, he refused to tap into the feelings he knew he should be having. He had felt worse than grief: he had felt nothing.

Now, his brother's question opens the floodgates. *What*

would happen now? It spins in Jason's head like a sickening ride at the fair. *What would happen? What would happen?*

His father looks at his youngest boy somberly. "We move on, son."

His father's right hand flinches ever so slightly, almost as if he is going to grab Christopher's shoulder to comfort him. Instead, he clears his throat, regaining control. "Now, when we get to the funeral home—"

Jason bolts. His black Oxfords thump against the hardwood floors, kicking up dust, as he runs for the front door. He is desperate to be anywhere but in that coffin of a room. His brain, now drained of all its sludge, explodes with muddy memories, one after the other: A family camping trip to Lake Michigan, where his mother taught them all how to properly roast a marshmallow; a 4th of July cookout at a neighbor's house, where she was the undefeated horseshoe champ of the evening; her 35th birthday party, where she wore her silky purple dress and orchid perfume and cried when Jason gave her a hand-drawn comic book of her favorite Bible story. In every memory she is there, warming the world around her with her red painted grin and soft blue eyes. She smells like orchids and her hair is long and curly, not withered, dead, and gone.

But worst of all, in every one of the memories, she is still healthy. She is still alive.

He runs across the dying Kentucky bluegrass that they call a front lawn and locks his gaze on the towering rows of corn that border their property.

*Be a man.* The words flash before his eyes like fireworks before disappearing into another memory, an image of his mother at their ancient spinet piano playing her favorite hymn. He beelines for the corn, plowing through the dusty, papery stalks like a terrified deer.

*Anywhere, he thinks. Anywhere but there. Anywhere but here.*

Jason runs for as long as he can, cornstalks whipping back in his face leaving tiny cuts in their wake. He hardly blinks at their sting.

Finally, in a small clearing surrounded by uniform rows of dirty brown corn, he collapses, pushed down to his knees as if the hands of God himself are leaning on his shoulders. Clutching the earth with his fists, Jason clenches his eyes shut and screams. He howls. He yells at the sky, the corn, and the dirt, letting every



sticky piece of grief inside of him disappear into the silent stalks. He screams until his voice cracks into a whisper, and then he cries. He quakes with sobs, lost in recalling characteristics of his mother: the lightness of her voice, the softness of her hands, the sweet, citrusy scent of her orchid perfume. From behind his eyelids he tries desperately to recall every detail of her face, but weeps harder when he realizes that it is only a matter of time until that fades into a distant memory as well.

Behind him footsteps thud. Cornstalks that had been lightly trampled as Jason ran are further crushed under the heavy stride of his father. He emerges from the rows of corn behind Jason, breathing heavily and coated with dust and dirt.

“Jason.” His father’s stern voice startles him back into reality. Realizing he has seen him doubled over in grief, Jason manages one last violent sob before furiously rubbing at his dirty cheeks to hide the tears. Unable to turn and look at his father, Jason attempts to choke out an apology. Instead, it comes out as an unintelligible gurgle.

A moment passes. Jason braces himself for punishment. Another moment, and a heavy, rough hand cups around Jason’s shoulder. He tenses. As he has done so many times in the past, Jason shuts his eyes and prepares himself for anything swift and heavy to collide with the back of his head. He knows the drill.

Instead, he feels the earth shift around him as his father slowly kneels, his arm stretching out and resting gingerly on his son’s shoulders.

For a long while they don’t speak. Jason keeps his head down, too ashamed to look at the old man. He studies the color of the dirt and the dark spots where his tears had fallen moments before. His emotions settle into a dull ache in his chest and a mere throbbing pulse in his head.

Finally, Jason can take the silence no more. “Dad?” he whispers.

No response. He is about to speak again when he feels his father’s body shake. Looking over, Jason expects to see that typical stern and apathetic Montgomery stare. He expects to be told once again about living up to the expectations of the family name. He expects to be called a baby and to get a swift slap to the back of the head. He expects to be told to grow up, and be a man. But, instead,

he sees his defeated, broken father covering his face behind his hand, hiding.

Again, Jason whispers, "Dad?"

His shoulders shake again and then, softly, his father sputters, "I'm sorry." He rubs his eyes. "I'm so sorry." His voice cracks and his grip tightens on Jason's shoulder. Gently, Jason leans into him, placing a hand gently on his father's knee.

"It's okay," he whispers.

Jason presses his head against his chest, closing his eyes and enjoying the silky fabric of his father's only suit. Inhaling deeply, he faintly makes out the scent of perfumed orchids, threaded into the fabric from a memory long ago.

