



the alembic.

providence college

Editors: Eliana Lopez

Jason Welch

Caitlin Bartley

Clara Howard

Alexsia Patton

*an engrossing collection of
fiction, nonfiction,
poetry, photography, &
literary interviews .*

2
0
2
0
2
0
2
2

Providence College

The Alembic

alembic

noun | **alem·bic** | / əˈlembik/

an obsolete distilling apparatus. for our purposes, a figurative “distillation” of the collective talents of a literary community. just as an **alembic** distilled each season’s yield of grapes to produce fine wine, we also gather and distill the year’s yield of creativity, in hopes of producing a palatable artistic vinatge.

2020-2022

The Alembic is published each spring by Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island. The two-year subscription rate in the United States is \$15.

Address all correspondence to:
The Editors, *The Alembic*
Department of English
Providence College
One Cunningham Square
Providence, RI 02918.

Our reading period is from August 1 to January 15. Works can also be submitted online at our website www.alembic.providence.edu. Please include a brief biographical note with all submissions, as well as an e-mail address for contact purposes. Manuscripts cannot be returned.

Materials published in *The Alembic* may not be reprinted, in whole or in part, without written permission from the editors.

Copyright © 2020 by *The Alembic*

THE ALEMBIC 2020-2022

Editor-in-Chief

Eliana Lopez

Managing Editors

Elena Bibilos

Clara Howard

Cecelia Little

Editorial Staff

Alexsia Patton

My Nguyen

Jason Welch

Caitlin Bartley

Faculty Advisor

E. C. Osondu

Cover Photo

Created by Eliana Lopez & Jason Welch

Literary Editing and Publishing Class

Faith Allen-Harris, Jack Bowden, Arianna Davey, Kathleen Grennan, Katya Horne, Clara Howard, Adam Kearing, Hannah Langley, Matthew Mazzella, Molly McCarthy, Emma Paxton, Kathryn Picone, Andrea Reyes, Christopher Sebastian, Gianna Simoncelli, Alia Spring, Maxwell Waite, & Kate Ward

Table of Contents

Editor-in-Chief's Preface	vii
Poetry	
Robert Cooperman	
<i>Anything Goes</i>	42
<i>In the Mirror</i>	44
Erika Girard*	
<i>she walks the bridge to nyc</i>	16
E. Laura Golberg	
<i>Algebra</i>	17
<i>Blackberry Jam</i>	18
David James	
<i>The Book of Dreams #3</i>	30
<i>Dust to Dust</i>	33
<i>The Return</i>	31
<i>Running Out of Time</i>	32
Josh Mahler	
<i>The Way of the Birds</i>	14
<i>Where Two Rivers Converge</i>	15
Michael Milburn	
<i>Golden Rule</i>	26
<i>Let It Go</i>	25
<i>Work Friends</i>	27
Elisabeth Murawski	
<i>At the Neo-Impressionist Exhibit: Louis Hayet's</i> <i>"Blue Hill"</i>	22
<i>The Cost of Discipleship</i>	20
<i>Flight to the Pacific</i>	19
<i>It Is the Morning</i>	21
William Norine	
<i>K B, No. 2</i>	10
Jose Oseguera*	
<i>Übermensch</i>	28

Kenneth Pobo	
<i>Kingda Ka</i>	34
<i>New Songs</i>	35
Dan Sieg	
<i>Empty Lots</i>	39
<i>Past Time</i>	40
<i>Side Tracked</i>	41
Christopher Stolle*	
<i>Arles, 1888</i>	23
John Tustin	
<i>Flower Chain</i>	36
<i>Snow</i>	37
<i>Woman In Ruins</i>	38
Danielle Watkins	
<i>Coda</i>	50
<i>Color of Love</i>	49
<i>Excuses</i>	48
<i>Maybe, Maybe</i>	46
<i>Moonlight Memories</i>	45
Fiction	
Sofia Amaral	
<i>V Formation</i>	73
Gabriela Baron	
<i>Time to Rise</i>	52
Josh Dhaliwal	
<i>Intrusive Thoughts</i>	89
Eugene Franklin	
<i>The Pink Bear</i>	96
Delaney Mayette	
<i>Apri L'occio</i>	80
John McCann	
<i>If I Should Die</i>	130
Meghan Mello	
<i>Almost Everything Bad is Green</i>	101

