



# STAFF

---

Editor-in-Chief: [Erin Eairleywine](#)

Assistant Editor-in-Chief: [Katie Lesiak](#)

Poetry Editor: [Elaine Samsel](#)

Assistant Poetry Editor: [Elizabeth Potter](#)

Prose Editor: [Addie Voss](#)

Assistant Prose Editor: [Sheffer Harbert](#)

Designer: [Jennifer Heywood](#)

Assistant Designer: [Nicole Carbajal](#)

Art Editor: [Jim Schaffer's Design for  
Print Media Class](#)



# AWARDS

## BOATRIGHT AWARDS

### PROSE

First Place: Elizabeth Potter, “The Detonation of Differences”

Second Place: Katie Lesiak, “Dr. Renner”

### POETRY

First Place: Monte D. Monteleagre, “Crossroads”

Second Place: Brooke Zinnel, “Melodies of Affliction”

### ART

Winner: Paige VanCleve, “The Guy”

Winner: Amy Richardson, “Lit”

## PROMISING WRITER AWARD

Winner: Lea Farho

## CAMACHO HUMOROUS WRITING AWARD

Winner: Katie Lesiak, “How to Survive Middle School”

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

## PROSE

<b>Nan</b>   Anna Auger .....	16
<b>Birds</b>   Erin Eairleywine .....	18
<b>The Denotation of Differences</b>   Elizabeth Potter.....	19
<b>Dr. Renner</b>   Katie Lesiak .....	22
<b>Marjorie Grace</b>   Kari Lundeen .....	29
<b>Masquerade</b>   Elizabeth Potter .....	32
<b>Going Ham</b>   Amy Richardson.....	35
<b>From the Pew</b>   Erin Eairleywine .....	40
<b>Wedding Cake</b>   Zaruhi Codr .....	46
<b>Benchwarmer</b>   Katie Lesiak .....	89
<b>Post-Seed</b>   Erin Eairleywine.....	90
<b>Lips</b>   Erin Eairleywine .....	98
<b>Dirt</b>   Katie Lesiak.....	104
<b>How To Survive Middle School</b>   Katie Lesiak.....	111

## POETRY

<b>I Collect Dice</b>   Monte D. Monteagle .....	15
<b>Pre-packaged Roses</b>   Julia Gomez.....	28
<b>Ma Vie, in Four Quarters</b>   Anna Auger.....	41
<b>Crossroads</b>   Monte D. Monteagle .....	49
<b>Remnants on Park Benches</b>   Brooke Zinnel .....	103
<b>Melodies of Affliction</b>   Brooke Zinnel.....	110
<b>Girl Wolves and Vulture Boys</b>   Abby Feldman .....	117

## PLAYS

<b>Regretfully Yours</b>   Kelsey Erhart.....	11
<b>The Need For Time</b>   Kasey Buller .....	76
<b>Psychic Monologue</b>   Monte D. Monteagle .....	97

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

## ART

<b>Stones</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	cover
<b>Harbor</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	52
<b>Self Portrait as the Sky</b>   Tarah Dawdy.....	53
<b>Bonjour</b>   Mikayla Tremain .....	54
<b>Freckles</b>   Mikayla Tremain .....	55
<b>Tartu</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	56
<b>Print</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	57
<b>The Cave</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	58
<b>Canes</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	59
<b>Nebraska... The Right Direction</b>   Shelby Svehla .....	60
<b>St. Benedict Rd</b>   Shelby Svehla .....	61
<b>Austria</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	62
<b>Fields of Gold</b>   Shelby Svehla.....	63
<b>Candles</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	64
<b>Lit</b>   Amy Richardson .....	65
<b>Luna</b>   Tarah Dawdy .....	66
<b>Home</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	67
<b>The Guy</b>   Paige VanCleve .....	68
<b>Golden Hour</b>   Tarah Dawdy .....	69
<b>Flames</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	70
<b>Gold</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	71
<b>Lioness</b>   Madison Hostetler.....	72
<b>Shift</b>   Amy Richardson .....	73
<b>Midsummer</b>   Jennifer Heywood .....	74
<b>Sunset</b>   Brianna Eslick.....	75

# EDITOR'S NOTE

Art is expected to do many things. Some say art should replicate reality, while others say it should make us question what is real. Some would argue that art is a projection of the mind, an expression of our inner selves as in a diary. There are even those that claim that art is never anything more than “art for art’s sake.”

What makes art so wonderful is that for each person, it is capable of doing something different. A piece of fiction might make one reader feel as if they have traveled worlds away, while the same story acts as a mirror for others, making them see their own lives more clearly and vividly than ever before. For a single photograph, the number of possible interpretations are as infinite and limitless as the horizon in its background.

The art in this year’s edition of *The Flintlock* offers an assortment that is sure to move you in whatever way you find most fitting.

The Flintlock Editorial Staff and faculty advisors hope that you enjoy this collection of written and visual art from the 2014-2015 Nebraska Wesleyan student body.



## KELSEY ERHART | REGRETFULLY YOURS

Dear Mr. Callahan,

Good Afternoon. My name is Mary Titus and I am writing to you about your recent production of the show, "Midsummer Night's Dream." I, for one, am outraged at the blatant efforts to distort our children's minds with your sexual ways. I was both shocked and disappointed at the amount of sexual content located in Mr. Shakespeare's script and your production. I would never have taken my child to this production if I was aware of the sexuality and profanity located in this play. I am requesting – no – I am demanding the return of my \$7.50 used for the ticket to enter that sex club you call a play. Please send me this money within the next seven days or I will be forced to take legal action.

Regretfully,

Mary Titus

Concerned Parent

Dear Ms. Titus,

Good Afternoon. As you have already seen, I have not enclosed the money that you have requested. I fear it is not within our policy to send money through the mail. If you would like to come to Theatre located on 70th and Calgary, we could go through the proper protocol to get this matter resolved. Our office hours are located on the bottom of this stationery. Thank you for your opinion and thoughts about the production. I look forward to your arrival.

Sincerely,

James Callahan

Dear Mr. Callahan,

Firstly, I do not believe I should be required to take time out of my busy schedule for a matter that I have no fault in. This production was directed by you not me. I was a customer and displeased with the product. I was offended and I am upset. I went to see a show filled with love. I, instead saw a show filled with sex. I will have you know that I studied Shakespeare in college. I took a Shakespearean literature course for a general requirement and even though it seemed ridiculously boring at the time, I passed that class and I am quite certain that Shakespeare did not intend for his works to be interpreted in such a sexual way. I would not be surprised if Shakespeare were rolling over in his urn. Secondly, I have noticed you haven't apologized yet, and in your next letter, along with the money, I look forward to your apology. I am deeply disappointed in you Mr. Callahan.

Regretfully,

Mary Titus

Dear Mrs. Titus,

Well, I'd like to begin by saying William Shakespeare intended for his plays to be interpreted in many different ways. Some of which are sexual, some of which are funny, some of which are romantic. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a quite sexual play and to take out all the sexuality for one person's liking does not seem like the best way to provide art to the general public.

Furthermore, I apologize... For not apologizing. I, respectfully, refuse to apologize for a show in which it is meant to have sexual innuendo. The actors in the production worked extremely long and hard; therefore, I do not feel the need to apologize to someone who might be offended by the smallest things. Please (because I know you will) send me a list of things you found offensive in our play, and I will personally justify each and every one. Thank you for your opinion.

Sincerely,

James Callahan

P.S. Shakespeare was never cremated. He's been buried for over 400 years

Mr. Callahan,

As you can see, I did not write Dear this time. Because you, jerk-a-doo, are not dear to me. Because this letter is sent with disgust and disappointment and not with respect. And because, in fact, I hate you. You are a despicable man and a terrible person. You should have a movie written about you and call it Despicable Me 3. The nerve of one man to correct a concerned parent on a subject he knows nothing about. I'll have you know, I Wikipedia'ed William Shakespeer and it legitimately states that he was cremated. So shove that one in your pipe and smoke it, sir. Secondly, I will make a list, you inconsiderate jerk-face. 1) I could see Hippolita's underwear. 2) The fight scene in the beginning made me uneasy and made me feel things that I don't like to talk about. 3) Bottum asked for Titanya's nuts, and girls, as you might not know, do not have nuts. This concerned me. 4) There were clothes ripped off. Necessary? No. 5) Many other. So, butt-head, I do appreciate the return of my **\$7.50** (I bolded it so you could see it this time [I'll do it again: **\$7.50**]) by tomorrow. Because I can guarantee, lazy pants, that you have a hundred percent nothing else going on.

Mary Titus

P.S. I didn't even write regretfully because, honestly, I am so disappointed in you, Mr. James Jugalug Callahan

Dear Mrs. Titus,

I regret to inform you that I have spoken with many of the production managers and the people involved in this show and we discussed your list. We discussed it as best as we could, with all the typing errors and misspellings. Apparently, this isn't getting through: William Shakespeare is spelled **William Shakespeare** (I bolded it so you could read it). And unfortunately, all the names of the characters in this

play you are so obsessed with, were misspelled as well. But that is beside the point.

The list you gave us, including the ever-so-encompassing number 5: “many more things” honestly, concerns me. Mrs. Titus, what you saw on Hippolyta (notice the spelling) was her shorts. Her underwear was located beneath those shorts. If you had seen her underwear, you must have been backstage while she was dressing and if that is the case, I must take legal action for my actor’s sake. As far as the fight goes, I would rather not talk about how turned on a middle-aged woman got at college-aged students fighting each other. Maybe your husband could take care of that for you. Thirdly, Bottom (I was really surprised by the misspelling of this one. Bottom is a relatively easy word to spell... What grade level can you read at?) asked for nuts from the forest! As you know, there are many kinds of nuts and berries located all around the forests. So that takes care of that one. Fourthly, clothes were taken off. For humor. As you saw, no skin was exposed but their arms and legs, and as I assume you are not Amish because you are typing on a computer to send me these letters, you expose both of these things as well. I hope this puts the matter to rest. I look forward to never hearing from you again. Thank you for your opinion, but please do not write again.

Sincerely,

Mr. James “Jugalug” Callahan (whatever that means)

To whom it may concern,

Above is a series of letter sent from me, Mary Titus, to your faculty member, James Callahan. I would like his resignation immediately. As you can see from the letters, he has purposely offended me, a concerned parent and loving theatre person and I, for one, will not stand for it. Please read the enclosed letters and get back to me with his letter of resignation within the week. I look forward to hearing from you.

Regretfully,

Mary Titus

Dear Mrs. Titus,

No.

Sincerely,

Dr. Fredrick Manter

President of Mayd Ahp University

Dear President Obama,

Hello. My name is Mary Titus and I live in your country. If you can read from the letters enclosed, I recently visited a production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream at Mayd Ahp University. Honestly, I have never seen such vagrant sexuality in my whole life. I was deeply offended and want these two men: Mr.

James Callahan and Dr. Fredrick Manter fired effective immediately. I look forward to hearing from you within the week.

Patriotically yours,  
Mary Titus

Dear Mary,

No.

Sincerely,  
President of the United States of America

Dear God,

Hello. My name is Mary Titus, and I live in your world...

## MONTE D. MONTELEAGRE | I COLLECT DICE

I know  
It sounds like a combination  
Of a stamp collection  
And a gambling addiction  
But it's different  
It's more of a combination  
Of an obsession with storytelling  
The chaotic workings of the universe  
And a stamp collection.  
I have a bag  
It's full of random numbers  
Of chaos  
Dancing and spinning  
Bouncing  
Mapping out the universe  
Across a dining room table.  
Cutting and sewing  
The strings of fate  
Determining the future  
Writing of the past  
Dealing damage  
Healing scars  
In a basement by a bag of chips.  
4 6 8 10 12 20 24 30 and 100  
Sided indifferent gods  
Jingling softly in a ratty black bag.  
Stamps are cheaper  
But I don't write a lot of letters.  
I prefer stories.

## ANNA AUGER | NAN

“And how did that make you feel?”

“What do you mean? I feel nothing.”

Nan was numb. The hospital greeted her with sterile emptiness. Her measured steps led her to the room where she sat by the bedside for hours. Nurses shook their heads and shed tears of pity for her. “That pretty young thing,” as the doctor called her, gazed listlessly at the body of her husband. Beeps on a machine were the only indications of the lingering life he once had.

“How did that make you feel?”

Over and over, the words repeated themselves in Nan’s head. They were a meaningless remembrance. Her foster parents had panicked when she said, “I can’t feel.” They dragged her to a therapist, where hours of questioning revealed no diagnosis. Just “an inability to process emotion.” No one knew what to make of it, but Nan didn’t feel anything.

“What do you mean? I don’t feel anything.”

Her eyes turned to the face of her husband. Life had been normal enough. She went to college, became a lawyer, dated a few guys. Then, this one came along. His eyes were deep and searching; his interest in her never waned. Instead of fearing her lack of emotion, he was intrigued. “Drawn to the fire,” he’d say with a smile. Peter gave her the words to feel.

“And how did that make you feel?”

Nan never did understand the concept of being “in love.” Once, in seventh grade, she’d asked a friend what “in love” was. The friend said with a giggle: “It’s when all you can think about is being close to another person.” In law school, she’d asked a professor; his reply was even more cryptic: “Love is a pleasurable interest, a desire for someone else.” A philosophy student only confused her: “Humans are all roaming the earth, seeking the other half—”

But what was love? Nan liked the way her Peter described it. He always said, “Being in love, dear Nanny, is when two people meet and forget the rest of the world exists. Love is those two people doing everything they can to protect the other’s happiness.”

She liked how he said it, with his sparkling eyes gazing deep into hers, and his hands softly around her waist. She knew he felt love in a very deep, extraordinary way. But looking back at him, letting those words sink in—she questioned her ability to love.

“I don’t feel anything.”

The therapists told her she wouldn’t. Yet it wasn’t quite true. Nan felt the satisfaction of winning a case. She knew the frustration of not being able to solve a problem. She knew the pain of the car accident, the glass in her face, the car door pressing against her side. Nan knew what these were. What she couldn’t name was that thing she felt when she looked over at Peter. His head was bashed against the steering wheel, his body covered in blood.

“Peter!” she had screamed. He didn’t answer.

That was a numbness. She felt it now. But she couldn’t find the words.

In his hospital bed, Peter stirred. His gauze-encrusted arm reached out unconsciously, as if searching for something. Nan took his hand, wanting to see life in his face. Instead, she saw a creeping grayness.

The room was silent.

“And how did that make you feel?”

The nurses busied themselves about the body, doing whatever it is that they do. The doctor asked “that pretty little thing” if she needed a glass of water, a hug, a shoulder to cry on—anything. Nan looked up blankly.

“Cry? Why would I cry?”

The doctor shook his head and turned away. Nan left, not wanting to see those nurses buzz about her dead Peter as bees swarm a wildflower. Peter wasn’t there anymore, and Nan didn’t want to hold hands with a lifeless image.

“I don’t feel anything.”

That wasn’t true. She felt empty. Lifeless. If she were a lamp, she would have said that all her light had gone. You or I would call it grief, but Nan didn’t know the words.

## ERIN FAIRLEYWINE | BIRDS

Sitting on a metal bench, I wait for inspiration to come striding up gallantly on a white horse. I gaze upon the wide expanse of the park, pen and notepad in hand, hoping my eye will catch something interesting worth writing about. I hoped to see some odd pairing of people, or maybe a unicyclist wearing a tuxedo with one shoe missing—some anomaly worth investigating. The old man feeding the birds has already been done a thousand times, and yet there he is—a walking cliché with a bag of old bread, bent over with a humpback, the pigeons gagging on the big chunks and jutting their heads in and out. Couldn't he have somewhere novel to be? Couldn't he have a small plane that he still flies at his ripe old age of 80? Or even better, maybe he could spend his afternoons at the strip club where he has a favorite dancer named Diamond when his wife thinks he's volunteering his knowledge from his old job as an electrician at their family church.

It is starting to irritate me that he is even bothering to be here, sitting on a bench now, as if to make the cliché even more concrete—as if to mock me. Frustrated, I walk over to him and decide to start a conversation. Maybe, I think, that will force something interesting to come of him.

“Hello,” I offer when I approach. He is everything I feared he would be and more. What gets me is the fedora; of course he would be wearing a fedora. He cranes his neck up, which appears to take some serious effort, and looks up at me from the rim. He has skin tags and liver spots and wrinkles so deep they must go through to the bone. His eyes are glossed over with signs of macular degeneration. He is holding a bag of old, dry, rye bread and wearing a red sweater over a striped, collared shirt. His beard is scraggly and he wears a pair of wire-rimmed glasses that form perfect circles.

“You scared away the birds,” he says plainly. He simply stands up, leaving his bag of bread, and walks home. A little taken aback, I take his place on the bench. I sit a few minutes until the birds return, and when they tentatively make their way back, I feed them crumbs from the bag. I tip my imaginary fedora at them. Now I've got something to write about.

# ELIZABETH POTTER | THE DETONATION OF DIFFERENCES

## I.

I would like to believe that in 1945 when the first detonation of a nuclear weapon was reflected in my Uncle Lenny's eyes, he closed them. I would like to imagine that while his fellow scientists and military officers watched a bomb transformed into an artist painting the New Mexican desert in violent strokes of color, against the backdrop of his closed eyelids, my great uncle did not have to endure the echoes of those colors. I would like to see him seeing nothing and cocooned in the blissful blackness of his own making. I would like to think that while the ears around him rang with the screams of a human-made machine set free, for once, all my great uncle heard was silence.

## II.

It was night, as it always seems to be when things occur that no one can quite believe, the first time it happened. Wrapped in blankets and the silence only night can bring, I struggled with sleep and lay looking up at my popcorn ceiling and listening to the night-time groans of my old house transformed into the growls of monsters on a strict diet of little freckled girls such as myself. What actually appeared, though, elicited a smile rather than a scream.

Have you ever stared at a light for a lengthy amount of time to find its vague outline etched against your closed eyelids in various hues? That night instead of monsters, I saw such a phenomenon performed for my own personal pleasure without the aid of any sort of stimulus. It was as if the northern lights had decided to migrate from the sky and dance on a bedroom ceiling for a little girl who couldn't dream.

## III.

No one knows for certain when my great uncle first succumbed to his schizophrenia. In fact, no one knows much of anything for certain about the disorder itself. There are many theories regarding the origin of schizophrenia, but little is truly known. What is known, however, is that it is highly hereditary and that it developed in my great uncle around a mysterious date with a girl.

I'd like to imagine my Uncle Lenny as the stereotypical character in your cliché first date scene: trembling hands trying on an entire closet full of clothes then thrown haphazardly on a bed, his mind reflecting this scene with his thoughts heaped tangled on the bed of his conscience. However, what makes both his bed and mind cluttered are not worries about either himself or the girl he is taking out, but rather the person who won't be there: his best friend and boyfriend to the girl he will be seeing this evening. But, out of time and clothing options, I see him sigh, and bed and mind still in disarray, drive to her house. Perhaps after that hands stole like refugees across invisible borders never meant to be crossed that night. Perhaps secrets were revealed and sealed with searing kisses. Perhaps nothing

of any significance happened at all. What did happen, though, was that after that night, guilt became a permanent resident, a hermit, in my great uncle's head that hammered away like an ill-tempered tenant with a broom cursing the noisy neighbors above. I can imagine that eventually this hammering became so incessant that it could even be heard outside of the house of my Uncle Lenny's head and issued out of his mouth in such questions as, "Do you think he knows what happened?" "Do you think he's after me?" However, as time progressed, guilt became bolder and no longer a hermit; it ventured outside its cranial home and manifested itself elsewhere. That's when the TVs started talking.

#### IV.

Hunched bodies, resembling the tombstones they will soon lie beneath more than the individuals they actually are, stare listlessly at a television set and collectively salivate in lieu of conversation. This seems to be a common cliché of mental hospitals. However, it is precisely what I saw the first and only time I met my Uncle Lenny. In contrast to his environment, the man himself did not at all fit the stereotype for a mental patient, or at least my own naïve notion of one. He didn't excessively salivate, he smiled. He didn't gesticulate wildly, but gently grasped my hand in greeting. He didn't make accusations at the air, but politely asked questions. This man, my great uncle, smiled, touched, and inquired about me. Me. A young girl who had not only never met him, but who had also harbored horrid ideas regarding him. I had imagined to leave his hospital turned home with embarrassment and images I would immediately attempt to eradicate. Instead, I left with the warmth of his goodbye embrace draped around me and the cold fist of guilt knocking on my own mind's door.

#### V.

I don't like to imagine my Uncle Lenny when the TVs began to terrorize him, but I do all the same. Static is a poor substitute for silence, but white noise has long been the successor of lullabies. So it was for my great uncle. Most nights, he allowed the static to sing him to sleep. But one night, it actually had something to say. Out of the TV, through the air, through Lenny's ear, and into his dreams, it began to whisper. I am coming for you. I am already here in your head and it is only a matter of time before I make myself seen...and make you disappear.

After that, my great uncle could only dream of silence. But, as he could never sleep, he could never dream and his ears drowned in an ocean of sound.