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## Animals Can't Be Tried in Court

Ravneet Kaur Sandhu

I am interested in interviewing war generals. Commanders of armies, military leaders, heads of the armed forces, all of them. I want to drive down to where they live, not the military bases, but their actual houses—hilled mansions with precisely cut gardens, fenced apartments with a cemented backyard, or maybe in maximum security prison like the ones they headed. I'll knock on their doors, or run away from their dogs. They won't answer my questions. No, they'll send me away. Accuse me of being a spy. Call the mob on me to kill the traitor. I'll leave in disgrace.

In my head, I always picture a loyal dog, standing eerily quiet next to the stolid, tall man. Dogs make the perfect soldiers, don't they? The top of the door is a hollow cross, through which the slanted sunlight casts a chess board with only one side. He stands there, noticing how alert his guards are, the dogs next to him, silent and still.

You can teach dogs prejudice too. Smells of spices can make them angry. Their narrow range of color applies to human complexion. If trained correctly, the dog will then attack at the enemy. It is sufficient if the dog appears to be ferocious. It will scare the ENEMY. And maybe kill the ENEMY. And what greatest ENEMY is there, but the ENEMY.

Dogs can follow the ENEMY for miles. They will never stop to think about your command. They would stare at you, their mouth open with sharp teeth that can rip apart tendons and muscles and capillaries, and then do what you say.

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There was an old man who lived in my neighborhood. He would look out of his window for hours at a time. I waved to him when I would come back from school. My parents always told me to be nice to old people because most of the people they know are dead. He started waving back, after a couple of hesitant days, quickly putting his hands out of the view as soon as he was done. And then

he would return to his posture, straight-backed on a rocking chair, with a cat that slept on his shoulder.

I didn't tell my parents I was friends with him—or waving buddies, maybe—so when they picked me up from school one day, they didn't know I was missing a daily ritual. My father joked around, calling my mother a happy potato, and she called him a plump pig with chicken legs. I thought they called me a flamingo, or a bird like a flamingo, because they were talking in my mother tongue. I didn't know it well—my mother tongue—which always upsets them. The laughter gave away to silence.

When we turned on our street, I saw it filled with cops. Their sirens were off. Many of the cops were leaving, blue uniforms meshing into white cars. My father slowed down the car. My parents exchanged a worried look. I opened the door and ran out, the heat from the road burning the rubber sole of my shoes.

A cop, with shaggy brown hair and a red face, told me to get back. The old man's house was spilled open, the door a mess of splinters slipping from the frame. I saw his cat then, meowing in the bushes. I called the cat towards me, but it shrieked and leapt over the fence onto the neighboring lawn, crossing the old man's window. The window was splattered with blood, like wild cherries pressed on glass. The old man's head was on the sill, a hole visible through his skull.

I didn't know the old man; not really; not at all. His cat didn't know me either. What I thought was familiarity was only politeness, so I ran back to my house, my parents trying to jog behind me. They didn't scold me. Instead, they opened the door in a hurry and pushed me towards the dining room.

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The old man's wife had died before we had set foot in this country. She had been a nurse in the wartime. Which war I didn't know, and it wasn't mentioned by my parents. To them all wars were the same. The nurse had owned the freakishly old cat, which she left behind. The cops found a basket underneath the rocking chair, which contained sewing needles, spools of unbroken threads, a pair of scissors, and a revolver with six bullets.

He was obsessed with the ENEMY, they said on the evening news. The stories his wife told him had unraveled his mind after her death. He would wake up, shivering in the night, and reported frequent hallucinations to his doctor. These hallucinations were of the ENEMY, dressed in torn fatigues, bloodied in the eyes. The workings of the mind of a desperate man with a lonely life.

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Why do they fight people with the same heart, the same blood, and the same eyes? People with vision, people with life, people with a heart that doesn't contain the world, losing in an arbitrary war that people in the coming centuries will forget like last morning's breakfast.

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I told my mother I wanted to go to the old man's funeral. We had to hide our going from my father, which was easy because he was at work. She dressed me up in white, took my hand, pulled a cream salwar-kameez off the hanger, and walked down to the church. The wind blew falling leaves under my mother's dupatta. They nestled behind her neck, and the long scarf fell from her head.

We walked in the church with our heads covered. Everyone turned to look at us. They all wore black and sat with their heads bowed, even the old man in a casket seemed to be staring at us. My mother was shocked, but she recovered to guide us to unfilled seats. Our white clashed obnoxiously with black coats and wooden pews, but there is nothing one can do about standing out.