Michele Koh Morollo	
<i>Smile</i>	62
Obi Nwizu	
<i>Gathered Pieces of the Sun</i>	111
Madison Palmieri	
<i>The Silence</i>	122

Interviews

with Eric Bennet	141
with Jonathan Dee	146
with Lisa Gardner	150
with Joe Scapellato	154
with Lisa See	159

Photography

Andrew Acord	
<i>Summer Memories</i>	137
<i>Natures Color Palette</i>	138
<i>Beach Days</i>	139
<i>Sinking Sunshine</i>	140
<i>Out of Ink</i>	136
Jalynn Booker	
<i>When You Lean On Me</i>	9
Jacqueline Kelley	
<i>Ballycastle, Northern Ireland</i>	51
Contributors' Notes	165
Editors' Notes	170

Editor-in-Chief's Preface

Dear Alembic Readers and Contributors,

I want to begin by thanking everyone that was a part of this edition. The Alembic team, myself included, experienced heartbreaking and honest setbacks during this edition's compilation. Through the pandemic and the challenges of transitioning into our new form of normalcy, I have adopted a newfound appreciation for the time and love it takes to create a work like this one.

I hope, as you read through your own work or the work of others, you relish in the deep sense of accomplishment and celebration I did when this all finally came together.

Lastly, I want to extend a sincere thank you to all the contributors for their patience and a congratulations on being able to share their work with all of you, readers!

Eliana Lopez
Editor-in-Chief



When You Lean On Me

Jalynn Rose Booker

K B, No. 2

William Norine

(i)

*“Sed fugit interea, fugit irreparabile tempus,
Singula dum capti circum vectanur amore—”*

-VIRGIL

I lob a sun-yellow tennis ball
 against a crumbling red brick wall
 in deserted Watertown, a green school
 acre off Mount Auburn Street
 on a summer day as quiet and as slow
 as the nineteenth century; the brittle grass
 as dry as Emerson’s essay on Self Reliance.
 The day withers, while ever harder I bash the ball
 through dribbles of head sweat; heat haze;
 blurred sun-waves of delirium
 And in each mindless, humid blow
 I mark that my love is as old as Rome.

Even now it rises in the brightest
 blue of the Palatine,
 to linger over the Aurelian Wall
 and the dust of the Circus Maximus.
 When Caesar son of Venus died
 he left three hundred sersteces to every citizen
 of Rome, while the solemn Hebrews moaned
 their lamentations for the dead
 and cast oblations on his pyre.
 And in the paper-white Greek

columns of Mount Auburn, love,
I stood among the marble certainties

and told the dead that I would conquer—
told them I would rise and hear
the splintered urgings of my longing;
a Rondeaux in a pastel green
of fluted pillars where you lean
in ripening air and lilacs, whose royal
purple blossoms drift and fall...
I lob a sun-yellow tennis ball
against a crumbling red brick wall...

(ii)

“I can’t get started...with you...”

Bunny Berrigan

Captain Schuller bade me “keep
it simple; no fancy fills or solos”
while we’re fundraising deep in downtown
Boston in the grandiloquent and swank
white marble lobby of the Shawmut Bank,
its High Victorian chandeliers
on loan from the Titanic, and the whole
afloat in the Ocean off Night. The trumpeter
in black tail and tie stands
on the afterdeck, silver horn in hands,
peers through glasses mooned with lights

and croons “I can’t get started”
while the room swims with the black-tied
Brahmins on the floor in tandem

with their grande dames. I dream who he is singing
to--see you leaning forward in your long gown,
a black-haired Goddess on a ship's bow.