#### VI.

Disappearing was never something I dreamed of. Many of my classmates seemed to make being absorbed into the greater student body a career, but not only was that never a desire for me, it was also never even an option.

Most people hear "Blue Bunny" and immediately imagine a rabbit of a blue hue. However, since childhood I have foolishly held on to the hope that humanity will one day cease naming things so lacklusterly

logically. Therefore, for as long as I can remember, the little logo on the Blue Bunny ice cream carton has been a spherical alien wearing nothing but a monocle. It wasn't until I was thirteen or so that the truth tortured my alien into the vague figure of a rabbit, and since then, Blue Bunny ice cream has never quite tasted as sweet.

While most children fear the dark, I have always feared the light. The dark is final. It comes and encompasses like a great velvet curtain. The light, however, is like those great clear protective plastic sheets that the protagonist in horror films always seems to flee through and that do anything but protect her from her predator. Like those sheets, the light provides no protection for our eyes from what is before us. It is not the dark that creates shadows, but the light. It is the dark that creates fear of the unknown, but it is the light that makes those fears real and known. For me, light has always seemed to be in motion. Dancing, dimming, disappearing altogether. Not even the curtain of darkness can stop its show. Sleep is my only solution and dreams my only distraction.

## VII.

Sleep was an escape that evaded my great uncle, but perhaps that only made him more awake than the rest of us. He did not dream and yet he heard what most of us could only dream. Who are we to declare that dreams and demons visible to us as individuals, but invisible to the world as a whole aren't "real"? How does one even define "real"? My great uncle's definition lit up the New Mexican desert sky, was a neighbor of guilt in his head, and was spoken through the static of TVs. My definition performed ballet on my bedroom ceiling, winked at me through a monocle-clad eye from cartons of Blue Bunny ice cream, and is every light that makes my pupils contract in fear. Before you yourself fill with fear or stamp us in incriminatingly red ink as "insane," just imagine how different the detonation of an atomic bomb is depending on whether it's reflected in your eyes in the light or projected against your eyelids in the dark.

## KATIE LESIAK | DR. RENNER

“...Patient suffers from severe Dissociative Identity Disorder, accompanied by hallucinations. Phases of personalities vary in length. The most frequent of these being an angry, schizophrenic man the patient has named Jackson. Patient displays fits of aggression towards hospital staff. Patient becomes increasingly aggressive when asked about his condition, mental health, and reasons for entering the hospital.

Today (11/10/83), patient became angry when RN Avery distributed his medications. Patient refused to take them while screaming and becoming violent. Patient was sitting in the common room at this time and began kicking RN Avery when she approached him. RN Smith and Samuel intervened by restraining patient and placing him back into his room...”

A light knock forces Dr. James Renner’s eyes from the notes and to his office door where Nurse Smith peers his head into the room. When looking at Smith, one does not think, “nurse” immediately. One might imagine his occupation is fighting fires or criminals. Which, in some way, is what he does on a day-to-day basis. His bulky, yet muscular frame becomes especially useful for his occupation as a nurse in Saint Elizabeth’s psychiatric hospital.

Although Smith’s large frame may seem intimidating when first viewed, his gentle voice reassures patients that he means no harm and assists when attempting to restrain them during an episode.

Smith is just one of the several stout nurses in this hospital, specifically the psych ward. His brother of similar build, Samuel, also works in the hospital. The patients in this ward are not especially aggressive, although the nurses may disagree. It is a small ward, but efficient in its treatments and excelling in its progressive research. New techniques for treating mental illness are developed and implemented daily by the doctors at St. E’s.

While the innovative research and techniques have provided the hospital with an admired reputation, the administration thinks it best to have the ward’s location remain distanced from the main hospital on a completely isolated and separate campus. Because of this, the physical being of the ward is insufficiently maintained. Many onlookers compare it to settings of old horror movies, with its faded brick walls, barred windows, and infertile lawns. It stands alone in a small lot surrounded by ominous barbed fences.

The interior of the building mirrors the exterior in its dilapidated state. However, Dr. Renner feels somewhat at home here. The barren, off-white walls and silent halls reflect those of his apartment; although, the musty smell is one to which he will never become accustomed.

“Dr. Renner,” Smith says as he enters, consuming most of the small office. “The room is ready whenever you are.”

“Thank you, Smith. I’m going to finish reading this report and jotting down some notes. I’ll be with you shortly.”

“No rush. I’ll wait outside till you’re ready.” Smith gently closes the door and Dr. Renner is left with the report that was filed earlier this morning. He glances at the worn hands of the clock, which display 4:57. An audible sigh escapes his mouth. Beginning a patient meeting this late is never ideal. But it’s not as if he has anything or anyone waiting at home for him. With a long aborted marriage that produced no children, his loneliness resonates in the empty apartment. He once thought about getting a pet, but he would never be attentive enough to keep it alive. Settling on the idea that the hospital may not be worse than home, Dr. Renner returns to the report.

“...Patient was placed in his room with his medications and will remain under supervision. RN Smith will continue to monitor mood and further actions.”

With a final sigh, Dr. Renner slowly rises from his chair and walks around to the front of his desk. He favors his left leg as he walks, his right foot seeming to cause slight soreness and pain. Although he cannot remember any specific incident that would have hurt his foot, he merely blames it on old age and runs his fingers across his desk. They eventually settle on a small plastic cup containing two pills. One of the perks of working in a psychiatric building is having access to a rainbow of pain medications. Typically this would not be remotely acceptable, let alone legal. But because of his many years of service and the efforts of the main hospital to push the department as much out of sight as possible, the doctors and nurses of the psych ward have no problem allowing Dr. Renner to prescribe medications to himself.

The chalky yellow pills settle on his tongue and absorb all of the moisture in his mouth before he is quick enough to wash them down. He attempts to rid his mouth of the foul taste with lukewarm coffee to no avail. Eventually, he forces his mind to plan for the meeting that lies ahead. Slowly, and slightly limping, he paces the worn linoleum tile in front of his desk.

The patient of his notes, the one he will be meeting with, has the legal name of Robert Johnson. This man has been in the care of Dr. Renner since the first day he entered the ward almost 25 years ago. He came involuntarily, escorted by police officers after attempting to beat a man for looking at him incorrectly. Dr. Renner concluded that Robert suffered from a mental illness and ordered that he remain in his care.

After further meetings and observations of Robert, it was noted that he suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder, also referred to as Multiple Personality Disorder. Individuals suffering from this condition, such as Robert, often personify several identities, never exactly sure of his or her one true self. The extensive notes on Richard conclude that he also projects images and voices, or hallucinations, which persuade him to perform acts that are contrary to his moral beliefs. Despite exhaustive efforts to implement new techniques and strategies during Dr. Renner’s meetings with Robert, his condition has remained stagnant.

Feeling the medications set in, as well as his concern for the upcoming meeting, Dr. Renner’s pacing increases. Suddenly, Smith’s large head fills the narrow window as he furrows his brows in concern. Dr. Renner merely dismisses Smith’s concern with a slight wave of his hand. Glancing again at the clock,

he moves back behind his desk to gather his notes on Robert. Deciding to strip all strategies from the meeting, Dr. Renner stuffs the coffee-stained papers and plain notepad into a new file folder. He quickly scribbles, "Robert, 11/10/83" across the top as Smith leans into the room.

"Need any help with that?"

"No, thank you, Smith. Just gathering my things, as well as my mind." With a slight pause and final glimpse of the clock, Dr. Renner sighs, "Alright, I'm ready."

The white halls of the ward are quiet at this time of night. Patients are finished with their dinner and retire to their rooms. Some remain in the common area to stare blankly out of the barred windows or drool over the bent pages of an old magazine. Pain slowly reentered Dr. Renner's foot from the longevity of the walk.

"Is your leg alright, Doctor?" Smith slows his pace, unconsciously hovering his hand behind Dr. Renner's back.

"No need to fuss, Smith. I'm fine. It just happens to be sore. Nothing that my medications can't take care of," Dr. Renner dismisses.

"What happened?" Smith is persistent in his prying. He is an extremely caring individual, but this can be portrayed as intruding on personal business, at times. In an attempt to dismiss the subject entirely, Dr. Renner merely shakes his head, mumbles something incomprehensible, and clears his throat. He changes the topic to focus on the patient by asking Smith about Robert's current condition.

"He's calm, slightly anxious. He has taken his medications, so he should be alright."

"And his incident today? Has he reflected on that at all?" Dr. Renner begins analyzing his agenda for the meeting, although he realizes this will change.

"He's definitely calmed down since then, but he shows no remorse. Maybe he will explain more to you." This is Dr. Renner's hope. Over the years, Robert has opened up to him more than any other staff member. However, whenever the conversation turns serious or uncomfortable for Robert, things turn for the worse. Eventually his persona, Jackson, takes over. When this occurs, Dr. Renner has learned that any further attempts at supplemental conversation are useless.

Dr. Renner nods to Smith in false hope. "Yes, we can only hope."

The meeting room lies just off of the common area. It is a small room, containing only one table with two chairs on either side. The walls are completely bare except for large mirrors that occupy two walls opposite of each other. This reflective tactic was invented by Dr. Renner. By viewing one's actions and reactions, Dr. Renner believes that the patient will learn to better understand his or her mental disorder.

Smith opens the door for Dr. Renner and they both step inside, placing themselves next to each other on one side of the table. Dr. Renner takes out his notes. When he looks up, he is staring straight into the speckled green eyes of Robert. His eyes are small and wrinkled around the edges, but not like an older grandmother's eyes that have wrinkled from years of sun and laughter. Robert's eyes were wrinkled from worry, despair, and constant searching for himself.

Sitting across from Smith is his brother, Samuel. They nod a familiar hello to one another. The brothers glance at the doctor with worried eyes, but Dr. Renner acts as if he did not notice.

“So, Robert, how are you today?” Dr. Renner asks, attempting to gauge the patient’s mood.

“Fine,” Robert answers in quick, short phrases, as though his words do not have enough air behind them to support their formation. “Except for that crap they call food here. The cook is so fat, she should stop eating the good stuff and start feeding it to us.” The corners of his small mouth turn up in response to his own snide comment. He glances at Samuel, but after realizing that he did not find it as funny, quickly reverts his eyes to his tangled fingers resting on the table. Seeming embarrassed at his comment, he becomes quiet.

Robert is not an unattractive man. In his mid-60’s, he looks young for his age, despite the wrinkles. He keeps himself well groomed and his previous education has granted him a quick, smart tongue. The years of residence in the psych ward are apparent by his sunken cheeks and baggy clothing. His pale skin has been withdrawn from the sun for too long.

“You need to eat the food they serve you, even if you think it’s crap. You’re looking a little thin. The ladies will think you’ve gone soft.” The doctor tries to keep the mood light, hoping to ease any anxiety felt by Robert.

Robert snorts at this preposterous idea. “Ladies. These crazies? No, thank you. Even the cook is better than the loonies in here.”

“Be nice...” Dr. Renner intervenes, struggling to hide his smirk.

“Alright, alright.” Becoming more relaxed, Robert rests his back against his chair. Dr. Renner does not wish to ruin this mood, but he can still hear the steady ticking of the clock’s hands in the back of his mind.

“Now, it seems as though there was an incident with Nurse Avery earlier today. Would you like to tell me more about that?”

“No.” Robert tests his limits with a raise of one eyebrow.

“This will all go much more smoothly if you cooperate, Robert.” Tired of games, Dr. Renner realizes that a more assertive tactic will be necessary.

“Okay, so what? I kicked her. I’m tired of everyone looking at me like I’m a wet puppy or a fat boy who got his donut taken away.”

“You think this is how Nurse Avery was looking at you when she was distributing your medications?”

“Yeah, like she had so much sympathy for me. Like she knew something about me that I was oblivious to. She plastered that sympathy smile on her smug little face that was so degrading. It really just pissed me off. So I kicked her.” The wrinkled corners of his mouth again upturned as Robert relived this moment, and yet a torn and confused emotion filled his eyes. An internal conflict was raging inside of his mind. He began quickly rubbing his palms on his pants back and forth.

In an attempt to relax Robert once again, Dr. Renner asks, “Did you feel any remorse after hurting

her?”

“Remorse? Of course not.” This comes out as a shrill laugh. “Do you think she would feel remorse if she was allowed to kick me?” Before Dr. Renner could object, Robert continued, “Of course not. Any one of the nurses or doctors here would be ecstatic to throw some punches at us crazies. Hell, if I was in your shoes, I’d slap the loonies on the daily.” Dr. Renner could see Robert dissolving into himself. Emerging was the violent, aggressive Jackson.

Quickly trying to resolve the situation, Dr. Renner stumbles, “Robert, all of the staff here would never dream of harming any of the residents. We are here to help you at any means...” A stronger, more confident voice interrupts Dr. Renner. It’s louder and more determined than that of Robert.

“It’s Jackson, now, Doc. I’m sure you’re all beyond thrilled to get to work with us on the daily. You must love us so much that your love comes off as torture. You keep us in here, lock us in confinement, starve us, all because you truly love us.” His eyes turned from small and wrinkled to wide and terrifying. They dart back and forth, never staying on one object for more than a few seconds. His hands are white as they grip the edge of the table. “And we all love you so much, too. That’s why I kicked that bitch. To demonstrate my love.”

Dr. Renner tries to calm Jackson down. However, his anger has reached the point of no return, and Smith and Samuel have seemed to realize it. Samuel places himself behind Jackson and grips his shoulders, commanding him to calm down.

“And you know what, Doc? I’d like to show you how much I truly love you!” The mirrors reflect the fury behind his eyes. With one swift motion, before Samuel or Smith could intervene, Jackson punches Dr. Renner directly in his nose.

\* \* \*

A light knock awakens Dr. Renner in his office. Smith, with apprehensive eyes, enters.

“Doctor?” The doctor slowly rises off of the small couch in the corner of his office.

“Oh, Smith. I’m so sorry. I must’ve fallen unconscious after that...incident.”

“How do you feel? That was quite the ordeal.”

“I’m still a little shaken...” Dr. Renner attempts to stand but Smith motions for him to remain seated.

“Here, take these. They’ll help.” Smith hands him a small plastic cup containing three pills varying in color and a glass of water.

“Thank you. Would you mind filling me in on the events that happened after...”

“After he became violent? We had to sedate him. I should’ve intervened sooner. I apologize for that.”

“No need. I really thought we were going to have a breakthrough with him.” Finishing the glass of water, Dr. Renner slowly stands and stretches. “I think I may go on a walk, just to clear my head.”

“Great idea. I’ll accompany you.” The two slowly start down the hallway. Dr. Renner’s mind seems clouded by something. Trying to shake it off, he begins thinking about the meeting with Robert and what went wrong.

“I will have to complete more research about different approaches for Robert,” the doctor comments, speaking mostly to himself.

“You have some time for your research. We still need to put the meeting room back together,” Smith replies just as the two are passing the room. From the open doorway, Dr. Renner can see that one mirror is decorated with a spider web of cracks. A repairman accompanied it, attempting to remove the large glass from the wall. As they continue past the meeting room further down the hallway, the doctor feels a slight tingling pain in his right hand. Looking down, it is bound with large bandages and gauze. A dark brown color was beginning to appear where blood was trying to escape.

## JULIA GOMEZ | PRE-PACKAGED ROSES

Tile flooring glows, glistens,  
and fluorescent light serves as  
a poor substitute for sunshine  
around a display  
of carefully preserved flowers.  
Their roots long forgotten,  
light-seeking petals have become used to the cold,  
air-conditioned shelter.

A little girl sings to them,  
her nose almost kissed by soft petals,  
and wonders if her song will make them grow.  
Footsteps draw near the pre-packaged roses.  
Hastened, impatient, the echoes sound,  
out of time with her tune.

The paper is wrapped tightly  
around the lovesick purchase  
of a dozen roses, pink and white.  
It crinkles loudly against  
the business-like, crisp pressed shirt.

The stems are jagged  
on the man's waistband,  
so instead he holds them to his side,  
swinging them up, down, up, down  
as the automatic doors blink  
and welcome him into the sun.

## KARI LUNDEEN | MARJORIE GRACE

It was a bright Saturday morning at the sky blue cottage on 5<sup>th</sup> Street. A light, tangy breeze blew through the open window into Marjorie Grace's pristine kitchen, picking up the sweet scent of Danish butter cookies and swirling it throughout the house. Wrinkling her nose, Margie closed the window with a gnarled finger. She stared forlornly at her wizened hand resting on the windowsill, wondering how long it had looked that way. Her pearl wedding ring looked small on her swelled digits. She tried to make a fist, but her fingers barely bent. How long have I been old? Margie pondered. It shouldn't surprise her, since she had turned eighty-five the week before, but she had nearly forgotten.

The timer dinged cheerily, breaking her reverie. She slid on her oven mitts and pulled out the cookies, gritting her teeth against the sharp pain in her back. Quietly cursing her aching body, she dropped the pan onto the stove with a thump. Margie glared at the cookies, demanding an answer from them, though she didn't even know the question. Suddenly, she heard knocking on her front door.

"Hi, Grandma!" a tall blonde boy said, smiling widely as Margie opened the door. He held out a bouquet of dark red roses and white carnations tied together with a pink ribbon. "Happy late birthday!"

"Dillon?" Margie gasped, accepting the flowers. "You're back!" She brought the flowers to her nose and inhaled deeply, but she could barely sense the beautiful aromas that she knew so well. She covered her disappointment. "Did you know that your grandfather used to bring me these flowers on my birthday?" When Margie looked up at Dillon, she noticed how much he looked like Richard, from his twinkling blue eyes to his slightly protruding chin. Even Dillon's carefully combed hair was similar to Richie's signature look.

"Mom suggested these flowers. I didn't know that Grandpa Richie always brought them." He looked anxious, like he was wondering whether or not he should have brought the flowers.

Margie grinned and patted Dillon's arm. "They are lovely, Richie," she assured him. "You have always known how to make me feel better." She turned and led the way into the kitchen.

"I made some butter cookies," Margie continued as she went to the sink and began filling a vase with water for her flowers. "Would you like some milk?" she inquired as she shut off the water.

"Grandma!" Dillon admonished her, sitting at the table. "You know I'm lactose intolerant!"

Margie frowned thoughtfully at the magnet-covered refrigerator as she placed some cookies on a plate. Of course she knew he was lactose intolerant. Why did she offer him milk? For a second she had been sure that Richie was sitting at his usual spot at the head of the table, waiting for his glass of 2%. He was late today. "Orange juice?" she asked as she set the plate in front of her grandson.

"Sounds lovely." He snatched a cookie off the plate. "Best cookie ever made!" Dillon pro-

claimed as he took a large bite. Crumbs bounced off his shirt and landed on the hardwood floor. Margie poured three glasses of juice and set one by Dillon's plate. He looked at his juice and then eyed the two glasses on the counter. "Are you expecting more company?" he asked curiously.

"I thought maybe Richie would stop by," Margie answered, sitting across from Dillon with her glass. "He gets off of work at five." She took a sip of her orange juice, but avoided the cookies. She hadn't eaten a single one since her husband died nearly six years ago. She still baked a batch every week, just in case she had company.

"Did you enjoy your trip?" Margie asked. "Richie said that France was a lovely country, even during the war."

Dillon looked strangely uncomfortable. "France was great, Grandma. I hope to study abroad again sometime." He paused, watching her with an almost pained look in his eyes. "Grandma, you remember that Grandpa Richie died, right?"

Margie nodded sadly. "You were fifteen. It's a shame that you never got to know your grandfather well." Tears welled in her eyes as she choked up. How she wished Richie could have been here! She cried nearly every night, wishing that he was there to watch their grandkids grow up, like they had imagined they would years ago. "He was a great man."

Dillon patted her hand reassuringly. "I get to know him every time you tell me about him," he said gently. Margie nodded and wiped her eyes with her old hands, smiling to disguise her pain.

Clearing her throat, Margie began, "Richie worked at his uncle's garage in town. I met him there when our radio broke, and I couldn't find anyone who could fix it." Margie beamed as the memories became stronger. "Richie said he could, and he did. The next day he drove out to my house and asked me to go driving with him." She laughed happily. "He always calls me Marjorie Grace, my full name."

"That's sweet," Dillon said awkwardly. Margie supposed he didn't care to know all the romantic details. "When did Grandpa enlist?"

"1943, after he turned 19," Margie instantly replied. "He helped liberate a German concentration camp." She shuddered as she recalled the haunted look in Richie's eyes when he described his experiences at the camp. "Richie had nightmares about it for years. He would wake up screaming."

"Maybe he had PTSD," Dillon commented. Margie nodded in agreement, although she'd never heard of it. She'd have to tell Richard when he got home. They sat in silence for a while, until Dillon stood and excused himself to go to the bathroom.

Margie got up and stuffed the remaining cookies in a freezer bag. There was no reason to waste them, after all. She brought the bag to the huge white freezer in the entry room. It opened with an icy blast, freezing her clothes for a moment. The shelves were filled with butter cookies, and it took some maneuvering before the new bag fit into the tight space.

"Good grief!" Dillon exclaimed as he entered the room. "How many cookies have you made? There are enough here to feed the whole town!" He stared at the stuffed fridge, his mouth agape.