I knew we had done something wrong. What I hated about being a child was that even if I knew something wrong, I was never in the position to correct it. I wished my father were here, to tell us what to do and what to wear and what to say. He was the shepherd we depended on.

When the eulogies came, my mother told me in a harsh whisper to look ahead and pay attention. I wish she hadn't. Nobody could understand what she said. I felt hot stares on the back of my neck, but I let it go, forgiving my mother for transgressions she didn't understand yet.

A man with a gray suit and crewcut stood on the pulpit. He said he was the old man's son. He was also the present war general of the country. I remembered him from the afternoon news. My mother straightened her back when she saw him. She recognized him too. I looked around. Nobody seemed much alarmed. They all had serene expressions on their faces, mouths expectant of smiles, as the war general spoke about how his father taught him discipline. The prodigal son had returned home. There were a couple of claps when the eulogy ended. He left as soon as he finished.

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The matter was put to rest when the coroner declared death by heart attack. It was expected, he said, of old men to die of diseases of the heart. The startled cat had shot the bullet as it dropped from the basket, a harmless bullet that couldn't hurt the dead. There was nothing to be alarmed about. Animals can't be tried in a court of law.

From that day on, I started asking my father about his heart. He humored me, smiling his bearded smile, and told me his heart was healthy. He said that as long as I was living, his heart wouldn't betray him. That filled me with some hope.

I wondered whether the war general ever asked his father about his heart. It was a sudden heart attack, generic like so many before him, and so many after him, the experienced killer of the old. I didn't think so. No, the war general with his pit bull and his pretty blonde wife wouldn't worry about the heart of an old man. The general had bigger lives to think about.

## The Professor's Clock

Caroline Fenty

It is ten o'clock on a Tuesday night and little Tommy Martin is up way past his bedtime. His twin Timmy is asleep. Timmy is more timid. The thought comes without Tommy knowing why and he wonders if his parents planned it this way. Timmy sounds like timid and the only thing Tommy sounds like is tom-tom drum. He was always fated to be the troublemaker. The dust raiser. Timmy was always meant to be the one behind with a broom, the smoother of bed wrinkles and ruffled feathers. Yes, that makes sense. They are tied together by brotherhood and a shared syllable in name, bound to balance each other out. Timmy has been there since the beginning to keep Tommy from causing too much ruckus and Tommy has always been there to keep things interesting. But tonight, Timmy is asleep and tonight, Timmy is not needed, for Tommy Martin is not making trouble. He's making everything right.

Lying in bed, eyes fixed upon the ceiling, curling and uncurling his toes beneath the covers to keep from falling asleep, Tommy waits, listening to the sound of the grandfather clock sing the seconds up the staircase to him. The clock has stood for as long as Tommy can remember, a gift to Tommy's mother by her favorite college professor, the man who comes weekly for dinner, who wears a scratchy tweed coat and a wispy beard and glinty half-moon glasses and smells like tobacco and carries caramels in his pocket. He comes every Wednesday for dinner and winds the clock while there, wipes it down, keeps it running smooth and steady and talks to Tommy while he does it. His voice is steady and smooth, like the clock whose constant companionship makes silence feel wrong, and empty, and almost evil as if hot fleshy hands have clamped themselves around a songbird and inside of them the songbird cannot sing, because inside of the hands everything is hazy, and pink, and humid, like Florida, like when Tommy visited his Aunt Melinda in the home with the palm trees out front and the squeaky peachy pink floors and the strange sick smell that didn't make sense because everything was so clean. You can't sing in Florida

and a songbird can't sing stuck inside of hands and one cannot sit comfortably in silence once they have had the company of the clock. Tommy has a cramp in his left pinky toe and then the clock strikes ten, sweet and slow and he is fully awake and not thinking of songbirds and Aunt Melinda and toe cramps because it is late enough that his parents are asleep and he can do what he has stayed awake to do. He can make everything right.