At 2 a.m. I take the bassist home
in foghorn darkness, up over the Tobin Bridge.
through Chelsea and Revere.

In Saugus, the pretty, distant lights
look jellied as if beneath the sea;
they twinkle in the haze of night.

Turned around, I face the forbidding city,
its nether-world of empty streets;
vapors bubbling from sea-caves.
At home on Huntington, I doze
in the steam heat, close my eyes
and dream subterranean eulogies
of the night--green visored Copley Station
beneath the Public Library and its
collected works of Man;
other tunnels--the grim Sumner
and the Callahan,
half a mile beneath the black harbor.

I seem to search for you on the Great Ship,
its boilers having burst in two; the water
gushing in in torrents; I seek
the solace of your silver gown,
trailing the winding stair in sea blur;
we are going down...

(iii)

I wake up drowsy to the whiskeyed rain
 on Hemmenway, imagine how
 it squinches down in gulleys, gathers
 last night's leavings in a wash; a drool
 of empties, dribbling down in babbling
 gutters to the drains. Inside, the steam heat
 rattles in my cast-iron grille that's painted
 silver like a flute; the echoed soundings rise
 like Mozart to the dime store lace
 at the windowpane. I dream your face
 and muse I still could somehow rise
 and conquer; if nothing else just gather up

what's left and look for you
 in the quiet city, huddling down
 the rainy cobbles of Westland Ave
 or Gainesborough. Instead I conjure last
 night's walk to nowhere, down Boyleston's
 dwindling white globe lights, that end
 at the unforgiving Fens, blind shore
 of a dark continent, felony outback
 of broken glass and jungle.
 Around the drizzly bend, the horrible
 Berklee School, windows like a zoo;
 a rape-guitarist jumping like a Kangaroo.

The Way of the Birds

Josh Mahler

You're safe at home, commence the wheeling
tumult of your days, fasten shut the sky
with a song sung by a ghost in love—
grass like an army of arrows aimed at heaven,
the trees hold the secret, as a lover would
after sleeping with another.

It is as it should be. Birds honor their flight—
we betray gravity like drunken men
with nowhere to go. I envy the
birds the longer I suffer. Leave now,
pieces of the earth are slowly breaking away.

Where Two Rivers Converge

Josh Mahler

I watch the sun slip from the mantle of God,
 spilling light through the dark woods.

I hear a chant linger on the spine of the wind.

I wave my hand in front of my face, dispersing
 the smell of sweat and honeysuckle.

I walk down the trail, blush of my forehead
 revealing the deeper creases of my brow.

I cross the footbridge to the other side,
 resting on my haunches.

I reclaim my breath; I mingle with the leaves.

I listen for a crunch under my boots.

In the distance, traffic lurches through the trees,
 humming a metallic call, a faint echo lost on
 the lips. Time to go, smoke

is rising off the shoulders of the mountains.

Let me be late wherever I travel. Let a prayer
 bestow a blessing of the religion

I have denied. I lift my head to the sky. I wait.

she walks the bridge to nyc

Erika Girard

in response to Louis Lozowick's "Brooklyn Bridge"

New York, New York circa 1930

from Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art

sometimes she forgets to look up
when she's on her way to work in the city
and she trudges along, heedless of the beauty
that surrounds her right before her eyes.

sometimes, though, she remembers
to look up at the sinewy cables
that stretch across the sky and anchor
those concrete arches to the world.

sometimes her fur coat helps
to ward off the cold and protect her
but sometimes the winter air cuts
right through the heavy faux fur.

sometimes she likes to pretend
that her morning commute consists of
more than stolen glances up at a bridge
that reminds her of the roaring 20s.

sometimes she thinks about that decade
and how it too wore a mask of gilded finery
she swings her gaze from one side of the
bridge to the other, then peers into the waves

wondering if the city will miss her.

Algebra

E. Laura Golberg

If $x + y = 23$, solve for x and y .
I sat across the desk from my father,
as every night he read and wrote
of the mysteries of estrogen.
My homework finished, I tried to solve
how to be his daughter.
Achievement was all. Looking for any
excuse to stay, I worked problems.
I got an A in the final.
At dinner, he raised a glass to me.