The freezer began to beep, so she slammed it shut. “I make a batch every week, Richie. You know that!” Dillon laughed nervously, running his fingers through his blonde hair.

“I’m Dillon, not Grandpa Richie,” he explained. “And you’ve made at least a dozen cookies every day since Christmas!” He opened his phone and began typing furiously on the tiny keyboard. His eyes are so beautiful, she thought fondly as she watched him. He’s just like his grandfather.

“Of course, dear,” she said pleasantly. “Run along back to the kitchen, now. Richie should be coming home in a little bit. He gets off of work at five.”

## ELIZABETH POTTER | MASQUERADE

I trail one hand languidly in the liquid mirror of the canal below me, and in my golden gondola I watch the reflection of the houses above me slip by like the cars of a sophisticatedly graffiti-covered train. Its passengers hurry past me with faces almost always pasted with ecstatic expressions that I can't help but imagine melting off like the paint on the famous Venetian masks they so resemble. I too wear a mask. It is a whimsical wonder of wire and it is beautiful, as most masks are, so as not to draw too much attention to itself or its wearer. (Beauty is expected and easily forgotten; it is its counterpart that remains in the mind). This physical mask is the only mask Venice and the rest of world can see, but it is not the only mask I wear.

\*\*\*

Snuggled in the emerald embrace only a tree can give, I smile down at my bleeding legs remembering my father's mantra, "If you aren't bleeding or throwing up, you aren't having fun." Satisfied that my legs will serve as a sufficient testament to my fun, I turn my gaze to the undulating canopy of leaves above me. It suddenly recalls images of a family tree I had been shown in my second grade class, and I can't help but gaze at the thick foliage enfolding me and think that if my family were a tree, it would appear cancerous with too few leaves. Ruminating on this and running my hands reverently along the bark of my tree, I become infatuated with the idea of its wood as a picture frame. Perhaps our family photos would finally look perfect like those in other people's homes if wrapped in its wood.

Why do most people see a picture frame made of money and automatically construct the image within it to be perfect? And yet, why do we all look at someone else's family photographs and see perfection without seeing ourselves reflected in the glass? Why do we never realize that other people do the same to our photographs? From my own seemingly "perfect" family pictures, I construct another mask.

\*\*\*

My nose buried in a book, quite literally as I have always enjoyed the scent of literature almost as much as its content, words come filtered through the porch screen on the summer air. Though not filtered enough for the delicate feelings of a fourth grader such as myself even as the tones are tempered. Hushed. As if the boys are passing a church or a cemetery, rather than my house.

"That's the house of that rich girl."

"I heard her dad has a plantation in Costa Rica...with slaves."

I have always taken the adjective "rich" as an insult, and a misplaced one at that. There are countless things that separate us from one another, why must we also make income a barrier? For most of my life, it was as if my father's paychecks slowly papered a wall between myself and the rest of the world. Or at least the world of my small Nebraska hometown. I didn't even have the distinction of being

observable like an animal in a zoo. No, for me it was the solitary confinement of a life padded by money and populated almost entirely by the literary characters in the books in which I lost myself. This allowed my classmates to imagine a window into my world with glass blown of skewed stereotypes-- a window supporting stained glass that shone the color of a world where they thought money always bought no emotion but happiness.

I will never forget the first time I admitted to a fellow classmate that I too was devoured by depression. She looked at me with betrayal coloring her eyes the way her irises should have (and perhaps I had betrayed her, as I certainly had betrayed her idea of me) and stammered, “b..b..but don’t you have your own airplane?” It seems the people who most often regurgitate the phrase, “money can’t buy happiness” are the identical individuals who eat up that very idea insatiably. Eventually, my “wealth wall” withdrew, but even a prison can become a home with time. So, from the money and stained glass, I fashioned another mask for myself.

\*\*\*

Eyelids at half-mast, bowing to the Cyclopes eye of the sun glaring down at me, my eyes dance over the words and spin through the pages of the book in front of me. It is Sara Gruen’s *Water for Elephants*, borrowed from a neighbor, to while away a windy summer afternoon. I have just dipped into the part detailing the murder of the ringmaster (my apologies if I have spoiled the story for you) when a realization halts my hungry eyes mid-step.

I may never kill anyone in my lifetime.

Presumably, probably, you have never entertained such a thought, as it has always been an accepted fact. However, for myself, at age sixteen, I was awestruck by the idea. Blame it on our culture. Point fingers at violent movies and videogames I’ve never played. Regardless of the reason, I realized under the sultry sun and the singing of cicadas that I had always subconsciously planned to kill.

If my expectations for the future were books on a shelf, killing would be snuggled in between having a house with a yard and learning how rubber bands are made. To you that probably seems like giving a book on gardening a *Playboy* magazine for a neighbor, but you must understand that the aisle in which the expectation to kill was housed was not one I had ever visited. It was more like the reference section of a library. Something you know in the back of your mind is there, but a place you rarely, if ever, choose to venture. I had never really consciously thought much about the existence of lawns in my future or how rubber is made into its classic circular form, but they were thoughts that were there nevertheless. Just because something is not known, or seen, or thought of, doesn’t denote its ability to exist. Just as one may think without transforming that thought into action.

Aristotle once said, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” I would like to think of my library as an educated one full of both thoughts I page through religiously and those I never check out. Killing was a book I had never even picked up from its shelf until that summer afternoon. I will admit that I peered through a few of its pages, but soon returned it to its

rightful residence. Perhaps I should have returned to the Nazi practice of feeding fire with words and burned it, but I just couldn't. Whether it was that I simply couldn't bring my trembling hands to touch it again, or if I vainly and stubbornly thought its presence made my library more "educated" by Aristotle's edict, or if I just took a perverse pleasure in its existence, I cannot truthfully tell you. Regardless, I posted a RESTRICTED sign over its aisle and used the leftover wood to fashion yet another façade.

\*\*\*

I have reconstructed four drastically different masks for you, and in doing so, have removed each. However, I still do not bear the face I was born with. Like a set of Russian nesting dolls or a stack of sticky notes or the heads of a hydra, I remove masks only to reveal more. These masks and these stories are mine, but they are really about you, about all of us. After all, a masquerade isn't just a single person, but many. Every day is a new dance and every dance demands a different mask. We all know the socially acceptable steps and interact with each other only on this surface level, safe behind the faces we fashion over our true countenances. We see a perfectly choreographed performance, not people. We see a mask, not a man. In the masquerade of life, we dance, we disguise, we die. When do we live?

## AMY RICHARDSON | GOING HAM

After a considerable length of time, I woke up. A large glass canopy hung looming above me and I was unsure of where I was or how I got there. It smelled faintly of flakey, buttery pastries and I went to sit up, hoping I could get one of those delicacies in my stomach shortly.

Unfortunately, I realized that I no longer had legs. Or arms. Or a torso. Or even a head. Odd, I thought. How was I seeing this strange place around me? If anything, it seemed as though my vision was expanding at a rapid pace. I could see a fluorescent light hanging above the glass on the ceiling. It was not turned on currently. Neither was I, to be quite honest. I sensed a presence, or many presences at that, very nearby. I felt like a crowd had gathered around me. I averted my gaze from above and looked around.

I surveyed my neighbors and wondered if they might give me some peace of mind. There were three fine looking croissants leaned up against one another next to me. That's where the buttery smell was coming from. They were delicate and I knew that one must handle them with great care as to not harm their fragile exteriors. A true gift to the baked goods world.

On the other side of me were a number of small tins full of quiche. They sat in a row and I felt as though they were stewing with silent judgment at the sight of me. There was something in the way their aluminum tins dimly glowed in the darkness, like they knew they were better than me. I truly begged to differ. I had to stop myself from getting heated at the thought of those no good, spoiled--excuse me. Pans of quiche.

I looked back up at the glass canopy and realized exactly where I was. I was in a bakery. The bakery a few blocks away from my former place of work. (I presumed former, considering I was no longer a sentient human being anymore.) It was named Lavender's, presumably because the owner's name was Lavender Jones. I had met her on a couple of occasions. She was a polite, homely woman, and I had been nothing but courteous to her. Perhaps she was some sort of a vexing witch, casting spells on unknowing men like myself.

I wondered now if I was some sort of ghost or spirit or something of the like, which would explain my lack of body or ability to move. Yet, I felt as though there was some material attached to my spirit. It was impossible for me to look down at myself for some reason, but there was a void in my vision that would account for some material aspect.

I figured I would have to wait and find out what exactly had happened to me and whether or not I would be able to worm my way out of this conundrum. I still felt the cold gaze of the quiche on me and knew without a doubt they were staring at me. I wasn't just some ghost. Damnable quiche.

There was the sound of a twisting knob and Lavender Jones pushed her way through the front door. She looked tired, her eyes a bit vacant, as she walked toward the display case. The clock that hung

above the door said 5:30, and I wondered why I was awake at all. I never woke before 6:45.

As she rounded the case, she swung her large green purse onto the counter attached to the rear of the bakery. The wall was the divider between the front café area and the bakery area where all the baking occurred. She flipped the switch on the wall and the fluorescent light above us hummed on. She went to start her coffee maker, but stopped, looking in the display case. I couldn't tell if she was just surveying her goods or distracted by something, but suddenly her eyes fell on me.

Her eyebrows creased and she slid the back of the case open. Her hand reached in and I felt a pressure on my... body? She picked me up and I suddenly got a taste of what was going on in this demented house of baked delights.

To the left of her was a mirror and as she held me up, examining me, I finally got a glimpse of what I had become.

If I had been human a shudder of epic proportions would have no doubt rose and cascaded through my bones twitching between all of the sinews and muscles that formed my desolate body, but this was not the case. I had no bones. Only two buns, four slices of ham, a piece of Swiss cheese with four asymmetrical holes, and a fine layer of mayonnaise scraped on one side of my buns.

I was a ham sandwich.

Lavender smiled down at me, her eyes grazing over my top bun, and she lowered me back into the display case. Was that a smile of acknowledgment? Did she know it was me? Was she intending to sell me to some hungry customer? Was this all some kind of sick scheme of hers? Was she demanding a ransom from my former place of business?

My bun felt cold against the wax paper beneath me and I was thrust into a great sphere of fear. Was I here as penance for my sins? Was this some sort of sick limbo that would only end after some unsuspecting soul would devour my poor ham sandwich form? I felt that if I had eyes, I would weep. Or at least try to. Emotion seemed to be building up somewhere, but how could I release it? Into the slices of ham? Into the vacancies within my bun? I was at a loss.

I had no choice but to wait for what was to come.

The first few hours passed swiftly. At 8 o'clock a.m., Lavender turned the open sign over and turned on the exterior lights. The curtains attached to the door's window were opened and light shone in, revealing the slick, polished look of the black and white checkerboard floors.

She swept for what seemed like hours (30 minutes), and a customer finally came in. After that, there was a steady stream of croissant eaters, coffee drinkers, and a couple of people devouring the large chocolate muffins I had come in to get before. They looked delectable, sitting up on the pedestal in the corner of the case. After awhile, they felt like some noble gods watching down over us lowly food items, and I felt as though a powerful faith was growing within my hamy body. By 10 o'clock a.m., all of the gods had left us and there was an emptiness, a vacant feeling of hopelessness that filled my soft buns. We were almost to the lunch hour.

I directed my gaze to the current café goers. There was a man and a woman drinking coffee together and a younger, perhaps college-aged girl sitting alone on her laptop. Her coat was ugly and dated. She was probably the artsy type. Despicable.

Across from the college girl, a redhaired woman ate a tin of quiche. She had plugs in her ears and tattoos on her arms. She was stunning, and if I had had been a human being, I would've commented on that fact. Some women just silently scream to be noticed. Whether they are on the street or in a destitute coffee shop. She was at a table near the door, looking at her phone every couple of minutes, when a busty, petite, yet wide brunette woman came busting through the front door. She had a green denim vest over a black t-shirt that read "Here, Queer, and filling you with Fear," laid out one word above the other. I tried to scowl, or maybe crease my ham slices. It was hard for me to take women like that seriously, so ungraceful and overt about their politics. What a waste of time. What a waste of a woman. Really more of a caricature than a real person.

She hiked up to the counter and gazed down at the goods. I thought about how it might be wise for her to just get a side salad or something. Suddenly, she smiled. And I knew her eyes were on me. Lavender came and greeted her.

"Would you like anything today?" Lavender asked, gently retying the knot of her apron.

The woman pursed her lips, but stepped back.

"I think I'll wait," she said. She turned back and headed over to the table with the redhead.

Lavender started restocking the case and I watched as more lunch items joined me. Hopefully they would be seen as more appetizing. Perhaps I would survive through the lunch hour.

A roast beef flatbread sat next to me, brooding in its intensity. It had a robust smelling mustard on it, which nearly overwhelmed me, but I remained vigilant. Or, well, I had to remain vigilant. I didn't have much of a choice. I decided that waiting for my impending doom was not my best course of action so I decided on focusing my attention on some way of changing back into a human.

I was not a fanatical reader of the occult, or a devoutly religious man, so I did not know where to start, but I did remember how an ex-girlfriend of mine liked to watch *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. I scoured my brain for some sort of answer to my problem. I recall a woman being turned into a pineapple, but I do not recall how she was freed, or if she was. I suddenly now yearned to be turned into something less glorious, like an overly ripe tuna casserole of some sort, but I stopped. Focus.

I thought about the logic behind me being turned into a ham sandwich, thought of possible tracks I could lead myself down to return to my human form. Ham was made of pigs. Perhaps I could revert into pig form and escape via the front or rear exits. Or be turned into a pile of yeast. Or moldy cheese. I doubted there would be a success in these thoughts, but I liked to think that there had to be some logic behind this scenario. That this was not some supernatural phenomenon. That there was some simple course that I had traveled down to get into this situation. Perhaps many humans, everyday, found themselves in positions like this, thrust into a digestive world.

I noticed that Lavender was setting something up on top of the display case. It looked like a little pedestal of some sort. She took out a box from below the counter. A box of fine china. She took one plate out and put it up on the pedestal. She was getting something ready. Something that struck fear into my buns.

I had been focusing on my buns a little too hard and didn't even notice Lavender looking down on me. There was this odd sort of look on her face, like an executioner, both violent but considerate in a way. She reached down and grasped me, lifting me up and out of the case.

She took me to the back counter and set me on a cutting board. I screamed, or at least tried to, but she didn't hear a single word. She turned around, searching for something, and I decided to make a run for it.

I began attempting to shift my weight, back and forth, back and forth, and suddenly felt my body twitch. I was making progress! I could get out of here! Back and forth, back and forth—another twitch! I felt ecstatic, until I realized Lavender was standing above me, looking down at me solemnly. Did she see my trying to make my escape? Was she onto me?

She placed a chef's knife next to me on the cutting board and I realized my progress was all for naught. This was the chopping block for my poor ham life. I was about to be put to death. Although I suppose I was already dead.

She cracked the knuckles, first on her right hand, then on her left, and picked up the chef's knife. This was it. She angled the blade down over my center. Goodbye cruel world!

And it was over. She made a cut down the center, through all of my layers, and I thought I was about to faint for a moment, but I thought better of it. And I realized I no longer had any blood that might cause a rush of blood that could cause me to faint. Best to look on the bright side sometimes.

She pushed my two sides back together and took a roll of plastic wrap off of the shelf in front of her. She ripped a sheet off and placed it above me. As she began wrapping me, I knew that I was the one going to be sat on the pedestal! She had to know it was me! How cruel can one woman be?

After I was firmly wrapped, she picked me up and sat me on top of the display case. This was it. I would undoubtedly be eaten. She also placed a cupcake in a plastic container and a bag of potato chips next to me. The silence between the three of us seemed to allow us to all acknowledge our hopelessly precarious position. The cupcake's frosting was dripping off on one side, like it was silently weeping. If I could have joined it in despair, I would certainly have done so.

I looked at the clock above the door and knew the end was in sight. 11:05. This was it.

The cupcake and I bonded fairly quickly, and I knew that we would most likely go out together. I sensed its distaste at being put on a pedestal, like an object, and I agreed. This was no place for a man like me. I didn't deserve to be some random, faceless ham sandwich. I had hopes! And dreams! And yet my only function now was to be devoured. And I had no doubt that that would occur shortly.

A couple of loud women entered and came up to the counter. One chose a tin of quiche. She had a wide gap between her front teeth and I wondered if spinach would be caught in that chasm. The other

chose the roast beef flat bread. I felt bad for the man who would have to kiss someone with rank mustard breath. The two paid and sat down.

A trio of businessmen entered and bought assorted sandwiches. They were a loud bunch, but obviously out to have a good time. I watched as crumbs fell on their ties and they spoke jovially between bites. I was quietly thankful, though, that none of them chose to eat me.

Other groups filtered in and bought their lunches, but somehow I managed not to be chosen. Every time. Multiple cupcakes and bags of chips were swiped off the pedestal and paid for, but I was always left abandoned, vulnerable in my position on the case. It was nearing 11:45. Perhaps I would be neglected and thrown out later. Perhaps I would not end up in someone's digestive track today!

Lavender was cutting another sandwich when I heard a tap on the glass behind me. I shifted my view to the front of the case. It was the wide, petite girl. She was smiling.

"I'll take the ham sandwich and a cupcake," she said. I could almost hear the drool pooling on her lips. Or perhaps that was my mayonnaise rubbing against my cheese in fear. I cannot be sure.

The rest was a blur. She paid. And I felt her grubby fingers wrap around me. She rejoined the beautiful redhead.

"That sandwich looks like it got left out overnight," the redhead said.

"Meh, there was only chicken salad sandwiches left and that wasn't jiving with my stomach, so hammy is my choice today."

"Just don't keep me up overnight when you start retching, alright?"

"Promise," the brunette smiled.

And bite after bite after bite after bite after bite, I was finally gone.

## ERIN FAIRLEYWINE | FROM THE PEW

The sanctuary was beautifully decorated for their wedding, and so was she. She was all done up, head-to-toe, her hair sprayed and pinned and all bouffant. She had used her favorite perfume and gotten her nails done, looking and smelling her finest for the big day. She was incredibly nervous—her stomach had been churning all morning long. She wasn't sure she was ready for this. Her heart pounded hard against her rib cage. Was he nervous, too? Did he have cold feet?

During the ceremony, she looked longingly at him. Never before had she been so sure that he was the one for her. He was the love of her life. She'd loved him since the moment her good friend had introduced the two of them at a party, and had been smitten ever since.

It was almost time to announce them as husband and wife. That meant the big moment, the kiss, was coming up. She readied her handkerchief, prepared for the tears to flow. She stared at him intently—this was it. If only the bride would move out of the way so she could have a better view of him from the pew.

# ANNA AUGER | MA VIE, IN FOUR QUARTERS

I.

Dull, long nights and  
slow sunrises.

We play polar bears in the snow.  
When we're too wet, we come in and it's  
Parcheesi and cocoa,  
singing carols,  
shivering by the woodfire.

Under four blankets, I dream of green things.  
The lazy light shimmers on frozen fields—  
No corn covering the earth.

Wake up, homework, housework, sleep.  
Wake up.

Scented air as Mom bakes cookies and bread.  
Soup's on the stove.  
She was sick, not long ago.  
But no memory of the dark days,  
because every one's the same.

Books on tape. *The Secret Garden*.  
British accents.  
Old home videos of the wedding, first years.  
Aunt Jodie kisses Dad—  
Who was that woman?  
I'm in a cradle on the kitchen table next to the turkey for Thanksgiving.

I dream of more snow—we never have enough.  
Even in winter, the farmers talk of drought.  
Needlework, reading, firelight:

Not bad, this life.

II.

I love this.

I'm waking up.

My body feels alive, finally.

We swing on the playset  
singing "Amazing Grace,"  
tempo set to the rhythm of our legs  
as they push us forward:

    throw out, pull back,

    throw . . . pull . . .

    out . . . back . . .

Jump, thud, feet-on-ground:

How sweet the sound.

Our neighbor girl swears at her mom  
on the sandbox floor of our restaurant.  
When she leaves, we build bridges  
and talk about eternity.

I like to look at the animals in the zoo.  
My life is a story; I am on display  
and watching them makes me feel better.  
How are you, Mr. Leopard?  
You pace a lot today.  
I pace, too—in my mind.

Rummage saleing—always made me think of ships.  
Do you own a daycare? The lady asks.

    No.

We just have a lot of kids.

I am the oldest.  
I am responsible for all ten.  
I carry the youngest and scold the fighters.

But really, we're all just playing make-believe.

III.

I believe in the sun:  
hot wind, hot stillness,  
hot, stiff, sweaty jeans,  
a clock too sweaty to tick.

But it's strawberry season—

plump, red, oozy-goozy  
warm with the light  
sweet with the straw.  
My knees itch from it  
as the basket weighs down my wrists  
and we sing "Go to sleep, you little baby."

Strawberry fights,  
waterbottle fights—  
giggling girls.  
We lie on our backs on the hard concrete,  
maddened by heat and exhaustion and humidity:  
I tickle her feet and her screams are  
chasing little Tori around the barn.  
But she slips from my fingers.  
Our hearts touch, bounce, slip away.  
I missed.