Tommy slips from his bed, attempting to miss all the squeaky floorboards, which is impossible because they're all squeaky, but he feels rather proud all the same as he maneuvers his way out of his bedroom and down the corridor, past his parent's room and Timmy's. The door is ajar and he can see his brother sleeping, breath rising and falling beneath his blankets, another steady sound, constant like the clock, that Tommy watches for a moment before moving further down the hall, down the staircase, quicker now because the stairs are carpeted. He bounds across the blue rug at the bottom to get to the great grandfather clock itself whose face glints in the pale light of the moon. The moonlight that has snuck like Tommy into the darkened house has slipped through the curtains drawn over the window to trace a pattern of silvery shadows across the floor, keeping the clock company as it ticks on. Tommy steps back, eyes on the clock, feeling behind him to find the curtain and push it more completely open, allow the moon's eye to fixate more fully, light streaming in now, kissing the clock's face, letting the clock know that it is seen, that it is not alone. This is only a half-truth however, because the clock *has* been alone. For two weeks now, the professor has not come, not for dinner, not to wind the clock. Tommy had asked his mother about it, in the kitchen, on a Wednesday, before dinner, and she had paused but did not reply, her wooden spoon only ceasing its circling of a sausage-filled skillet for a second before continuing to stir the crispy crumbles, their crackling and the tomato sauce slowly bubbling on the stove creating a savory sonance that wafted through the kitchen and drowned out Tommy's question. He repeated his query, wrapping his fingers around the edge of her apron and tugging. She turned, wiping her hands on the towel slung over her shoulder and knelt in front of him.



“Tommy . . .” She trailed off, her brow curled like a caterpillar, looking at him and cocking her head as if his face was a crossword she could not solve, lips pressed tightly together, not ready to put anything in ink, but unable to speak in soft pencil strokes.

“Mom?” Tommy’s mother blinked, hard, and let out a long breath, taking a curl of Tommy’s hair and winding it around her finger before combing it back into place and giving his shoulder a squeeze.

“He’s very sick, honey.”

Tommy frowned. “Oh.”

She nodded, watching him, waiting for his reaction. Tommy slowly nodded.

“Can I have some sausage?”

Smiling, a bit sadly, she nodded again and stood, turning back to the stove. Reaching into the cupboard, she deftly spooned sausage into a small bowl and handed it to Tommy.

“Use utensils, not your hands.”

Tommy nodded, even though she had already turned back again to tend the sizzling sausage and could not see. He reached on tip toe to open the silverware drawer, searching for a spoon. Finding one, he closed the drawer with a faint “fmph” and sat down at the worn kitchen table to eat his sausage. Putting a spoonful into his mouth, he chewed thoughtfully, savoring it as he sat surrounded by supper smells. He swallowed and put down his spoon.

“When will he will be better?” The sound of skillet scraping paused again, the kitchen falling silent short of the clock and the hissing crackle of the skillet and the occasional sucking pop of the pot.

“Mom?” The scraping returned, slower and less vigorous than before.

“I don’t know, Tom.”

Tommy took another bite, contemplating this. He worked the statement over in his head as he worked the bit of sausage towards the back of his throat. He swallowed again.

“Is he going to get better?”

His mother turned off the heat with a snap, yanking open a drawer for a lid to cover the sausage, capturing the steam inside

the skillet, containing it. She switched the heat beneath the pot to simmer and wiped a spot of tomato sauce from the countertop.

"I don't know."

Tommy set his bowl on the table. "Who's going to take care of the clock?"

The sucking silence was heard again.

"Go wash up for dinner, Tommy." His mother's voice was soft. "Tell your brother, too. Don't worry about the clock."

She turned to face him, planting a light kiss on Tommy's forehead and wiping the grease from his mouth with her towel. Squeezing his shoulder like before, she turned away. "Go on."

Tommy caught a brief glimpse of her eyes before she busied herself once again, soft and sad and full of something he didn't recognize. It was her eyes that stopped him, corked the questions bubbling inside like the seltzer water his mother used to get out stains. Tommy had once shaken a fresh, unopened bottle of seltzer after Jim from school told him that it would explode like a volcano. He didn't open it though. Timmy didn't let him, didn't even say a word, just stared at him until Tommy handed him the bottle, slightly sulky, slightly ashamed. Timmy and Tommy spoke often through their eyes, something they had not learned from their mother who avoided eye contact almost as much as she avoided sitting, preferring to constantly move and make and mind. She was a woman of avid action and Tommy was very much the same way. Timmy though had a way of catching him in the moments of anticipation, in the buzzing hum of the before when Tommy was poised to pounce, to carry out whatever plan he had in play. It was because of this that Timmy had a profound ability to stop Tommy in his tracks.

Timmy was asleep tonight, however, and Tommy didn't need to be stopped. He wasn't doing anything bad. Quite the opposite, in fact. He was going to take care of the clock. His mother had told him not to worry. Tommy rarely listened to his mother. The professor had not come in two weeks. Tommy was worried. He had watched and waited and no one had touched the clock. It ticked on, as usual, but Tommy felt an itch every time he walked by and saw a smudge that had somehow made its way onto the glass of the clock's face. A reminder that it had not been lovingly wiped clean

that week, that something was wrong. The professor had not come in two weeks. Something was wrong. But time ticked on and the clock ticked on, as if the world had decided to ignore that which wasn't right. This could not last, Tommy knew, and he was worried. He knew because he had watched the professor time and time again wind the clock and wipe it clean and oil the gears, and Tommy once asked him why he did it. The professor had peered up at him from his perch at the base of the clock, his whiskery lips smacking, sucking a caramel as he worked and he put down his rag, lodged the caramel in his cheek and looked at Tommy, really looked at him, and said, quite seriously and sincerely:

"I care."