I loved the logic, the dance of x and y ,
as x sits at the back of the desk,
trying to get y to notice her.

Blackberry Jam

E. Laura Golberg

Grandma carped about my mother's cooking, the way she raised her children. Grandma said if she were in charge of the food, my brother would be a full foot taller. She'd traveled from South Africa to join our family for late-summer holidays.

Blackberries were prolific, growing wild in Wales. We spent days picking. First I'd put my hand, still small, especially suited to the task, around a deep black berry, no red showing, then I gently pulled, each perfect berry intact.

My mother washed the berries, added water, transferred them to the cauldron, measured sugar, watched white islands disappear into red blackness, stirred, preparing jars in their symphony of boiling, their rattle, windows steaming, then lava of thick jam,

whole blackberries suspended, pouring from the upended pot, into sterile bottles. Then Grandma took one dozen quart Kilner jars of blackberry jam on the ship home, as presents for her friends.

Flight to the Pacific

Elisabeth Murawski

Stacked on the horizon
a mass of cumulus

mocks Shiprock, gold
seeping from its edges, fire

banked in its hold. Captive
in our jet cave, we wait

for the coast, the Pacific
dragging her train. Nothing's

changed since we began
our flight. Words still

fail. Silence reigns
before, after, and between.

Love catches at our sleeves
like a burr.

The Cost of Discipleship

Elisabeth Murawski

The rich young man
hangs from his camel's height,
leans for an answer.

What must be done:
the rummage sale of all he cherishes,
draws and quarters him.

He has much to lose:
a host of camels, vineyards,
stores of oil and grain.

Taking his leave
of this uncommonest divine,
he throws a coin to a beggar child.

Today It does not please him--
the dirty face lighting up,
the grin of the poor.

In the shine of his fine gold rings,
he sees a winding sheet,
a niche of stone.

It is the Morning

Elisabeth Murawski

I lift an oar heavy as sin.
Broken spectacles pine
on the bottom of the boat.
No sun to catch.

I am transparent, a worn
and wordless thing. Time floats
among orange peels
and unread tea leaves,

lost in the future. Heron,
snake, question mark,
I bend back on myself,
empty of children,

my belief in men
unrequited, the sky
a Hokusai blue inviting
the water to heal my life.

At the Neo-impressionist Exhibit: Louis Hayet's Blue Hill

Elisabeth Murawski

Few stop to look at the painting
of the blue hill. Not even
the guard who works here,

hands in pockets, leaning
against a wall. I take
several turns around the room,

keep coming back to it.
As if I'd caught the painter
stealing fire.

Or found myself
in a previous life
with that cypress in the corner,

hands up to the sky.
Maybe it reminds me
of the foothills of the Blue Ridge

where my son's ashes lie,
the feeling of peace
ringing out like a pardon.

Arles, 1888

Christopher Stolle

Willem and Henri walked
 to 30 Rue de le Martine,
 leaving Vincent and Paul behind.
 They had been dipping their toes
 and their despair in the Rhône.
 Now they stood upon a new threshold:
 the Café de la Gare—the Coffee Station.

They saw refugees of the dawn
 and beauties hiding from the night.
 They light cigarettes and drank cognac.
 They rubbed their grief into billiard sticks.
 They listened to penniless veterans
 recount their indignation at uniting Italy.

When they found they'd slept the next day away,
 they dragged themselves to the Yellow House.
 They pulled goldenrod, celadon, and carmine
 from its skin to mesh with the ultramarine
 and persimmon from their clothes.
 They centered their paintings with solemn muses
 and they gave shadows complete dominion.

When they next visited 30 Rue de la Martine,
they found themselves among their oiled strokes.

Let It Go

Michael Milburn

It's a strategy
I'm unqualified
to weigh in on,

no closer to executing
than a sword swallow
or cave dive,

the simple-to-some
surrender
of a feeling.