I look to hide.  
Horses try to make up for the pain.  
I muck, I ride—

I accomplish little; I'm more work than I am gain.  
But I love it.

The horses listen.

IV.

Relief.

Coolness: dry, cutting wind.  
The leaves turn and fall  
as the trees blanket themselves—  
insurance against the coming cold.

Canning the tomatoes,  
freezing the apples,  
picking all the peppers,  
making our shelves look like leaves.

I have homework—  
Not chains, but a purpose,  
I'm learning.

Starting over,  
new friends, new school, new life.  
I find confidence, a little bit.  
She's platinum blonde, and she makes me feel needed  
while I miss my old friends.  
But they're still with me, in a way.  
When I see them, it's like they never left.  
As the baby tugs my hair,  
they tug my heart.  
—It hurts.

Still, I can't say goodbye.

Just—see you soon.  
My heart holds too tightly.

This is the promise:  
We'll do it again.

But I can't let go, because this will shatter if I do.

## ZARUHI CODR | WEDDING CAKE

Karen looked at her wedding cake, and she hated it.

She was getting married the next morning, but she had made so many compromises during the past six months of wedding preparations that she no longer thought of it as the day of her wedding; she rather thought of it as a big fat party of making everyone else happy. Within the last six months, many things had gone wrong, and she had to settle for the wrong decorations, the wrong dress. She had settled for it all, and convinced herself that she could go through with it. But then, she saw the cake.

The theme of the wedding was “Indian summer,” and Karen had wanted a red velvet cake to match it. The cake was suggested by Lilla, her wedding planner, and she had instantly agreed. Three story with cream-colored frosting, covered with fall leaves and mini caramel pumpkins. They were going to order it from “Le Cupcake,” the best cake shop in town. Their pastry was made from scratch, Lilla had said--just the right amount of sweet and the right amount of soft. Their cakes were tender and moist, and they would melt in your mouth. These details had made Karen’s skin crawl with pleasure.

But there it was--her wedding cake, and there was nothing tender or velvet about it. It was a chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. The bottom of every story was wrapped with a cream-colored ribbon, and there were mini caramel candles and pumpkins on the top. Karen couldn’t help but notice how it did not match the theme of the wedding. But then again, nothing matched anything anymore, so she wasn’t sure if she needed to be upset.

Then, she thought of everything else that had gone wrong.

Karen was the very opposite of what one would call a Bridezilla. She did not panic when things started going wrong, nor did she cry when two months into the wedding she noticed it was being taken away from her by everyone else. She was too shy to say anything.

First, it was the theme of the wedding. Karen loved the spirit of the fall season. She had dreamed of a fall wedding for as long as she could remember. Red, magenta and yellow leaves would cover the yellowing grass in their backyard where the wedding ceremony would take place. Lilla had said it would be possible to bring a few truckloads of bright colored leaves and spread them across the yard to give it the “Indian summer” look. Waste of money, Mark, her fiancé had said. And besides, that just sounds funny. There are plenty of trees in our backyard to get leaves from. In this way, she had settled for what fall colors the trees in their backyard offered. The problem was it offered a horrible combination of white-pinkish Saucer magnolias and Japanese maples with bright red berries and green leaves. She thought it was terribly tasteless, but she settled for it. Now, a day before her wedding all she had was yellowing grass with occasional patches of pink and red.

Then, there was the altar. Lilla had come up with decoration ideas for the outdoor wedding altar and the guest seats. There were to be rustic yet glamorous combinations of painted pumpkins, gourds and candles. The candles would be scented – cinnamon and apple pie. In this way, as she walked down

the altar, the guests would see and scent the fall. There would be silk curtains around the altar - red and orange. The soft afternoon sunlight would hit them, reflect through and shed a beautiful red light on the bride and the groom as they read their vows. But the backyard faced north, so there was really no way to position those silk curtains at a right place. Also, after experimenting with cinnamon-scented candles, it turned out the area was too big, and the smell wouldn't stick around. As Karen walked around sad and confused, trying to think of what to do, Mark gave her a loving hug and said, "You and your silly ideas." She decided not to make a big deal out of it and settled for no cinnamon scent and no red sunlight.

Then, there was the dress. She wanted multi-layered tulle with an empire waistline, and the corset was to be decorated with a combination of cream-colored patterns.

But it broke her grandma's heart. She believed rather strongly white was the color of purity, and Karen was ruining it. She didn't make much of that remark at first, but then grandma cried, looked at her with disapproval a little every day, and before she knew it, she had ordered the same dress in white instead of cream. White killed the patterns that were so clearly outlined on cream. It looked like any other wedding dress, but she settled for it.

And now, there was the cake.

What she hated the most about this non-velvet cake was how it just stood there--ignorant of all her disappointments within those past six months. It just stood there - so audaciously chocolate!

She and Lilla had tasted the cake a month ago, and it was velvet - just as she wanted it. She wondered what the hell happened.

She could feel her ears warm up with rage, and tears started forming in her eyes. No longer able to contain her emotions, Karen ran out through the door that connected the kitchen to the backyard. She collapsed on the patchy yellow lawn, and for the hundredth time she noticed how miserable it looked. It was dark outside, and she couldn't see much, but whatever she did see, she didn't like, and she broke down. Karen was not sobbing or weeping, she was crying violently and wholeheartedly. Those were tears of liberation and self-realization, and she did not want to stop.

Suddenly, she raised her head. With her eyes still red from crying and her sudden smile, she looked like she had just gotten bit by a vampire. With small and quick steps, she walked into the kitchen, carefully picked up the black scalloped cake stand with the wedding cake on it and walked back to the yard. The cake was mocking her, and she wasn't going to put up with it. Karen ran back inside and came out with a baseball bat.

She bashed her wedding cake like a piñata, and it felt like the last six months of her life had never happened. That cake stood for all she had settled for - that miserable wedding ceremony that had nothing to do with an Indian summer, that bright white dress, that tasteless altar. And last but not least, the groom.

For everything it stands for, Karen whispered hysterically, and collapsed on the lawn. It stood for the groom more than for anything else. She closed her eyes and for a brief moment she reminisced about all their relationship had been - high school love, passion, adventure; kissing in the school bathrooms and

sneaking into each other's houses at night. Later, being labeled as the same person, "Mark and Karen are coming over," they had said, "Mark and Karen" was her new name. Then, their relationship entered the boring phase of "doing things right" and pleasing others, which led to him proposing and her agreeing to marry him.

With the destroyed wedding cake in front of her, she felt she was ready to admit she loved him a little less with every passing day. She was ready to admit their relationship was an ever-tightening rope around her neck. She realized the flying pieces of the cake symbolized the fear she had that she could never do better than him, the fear that made her settle for him. She felt she could not and would not go through with this ceremony. She had settled for many things, and could settle for a lot more, but marrying the wrong guy was too much. The wrong guy, she said out loud, and it put a sad smile on her face. The wrong guy, she repeated, just like the wrong cake.

She poked the cake with her index finger and licked it. The cake was all it was said to be –tender and moist, and she felt it melt in her mouth. Except it wasn't red velvet, it was chocolate. She felt, for the first time in six months, she had every right to have her cake as velvet as she pleased.

Tomorrow it would all be over. She would watch the guests drive away, sad and disappointed. Some of them would scorn her, others would laugh at her, but it would all be worth it. She felt that she was ready to stop pleasing them.

## MONTE D. MONTELEAGRE | CROSSROADS

Nobody  
asks the Devil  
if he wants to jam.

They approach his crossroads  
with their guitars, fiddles, and banjos  
and the only four chords anyone bothers to learn

and the Devil waits  
chained to the corner of  
Cheap and Fame  
while the bodies pile up  
down the only four roads  
he sees anymore.

Each man, woman, and child  
asks how many notes  
the Devil pays for a soul  
and he smiles while he hisses  
“Every one between the frets.”

But none of the customers look to jam.  
Even as they sign away their soul,  
they'd rather rot in hell than make art with the Devil.

They'd rather the Devil cradle their guitar,  
or fiddle,  
or banjo,  
and make it sing  
until they know how.

After the Devil fills the instrument's body  
with his own song  
nobody thinks to ask  
about the years he has played  
chained to the signpost at the corner of  
Eternal and Damnation  
decades of patient practice  
to hand out to every petty beggar  
and rotten star who crosses his path

Nobody wonders about the Devil's calloused hands  
when he hands back their Guitar,  
or Fiddle,  
or Banjo,  
but if they bothered to look,  
or cared what the price of their soul was,  
they would see  
the Devil's slick sweat soaking into the strings  
his blood seeping into the fingerboard  
and his tears shining on the body.

Musician's call the practice space the Hot House  
and nowhere burns hotter than the corner of  
Lonely and Feared  
at sunset.

Next to the Devil  
sits a pile of unopened records  
and with every new soul  
the Devil puts a new record on his pile.

He can never bring himself to listen to the albums.  
He knows what they all sound like.

No matter how many eons  
the Devil pours into his misguided flock  
and no matter how many records he collects  
nobody considers joining his band.

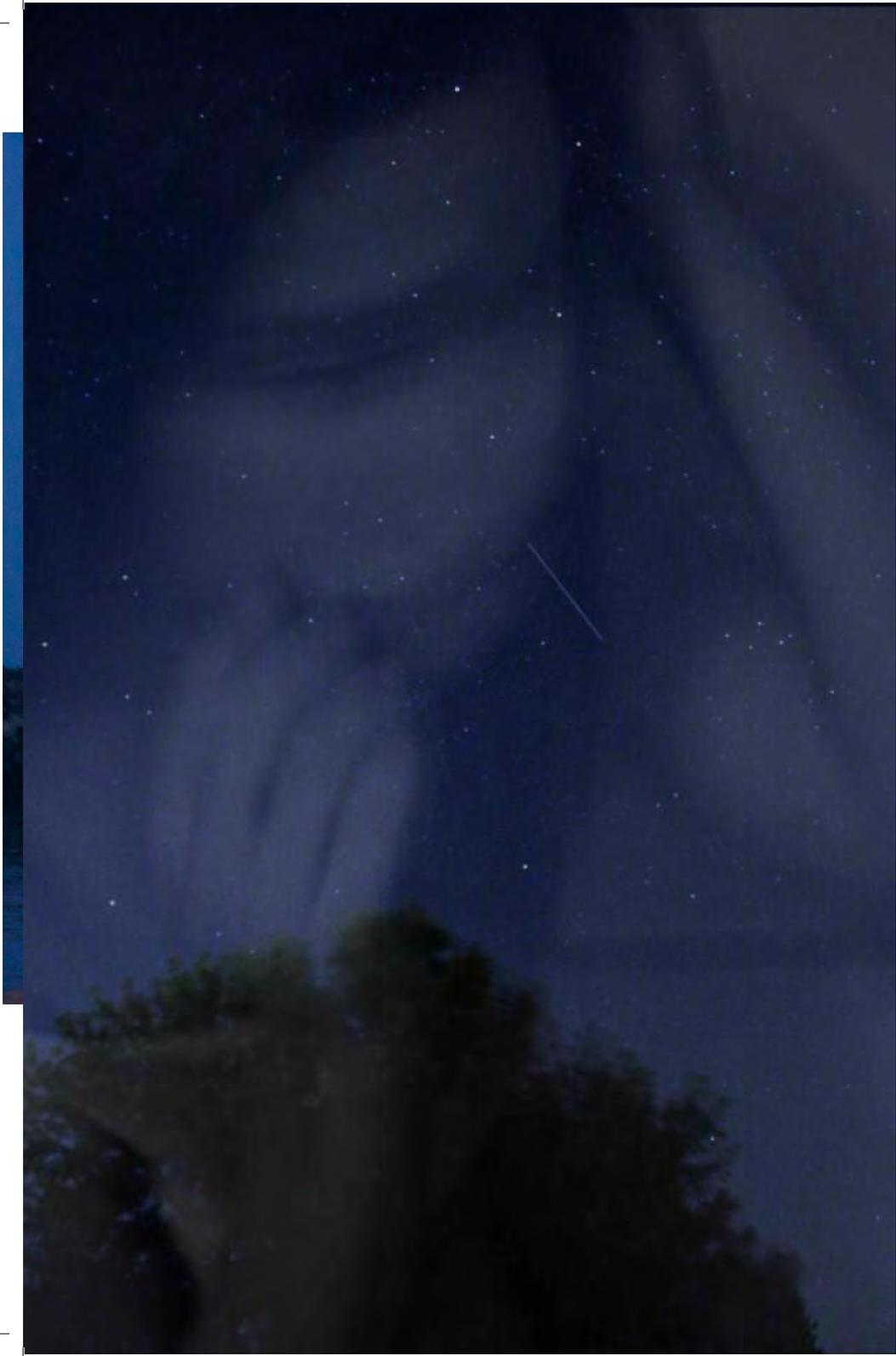
Some don't come to sell their soul  
some come to battle the Devil one-on-one  
but nobody asks the Devil if he wants to jam.

They approach his crossroads  
with their guitars, fiddles, and banjos  
and only enough chords to satisfy themselves.

Among the talented  
there are the lucky,  
and the damned  
and those who pour everything  
into a talent for petty beggars  
rotten stars  
and the Devil himself.



JENNIFER HEYWOOD | HARBOR



**TARAH DAWDY |**  
SELF PORTRAIT  
AS THE SKY



MIKAYLA TREMAIN | BONJOUR



**MIKAYLA TREMAIN | FRECKLES**



JENNIFER HEYWOOD | TARTU



JENNIFER HEYWOOD | PRINT



## JENNIFER HEYWOOD | THE CAVE



JENNIFER HEYWOOD | CANES



SHELBY SVEHLA | NEBRASKA... THE RIGHT DIRECTION



SHELBY SVEHLA | ST. BENEDICT RD



JENNIFER HEYWOOD | AUSTRIA



SHELBY SVEHLA | FIELDS OF GOLD



## JENNIFER HEYWOOD | CANDLES



AMY RICHARDSON  
| LIT

TARAH DAWDY |  
LUNA





JENNIFER HEYWOOD | HOME

PAIGE VANCLEVE |  
THE GUY





TARAH DAWDY | GOLDEN HOUR



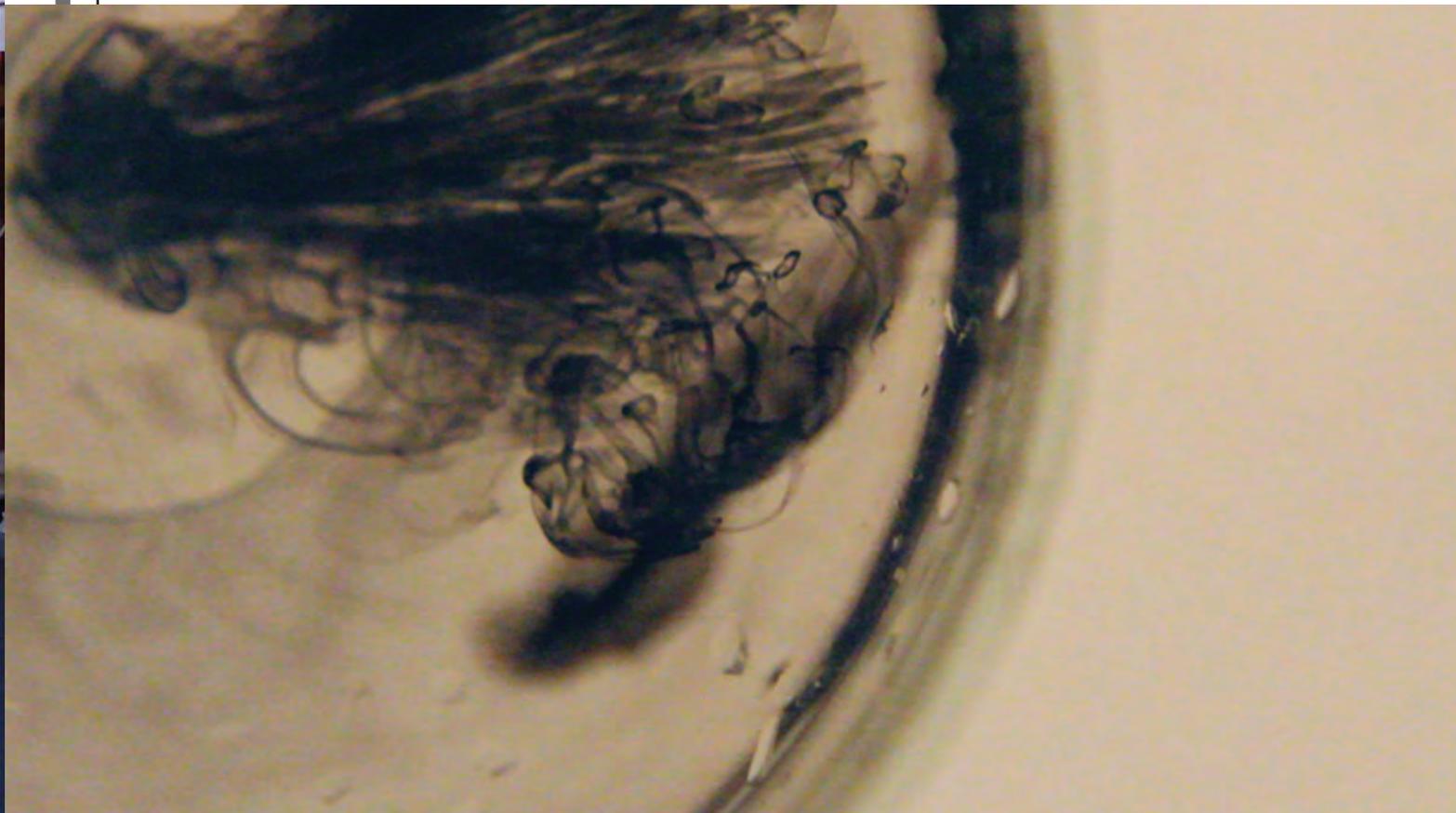
JENNIFER HEYWOOD | FLAMES



JENNIFER HEYWOOD | GOLD

MADISON HOSTETLER |  
LIONESS





AMY RICHARDSON | SHIFT



JENNIFER HEYWOOD | MIDSUMMER



**BRIANNA ESLICK | SUNSET**

# KASEY BULLER | THE NEED FOR TIME

## Synopsis

Mary is in her third year of teaching. It hasn't been an easy year, both personally and professionally. She tries to convince herself and others that time is all she needs.

## Characters

Mary Sanders—twenty five year old, third grade teacher, average looking

Cindy Lucas—third grade teacher, taught for at least ten years

Ms. Lehrman—Bobby's mother, convinced her son has a learning disability

Bill—custodian at elementary school, 50 to 60 years old (could be doubled with Mr. Davenport)

Mr. Davenport—principal at elementary school, was a teacher before becoming a principal (could be doubled with Bill)

Angela—third grade student (all students can be read by the same person)

Matthew—third grade student (all students can be read by the same person)

Bobby—third grade student (all students can be read by the same person)

*Mary Sanders, twenty five years old, average, stands in front of her class. It's the end of the day. Mary looks beat and ready to go home.*

MARY: Okay, class. You have the next five minutes to finish up any work that didn't get done during the day. Like the math assignment or your essay about your favorite animal.

*Some students begin working on things. Others choose to talk or not work.*

MARY: Angela and Matthew? Did you finish your math assignment?

ANGELA: No, Ms. Sanders.

MARY: Don't you think now would be a great time to finish it?

ANGELA: Can't I take it home?

MARY: You could, but you have five minutes to finish it now. Then you wouldn't have any homework.

ANGELA: Okay, Ms. Sanders. *(Angela gets out her math and begins to work)*

MARY: Matthew, what about you?

MATTHEW: I finished my math and my essay.

MARY: Really? Well, then turn both assignments into the math and writing trays in the back of the room, and get out a book to read.

MATTHEW: Wait! I just remembered I didn't finish the math.

MARY: Well, it's a good thing I said something.

MATTHEW: Yeah. *(Matthew gets out his math and begins to work)*

*Most of the class has begun working on something, and the noise level has decreased. Mary notices Bobby not doing anything.*

MARY: Bobby? Did you finish all of your work?

BOBBY: No, Ms. Sanders.

MARY: Well, don't you think it would be a good idea to start?

BOBBY: Yes.

*Bobby continues to sit there doing nothing. He looks frustrated.*

MARY: What are you going to work on?

BOBBY: Math, I guess. It's just that I don't get it.

MARY: Oh. Well, get out your math assignment and let me help you.

*Bobby gets out his math assignment. Mary goes to his desk.*

MARY: Okay, Bobby. Write the first problem down on your scratch paper.

*Bobby begins to write the numbers down.*

BOBBY: Like this, Ms. Sanders?

MARY: Close. Remember we need to line up the numbers so the ones are in the same column and then tens are in the same column.

BOBBY: Why?

MARY: Because when we subtract numbers, we need to subtract the ones first and then the tens. If our numbers are lined up then we know what to subtract first. It's like when we learned how to add, remember?

BOBBY: Oh, yeah! *(erases and writes again)* Like this?

MARY: Exactly! Now, let's subtract the ones column.