"You care?"

"I care. That caring is constant and this clock is constant and those two things, love and time, are really the only two things you can count on to be constant in this world. If this clock isn't cared for, it can't keep its consistency and that's a contradiction, a bit of chaos in the order." He paused a minute to cough, a thick and throaty sound, before continuing. "Chaos based on carelessness, that just creates chasms, breaks things, breaks people apart. Carelessness is cacophonous, calamitous, it is something always uncalled for. We have too little time as it is and to spend it thoughtlessly, well, we must not start that habit with the little things, lest it leave us up a creek when time is what we want most."

He pulled a caramel from his pocket and handed it to Tommy. Tommy sat, unwrapped the caramel, sucking on it as he watched and the professor worked and the clock ticked.

The professor had not been to the house in two weeks. The clock had not been wound or wiped or cared for. There was a bit of chaos in the order. Tommy was going to fix that. He was going to fix it and then order would be restored and the professor would come back and Tommy would tell him what he had done and the professor would look at him, really look at him, and give him a caramel and maybe a thoughtful chuckle, his wiry white whiskers twitching and his tweed jacket scratching Tommy's cheek as the professor ruffled his hair. Yes, that is what he would do. That is what will happen. Tommy sets off determined towards the kitchen.

He knows that somewhere in the kitchen are the tools the professor used and the oil and the rag he wiped down the face of the clock with. He just has to find them. Then he can do what the professor did, make magic, bring the clock back to life, clean it, care for it, keep order. The clock strikes half past ten, echoing through the house. Standing in the dark kitchen, Tommy contemplates where to start his search. He realizes he really has no idea where the tools were kept and in the last hours of the night the kitchen suddenly seems vast and unknown, a multitude of drawers and cupboards. It is a maze Tommy can scarcely see and without the moonlight peeking in and with the ticking of the clock now faint and far away, Tommy finds himself feeling suffocated by the darkness. He feels his way through the kitchen, looking for at least a rag, something that he can use to do *something* for the clock. His fingers find nothing and he searches more frantically, moving circles in the kitchen to end up where he had started.

Suddenly ill equipped to take on the task before him and standing in the dim kitchen, the clock almost out of ear shot, Tommy can feel both his own resolve and the professor slipping away. Overwhelmed, he sinks down to the floor, pulling his knees to his face and squeezing his eyes shut, trying with all his might to focus on the sound of the clock, to see the professor in his mind, to hold onto that perfect image, the sound, the smell of the constants he had grown so accustomed to. He breathes in shakily and feels a touch on his shoulder. Startled, he bolts upright to find Timmy beside him. Timmy, the bed smoother and boat settler. Who had been asleep. Who hadn't been needed. Who had arrived just in time, as he always did. The brothers stare at each other, Timmy's eyes still thick with sleep, Tommy's with unshed tears.

"What's wrong?" Timmy whispers. His hand searches for Tommy's in the darkness. "What's wrong?" He repeats.

Tommy cannot reply and Timmy looks at him concerned, creases appearing in his forehead. The two stare at each other. The faint clicking of the clock continues, marking the moments. Neither brother says anything. Finally, Timmy nods. Keeping eye contact, he leads Tommy from the kitchen, back towards the stairs, Timmy methodically moving himself and his brother, looking back

occasionally to check on Tommy who stumbles on, silent, stuck in his own helpless failure to complete even an ounce of his task.

They pass the clock and Tommy can go no further, just stands there, staring at it. Timmy stares at him, and then at the clock, their figures bathed in moonlight, casting long shadows on the carpet. The clock strikes eleven and Tommy feels some of the tears escape, slipping like traitors down his cheeks.

“It’s smudged.” He croaks out. “The face is smudged.” He breathes in with a snuffle. “The professor’s not coming back. I couldn’t fix it. I couldn’t find the rag.”