Let it go?
Let regret or doubt
or self-reproach go?
Good one.

I'll be damned
if I have ever relinquished
a way of looking at myself

that turned out to be
most hurtful
or least true.

Golden Rule

Michael Milburn

Would I ever
do unto others
what I do after
my own blunders
like a coach with a bullhorn
blaring fault after fault
until the disappointer
turns to the disappointed
and signals I give up
or what the fuck?

No, I'd never treat
anyone else that way,
a style of appraisal
best kept to myself.

Work Friends

Michael Milburn

for A.D.

After her departure
our conversation dwindled
to me catching her up about our old job
and her filling me in about her new one,
as if all we had left in common
was what we'd had in common.

We needed to go on
a long drive together,
small talk brutally outlasted,
because intimacy
is what's transacted
between two people

in silence, a little like
the clarity and energy
that come over one
after the first days of a fast,
but you need that interval
of being starving.

Übermensch

Jose Luis Oseguera

The driver sat in silence as he listened to a couple's conversation,
interjecting gentle nickers that shook his moustache—
more scottish terrier than Nietzsche— whenever it felt right to do so,
as a father laughs at the inanities of his children's backseat chatter;
it was his reward for working so hard at keeping us safe.

The silver minivan wasn't simply his job:
it was his life—his failure— though not very becoming of him,
it had become him and everything he wanted to hide from the
passengers;
it was the man he needed to overcome but couldn't,
yet, while in his care— his world upholstered in burgundy vinyl—
he felt responsible for us, as if the mere fact that he was behind the wheel,
and we strapped in his seat belts, made him our surrogate parent.

The van stopped short, and when the woman, man,
and their little girl stepped out of the van, the driver said,
“Have a good weekend, Ashley;”
his voice was faint, it purred frantically
even though he was reading her information off his phone.

Her disregard shattered the voiceless dank
smudged on the windows— warmer than clam chowder—

as she struggled to slide the door closed.

I did what I feared most— I begged myself not to—
and stared into his disillusioned eyes.

When we arrived at Cow Hollow, he didn't read my name;

I was relieved, but it still hurt.

Beneath his nihilistic mane, his lips smiled— as if contrived by the app—
the exact opposite of what the gesture was meant to express.

He didn't say "have a good night" after I closed the door,
not that I expected him to, but rather,
it felt as though he needed me to,
and even if he didn't, after all we'd been through—
me in the passenger seat, he in the driver's— I did;
his smile finally went away a few minutes after he did

The Book of Dreams #3

David James

The morning sun
knocked on my front door, but when I opened it, there was a polar bear
with glasses and a fedora, wearing a black hood that made him
look like a nun,
a hairy nun with red lipstick smeared around his lips.

He sat on a chair,
which broke, so he sat on the living room couch, which broke.
Then he sat on the floor, which broke. He looked to me for answers.
With incredible flare,
I sang a traditional lyric song about living an orderly and simple life,

somewhat baroque,
but my tongue fell out, my ears drooped, my hair sailed
into the sky. The trees stumbled a bit like stiff old men
with strokes
but there was no 911 call, no expensive ambulance trip

down the trail
of hospital tears. No, the sun opened the day with the wink
of his eye and my mother gave birth to ten infant bears,
all wet and frail.
My friend, the wind, adopted them and taught them the secret of flight.

The Return

David James

I'm happy to report the return of my virginity. I'd lost it years ago to a woman who kept it to herself for sixty-eight years. And, in appreciation, I kept hers safe from the rest of the world until she died.

It's strange being a virgin again, new, untarnished, unused. I'm not sure what I'll do with it after so long in one woman's hands. It felt complete there. At home. Like it belonged. I wonder how many people get their virginity back these days?

I think I'll keep it to myself and lose it in my next life.

Running Out of Time

David James

you

know

there's not

enough time

in a day to show

the people you love how much you

love them. you can call, text, hug those close to you but that

doesn't really work. you pray they know how you feel, but they

don't. and then the sun goes down.