ANGELA: Excuse me, Ms. Sanders. But it's 3:05. It's time to line up.

MARY: Oh, goodness. You're right. Time just flew by. It's a good thing you were watching the clock.

Okay, class. Pack up your things and line up at the door. If you didn't finish your math, it's homework for tonight.

BOBBY: But Ms. Sanders. I don't know how to do the homework.

*Mary knows he should stay a few more minutes, but she really wants to leave. She checks the time.*

MARY: Well, Bobby. Why don't you stay a few more minutes and we can work on the math a little longer.

BOBBY: Can't I just skip the homework tonight and try again tomorrow?

MARY: I'm afraid not. It's okay. It won't take us long.

BOBBY: But Ms. Sanders. I have baseball tonight. I can't be late.

MARY: Bobby, it's okay. You won't miss the bus, I promise.

*Mary moves to the door of the room.*

MARY: All right students. Remember to study for your spelling test tomorrow. And don't run to the bus!  
*Students exit the classroom.*

BOBBY: Ms. Sanders?

MARY: Yes, Bobby?

BOBBY: I think I got it. Now can I go?

MARY: Let me check it.

*Mary walks to his desk and looks at the problem.*

MARY: Hmm. Oh, I see what happened. Let's look at the ones column again. In the ones column we have 5 minus 9. You switched it around.

BOBBY: But you can't take nine away from five.

MARY: I know. So what do you do?

BOBBY: I forgot.

MARY: *(pause)* Okay. Let's look at the example at the top of the page. Does that refresh your memory?

*She points to the top of the page. Her hand is shaking.*

BOBBY: Why is your hand shaking? Did you have too much coffee again?

*Pulls back her hand, embarrassed.*

MARY: That must be it. Don't worry. It's nothing serious. Now, back to the problem. Does the example help you?

BOBBY: Kind of. Ms. Sanders?

MARY: Yes, Bobby.

BOBBY: I'm late for the bus.

*Mary goes to the window and looks.*

MARY: The bus is still there. We got time. So, what does the example show you?

BOBBY: I need to change the number in the tens column. Then change the number in the ones column. But why?

MARY: We're borrowing from the tens column. We don't have enough in the ones column, so we borrow. We borrow one ten from the tens column and add it to the one's column.

BOBBY: But we can't have more than nine in the ones column.

MARY: This is one time where it's okay.

*Bobby looks confused, but begins changing the numbers on his paper.*

BOBBY: Are you sure about this?

MARY: Yes. Now let me look at what you have.

*She looks at his paper.*

MARY: Good. Now, let's subtract 15 and nine.

*Bobby slowly subtracts numbers. It's almost painful for Mary to watch.*

BOBBY: Six?

MARY: Yes! Now the tens column. Eight minus four is?

BOBBY: Four?

MARY: Yes. So our answer is?

BOBBY: Forty six?

MARY: Exactly! Now, do you think you can try five problems at home tonight?

BOBBY: I'll try.

MARY: Good. Now, hurry up and catch that bus.

*Bobby gets up and looks out the window.*

BOBBY: Ms. Sanders?

MARY: Yes, Bobby.

BOBBY: I can't.

MARY: You can't?

BOBBY: I can't. The bus left.

*Mary rushes to the window.*

MARY: So it did. Sorry about that, Bobby. I thought we could get one problem done before you left. I'll call your mom. In the meantime, you could study your spelling words. We have that test tomorrow.

*Mary begins to look up the number and dial. Bobby sits at his desk and does nothing.*

MARY: Hello, Mrs. Lehrman? This is Ms. Sanders. Hi. I was helping Bobby with this math assignment and we lost track of time. He missed the bus. Are you able to pick him up? (*picks up coffee mug and shakes it, it's empty*) I'm sorry, Mrs. Lehrman. I just wanted to make sure he knew how to do the homework before he left. Again, I'm sorry for the inconvenience. You are? Be here in fifteen minutes? Thanks. I'm sorry about this. Okay. See you in fifteen minutes. (*hangs up*) Ok, let's see that spelling list.

BOBBY: I don't have one.

MARY: You don't? Why not?

BOBBY: You didn't give me one. Remember? I was gone Monday.

MARY: Oh, well let's find you a copy. I think I have an extra one on the back counter. Why don't you look for one? I need to step out for a second.

*Grabs her mug and purse.*

BOBBY: More coffee?

MARY: Bobby. I'm a grown up. I can take care of myself. Now, look for that spelling list.

*Bobby goes to the back of the room to look for the spelling list while Mary takes her purse and mug out of the room. There is an aquarium tank with a turtle inside in the back of the room. Bobby approaches the tank.*

BOBBY: Hello, Speedo. Are you hungry? You look hungry. Did Ms. Sanders forget to feed you again? She's forgetful sometimes. How about some nice turtle food? Would you like that?

*Bobby tries to take the top off the turtle tank. It's too bulky for him to lift. It slips out of his hands and crashes to the ground. Mrs. Lucas hears the crash and comes into the room.*

LUCAS: Bobby! What happened? And why are you still at school? And are you okay?

BOBBY: (*near tears*) I was...Ms. Sanders...the turtle was...I thought...(*crying*) It was an accident!

LUCAS: (*rushes to Bobby*) It's okay, Bobby. I'm sure it was an accident. Come over here, and sit down. (*guides him to a chair, kneels beside him*). Take a breath, and start from the beginning.

BOBBY: (*still upset*) I was working on math and Ms. Sanders said I needed to stay after and then she left to get more coffee and I thought Speedo was hungry so I went to feed him and then the lid fell out of my hands. (*crying*)

LUCAS: Okay, Bobby. It was an accident. Are you hurt?

*Bobby shakes his head no, and Mrs. Lucas examines his hands and feet.*

LUCAS: Stay here, and let me look at the lid. (*goes to lid*) It looks like the bulb broke, but the lid is fine. I'm going to call for a custodian, just stay where you are. I'm sure Ms. Sanders will understand. (*goes to the phone to call office for custodian*) Nancy? This is Cindy. I'm in Mary's room and we have some broken glass that needs to be picked up. Can you radio Bill? Thanks. Oh, the lid to her aquarium fell and the bulb broke. Uh huh. Thanks again. Have a good night. (*hangs up*)

*Mrs. Lucas walks over to Bobby.*

LUCAS: So what type of math are you working on?

BOBBY: Subtraction. It's really hard.

LUCAS: Let me see your paper. (*Bobby hands her his paper*) Ooooh. Yeah, this can be tricky at first. I'm sure you'll do just fine. What did you say Ms. Sanders was doing?

BOBBY: Getting coffee.

LUCAS: Let me see if I can help you with the math.

BOBBY: But Ms. Sanders told me to work on spelling.

LUCAS: Okay. Let's look at that spelling list.

BOBBY: I don't have one.

LUCAS: Isn't your test tomorrow?

BOBBY: Yeah, but I was gone on Monday.

LUCAS: Does Ms. Sanders have extra?

BOBBY: Yeah, there in the back of the room.

*Lucas gives him a look. Bobby gets the hint and goes to the back of the room to get a list. He finds it and returns to his seat.*

LUCAS: How would you like to practice your spelling words?

BOBBY: I think I'll write them four times each.

LUCAS: I think that's a great way to study.

*Bobby starts working.*

LUCAS: Bobby? Does Ms. Sanders leave the room a lot during the day?

BOBBY: Well... (*unsure how to answer*)

LUCAS: It's okay, Bobby. She won't get in trouble. I'm just curious. Would you say she leaves the room once a day? Five times a day? Or maybe twenty times a day?

BOBBY: Twenty?! That's way too many times. No, maybe three?

LUCAS: What does Ms. Sand---

*Enter Mary with coffee cup and purse, confused.*

MARY: Well, hi Mrs. Lucas. What's going on?

LUCAS: Well, we had a little accident. Bobby was trying to be helpful and feed Speedo, but the lid fell out of his hands. Bill should be on his way to help clean up.

MARY: Oh. Why were you by the aquarium, Bobby?

BOBBY: I thought Speedo was hungry. I was trying to help.

MARY: Were you trying to help, or trying to get out of studying for your spelling test?

BOBBY: Help, honest!

MARY: You know, Bobby. This is the second time today you tried to get out of doing your work. Please go get your spelling list and start working.

BOBBY: But I wasn't trying to get out of work, I was—

MARY: No more excuses, Bobby. Please, just get a spelling list from the back the room like I asked you to do the first time.

BOBBY: I got my spelling list already.

MARY: You did? *(Bobby holds up his list)* Good. How are you studying your words?

BOBBY: *(with attitude)* I'm writing them four times each!

MARY: Excuse me? Can you say that again without the attitude?

BOBBY: I'm writing them four times each.

MARY: Thank you.

*Bobby continues to study his spelling list. Mary starts for her desk, drinks from her coffee cup. Mrs. Lucas follows her. They speak in hushed voices.*

LUCAS: Mary...

MARY: Yes?

LUCAS: *(unsure of how to approach this conversation)* How are you?

MARY: Fine?

LUCAS: Are you sure?

MARY: Yes, I'm sure.

LUCAS: It's just that you seem to be... distracted lately.

MARY: Oh. No, things are fine. Just trying to make it to Fall Break, you know? Ready for a break.

LUCAS: You and me both. Uh. I have to ask. Last week I ran into Olivia's parents. Her dad mentioned the parent-teacher conference you had last Thursday. Do you remember that?

MARY: Oh, yes. It was my last conference of the evening. I was so ready to be done!

LUCAS: Yeah. He had a lot of questions for me. Questions that should have been answered during the conference. He said that you would look into things, but he hasn't heard from you.

MARY: I completely forgot! Thanks for reminding me. I should do that now while I have a minute.

LUCAS: Okay. *(starts to leave, but knows she needs to continue this conversation)* He said something else. *(pause. Lucas moves closer to Mary and makes sure Bobby can't hear the next part)* He said something was odd about your speech.

MARY: My speech? What do you mean?

*Before Lucas can respond, enter Bill, the custodian. He's in his 50-60s.*

BILL: Excuse me, Ms. Sanders. What happened here? Did Speedo try to break free?

*Bobby smiles. Mrs. Lucas breaks away from Mary.*

MARY: Yeah, Speedo decided he wanted to be a tortoise, not a turtle. *(light laughter, pause)* Bobby, why don't you tell Mr. Bill what happened?

BOBBY: Okay. It was an accident. I thought Speedo was hungry, so I was going to feed him. I tried taking the lid off, but it fell. The light broke. I'm sorry.

BILL: Sometimes things go wrong even if you're trying to help. Let me take a look at it, see what I can do. *(Bill walks over to the lid, examines it).* Well, this isn't so bad, just a broken bulb. *(Bill picks up the lid, places it back on the aquarium, then sweeps up the broken glass)* Now all we need is a new bulb. Would you like to come with me, Bobby, to find one? We can stop by Mrs. Anderson's room and look at her fish. *This brightens Bobby's spirits.*

BOBBY: Sure! *(he's about to leave)*

BILL: You might want to ask your teacher first.

BOBBY: Can I, Ms. Sanders? Please?

MARY: Fine. Go. But be back in about five minutes. Your mom should be here by then.

BOBBY: Thanks! Hey, Mr. Bill! Did you know that fish can breathe underwater?

BILL: No. How do they do that?

BOBBY: They have these things called gills. *(Bobby continues to talk as he and Bill exit the room)*

MARY: Thanks for reminding me about my conversation with Olivia's dad. I'm going to e-mail him now. And thanks for coming in and checking on Bobby. I should have known better than to leave him alone. Like I said, I'm ready for Fall Break!

LUCAS: Yeah. Listen, I didn't want to say this in front of Bobby, but Olivia's dad said you sounded drunk.

MARY: Drunk?!

LUCAS: Were you?

MARY: I can't believe you're asking me that. Excuse me, Cindy. I have some work I would like to do before I leave today. Thanks again.

*Mary starts working at her desk. Mrs. Lucas won't let it go.*

LUCAS: I'm concerned about you, Mary.

*Mary stops.*

MARY: I assure you I'm fine.

LUCAS: You don't seem fine to me. You come in late, it doesn't look like you get any sleep. Yesterday, you were ten minutes late picking up your class from P.E. You've missed quite a few staff meetings. When you do show up, you forget your latest progress reports. Then there was that incident with--

MARY: I've only missed three meetings this year. And you can't tell me you were never late picking up your class from specials. I'm just going through something personal right now, that's all. I just need some time.

LUCAS: Have you considered taking some time off?

MARY: It's not that serious. I'll be okay.

LUCAS: Mary. I think it is serious. And I'm not the only one who thinks that.

MARY: Oh? Who have you been talking to, Cindy?

LUCAS: Mary, it doesn't matter who I've been talking to. The problem is that we've seen a change in your performance. We're concerned about you. What's going on?

MARY: Like I said, it's personal, okay? I just need some time to sort through some stuff. Cindy, please tell me who you've talked to. I think I have a right to know.

LUCAS: Mr. Davenport and the other members of our third grade team. And after what happened last week--

MARY: How many times do I have to apologize for that? I'm trying to move on, to continue to do my job. Parker was moved to another classroom and, from what I hear, doing a fantastic job with his new teacher.

LUCAS: It just seems like something's bothering you, and it's affecting your work. Please. Talk to me. I want to help.

MARY: There really is no way for you to help. It's just something I have to take care of on my own. I appreciate you asking.

*Lucas notices Mary's hand. It's missing an engagement ring.*

LUCAS: Did you lose your ring?

MARY: Yeah, yeah. Something like that.

LUCAS: Oh. Well maybe it's in the teacher's lounge.

MARY: No, it's—

LUCAS: Or the bathroom.

MARY: It's not there—

LUCAS: Have you asked Bill if he has seen it?

MARY: I'm sure Bill hasn't seen it.

LUCAS: Have you asked him?

MARY: No, I don't need to ask Bill if he's seen my ring.

LUCAS: It wouldn't hurt to ask.

MARY: Bill hasn't seen my ring because Sean took it back! Okay?

LUCAS: Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't know. When did this happen?

MARY: A few weeks ago.

LUCAS: Why? Did he say why? Was this something you both wanted?

MARY: No. Cindy, please. I really can't talk about this now. I have to meet with Bobby's mom, and I really can't think about this now. Please, stop asking questions.

LUCAS: Okay. Okay. I'll stop. Just know that you can talk to me. I'm sorry about Sean, Mary. I really am.

MARY: Thank you.

*Enter Bobby's mother, Mrs. Lehrman. She is in her mid-thirties, defensive.*

LEHRMAN: Ms. Sanders. I hope I'm not interrupting something. Where's Bobby?

LUCAS: Hello, Mrs. Lehrman. I'm Mrs. Lucas. Bobby went with Mr. Bill to feed the fish. Ms. Sanders? Why don't you get Bobby, and I'll stay here with Mrs. Lehrman.

LEHRMAN: It's Ms. Lehrman. And I would like to speak with Ms. Sanders first.

LUCAS: Okay. I'll go get him.

*Lucas leaves the room.*

MARY: Hello, Ms. Lehrman. Thank you for picking Bobby up today. How are you?

LEHRMAN: Well, Ms. Sanders. I'm not great. You see, Bobby has been coming home at night, telling me he doesn't understand the homework. So, every night I have to teach him what he should have learned in school. I'm very busy. Between going to work and taking Bobby to baseball, I don't have time to teach Bobby what he should already know how to do. How are you going to fix this?

MARY: I'm sorry, Ms. Lehrman. Because Bobby is new to the school, it's been a challenge to see what he has been taught.

LEHRMAN: Uh huh. I knew changing schools would be hard for Bobby. I just didn't think he would be this behind. Are your standards different than other schools in the district?

MARY: No. We have the same standards and curriculum as the other elementary schools in the district.

LEHRMAN: I see. Well, maybe Bobby should be tested for a learning disability. He seems to struggle in math the most. Maybe he has a disability.

MARY: (*doubtful*) That is an option. But let's try some other things first.

LEHRMAN: You don't think it could be a learning disability? What do you think it is then?

MARY: It's not for me to diagnose. He's only been in my classroom for a few weeks. I'm still getting to know him. Before we go to testing, I think we should try some other things first.

LEHRMAN: Like what?

MARY: Hm?

LEHRMAN: Like what? What things would you like to try before testing him?

MARY: (*Mary is caught off guard*) Well... We could... Let me talk to his former teacher and see what she has to say. Also, I can try different methods for teaching math.

LEHRMAN: And then we can test?

MARY: Yes. Then we can test.

LEHRMAN: Ms. Sanders? In your honest opinion, do you think Bobby will be tested into the special education program?

MARY: I'm really not qualified to answer that.

LEHRMAN: But if you had to make an educated guess?

MARY: Ms. Lehrman, I can't answer that.

LEHRMAN: Oh, forget politically correct! I need to know your honest opinion.

MARY: Okay. No. I don't think Bobby will qualify.

LEHRMAN: Why? What is it then? Why does he struggle so much in math? He's had this problem since the beginning of second grade.

MARY: Well, what I observe Bobby doing during math is not looking at the board, playing with things in his desk, and leaving the classroom several times to get a drink or go to the bathroom.

LEHRMAN: So he's lazy.

MARY: I didn't say that.

LEHRMAN: But you implied it. You think Bobby is just lazy. Why didn't you tell me about this earlier? I could have talked with him at home.

MARY: I guess I wanted to see if I could fix it first, before it became a problem.

LEHRMAN: Well, it is a problem. It's been a problem for two weeks. Why are you letting this stay a problem for so long?

MARY: Mrs. Lehrman—

LEHRMAN: It's Ms.

MARY: Ms. Lehrman. It was never my intention to let it last so long. I just thought because he was new, he was still adjusting. I'm sorry. I will communicate with you more about his performance in the classroom.

LEHRMAN: You know, before coming to this school, I talked with Elaine and Steve Truitt. You know? Parker's parents? At first I thought they were being overprotective parents. But, I'm beginning to wonder if what they said is true.

*Mary is stunned. At this point Bobby and Bill come into the room.*

BILL: Look at that! We're just in time to--

LEHRMAN: Bobby, get your things. It's time to go to baseball. *(Lehrman takes Bobby's hand and takes him out of the room)*

BILL: Well, you have a nice evening too. It was lovely to meet you.

*Bill notices Mary.*

BILL: You all right, Ms. Sanders? You shouldn't let that get to you. She's just a mama bear looking after her cub.

MARY: Yeah, yeah. That must be it.

BILL: You sure you're all right? My break is coming up. I can stay, if you need to talk. See this shoulder? *(pats his shoulder)* Great spot for tears.

MARY: Thanks, Bill. But right now I need to be alone.

BILL: Okay. *(starts to leave)* Oh! Before I leave, here's the new light bulb for the tank. Do you want me to—

MARY: No! no. Thanks. I can do it.

*Bill puts the bulb on her desk.*

BILL: Chin up, Ms. Sanders. Tomorrow will be better.

*Mary looks at Bill and gives him a weak smile. Bill nods and exits. Mary sits at her desk, picks up her coffee cup, contemplates drinking, then throws it across the room and sobs.*

*Enter Mr. Davenport, the principal.*

DAVENPORT: Mary?

MARY: *(startled by his presence)* Mr. Davenport! Did we have a meeting today? I'm sorry, I must have forgotten.

DAVENPORT: No, no meeting. I just saw Bobby and his mom storm out of here, and I was wondering if everything was okay.

MARY: Oh, yeah. I think everything will be fine. She was just concerned about Bobby's math grades. She thought he should be tested for special education, and I didn't agree with her. So...

DAVENPORT: Ah! I'm sure I'll get a call in the morning.

MARY: Did you need anything else Mr. Davenport?

DAVENPORT: Mary, why did you become a teacher?

MARY: What?

DAVENPORT: Sorry to be so abrupt, but humor me and answer the question.

MARY: I don't know. I guess working with kids has always come easy to me. I thought the next logical step would be to become a teacher.

DAVENPORT: Do you still feel like that? Do you think it's still easy to work with kids?

MARY: For the most part. It gets a little overwhelming with thirty students, but that's the way it is. Class sizes won't get any smaller.

DAVENPORT: That's true. Aside from class sizes, is there anything else that you find troubling or difficult about teaching?

MARY: Grading always seems to be neverending.

DAVENPORT: *(small chuckle)* I don't miss that part of teaching. What about working with parents?

MARY: This year has been a little rough. I feel like I can never do enough to please them.

DAVENPORT: Why do you think that is? What's different about this year?

MARY: What do you mean?

DAVENPORT: Last year I had many parents tell me what a wonderful job you were doing with their children. This year seems to be a little different. What's different about this year?

MARY: (*not sure how to respond*) I don't know.

DAVENPORT: Okay.

MARY: I didn't realize so many parents had complained. Over Fall Break I'll work on things. I'll see how I can improve communication and classroom management. I think I just need that time. I don't think I was as prepared for this school year as I was for last school year. I'm sorry, Mr. Davenport. Things will improve after Fall Break.

DAVENPORT: Do you think things will improve after Fall Break? Is that enough time to make the changes that need to be made?

MARY: Yes. A week without students will help me evaluate what needs to be done. Why? Do you think I need more time?