Timmy cocks his head at him, listening, thinking. A moment passes. Timmy nods again. Slowly, he unbuttons his pajama top, revealing his thin white undershirt. He hands the pajama top to Tommy, kneeling and cupping his hands to form a stool. He looks up at Tommy, Tommy looks down at him, and then places his foot in the cupped hands. Tommy lifts him up, and carefully, with smooth gentle strokes, Tommy cleans the face of the clock. Timmy slowly lowers him back down to the floor and Tommy hands him his top back. Timmy buttons the top back on as the two boys stare at the clock face, now clean in the cool moonlight. Timmy finishes his buttoning and straightens the shirt, putting a hand on Tommy’s shoulder and looking at him, really looking at him, raising his eyebrows to see if Tommy is okay. Tommy leans in and abruptly grabs his brother, wrapping his arms around him. Losing his balance, in surprise, Timmy rights himself, hugging his brother back tightly. As the clock strikes a quarter past eleven, the boys continue to hug, holding one another, together keeping order as the clock continues to tick and the night marches on.

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## The Ant Funerals

Sarah Spaulding

Jonah was not the kind of guy to be late for coffee with an ex-girlfriend, but if the traffic caused by a protest down the street didn't start moving soon, his life was about to become what he always tried not to be: messy and unpredictable.

*Who even holds a rally on a Thursday anyway?* His stop at the flower shop had already put him behind schedule, so it was a miracle when he managed to find a parking space, even if it was two blocks away. By the time he had parked exactly between the lines, he had regained his composure. With swift precision, he removed his black cardigan from underneath the white daisies on his passenger seat—not a cotton fiber wrinkled or a petal dropped. After triple checking to make sure his car was locked, he sighed and began his own rapid march to the coffee shop.

Jonah had bought the daisies to take to the graveyard later. Cemeteries had always been a safe place for him, and after what was bound to be a stressful encounter, he knew he would need to unwind. The cemetery he'd found in the city was quiet and well-tended, and though he knew no one buried there, he felt he owed the headstones ornamentation for using their sacred space. To him, graveyards were as close as you could get to heaven on earth. Unmoved and undisturbed, each yawning grave held the absolution of an inevitable end free from anxiety and doubt. Death was certainty, but the rest was too unruly, too easily tainted by our choices.

Distant chanting broke Jonah out of his reverie. *As if shouting is going to get them what they want. Real change starts with a repenting heart.* He was relieved when he saw the neon blue sign of The Divine Cup. The minimalistic white and steel decor was a little too avant-garde for his tastes, but he forgave the shop because they had the best coffee he'd had since leaving his favorite diner back in Delaware. Jonah gave himself a final onceover in the shop's window and smoothed his thick, dark hair before pulling open the door.

The shop was busier than usual, which gave him a funny feeling. Crowds had a sense of superficiality that always made Jonah

feel like a carbon copy of humanity instead of a new creation. The intermingling façades of people passing by reminded him of his childhood and of his father's frequent "business" trips to Philly. He skimmed the bustling café until he locked eyes with a familiar freckled face and a pair of golden brown eyes.

"Aurora?" Her answering smile reflected a comfortable familiarity that he hadn't felt in a while. He hadn't seen her since he'd left during his sophomore year of college, right after her dad died, but he could never forget her face—it was etched into too many of his midnight memories. Although, somehow, she was different now. Perhaps it was the sharp bob where long tendrils once curled, or maybe it was the nose hoop. He decided not to comment on the change.

"I'm so glad you're here. I was delighted when I got your message."

She extended her arms for a hug. "Well, I was going to be passing through on my way to NYU and I couldn't just not stop. I had to see how you were doing. It's been too many years without a letter or a call."

"I know. And I'm sorry about that. It's just been a hard transition between school and my move. I've been here a year now and I'm still getting settled." Looking down, Jonah noticed a thick textbook sticking out of Aurora's tote bag.

"That doesn't look like your normal reading material." He nodded his head toward her bag, giving an awkward chuckle.

"Oh," she laughed, "well it is now. It's for the clinical psychology program I'm going into."

"Psychology? What happened to your religion major?"

"Yeah, that was never really for me; you were the religion guy. But I'll tell you more about it later. We've got a lot to catch up on."

Jonah meticulously arranged his cardigan on a chair as his brain struggled to keep up with what she was telling him. "Yeah, I guess so. I'll get drinks."

Returning with a green tea for her and an Americano for himself, he noticed Aurora had moved from the back corner of the shop to a set of chairs facing the window.

“Sorry. It was just so cramped and drab back there. This view is so much nicer.”

She reached for her drink and Jonah noticed the small sun tattooed on her wrist above a date of roman numerals. *That was new.* The Aurora he knew—the Aurora who’d been set to become his wife once he was a pastor—would have *never*. It was strange to him how opposite they’d become. Instead of commenting, though, he picked up his cardigan, which had been carelessly tossed on the table, and poised it on his chair.