Dust to Dust

David James

everything boils down
to chance, luck, and hard

work. I've had my fair share
of chances and a few caught me
off-guard;

some I ignored. the luck came and went like a rare
bird in its prime,

but hell if I knew what to do with it.
I worked hard, but not hard enough.
what I would give to go back in time

with focus and grit
and bear down for my own good.

you figure it out too late.
the dice rolls, you win some,
lose more, and then there's nothing's left

where you once stood.

Kingda Ka

Kenneth Pobo

Jeff and Jerry drive to the courthouse
and say I do.

Marriage,
the Kingda Ka coaster,
New Jersey everywhere you look,
zero to 128 mph.
Three and a half seconds. A kiss

takes off, breaks apart
by a cookie jar.

New Songs

Kenneth Pobo

Age, a heavy coat

I keep trying to pull off.

An owl, I swerve my head
backwards, ask who, who.

Many of my favorite who's
are gone. I fly well at night,

know my place in the forest.
The wind makes old trees

creak and sing, their songs
still new.

Flower Chain

John Tustin

She put the flowers in a chain
 But she never wore them
 As a necklace or a crown.
 She kept the flower chain in a locked drawer
 Below a book of Poe given by a dandelion,
 Beside an engraved corkscrew given by a mangrove flower,
 On top of a stack of poems written by this moon flower.

One flower rarely touched another
 And when one accidentally did
 In her shut drawer
 She just denied the existence of the other flower
 As a whisper in the dark.

She put the flowers in a chain,
 Never wearing them
 As a necklace or a crown
 But hiding them in a drawer
 Away from the light.
 Removing them one at a time
 To wear behind her ear
 Solitarily
 In the dark
 Before the mirror,

Feeling at once sad and powerful,
 Sexy and unfulfilled,
 Needed but alone.

Snow

John Tustin

Snow has stopped, stilled and prevented more wars
Than all the men and women
Of man and womankind

And that is why I trust the weather more
Than men or women
And I don't trust the weather one bit.

Woman in Ruins

John Tustin

There was a woman in ruins,
Her hair gorgeous floating spirals of fire
And the dead slumped in the seats around her
In the dark with the light far off flickering

And this woman thought about unicorns
And wanted to live alone in the woods
-The things a little girl would dream -
But she was not a little girl but a woman

So she moved as far from us as possible
And watched the deer in the morning
Cavorting thirty feet from her bay window,
Knowing though that the moment she closes her eyes

She will see the dead in the seats around her
In the dark with the light far off flickering
And the others still alive scrambling and screaming for safety and cover
With not a saddled unicorn in sight.

Empty Lots

Dan Sieg

Empty lots of childhood

were peopled by few, but populated
by ants and gravel and weeds lining
trodden sandy paths, shortcuts
flattened by Keds and bike tires,
edged by ragged chicory undergrowth
hiding rusted rubbish and jagged chunks
of concrete, paths punctuated by bottle caps
and glass shards, and pebbles perfect to throw
at pop bottles set in rows on metal beams gridded
behind massive billboards, beams inviting
climbing, but whose raw rusty edges resulted
in bloody palms needing a mother's ministrations
of admonitions and Mercurochrome.

Past Time

Dan Sieg

in his cluttered back room our deaf and mute
shoemaker showed me his handicraft hobby,
a formal faux marble pergola peopled by preened and
mostly naked wreathed putti or cupids
parading around ivied fountains and
ornately decorated turquoise colonnades
and glittering stairs

tentative in showing as I, a boy, was
in seeing his inner sanctum, he smiled
and pointed and gesticulated,
delighted in showing off his recreation,
his labor-of-love respite from fixing heels and soles
and sewing separated purse strings
by which he made a solitary living
in his stand-alone cinder block
shop with a back room home
where ice box, couch, heating ring
and toilet competed for space
with his passion, the prancing
hand-carved figurines behind glass,
mimicking some rococo paintings
he'd torn from glossy magazines with his
rough hands, blackened by shoe polish

Side Tracked

Dan Sieg

Train-ditch tadpoles
sidled amiably together, apart;
seemingly aimless. Looking like
pregnant commas
needing to punctuate.
Ourselves also latent,
we returned repeatedly to the
scummed muddy trench
to monitor progress,
remark the metamorphosis.
In some few weeks they
lost tails, grew limbs
while we, unchanged,
made our eager visits
until finding
no visible pond life,
but did hear faint
croaking some distance away.