DAVENPORT: That's not for me to judge. But I can tell you that if improvements are not made, I will have to make the superintendent aware of what's going on. Then we will determine whether or not you should continue the school year or take a leave of absence.

MARY: Oh. Is this because of Parker's parents?

DAVENPORT: Not just that. There have been other things that I find concerning. Some of the other teachers have come to me with concerns. Missing meetings, late to pick up students, not being prepared for meetings, and I just received your latest test scores. Mary, only fifty percent of your students are at benchmark. Something is off this school year, and only you can know what it is. (*pause*) Let's talk about what happened with Parker.

MARY: Mr. Davenport, I would rather forget it ever happened. That was probably the lowest point of my career. I regret it ever happened and would like to just move on.

DAVENPORTL: But you never gave me your side of the story. All I heard was Parker and his parents' side. Tell me your side.

MARY: It was just like they said. Parker knocked over my coffee cup, spilling it everywhere, then I yelled at him and told him to stop being a pain in my ass. I regretted it the moment I said it.

DAVENPORT: How have things been since then?

MARY: Better, I think. I think it was for the best that Parker was moved. Mr. Anderson has helped Parker more than I was able to.

DAVENPORT: Are there any other students you feel would do better in another classroom?

MARY: No.

*Davenport notices the spilled coffee.*

DAVENPORT: What happened here?

MARY: Oh, I was trying to do too many things with the mug in my hand and it slipped.

DAVENPORT: (*doubtful*) Let me help you clean it up.

MARY: That's all right, Mr. Davenport. I can get it. I think I'll just clean it up and go home. It's been a long day.

DAVENPORT: Please, Mary. Let me help.

*Davenport bends down to pick up the mug. Something catches his attention. Mary rushes over to help or prevent him from noticing.*

MARY: It really isn't necessary, Mr. Davenport. You don't need to help.

DAVENPORT: Mary, I think you should request a sub for tomorrow.

MARY: But it's the last day of school before Fall Break! I don't think—

DAVENPORT: I know. But I'm going to schedule a meeting with the superintendent. I will call you about a time you need to meet with us.

MARY: Mr. Davenport. I don't think that's necessary. Really! I'm fine. I don't need to take a day off. This meeting doesn't need to happen.

DAVENPORT: I think it does. Is there someone who can pick you up? I don't think you should drive home.

MARY: There's no one.

DAVENPORT: Fine. I'll get my keys and drive you home. Promise me you'll stay here until I get back. *Mary nods, but doesn't look at him.*

DAVENPORT: Good. It shouldn't take me long. *(pause)* You know you're wrong. There are people here for you.

*Mr. Davenport waits for a response from Mary. She doesn't respond. He exits. Mary slowly, mechanically gets up and gets some paper towels to clean up the mess. She looks at the door.*

MARY: Then why do I feel so alone?

End of Play

## KATIE LESIAK | BENCHWARMER

“Haley!”

Jump off bench.

Sprint to coach.

“I said Kaylee...”

## ERIN FAIRLEYWINE | POST-SEED

“What’s in there, Mom?” I was speaking to her like a parent speaks to a child when they know perfectly well the answer to whatever question they’ve asked.

“Go ahead—look!” Dave was getting antsy, rubbing his hands together and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. I nudged him in the arm and shot him a look that I hoped would translate to something along the lines of “cool it.” Either he didn’t catch it, or he disregarded my silent request. Mom hesitantly grabbed the handle of our stainless steel oven with her manicured hands, which had begun to show their age with the appearance of wrinkles and slightly raised veins, and bent down to peer inside.

“It’s just a roll.” She stepped back. Her penciled brows furrowed with confusion and the wrinkles in her forehead etched deeper into her skin as she scowled, crossing her arms.

“Or...” Dave offered. We hadn’t planned on synonyms getting in the way of this special moment.

“Or what?” she spat. “I don’t get it!”

I sighed. “Okay, what’s another name for ‘roll?’” I was getting impatient. This was Dave’s idea, not mine—I reminded him of that later. I had just wanted to make a t-shirt with “Grandma Diane” printed on the front to give to her. Simple. No drama, no cutesiness—and no synonym issues.

“I don’t know, a bun? But nobody calls ‘em buns anymore. Honey, why are you doing all thi—” her mouth fell open. I realized this was the first time I’d seen her truly at a loss for words in quite a while. “A bun in the oven?” she whispered, her hands clutching the sides of her face. I nodded. The corners of her mouth curled into a wide grin and then a toothy, watery-eyed smile. Now she grabbed my face. “My baby is having a baby!” I nodded again and smiled back at her. A tear in the corner of her right eye was preparing for the journey down her blush-stained cheek, with many others soon to follow. Here it comes, I thought to myself.

“Mom,” I groaned, half convincing myself too, “it’s good news—happy news!”

“Well, they’re happy tears, dear!” Happy tears—something I had never understood. “I can’t help it!”

They were streaming down her face. I wasn’t exactly unfamiliar with this display of waterworks. I liked to theorize that once Dad succumbed to his 5-year-long battle with cancer when I was twelve years old, Mom must have realized she didn’t have to be strong for anyone anymore and started letting go—*really* letting go. Then again, it might have just been the early signs of menopause. Either way, she now made significant emotional investments in everything she did, heard, or even read in a magazine.

In that moment on the linoleum, I had promised her everything she had ever wanted. For years, I had been receiving e-mail after e-mail from her with articles on “improving your fertility,” the worst of which included information on something called “pre-seed”--gross--a lube that was apparently less likely to kill Dave’s sperm. I was forced to face the fact that, not only did my mother think about the

type of lube my husband of nine years and I used for intercourse, but she also concerned herself specifically with his sperm.

Until now, I had successfully dodged the baby bullet, which had been no easy task. My mother's "subtle" hints paired with Dave's repetitious sentiment that babysitting our friends' kids was practice for whenever we finally had our own kids had begun to wear me down. Being 33, I was admittedly starting to have doubts about my ability to conceive, too, but I wasn't too terribly concerned. I didn't think having a baby would be the worst thing in the world, but I didn't have a serious agenda to make it happen, either. Mom, though, was on a mission to make sure her only child produced an adorable, tiny, spoilable offspring. And she could not understand my indifferent attitude towards having children. My friends had proven to me that I was clearly in the minority. By now, their oldest kids were five and six, some even older than that.

"I've been thinking—maybe you just haven't been bitten by the 'mommy bug' yet," my coworker and sometimes friend, Nicole, tried telling me. She had walked into my cubicle again, unannounced, and began prophesizing. "You know—baby fever! I could tell I was ready for a baby when all of a sudden it felt like every baby I saw was staring at me. I just knew!"

"Dear God." It sounded like something out of a horror film. I kept an eye out for babies as I walked to my car after work that night, fearful one might be staring at me from my backseat when I looked in the rearview mirror.

Dave must have caught "daddy fever" the day we were married, or possibly earlier. He could hardly contain his excitement. He probably would have been ready years before this, if I'd been as gung ho as he was. Now that I was "post-seed," he took every precaution with me.

"I'm headed to the store babe, do you need anything?" I yelled through the house one Sunday afternoon. He sounded like a herd of elephants barreling down the stairs. He was nearly panting by the time he reached the first floor.

"I'll go for you, honey! Why don't you just rest, okay? Put your feet up." He brushed my hair behind my ear and kissed my forehead.

"Dave, I'm pregnant, not dying," I joked.

"I don't know... I heard you in the bathroom this morning; could have fooled me!"

It was true; this morning, last night's dinner and late-night snack had teamed up and bee-lined their way out of my stomach. I hugged the toilet, my newest and most loyal friend, while I spilled more and more of my guts into it with each violent heave. I sat on the ground, knees wrapped around the toilet bowl, legs shaking from the exertion. Ah, the beauty of pregnancy.

"Just you wait," I said, "this is just the beginning!"

"Oh, I know. I've been reading up! You drooled a lot on your pillow last night, too. My book says that's typical for women in their sixth or seventh week."

"Your book?" He had never been one to really do his research on much of anything. Once, he

tried fixing something or other with the combustion in our Ford Escape by himself because he “figured it was self-explanatory.” The hood was charred to a crisp within half an hour. So, the fact that he even had a pregnancy book in his possession was impressive.

“*The Few, the Proud, the Pregnant*,” he said. I rolled my eyes. “It’s got all sorts of stuff in it—weird stuff—stuff I had to Google.”

“Weird stuff?”

“I got it the day after we found out. I wanted to have a better idea of what was going to happen, so I didn’t pester you with questions while you’re... well, you know... hormonally imbalanced.” At least he *tried* to choose his words carefully.

Until then, my attitude about the whole thing had just been sort of nonchalant—whatever happens, happens. I wasn’t worried about “weird” stuff. I’d had some serious bouts of purging what felt like my entire digestive system, but I had expected that to happen both from movies I’d seen and from the over-sharing of my previously pregnant coworkers. What I did not realize until it happened to me, though, was that whatever “morning sickness” is does not exist. It’s just plain “sickness.” It would be way too convenient if it was confined to one small section of my day. I wondered if it wouldn’t hurt to find out what else this tiny parasite inside of me would throw at me.

“Sure, you can go to the store for me, babe. Thanks so much!” I gave him a kiss and handed him the grocery list I’d made before running upstairs to our bedroom. I headed straight for his reading materials on top of our toilet. Sure enough, beneath a *Sports Illustrated* magazine with a suited up NFL player on the cover was a thick, paperback copy of *The Few, The Proud, The Pregnant*. A few of the corners were folded over as place markers, so I flipped to those pages first.

On page 23, there was a bulleted list titled, “Things You Might Not Expect in the Delivery Room.” The first bullet was bolded: “**Poop.**” What? I kept reading. “It is very common for a woman to have a bowel movement during labor, because the same muscles are being used to push the baby out that are used to move the bowels. This is natural, and should not be embarrassing.” Right. Taking a dump in front of my husband, who I had hoped would still find me somewhat attractive after the parasite was born, shouldn’t be embarrassing at all.

I leafed through the pages to find a list of things to expect during each week of your pregnancy, and stopped at a page titled “Week Seven”—me. Going down the list, everything seemed to check out: the vomiting, the frequent urination, the tender, swollen breasts. I felt bad for Dave. My boyish A cups had morphed into voluptuous B’s in these few short weeks, but he found out the hard way about my strict “Look, Don’t Touch” policy when I recoiled from him in pain a few nights ago in bed after he ventured a squeeze.

...

While my second trimester brought with it a welcomed respite from what had become my normal vomit routine, a whole slew of other weird things were happening. The parasite had been growing rather

quietly until now, with few daily reminders of the life inside of me other than the increasing difficulty of locating my feet when I looked for them. But in week 17, it was doing what Dave's book called "quickening"—starting to move around inside my belly. While I understood logically why this was happening, I couldn't seem to get over how strange it was to feel something moving inside me that had a mind of its own. I would almost rather have had the vomiting keep me up; at least that had begun to feel somewhat familiar.

Dave was careful to always ask before touching my belly (I never really got used to referring to that region of my body with the same term my uncle used to describe his beer gut), although he was the one person I would allow to do so without asking. When I really started showing, Nicole came up to me while I was standing at the vending machine at the office and rubbed my belly like I was a walking Buda figurine. I quickly realized my belly apparently did not belong to me anymore—everyone had the right to touch it, rub it, call attention to it, and talk to it, with or without my consent.

Nicole bent down until she was eye-level with the parasite, and whispered, "You're growing so fast!" She peered up at me from her squatted position. "She's gonna be beautiful, just like her mama!"

"She? How do you know it's going to be a girl?"

"Well, you're carrying high; I can tell. And you're craving sweets—telltale signs. What is this, the third—fourth—time you've gotten something from the vending machine today?" I dropped my quarters back into the pocket of my stretchy, elastic-band dress pants defiantly, and walked back to my desk.

When I got home, I asked Dave if he had any interest in finding out the gender of the baby at our next ultrasound.

"I've been thinking about it," he said, contemplatively. "We could plan a lot more of the nursery decorations if we knew the gender. You know—we could buy some fluffy pink stuff if it's a girl, a football mobile for the crib if it's a boy?" It was hard to imagine that this thing inhabiting my womb would one day be a person with a gender. "And maybe it would help the baby seem more real to you," he added tentatively, "if we found out the gender and even picked out a name."

"What do you mean?" I pressed him.

"I'm just suggesting we find out the gender, babe." He didn't dare suggest that I was unenthused about the baby.

"No," I said. "I want to look at her—or his—face before we name it. What if we name it Sarah before it's born, but after it's born it doesn't seem like a Sarah at all?"

"Honey... what does that even mean?" He was right. No matter what gender it was or what name we gave it beforehand, it was going to come out looking like a smooshy little cone-headed potato.

...

We started baby-proofing the house closer to my due date, hopeful that the activity would be therapeutic and would ready our minds for thinking about what could possibly pose a threat to a little one. My dark wood coffee table now had tacky, white bumpers on the corners, and the cupboards Dave had in-

stalled last year now had child safety locks on them, which I kept forgetting about at night when I fumbled around for a bowl or a glass for a midnight snack.

With every adjustment we made, I felt the parasite's presence more intensely. Soon, it would really be here, bumping into things clumsily, falling, tugging on table runners (better just get rid of those, too), and breaking things. I grabbed my glass vase off of the runner, removing the whole table runner and centerpiece next with a sigh. I caught Dave looking at me disappointedly, so I quickly smiled at him. He was giddy about this stuff, but it was easy for him to be. He only had to go through the ugly parts of the pregnancy from afar. I really should have been more appreciative of his excitement, but instead, it kind of drove me crazy. I knew that he knew this, too, which made me feel sort of guilty.

"Maybe we should have done this a long time ago," I joke, struggling to figure out how to open the cupboards. "It would have been a good way to lose weight!" Dave smirked at this, latching on to my lightheartedness eagerly.

...

It turned out that the parasite's little cone-head was not smooshy in the slightest—or at least not in a way that helped me out in the delivery process. I tore. And I screamed. It also turned out that, unlike the advice I received from reading books, participating in online forums, and talking to my mother, all of which assured me I would not remember the pain I felt once it was all over and the baby was in my arms, I remembered that and everything else—vividly.

After thinking I had peed my pants in bed about a week before the parasite was due to surface, Dave grabbed our pre-packed delivery bag and rushed me to the hospital. It wasn't until we were about halfway there when the pain started to set in. My hand clenched Dave's leg in a vice grip when the first contraction started coming. He bit his lip through the pain so he didn't yell, but reflexes pushed his foot down even harder on the gas. It felt like a bowling ball had just been dropped on top of my pelvis. I remember thinking the parasite must weigh 15 pounds, and imagined how painful it was going to be to push that bowling ball baby out of my ten centimeter opening.

We were flying through red lights and stop signs, which was getting us to the hospital faster but didn't exactly ease my anxiety. When we pulled into the parking lot, I stood up and waddled toward the sliding doors awkwardly, trying to remember my breathing technique—anything to try to ease the pain and pressure. Was it "hee-hee-hoo-hoo" or "hoo-hoo-hee-hee"? I thought it was a load of crap, but I found myself wishing I had paid a little closer attention. Dave ran up beside me with the bag in tow and joined me in the breathing. We surely looked like crazy people, wide-eyed and panting, and I was so glad right then to have someone willing to look crazy with me.

The delivery room was a joke. There had clearly been an attempt to make the room homier and inviting, which no place where upwards of five people will soon crowd around my lady bits could ever really be. The walls were a warm cream color, and there were curtains on the window. A leather La-Z-Boy recliner sat in the corner, covered with cushy pillows, with a lamp next to it and an end table, in case

daddy-to-be wanted to get some reading in, or maybe a nap while his baby mama endeavored to force a watermelon through a straw. A small, metal table juxtaposed the comfy scene in a disturbing way, covered in forceps, what looked like a long crochet needle, scissors, and other sharp looking objects that I didn't think I wanted anywhere near me.

Once the pushing started, it seemed like it would never end. Three hours in, and we had gotten nowhere, really. Dave reassured me of what the doctor said, that the parasite had moved downward some, but that it wasn't enough. I was doing so much work, all for nothing. I imagined it was in there clinging to my uterine walls with sharp nails and an evil grin, resisting all my efforts. The nurse asked if I wanted to go ahead with a dose of Pitocin to speed the process along, and I looked to Dave. He never once used the La-Z-Boy, except as a place to direct my mother when she was in the way, which happened a lot. He was right beside me the entire time, holding my hand even when there wasn't any real action. He just wanted to be there with me. Dave nodded at me reassuringly. I turned my head and nodded at the nurse.

The next two hours were a painful blur. I remembered poor Dave mimicking the breathing techniques we learned at that Lamaze class, and me yelling at him to stop breathing in my face. I remembered time passing slower than I ever thought it could during those final hours of pushing, breathing, standing, laying back down, pushing, shitting (it happened), crying, and finally feeling like I was being split in half down the middle when the parasite released its grip and let me push it out of a hole that clearly was not made to be an exit point for something so big. No forceps necessary, and for whatever reason, I was proud of that. I remembered Dave never leaving my side, even though he would tell me later that he about passed out when I started crowning.

And, I remembered the first time I saw the slimy, bloody, misshapen thing that emerged from me. I knew her name was Lillian Marie Dawson just from looking at her, and Dave agreed—whether out of fear or compliance or something else, I was never quite sure. Dave put her in my arms and I was in awe of this living, breathing thing that I had birthed into existence. However, now that the parasite—the baby—was here, and it was so tiny and fragile, I panicked. Was the house baby-proofed enough? What if I looked away at just the wrong time and she hurt herself? She was so ill-equipped for this world, with her squishy skull and tiny frame. Reality set in. I felt a need to protect her, but I didn't love her right then and there, like in the movies. I didn't have any idea what kind of person she was, or who she would grow to be. Lillian and I were strangers. What if she doesn't even grow up to like me? I suddenly understood my mother's crazy protectiveness and hovering. I motioned for my mother and pulled her over to me. She held my hand.

"I get it," I said. She was bawling already, naturally, and this sentimental moment only encouraged her. I shed a couple drops, as well.

"You're beautiful!" I said to her, brushing her flushed cheek with the side of my finger. I tried to make a good first impression.

“*You’re* beautiful,” Dave said, brushing some flyaway hairs off of my sweat-drenched face. If I was being honest with myself, there was no doubt I looked better than Lillian; she was a potato-headed parasite. But now, she had a name, her father’s nose, her mother’s jet-black hair, and her grandmother’s cry. She was here, and she was ours.

## MONTE D. MONTELEAGRE | PSYCHIC MONOLOGUE

*Lights come up on a table with divination cards atop it. PSYCHIC comes in. PSYCHIC should talk directly to the audience as if the audience is their customer.*

Psychic: Hello, Hello. I'm sorry I'm late, there was some traffic I didn't expect. Anyways, you want your future told, correct? Yes, I could sense it. Well you came to the right place! I think I'm going to do a one year forecast for you, it's very quick. We'll have to be quick, I'm strapped for time. Something unexpected came up. Okay, so, um, could you pick out thirteen cards please? And keep them in order. It's very important that they are kept in order. The top thirteen will do. You must be in a hurry too; no need to tell me, the cards will.

*PSYCHIC places thirteen cards on the table.*

Psychic: Alright, let's get started, shall we? Month 1: It says here you will die three times. By the end of the month. But then the next month you will receive a lump sum of cash. Insurance? And the third month is represented by an energetic man. Probably not you, you'll be six feet under three times. Must be someone else, perhaps your mother is remarrying? Your father is still alive? Then she must be having an affair. Never mind, the next two months are your mother and a card representing death. I believe she will be murdered. Well, nothing we can do about that. The seventh month is new emotional beginnings; I take that to mean that your father is the one having an affair and that you will have a new mommy. On to the eighth month. Now this card could mean the beginning or the end of a relationship. I don't think this applies to you. But this card represents a two-faced female. Are you married? Oh, that's the end of the relationship! No other cards about love though, so you don't have to worry about that anymore. The ninth month is represented by isolation, which is fitting, because you will be dead by then and probably in hell. Following that is jealousy, probably of the living, and then partnerships, probably with the devil. The twelfth month's card could either mean financial ruin or ponies. We'll flip a coin. Oh, it landed on its side. Umm, both. Ponies are expensive. And now for the thirteenth card. This card represents your year overall. Overall this will be a year of contentment for you. Thank you, this reading will be \$30, and please pay up front. I want the money before you die. Oh, and I know an excellent necromancer who can help you with your death problem. He's the top necromancer of his company. You don't want his number? Well alright, try not to get hit by a car when you leave! Come again!

## ERIN FAIRLEYWINE | LIPS

I'm starting the process all over again, and I'm excited about this one. I feel almost giddy! The basic frame is done; now the real detailing begins—this is the fun part. I take her cold, lumpy shoulder in my hands and envision what the real version looks like: firm, sculpted, with just a hint of a bone pressing against the skin from underneath. She has nice shoulders, among other things. The shoulder in my hands is too bulky, though. I grab my glasses and my tools, and slowly take away the parts that don't belong to her.