“So,” he began, “how have you been?”

She fidgeted with the tag of her teabag. “I’ve been okay.” A low half-smile tugged at her earnest face. “Since my dad’s death I’ve really learned a lot about myself. It’s been hard, though. Losing him, and you,” her eyes flicked upward, catching his, “was a lot of work.”

“I—” Jonah started, but she cut him off.

“But it’s been six years, you know? I’m doing well. I got out of Delaware, and I finally forgave it.”

Jonah leaned forward in his seat. “Forgave it for what?”

“For the memories, I guess. For the loss, the expectations, all that I still can’t explain. Metaphorically speaking, I realized I didn’t have to live my life locked in my father’s coffin anymore. I don’t have to blame anyone for my past. There’s freedom in letting go and starting over.”

Jonah stared at her blankly.

“Forgive me if I’m being too frank, but isn’t that why you’re here, Jonah? To understand your father? I remember you told me he died here.”

Jonah tightened his grip on the coffee cup. Philadelphia had always been a mystically dark place in his mind, surrounded by a cloud of chaos and confusion over what had happened twenty-one years ago.

“Well, after seminary I was offered a job at a church down the street. I just felt like I should be here. My whole life I could never think of a place more in need of God.”

“And you don’t think the memory of your dad had any influence on your decision to move here?”

Jonah tried not to talk about his father and his failures often. His dad, Saul, hadn’t been the most stellar guy; he hadn’t



even been baptized before his death. But his mother never liked to acknowledge where her husband fell short. Instead, she only seemed to remember how much he'd loved Jonah and how he had taken care of her, which explained the anxiety and the obsessive-compulsive tendencies she'd developed after his death. But what kind of loving and caring guy went messing around in the drug trade when he had a family that needed him? His mother had described Saul as being a "redeemed man" upon Jonah's birth, but the older Jonah got, the more he realized his father's choices were his own undoing. Saul's new start was just a pretense that set him up for a harder fall.

"I mean, I was five. I hardly even remember the guy. The only father that drove me here was God."

Aurora looked torn between skepticism and pity before sighing and pressing on in a new direction.

"Ah yes, Preacher Boy LeWay. You always knew you were going to grow up to do the Lord's work." It was true. Jonah's mother constantly told him that when she went to visit her family in Tennessee, people would look at her pregnant belly and say she was going to have a preacher for a son. Jonah had never wanted anything else.

"Preaching has always made me feel peaceful."

"I know. God, remember, in our church growing up, how they used to let you preach little sermons? I swear something about that pulpit only made you want to talk about death. You were always so serene, too. I never got it. I just wished you would speak on something else, like the Fruits of the Spirit or the miracles of the Old Testament or something." She stared at him. "I never told you this, but I didn't understand you until you left."

"What do you mean?"

"Until I started dealing with my own grief, I never understood yours."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like those ant funerals you told me about that one night. I'd never seen anyone so full of awe and despondency, but as you talked, I could picture little you out there in your backyard blasting gospel on your boom box. Sitting on that picnic table with a Bible open, just pulverizing every bug that crawled your way. Even if it

couldn't be seen on your face, there was anger there, Jonah. And honestly, I didn't get it at first; it just made me afraid of you."

Jonah clenched his jaw and tried to shrug off her accusatory tone. He remembered how he'd played as a child. The ant funerals had been his favorite pastime, a peaceful activity. He'd been so precise in his ceremonies, with tissue strips for mummification, foil for tiny caskets, even toothpicks for slats. He had felt the Lord working in his funerals. He used to stand up on the picnic table his dad had built on one of his rare weekends home and preach about redemption—all his sermons modeled after the only service he'd ever seen. God had been working to make him a savior of souls from an early age . . . he was just one person too late.

Jonah felt the drone of the coffee shop mixing with the faint echoes of the approaching protesters beginning to buzz in his ears.

"Have you ever heard of God working in mysterious ways, Aurora?"

She paused, startled. Before she could regain her composure, chanting overwhelmed the small coffee shop as the protesters made their way down the street. She watched them for a moment, her face lit up with curiosity and admiration.

"How brave."

"What do you mean?" Jonah asked as he squinted his eyes to avoid the glaring light being thrown off the bobbing nose ring.

"It takes courage to fight for change, to face what scares you or what holds you back and dare it to mess with you one more time."

He tried not to scoff. *Courageous? More like chaotic. Why actively choose to make more of a mess? If they really wanted change, why were they still living in the same sin?*

"These people can't save themselves. They're not going to change anything if they're doomed to fail."

"I don't know what they taught you in seminary, Jonah, but God gave us free will for a reason. He gave us the capacity to choose to shed our old skins, for better or for worse. If there's one thing human beings have, it's an amazing ability to choose to change ourselves."

"Well, that choice is the difference between heaven and hell," Jonah deadpanned. He wiped his sweaty hands over a small

stain on his dark jeans to hide the red and splotchy look of his usually pale skin. This conversation had been a bit more stressful than Jonah had planned. Actually, this whole day had been a bit disorderly. Not that he was surprised. He'd left Aurora for a reason, and by the looks of things, maybe the time had come to do it again.

Deciding the moment was right for some solitude, he stood up abruptly. The sudden scrape of his chair on the porcelain tile demanded the attention of the entire room.

"I'm sorry Aurora. I'm really not feeling well. Maybe we'll get together some other time. It was so nice to see you." His words fell out flat and emotionless.

"Jonah, please don't do this. Not again."

In one fluid motion, he grabbed his cardigan and was out the door. He didn't pause until his back was against his leather seat with the key in the ignition and the daisies sitting pristinely in the cup holder to his side. He took a deep breath and held it while driving away. It seemed to him he didn't really let it out until he'd parked the car and was cycling breath with the rust colored trees that broke up the iron-grey sky.

He walked softly along the crumbling headstones thinking about God's plan for each and every one. Who were these people? Who were their relatives? Did they ever visit? The lack of flowers on the plots seemed to suggest not. Perhaps they'd become converts to the change Aurora had talked about. Or perhaps they had tombs of their own. Jonah laid a white daisy on the marker at his feet and looked around. Although he didn't know any of the names, they all felt like family.

*Sarah Spaulding studies Psychology and English with an emphasis in Creative Writing at Carson-Newman University. She is an editor for the university's literary journal, Ampersand, and a tutor for the university's writing center. She has helped publish a cultural guide to Southwestern Iceland. Her work appears in Ampersand and is forthcoming in Aletheia. After graduation in May 2018, she plans to hike the Appalachian Trail and to follow her love for literature and humanity to graduate school.*



## Jurors

**Rebecca Bechtold** is an assistant professor of English at Wichita State University, where she serves as the department's graduate coordinator and Sigma Tau Delta Chapter Sponsor. Her research focuses on the role of sound and music in early American literary culture.

**Michael Behrens** is an assistant professor of English at Emporia State University where he teaches courses in British literature and literary studies. His research focuses on early modern women and religion.

**Kevin Brown** is a professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry—*Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (Wipf and Stock, 2014); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the 2013 Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009)—and two chapbooks: *Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) and *Holy Days: Poems* (winner of Split Oak Press Chapbook Contest, 2011). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again* (Wipf and Stock, 2012), and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State University Press, 2012). He received his MFA from Murray State University.

**Anne Canavan** is an assistant professor of English at Salt Lake Community College. Her teaching and research interests are in critical theory, popular culture, and American literature and TESOL. She has written book chapters in edited collections on *The Hunger Games*, *Zone One*, and adjunct labor, as well as scholarly articles on tutoring English Language Learners (*The Writing Lab Newsletter*) and folklore (*Storytelling, Society, and Self*).

**Shannin Schroeder** is an associate professor of English at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches world literature, composition, and creative writing and directs the Writing Center. She is preparing her first young adult novel, centered around Ernest Frankenstein, for submission to agents and is co-creating a children's video game for mobile devices. Her publications include the monograph *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*; she has recently presented on flag culture, superheroes, dystopias, and graphic novels; and she has a solicited chapter on the development of Magical Realism in North America forthcoming in a Cambridge UP series.



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## Submission Information

The Sigma Tau Delta Journals annually publish the best writing and criticism of currently-enrolled undergraduate and graduate members of active chapters of Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society.

These journals are refereed, with jurors from across the country selecting those members to be published. The journals have had illustrious head judges, including Jane Brox, Henri Cole, Jim Daniels, Maggie Dietz, W.D. Earhardt, CJ Hribal, Kyoko Mori, Katherine Russel Rich, Lisa Russ Spaar, and Mako Yoshikawa, to name a few.

The best writing is chosen from several hundred submissions in each category. Not only do these publications go to over 10,000 members worldwide, of an over 20,000 member organization, but they also honor the best piece of writing in each category with a monetary award. There is also a reading at the annual Convention from *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* by any of the published writers who can attend.

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For complete submissions information, guidelines, and a link to submissions: [www.english.org/sigmatd/publications](http://www.english.org/sigmatd/publications)