The first life-size wax sculpture I ever made to completion was a replica of Albert Einstein, for Madame Tussaud's in London. Well, it wasn't just me, of course. There were the makeup artists, the costume designers, and the mathematicians who did the measurements (or the guesswork) as to how thin or not so thin the real versions of the figures were. And then, there was me. I was interested in the shaping itself. I prided myself on "finding" the sculpture beneath the lifeless, flesh-colored, moldable mounds, and pumping blood through nonexistent veins.

My work had always been kept to just that—work. My wife found my creations unsettling. I often wouldn't finish a whole piece, so there would be an unfinished head here, a detached hand with three red fingernails on the tips there. She always said the stray parts looked "too close to the real thing, but too far away at the same time," and they made her feel "uneasy."

"They're works of art," I would plead. "It's the same thing as those silly still life paintings of fruit bowls you like so much! Can't you appreciate that?"

"It's different," she'd spit, and purse her lips. "I'll tell you what it is, Irving. It's disturbing, is what it is." Fay could say anything she wanted to about my sculptures and I wouldn't care for a couple of reasons. One: I loved her more than anything and anyone, and therefore allowed her to speak her mind on everything (no matter how cruel or wrong she was about it). And two: I kind of enjoyed when she got the willies from the wax figures and pieces I made. The more disturbing and lifelike she found them to be meant that I was doing something right as an artist. But, per her request, I confined my sculptures to my tiny studio in our modest, two-bedroom home, where she never had to see them.

That's where I spend most of my time now—surrounded by baby blue walls of what would have been our baby boy's (I always knew if we had one, it would be a boy) nursery. Fay couldn't conceive. We tried for many frustrating years in our mid-twenties and early thirties to no avail. After a few crushing false positives, we gave it a rest. Fay was tired, and I was tired of the disappointment. So, I found a way to use the space. The never-before-used crib I assembled myself fifty-some years ago, still standing against the wall, works as a handy bin for my spare parts—feet, calves, heads, forearms—anything I might use for a future project. The one I'm working on now, though, requires fresh, untouched wax.

I've never been so meticulous like this about a sculpture before, except in one instance—my most prized figure.

Fay's sculpture sits in her rocking chair in the corner of the nursery, with nearly as much elegance as she would have had in life. I've dressed her in her Sunday best, her favorite light purple dress with pearls and a big, floppy sunhat that I bought for her on one of our trips down to Florida. She glows. I got the dimple on her left cheek just perfect, as well as her crows feet and what she called her "worry lines," which ran vertically between her eyebrows. Try as I might, though, I could never fully capture her characteristic smirk that I enjoyed so much. Ever since she passed, I couldn't quite see it in my head anymore. When I think hard on it, trying to see her face, it's as if she doesn't have a mouth at all.

Living alone, I've had a lot of time to sculpt. I start a lot of projects but rarely finish them. I'm bored of doing celebrities, so I started on sculpting certain features of people I see day to day. The only problem with that is that I only see a few people—the mailman, the neighbor people, and my at-home nurse, Laura. The mailman's head was as far as I got with him. After that was done, I lost interest. It turned out so well, though, that I keep it displayed on the shelf above the crib. The same went with the neighbor people, except I only finished their bodies. I never got to their faces. I left that for last because I only ever really caught glimpses of them when going out for the mail, or every once in a while when I saw them through my window and theirs. The three of them, a man and woman, each in their thirties, and a small boy, stand together near the window, peering with no heads into the backyard.

Laura takes wonderful care of me. She has taken up the tasks my Fay used to do for me before she passed. She gives me all the right medicine, makes sure I'm eating, and walks with me for about an hour each afternoon so I get some sunlight. When you get to be my age, they start treating you like a plant. Since I had the heart attack a year after Fay passed, my children, both of whom conveniently live far away, hired Laura for me. They don't care enough to check for themselves that I'm doing okay, but they care enough to hire someone else to check. I suppose I should be grateful.

Walking with her is the best part of my day. I'm sure she thinks I'm nearly in need of a walker by how slowly I walk with her, but I purposefully lag behind just to watch her move. I can make out the outline of her shapely hiney beneath her scrubs, and it makes me wish I were fifty years younger. Every now and then, I make sure to "fall" on our walks, grabbing onto whatever part of her I can reach in order to steady myself. I've been pretty sneaky about it; I don't think she's caught on yet.

On our walks, Laura asks me about my day. I never have much to say, except that I am making progress on the wax figure I'm bringing to life. When she asks what it looks like, I am vague. I don't want her to know about it until it's finished. I want to impress her with a big reveal.

She often asks about my past. Either she finds my stories intriguing or she is a good actress. It's easy to talk to Laura, and it's rather therapeutic. Mostly, I tell her about Fay. I've told her about how Fay and I met in high school and were married shortly after our graduations. I've told her about the breakfasts in bed I made for her on her birthdays and our anniversaries, and how I wish I had done more for her, since

she did so much for me. Those pancakes and eggs on a steel tray with one little rose didn't compare to the hundreds of shirts she ironed, ties she tied, or lunches she packed me for work. She always listened to me go on and on about my day, without me bothering to ask about hers. I make it a point not to make the same mistakes with Laura.

I ask her about how her day has been. And I listen. I ask her questions. Her stories about being a nurse aren't all that interesting, usually, unless another patient of hers has died. But the way her eyes light up when she talks about her patients is exciting. I wonder if she talks that way about me to her other patients on their walks.

Sometimes, she talks about her personal life. Most recently, she is still having trouble with her boyfriend. He's not worth her time, if you ask me. I try to be gentle with her, but I can't help but take advantage of the situation.

"I hope you don't mind my asking," I try, "but does he make you feel special? That's now I knew Fay was the one for me. She made me feel special." I feel the blush flooding my cheeks. I look away from her while I wait for an answer.

"Not as much as I wish he would," she says. "Maybe in the beginning, but not anymore. Sometimes, I guess love just burns out. Know what I mean, Irving?"

"Yes!" I say, a little too excitedly. I clear my throat. "Yes, I know exactly what you mean, Laura." I loved saying her name out loud. I muster up some bravery. "You know, I'm always here for you, Laura."

"I know you are, Irving." I finally look up at her, craning my stiff neck. She is smiling at me. "I can always count on you!" I start to think the stars have finally aligned. All these walks, and it might finally be happening. I can hardly believe it—an old, wrinkly man like me!

I'm working on the face now, with careful precision. I delicately round the button-nose and move up the bridge toward the eyes. The eyes are perhaps the hardest feature to perfect on this particular figure. I'm trying to capture their depth and richness, without withholding their mystery. Their shape alone has to be their defining characteristic, since the youthful, smooth skin is free of cracks and crevices. I form the eyelids to lazily close just a hair, and I raise an eyebrow. Now they seem to say, "come get me." Even though the head is bald yet and the mouth not fully formed, my heart starts to race.

I've been so concentrated that I almost don't realize how cold I am, until my shivering makes my carving hand unsteady—well, more unsteady than usual. I keep my studio at a chilly 60° Fahrenheit with fans and a small air conditioning unit, just to be sure the wax keeps. I was so excited to make progress on the face that I forgot to dress properly. I decide I'd better get a sweater, or else risk damaging my newest masterpiece by a silly slip of the hand. I think of Laura, too, and how she would scold me for not taking good care of myself. On my way out I notice Fay; she looks cold, too.

"I'll grab you an afghan too, dear," I say upon shutting the door behind me.

When I return to the studio, I drape the afghan over her, tucking it beneath her legs as she sits. Gently, so as not to remove the painted gloss, I place a kiss on her lips and turn back toward the unfinished

face.

Now, for the lips. They are fresh in my mind; I can see them clear as day. The lips are full and look as if they might be soft, although I unfortunately have no way of knowing if that is really the case. There is a bit of shine to them, either from Chap Stick or from licking them—maybe both. I draw the corners up into a sweet smile, and brush them with a rosy hue, finishing them with a gloss. Now that the face is complete, I have the perfect wig to top it off—silky, dark, auburn locks that fall delicately over the shoulders in big, loose curls. I step back and admire my work. I want to share it with someone.

“Come here, Bill! Look at her!” I gesture to the postman’s head. Carrying him by the rod I’ve stuck up just behind his chin like a skinny little neck, I bring him over to see her up close. “Would you look at those peckers? Those have got to be the best damn pair of lips you’ve ever seen, are they not?” Bill nodded in approval as I moved the rod up and down. Satisfied with myself, I put Bill back up on his shelf and turned to look at Fay. Defeated, she stared back at me.

“Oh, honey, you know how I get excited about new pieces,” I try, working to undo the damage I’ve done. “You know I only have eyes for you.” I look at her lips, how foreign they seem in comparison to my new sculpture, how unrecognizable. “You look tired, dear. Would you like to rest?” She seems agreeable, so I come near her and pull her sunhat down over her eyes so she can sleep.

Knowing Fay is asleep, it’s easier for me to get started on the more intimate bits of my new figure. I work with the chest first, carving out the two perky mounds with tenderness. Though I’ve never seen the real ones, I’ve partially felt them through a shirt a few times. I twist the tips into little knobs and glance back to make sure Fay is still sleeping. She is, so I shift my focus downward, quickly digging a delicate hole for the bellybutton.

My wrinkled, labored hands then glide smoothly over her backside, working the wax until it’s smooth and shapely. It feels almost exactly as I recall... just a touch more wax on the rump and that ought to do it. I reach for my extra wax and notice Bill. He’s staring; I don’t like the way he’s ogling her. His head is on its side, greedily taking it all in.

“Hey,” I say, rolling him over to face the wall, “she’s mine!” I can’t believe it. Who does he think he—I remember Fay is still there. I’ve probably woken her up. The hat is still down over her eyes, but she’s just pretending she hasn’t heard me say those things, pretending she’s asleep. I can’t have her endure this anymore. She knows I have to move on, but this is just cruel. The two of them in the same room? I’ve been careless.

I take my new figure by the waist and carry her out of the studio into the living room, propping her up next to the couch, facing the TV. The way she’s standing, though, she’s looking just over the screen, not directly at it. In the light pouring in from the bay window, she looks different—not as lifelike. Her skin has a glossy sheen to her that’s not fully human, and she leaves residue on my fingers. I’m disappointed.

I hear a key twist in the lock on the front door. I’ve lost all track of time! It’s Laura—she’s here for

my walk. I'm too shocked and embarrassed to think of a cover-up excuse, and too old to run fast enough to avoid the scene to come.

Laura enters with what would have been her usual greeting: "Hi, Irving, I'm back!" But it's cut short. "Hi Irving, I— Oh my God..." I can imagine her surprise. At first sight, Laura sees a hunched over, embarrassed, eighty-year-old man holding a naked, real-looking young woman. I don't blame her for being caught off-guard.

"It's just a little project I'm working on! Nothing to be afraid of!" I shuffle toward her and tenderly take her hand. "Come see her up close!"

"Irving..." she mutters.

"I've done every detail perfectly." I graze the wax jawline with the back of my hand. "Feel." I take Laura's hand and guide it to the figure's face.

"It's...." She takes a few moments to finish her sentence. The moments start to feel like days, so I fill the silence.

"Now, I think I've been able to form the breasts and rump to about the proportions I imagined they'd be." I look up at Laura, who is looking her own stark naked figure up and down. She folds her arms across her chest.

"So, how did I do, Laura?" I ask anxiously. I wring my veiny hands. "I wanted to show her to you in a.... different.... way than thi—"

"It's amazing, Irving," she says timidly. She still hasn't looked at me. She is caressing the arm of her wax figure. I hoped she could not tell how many times I had done the same. She moves her hands over to the figure's face, then touches her own face in comparison. Once she has taken it all in, she turns and looks at me. A tear has run down her cheek and pooled in the crevice between her lips. She licks it away.

"Thank you," she says, managing a whisper, "for making me feel special."

## BROOKE ZINNEL | REMNANTS ON PARK BENCHES

In passing people  
who lie in wait,  
slumped near the darkened angles  
of storefronts, jagged and

skewed,

she would distribute her  
empathetic grin.  
A peculiar medicine for an empire that  
favors conquest,

individualism,

indifference. Jane,  
Where is Hull House today?  
Still they lie in wait.

## KATIE LESIAK | DIRT

I missed Chicago the moment I stepped aboard this train. Soon after it left the city, I was surrounded by vast fields and empty skies. With three days into my journey, it now seems that my home is years away. Saying goodbye to Mother was not as difficult as I had anticipated. Mother remained stoic and silent, even as our driver attempted conversation during the commute to the station. Her thin lips graced my cheek when the conductor's final whistle rang. Although my face felt damp with Mother's touch, her hazel eyes were free of any tears as she stepped back and slid her hands into her silk gloves. She bid me to write her when I arrived in Nebraska and to continue writing weekly.

Father did not wish me farewell. He had no final words. When I awoke on the morning of my departure, he had already left for work. To say that I am surprised would be a lie. He is angry and I understand, although I do not regret my actions. As a professor of history at Northwestern University, his reputation could not be tarnished by his rebellious daughter.

Although I miss Chicago, its large buildings and bustling city streets, I will not miss St. Michael's Boarding School for Young Women. Father thought an all-women's boarding school would stifle my cravings for adventure. Contrary to his belief, it simply provoked it.

As the train approaches Nebraska, the land becomes flatter and more barren. An overwhelming feeling of dread overcomes me and I have the sudden urge to cry and demand this train carry me back to my home. Mother's voice accompanies that thought, singing that a true lady would not behave in such a manner.

The train slows into the station, and I force my eyes out the window. With a glance, I see my aunt and cousins waving erratically at the incoming train. Not knowing to which car I belong, their waving is futile. My nose wrinkles with the sight of their ratted hair and homemade clothing, most of which is covered in dirt. The three of them stand at the far end of the platform. I look for the fourth before I remember that my uncle passed away two winters ago. Their mourning period was brief, however. There was a farm that needed tending to.

"Welcome to Nebraska, Maggie!" Junior hugs me, forcing me to lose my balance and drop my luggage. I immediately wish to board the train and beg the conductor to take me anywhere but here. "Sorry, cousin. I'll grab those for ya."

"Margaret," I correct him. "And thank you, Junior." I forgot how obnoxious these people are. Before I can regain my bearings, my face is enveloped in Aunt Maybelle's bosom. Her voice is muffled, and I can only focus on the smell of fried meat and dirt on her clothing. She grasps my shoulders and holds me at arm's length. Her grip is too strong, and her hands too coarse for a woman.

"Now, lemme look at you. Yer all grown up! I'm sure yer parents are proud of ya." When she says this, her eyes find their way to my stomach. Her smile wavers and her eyes search for Junior. "Put them bags in the cart, Junior."

Aunt Maybelle begins walking with Junior over to the horse and buggy. Standing quietly to the side is little Annie. She must be about 11 years of age; however, she looks no older than eight. The arms of her dress repeatedly slide off her shoulders. Awkwardly, she tugs on her clothing while staring at her boots, which I assume are also too large for her petite stature.

“Hello, little miss,” I say. “You’ve grown since last I’ve seen you.” I have only been to Nebraska once previously. My parents and I visited my grandparents in Lincoln about six years ago. It was a small family reunion, or that is what my parents said. In reality, my grandparents had grown older and sicker; my mother wanted to solidify their will before something severe occurred.

Annie was five at that time and the size of a toddler. She barely spoke to anyone, and I can tell that has not changed. She glances up at me as she clutches on to her dress. The corners of her mouth turn up in a slight smile and her eyes fall back to her boots.

“Maggie! Annie! C’mon, the day’s not gettin’ any younger. We got a long ride back to the farm.” Aunt Maybelle’s voice is shrill. Annie and I start towards the horse and buggy, creating small clouds of dirt with every step. It will not be easy growing accustomed to this dust, nor my relatives.

\* \* \*

Junior is utterly incompetent. His voice is belittling as he explains the chores of the farm. I have to bite my tongue to restrain myself from saying something rude. My parents have an understanding with our relatives that I will earn my keep while I stay here. I know that my parents also send them monetary compensation, both for the burden of my temporary residence and their silence. It isn’t as though these people would have anyone to gossip with, other than the cows and the corn.

“Now, see here. Ya just grab a small handful...well, yer hands are pretty small anyways. So, just grab a handful and sprinkle it like this.” Saying this, he reaches his dirty hand into a pail of corn and grain. He sprinkles the mixture in a circumference around his body, causing three-dozen chickens to come running. “And ya have ta make sure that ya give some to all the chick’ns. So, sprinkle some feed off ta the side for those slower ones.”

“I’m sure I can handle this, Junior.” Irritation is pulsing out of my pores. My arms cross in front of my chest and I find that it is getting easier to rest them on my stomach.

“Well, I don’t want ya ta strain yerself.” He holds one of the smaller chickens in the crook of his arm and feeds it grain out of his free hand. I know my face shows my disgust, but Junior doesn’t notice. “Ya know, with yer predicament an’ all.”

“I’m fine, Junior!” With his comment, it is almost impossible to hide my frustration. I stomp over to him, forcing several chickens to squawk and clear a path for me, kicking up dust in my wake. I forcefully grab the bucket and throw grain carelessly over my head as I march back to the coop, drawing a line of chickens to follow.

Annie is there collecting eggs. Her small hands delicately pluck the orbs out of the many nests. Some of my anger wanes, and I find myself helping her in silence. How this little angel stays from going crazy

on this farm is beyond my understanding. Maybe she is crazy and simply hides it better than most.

\* \* \*

I have decided to make Annie my project. Hopefully, she will keep me sane and I can show her that there is more to this world than the vast confines of this farm. She's teaching me how to knit and I am helping her read. It has taken several weeks for her to become comfortable with me, but every day is a small accomplishment.

We sit in my room in the evenings. I am knitting a scarf for father and hope to finish it before the holidays. Annie sits at my feet, reciting Shakespeare. With these words, my mind drifts to Chicago, my parents, my previous life. Unconsciously, I stroke my stomach.

"Does it hurt?" Annie pauses, looking up at me and then down to where my hand rests.

"Oh, no." My hands again busy themselves with my knitting. "My mind escaped me for a bit. It's back now." I smile, trying to dismiss the situation. "What do you think of Mr. Shakespeare?"

"He's fine." She closes the book of sonnets. "Do you miss him?"

"Shakespeare? Well, I didn't even know him." I force a laugh. Annie is not amused, but simply stares at me with her large blue eyes. "Okay, I'm sorry. I have not spoken about this with anyone." This answer does not suffice. Annie continues to stare expectantly, and I stumble for words. "I barely knew him. It was an accident. I miss Chicago. And my parents."

As if Aunt Maybelle can detect our unholy conversation, she enters the room without so much as a knock. "Alright, girls. Prayers and then bed!"

The three of us kneel at the side of my bed. I use the bedpost for support as I ease myself onto my knees. Aunt Maybelle looks on impatiently.

"Dear Lord, bless this house and all who live here. Bless our farm, the animals, and all our crops for a successful harvest. Guide our paths down the road of righteousness and lead us away from evil. Forgive us all our sins." Stressing this last line, I feel her gaze fall on me. "In Jesus' name we pray."

"Amen," we say in harmony. I am not precisely sure why Aunt Maybelle wastes her time on me. Prayers will not help at this point; the damage is already done.

\* \* \*

Mother writes of Chicago, the changing weather, the empty townhouse without my presence. She mentions father in a brief sentence, ensuring that they both miss me. She asks if all is well, yet never directly asks how I am feeling. With each letter, my loneliness grows.

I feel as though I'm being smothered by dirt. It is everywhere, in the wind, the water, even in my dreams. Its presence seems oblivious to these people. Rather, they seem to thrive in it. Not once have I seen Junior without dirt somewhere on his being. I'm beginning to think it is simply part of his biology.

"Maggie! Come help me with these chick'ns!" His voice is just as shrill as his mother's. I slowly rise from my perch on the porch and slip mother's letter into my apron pocket. I have grown out of all my clothing and am forced to wear Aunt Maybelle's dresses and aprons. I was entirely embarrassed at first.

However, there is no one here whom I wish to impress, and by saving my clothing, I hope to avoid carrying any Nebraska dirt back to Chicago.

“What is it, Junior?” He is standing next to the barn. Each of his hands is grasping a chicken by its feet. Their bodies dangle and they squirm. Wings and feathers flap, making the birds more ugly than they already are.

“Grab one of these here birds. Ma wants ta make some for lunch and supper.” He thrusts one of the chickens at my face and an uncomfortable squawk escapes the mass of feathers.

“No! Get that thing away from me. I’m not touching it,” I say, instinctively stepping away.

“C’mon. Ma needs these now.” Junior’s frustration with me has grown since my arrival. My ‘predicament’ does not receive his sympathy as it previously had. “Well, if yer not gonna touch one, then yer gon have ta chop one.”

“You mean...?” I ask as my eyes find the axe next to the chopping block.

“It’s one er the other,” Junior demands. He isn’t taking ‘no’ for an answer this time.

Stubbornly and slowly, I walk to the axe. Junior places a chicken on the block and forcefully holds it steady. The thing is wrenching uncontrollably now, and Junior yells at me to hurry up and do it already. The axe is heavier than anticipated. I clasp it with two hands and heave it onto my shoulder, arching my back. My stomach lurches forward so that I can barely see the block, let alone my feet. With a quick squeal, I let the axe fall to the block. I open my eyes, not aware that I had closed them, and notice dots of red spattered onto my apron. Junior does not congratulate me, but looks appreciative. He removes one chicken from the block and replaces another. I straighten my apron, dust already settling on the wet blood.

\* \* \*

It came earlier than I had expected. Aunt Maybelle phoned the midwife as soon as the first pains started. They lasted for hours. Annie never left my side. She brought me water and cool, damp cloths for my head. Her soft voice was constantly encouraging me, although her exact words were unclear.

The midwife was a nun sent from the Catholic orphanage of the neighboring town. She was a wicked, heartless woman. When it was all over, she left, taking part of me with her. I wept. Out of pain, both physical and emotional. The smell of blood and dirt was ever present.

\* \* \*

“I’m leaving in a fortnight.” I am just finishing my packing. I have shed all of Aunt Maybelle’s frumpy clothing and can finally fit back into my dresses. “I’d like you to come with.”

Annie stands just within my doorframe. She has been most silent since the night it happened. Our lessons have ceased. I feel as though she is sinking back into herself again. If I don’t get her out of this place now, she will never leave.

“Mother wouldn’t approve.” Her voice is a whisper. She holds tight to the booklet of Shakespeare’s sonnets.

“It is what’s best for you, and she knows it.” Her eyes stare deeply into her shoes. She has no response to this, although she knows it to be true. “I will speak to her.”

\* \* \*

“No.”

“Aunt Maybelle, you’re not listening...” We’ve been arguing like this for hours, or so it seems. My common sense cannot breach her thick, stubborn head.

During supper I asked Aunt Margaret to speak with me this evening. Annie’s wide eyes quickly darted from me to her mother. Aunt Margaret simply nodded in agreement and Annie silently looked down in her lap. Now, we sit in the kitchen. Junior and Annie have gone to bed. I know she is listening from her room. I am fighting for her.

“No, Margaret. I’m listenin’. You want my lil’ girl to pack up her life here and prance off to the city with ya.” Aunt Maybelle sits at the head of the table where her husband sat when he was head of the house. Her rough hands are clasped tight in front of her and her broad shoulders are square to the table. “Well, she has a life here on the farm. She can’t just up-an’-leave.”

“Why, because you need her to work for you? She’s a little girl! She needs to be in school, not wasting away on this God-forsaken farm. There’s more to life out there, and she will never learn that if she stays here.” My anger is boiling over and I am struggling to contain it.

Aunt Maybelle squeezes her hands even tighter like she’s squeezing the neck of a chicken. “She’s learnin’ and growin’ here jus’ fine. Besides, d’ya think I want my baby girl to end up like you?” At this, her eyes glare into my stomach and slowly work their way to my eyes. She places her stout hands flat on the table and pushes herself to a standing position. “Jus’ cuz our way of life don’t match up with yurs don’t mean it’s wrong. Ya might want ta look at yer own decisions before yer so quick to judge others.” She pauses and takes a large breath, standing tall in front of the table. Her eyes squint and glare into mine. “The Holy Book might be able to help ya with that.”

Aunt Maybelle turns and walks out of the small kitchen, her back towards me. As she slowly makes her way down the hall, I call after her, “You’re making a huge mistake! Don’t let your stubbornness get in the way of your daughter’s future!”

She does not acknowledge these final comments. Her bedroom door closes softly and the house is quiet. The anger within me is so loud, however, and my entire body begins to tremble. I cannot sit here any longer. I leave the kitchen in haste and exit through the front door into the night.

The moon is close, bringing light to the dark. I am unsure of my destination, but I continue walking. Even in this dim light I can see the clouds of dirt in my wake, which fuels my anger, and I begin running. I cannot remember the last time my legs have moved like this. I am surprisingly fast; I can feel my muscles stretching, propelling me on. My strength has grown from the physicality of my work on the farm, so I push my legs even faster.

I run in the cornfield. The stalks have just begun to grow. I am careful to place my feet in the crevice

between rows as to not step on the precious green stems. I run and think of nothing; my mind is blank and there is nothing around me but sky and dirt.

I want to run to the ends of the earth. Instead, I run until I reach the fence at the end of the field. It needs tending to; the wooden posts are crooked in the ground and the wire is loose. I graze my finger across the smooth wire as large gasps of crisp air enter my lungs. A smile crosses my lips. I turn back and look at the vast field and up at the night sky. The clouds of dust still hang in the air.

\* \* \*

The train left the fields some time ago. Buildings begin to litter the horizon. I know that I have missed this. Returning is a good thing. Everything will be as if nothing has changed.

The station is approaching. I know Mother will be waiting for me and our driver will take us to our townhouse. We will not speak about Nebraska or anything that happened there. I will return to school, my friends, my old life. I will not think of Annie. All will be well.

I replace my book in my bag. When I do, a cloud of dust rises from the movement and the smell of dirt fills my nostrils once more. I left so much in Nebraska; the only thing I bring back is the dirt. It fills the crevices of my shoes, slips between the pages of my book, and settles at the bottom of my bag. I do not attempt to rid myself of it, however. The dirt remains with me.

## BROOKE ZINNEL | MELODIES OF AFFLICTION

Dew shines on the greens of a million crisp morning blades.

Rays of darkness pierce our soft bellies, be still my heart.  
The sun warms everything and  
the earth swallows us up, empty drops of water.  
No sound escapes us, not that can be heard,  
but the bird's song and dancing grasses, their Voices resound.  
If you were to visit us at dawn,  
our Longing may linger on your tongue, but by noon you would taste nothing.  
You may see us. Time is a funny thing.  
We go about our lives, pride glistening.

Soon all is Forgotten.

Among the birds and blades, we are nothing.  
A soft, humbled scent.  
You breathe us in, but our flavor does not resonate.  
Nothing.

The droplets roll on.  
We cry out, it is the roses that have ruined us.  
We have done nothing,  
nothing, yet the sun comes for us. The sun warms everything,  
we roll on.  
The roses hold our guilt, our shame,  
those things we refuse to carry.

I will carry these things.  
I will mount the bird's wings  
Wings

Rays of darkness, be still my heart.  
A million crisp morning blades are singing, as we fall apart.

## KATIE LESIAK | HOW TO SURVIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

You plan your first day of school outfit two weeks in advance. Your mom helps you pick out a new shirt with your favorite boy band members plastered on the front (N'Sync, obviously). This shirt also matches your notebook, folder, and pencils, which you and your best friends decided would be the coolest way to enter seventh grade.

You wake up plenty early to ensure that your hair looks perfect for the first day. Your mom helps style your bangs because you can never curl them right. During the ten-minute ride to school, your mom tries making conversation with you and your younger brother. He is ecstatic to enter the fourth grade and can't stop talking about it, which is fine, because you're afraid if you try to speak the Froot Loops you had for breakfast will color the tan floor mats of the family mini van.

Your mom reaches the school too quickly. You frantically pull down the visor and inspect the protrusions on your forehead. You become frustrated with your bangs because they somehow managed to become ruined in the short car ride. Your brother's seatbelt snaps back with a slink. He jumps out of his seat, hugs Mom, and dashes to the playground where a rigorous game of hide-and-seek is underway.

Meanwhile, you seem to be glued to your seat, its belt locking you in with unchallenged force. With kind, encouraging eyes your mother asks if you're alright. Your eyes habitually roll. You're obviously not okay. Your shirt and matching school supplies were stupid ideas. Your shoelaces are way too pink. Your shorts are clearly last year's style. And your bangs are even more of a disaster than they were two minutes ago.

This minor tantrum is making you sweat, and your 'Sassy Girl' deodorant is not covering this up with a shimmering fragrance like the label said it would. Your mom magically fixes your bangs with a light brush of her fingers. You hate that she can fix them that quickly, but you're also extremely grateful at the same time.

"You look great! You will be fine today. It's a big step, but it will be so fun and exciting that you won't even notice the nerves." Your mom's attempt at calming you down has just enough power to force you out of the security of your seat. You open the door and pause, forcing your lips to form a contortion that you hope looks like a smile. "Good luck, babe! I love you," Mom's encouraging voice sings as you shut the door and turn to stare at the sea of children.

Entering middle school at Williams Public Schools isn't that momentous of an occasion. It's such a small district that the elementary, middle, and high school are all connected by the gym and cafeteria. The main reason you're freaking out is because all of the middle school classes are in the high school. You're venturing from the comfortable, colorful, friendly elementary building to the scary, drab classrooms of the high school. There are no purple hippos above the bathroom sinks that tell you to "scrub-a-dub-dub." Instead, you'll have to pee in the third story bathroom where some girl hung herself with her shoelaces. She still haunts the stalls by playing tricks on all the young girls who use her bathroom.

You're still calculating if you can hold your pee through the entire school day when you enter the main doors. In front of you lies the cafeteria where some students of varying ages sit and socialize before classes. The playground is for babies; this is for the big dogs. The football boys and cheerleaders sit at two over-crowded tables at the far end, laughing and glowing like gods. Those girls shimmer without 'Sassy Girl'.

Instead of staring at the maze of upperclassmen and searching for your friends, you keep your head down and walk past them down the long hallway of middle school lockers. They line the hall on both sides, screaming their presence in mustard yellow. They were meant to reflect the school mascot, the hornet, but they have faded and chipped over the years. Now, they look like rotten chunks of cheese rather than displaying your hornet pride.

There are only two other boys at the far end of the hallway digging through their lockers. You find yours at the opposite end of the hallway. Your locker combination written on your palm is now smeared to almost illegibility due to your sweating. With frustration, you unlock it after several attempts and squeeze your book bag inside. These lockers are barely big enough to hold anything, but, like Principal Larsen said, "You're lucky to even have lockers as seventh-grade students." You grab your magnets of N'Sync's faces from your bag and stick them on the inside of your locker door in order of attractiveness. You put your small mirror on the door, as well, right next to Justin's face.

Satisfied with your simple decorations, you dig your schedule out of your bag and begin studying it. You've already memorized it down to the last detail, but some last minute cramming couldn't hurt. The butterflies in your stomach churn your Froot Loops once again as you stare at all of your unknown classes and teachers.

"Hey, Sarah!" Because you were too busy sweating and studying you didn't notice Trent open his locker down the row from you.

"Oh, hey, Trent!" You accidently yell at him because you're so relieved to see a familiar face. Some saliva droplets even shoot out at him with the force of your excitement. You casually wipe the spit from your lip and hope that he didn't notice. "How was your vacation?"

"It was awesome. Universal Studios is definitely all it's cracked up to be. I'd go back in a heartbeat." Trent's shirt makes that clear. Spiderman decorates the front, gripping a building while attempting to shoot a web at the onlooker. He is made out of that shiny, 3-D plastic stuff that looks really cool for the first couple of times you wear the shirt, but then melts or rips off in the wash and ruins it.

"Yeah, I can tell from your shirt. It's really cool." You and Trent have been together since diapers. Because your parents are close friends, you two were forced into partnership. It actually blossomed into a great friendship, the kind where you both are such complete opposites of each other so that the opposites negate and turn positive. He's the nerd who likes technology and comics, and you are the girl obsessed with boy bands and lip gloss, yet you have the same humor. Your parents insist that you two will get married someday, but you both vomit a bit in your mouths at that thought. In your opinion, the opposite sex

is still infected with cooties.

Although Trent is a great friend, you really wish you had your girls here. You scan the halls looking for your two best friends, Ali and Nikki, but they are nowhere to be found. You have only been friends with them for a couple years, but you three continually grow closer together. The first time you tried make-up, they were there to help sneak it from your mom's drawer. You've had too many sleepovers to count. You giggle constantly when you're together. Immediately when you receive *Seventeen Magazine* in the mail, you get together and attempt to contort each other's hair and paint each other's nails just like the models show. It never works, but you have fun anyway. You haven't seen each other for over a month, due to your families going on last-minute vacations before the school year started. They only have one class with you in the middle of the day, study hall, but you had hoped to see them before classes started.

Before you can ask what class Trent has first, the shrill of the first bell notifies you that there are ten minutes to get to class.

"Are you heading to woodshop?" Trent asks as he grabs his book bag, decorated with 3-D plastic webs and a Spiderman logo.

"Yeah! Are you?" Again, you say this with too much excitement that it comes out as a squeak with more spittle.

"Totally. We can walk together." He shuts his locker, slings the webs over his back, and begins down the hall towards the classrooms. You glance at your mirror, finger-comb your bangs with no success, and quickly shut the door to catch up with Trent. You glance around the hall once more for Ali and Nikki, but determine that they are probably in homeroom already.

"So, are you excited for middle school?" You ask Trent as you settle onto the stool next to your woodshop bench.

"Well, I guess I'm just trying to survive."

\* \* \*

You're the first one in your study hall. You sit in the back with your chin in your hand. This morning's classes were horrible. You confused the hack saw with the back saw in woodshop. In keyboard class, you accidentally typed 'shit' instead of 'sit', which got you plenty of laughs from your classmates, but a glare from the teacher. Biology was your favorite class, by far. You just need to learn to stop sweating and blushing over your extremely cute lab partner.

You wish that Ali and Nikki would hurry up. You've been dying to talk with them all morning. When two way-too-ambitious girls try to take the only open seats at your table, you give them the most ugly glare you can muster until they scamper off to different seats. As you follow their scamper with your glare, you finally see Ali and Nikki walking towards you and have to blink several times to make sure your eyes were correct.

The first things you notice are Ali's boobs. You just saw her a month ago. Where did they come from? Sure, they look bigger in that tight, pink, deep-v shirt she's wearing, but still. She's actually wearing a real

bra, too. You unconsciously glance down at your nonexistent boobs supported by your training bra. Justin's face winks up at you.

"Sarah! Oh my gosh, where have you been? We've missed you!" Ali exclaims very dramatically as she pulls you into a hug. Your face smooshes directly against her new bust.

"Hey, guys. It's so great to finally see you." You're too distracted by the bulbous additions on Ali's chest to really sound excited. Peeling your eyes away, you finally notice Nikki. She has grown at least a foot within the past few weeks. Her long, slender legs protrude elegantly from her athletic body and tiny booty shorts. They both look three years older, and here you are, a silly tween in a boy band shirt.

Ali and Nikki put their bags down in the chairs next to yours. You slowly sit, trying to wrap your mind around your lack of hormones and how you can acquire more. The two girls are still standing. Ali grabs a plastic wrapper from her bag and slips it in her pocket.

"C'mon! We need a pow-wow in the bathroom," she winks. You are about to reject when she coyly tells the study hall supervisor, "We have a girl emergency and need the restroom!"

The supervisor barely glances up from his newspaper and waves you on. Ali grabs yours and Nikki's hands and you flit to the bathroom down the hall. Ali disappears into a stall as you and Nikki fix yourselves in the mirror. Looking at yourself next to Nikki, you can really see the differences. Not only is she an entire foot taller than you, but her facial features have also matured and her long, curly hair is flawless.

From the stall, Ali complains, "You know, sometimes I just hate being a girl." The toilet flushes and she appears.

"What do you mean?" You ask, sounding like a child.

"I mean, this little package Mother Nature delivers to me every month really sucks," she says, winking again. Ali has always had a way of complaining about things that she actually wants to brag about. Like when she grew two inches and lost her baby fat last summer. She came over to your house to borrow some clothes and complained about how nothing fit her new figure anymore.

Is she really bragging about her period? The way your mom described it to you, puberty sounds disgusting and unsanitary. She rinses her hands and then joins you at the mirror, adjusting her bra and winking at herself, glossing her lips with something pink. "Oh well, I guess that's just part of being a woman."

You step back and admire those two; they look great and they know it. They project confidence with every move. They probably can't even fit into the N'Sync shirts you bought together: Ali's boobs wouldn't fit and Nikki's torso is too long. You stare at yourself through the mirror. The little confidence you had is gone. "Yeah, just part of growing up."

\* \* \*

You get in line for lunch with Ali and Nikki and the rest of your classmates. There is an unspoken rule that the middle school kids sit at the front tables, next to the trashcans. The idea behind this is that you all smell so bad anyway, the discarded food cocktail in the trashcans might actually improve your

odor. The back tables are reserved for high school kids, and the far back tables are reserved for the popular high school kids.

WPS is notorious for its inedible food. On a good day, you are lucky to only find one hair in your goulash. The cafeteria does offer a soup or salad option if you are desperate, but you never choose those options because it's either all broth or all veggies. Ali, however, opts for the salad.

"You like salad?" You spit in doubt.

"Yeah. I'm just trying to stay healthy," she winks, again. You start to wonder if she developed an eye twitch along with her boobs. Walking past her, you spot some open seats next to Trent. You nod and smile, and start making a beeline towards his table. "Let's sit over here," Ali chimes from behind you. "We don't want to sit with Spiderman." Her perfectly plucked eyebrow slightly rises with her smile. She sets her tray down at the table where the football players and cheerleaders were sitting this morning.

"Are you sure? I think that table is for older kids." Even as you say it, you know you sound like a child. You try to help by saying, "And that's Trent; we could just sit with him."

"Sarah." Ali draws out the second syllable of your name, her tone becoming increasingly condescending. "We are running with the big dogs now. Reputation is everything. Do you want to be Spidegirl or the cheerleaders? Besides, there isn't assigned seating. It's the lunch room." This must have triggered an inside joke between Ali and Nikki because they start to giggle. You don't get it.

Reluctantly, you set your tray down next to them and begin pushing your yellow mashed potatoes around your tray. The bell triggers the high school to line up for lunch. As you expected, the older students begin filling the back tables. A couple football boys join your table. Apparently Ali's boobs came with a homing device for hot guys. They both begin flirting with them and it's as if you didn't exist.

You inhale your food without tasting it, which is probably best. You quietly leave the table to dispose of your tray and catch Trent's eye as you pass. He looks confused, raising his eyebrows and glancing from you to the football boys still drooling over Ali. You give him an apologetic smirk that probably looks more like you're constipated. You're too embarrassed to stop and talk to him, so you quickly dump your tray and scamper to the third floor bathroom where you can hide and wait for your next class. Maybe the ghost of the dead girl will keep you company.

\* \* \*

"Well? How was it?" Mom asks with enthusiasm as you climb into the front seat of the minivan.

"Stupid."

"How was it stupid?" You knew she would pry. One-word answers never suffice.

With a great sigh, you begin your rant, "My first classes were horrible. I was sweating the entire school day. It took me five attempts to open my locker after lunch and so I was late to English and got a lecture about punctuality from Mr. Peterson. Lunch was a disaster, and not just because my potatoes were discolored."

"Okay, so classes will take some adjusting. We can work on that. You are such a smart girl; strait A's

have never been a problem for you. You might just have to study a little more, but you can do it. Lunch will just take time to find your place. I can start packing you some if you'd like?"

"No way! I'd look like even more of a dork with a sack lunch! I'll be fine." Your mom should know by now that the only thing worse than eating the school lunch is bringing lunch from home in your N'Sync lunch box.

"How are your friends?"

"Nikki grew three feet taller over the summer. Ali got boobs. Oh, and her period." You try to say this under your breath, but the suppressed anger you've been building up all day is finally emerging.

"Ah, puberty," she says, a small grin creeping onto her face.

"It's not funny, Mom!" Your anger is really coming to surface. You didn't realize how worked up you were about the boobs until now. "Seriously, I look like a child compared to those two."

"You are a child, sweetie..."

"Not helping," you interrupt. You really just need her to be on your side right now.

"Okay, well, you have Trent. I'm sure he helped you out through your rough day."

You audibly groan. "I'm pretty sure he hates me after today."

"Okay, listen." Her lecture voice comes out and you know she's serious. "I know that today was miserable for you, but you will find out who your real friends are. Being 'cool' is worse than losing your best friend." You try to defend yourself, but she persists, "And I know you are frustrated with your body right now. But growing up isn't all that great; it's a lot of work. Your time will come. I was a late bloomer myself." At this you roll your eyes and wrinkle your nose. The last thing you need is a talk about the birds and the bees.

You drive a few more minutes in silence. You decide that you have two options. The first is to burn all of your N'Sync shirts and find out if socks or tissues look more natural when stuffing your training bra. The second is to transfer schools. "Do I have to go back?"

"Oh, honey." She grabs your hand and smiles. "Yes. Yes, you do. But if you survived today, you can survive the rest of middle school."

## ABBY FELDMAN | GIRL WOLVES AND VULTURE BOYS

“Little Girl,” they say,  
when i come to them with bleeding knees  
and pocketed bruises,  
“if you run faster than the boys they will hurt you.”  
i smile outside and say nothing at all  
but inside i scream

I DON'T WANT TO RUN WITH THE BOYS!  
i want to run with wolves  
cool sleek strong deadly in the moonlight  
i want to throw back my girl-wolf head  
and sing the sky  
songs of my POWER

but i am not a wolf  
not  
yet

my fingernails are cartilage  
my blunt human teeth  
not capable  
of tearing out still-beating hearts of men

so when the vulture boys take what they want from me  
eyes  
kidney  
womb  
(hymen)  
and i stumble home  
walking roadkill  
they say to me  
“Little Girl, what did you expect?”