Anything Goes

Robert Cooperman

Not just as in

“Anything can happen,”

and usually does,

but as in “Everything goes,”

and sadly, “Everyone,”

like a dear friend, whose body

is a ripped up battlefield.

All he can think of

is how tired he is

of pain’s constant barrages,

how he hates being a burden

to his wife, and how much

he wants this war over, even if

there’s nothing on the other side,

though since anything goes,

maybe, just maybe, everyone

he’s loved is waiting

to welcome him: returned

from his long, trouble-filled journey,

but no need, anymore, to stray

from the porch rocking chair,

regaling his dear ones

with his exploits,

and applauding theirs
while lemonade and cookies
magically appear,
and the only tears
are happy ones, in the land
of “Anything Goes.”

In the Mirror

Robert Cooperman

At physical therapy,
Mike has me watching myself
in the ceiling-to-floor mirror,
so I'll do the stretches
and exercises right.

He's young, fit as a linebacker
before knees turn to spaghetti
and head can't stop ringing—
to make me feel every minute
of my age, every twist of the pain
that barbwire my face.

But when the sessions are over,
my stride's Millett's vigorous Sower,
at least until my hamstrings and calves
stiffen, cramp up again, commanding:
slow down, act your feeble age,

while Mike bops some dance steps
to the piped-in pop music,
before welcoming his next client,
or if I'm completely honest,
his next aching patient.

Moonlight Memories

Danielle Watkins

Swept up like a child who strayed too far from her mother's eyes, I want more. Wide-eyed, I absorb it all: the boatman reeling up keychains to pedestrians along the pristine, picturesque canal houses, bright pink gloves purchased as I waited in line, entering Anne Frank's melancholy "huis" against the unforgiving wind. Flashing and flaring no more, my camera is laid to rest in a tomb of leather, reemerging when tulips pop up in unexpected places, announcing their presence. See it, breathe it. Remember it. I push the button with pink fingers, gloves masking their true color, and my camera's flash receives the keychain from the boatman in the enchanting canal. Tulips sigh after the flash leaves them for they are timeless and cannot be caught. Flawless in pictures, their roots will always return, even after their heads are cut off. Walking back from dinner, I revel in the beauty of the night, seductively wrapping me in a blanket of darkness. The moon awakens me. Pink fingers push the button as the flash reaches toward the sky but fails to grasp the unsuspecting moon. The image lies. The moon is not ugly as the picture says. I feel arms around me, telling me to feel the moment instead. Upward I gaze.

Maybe, Maybe

Danielle Watkins

She walks into middle school and goes to her locker. She opens it, decides what books she needs for class. She pushes her glasses up the ridge of her nose. She feels a hand grab her ass. She turns around and sees two boys laughing. She feels the heat in her cheeks as a group of girls gossip loudly on their way to class. Everyone is laughing about different things.

Maybe, maybe.

In homeroom, she considers the evidence. Students are rowdy in the halls all the time. And was that even an ass-grab? He probably jostled and brushed by her by accident.

Maybe, maybe.

She is quiet. She tells no one. Her friends don't understand her distance. She better find new friends.

She doesn't find new friends. She finds new boys. Boys that know she's easy. She craves the attention. They tell her she's hot and then swig from a bottle. She lets them touch her even though she knows they'll be gone soon.

They never notice the tears running down her face, smudging her mascara. They never notice her silence when they thrust inside her. They never notice.

Maybe, maybe.

But maybe her homeroom teacher asks if everything is okay.

Maybe she can't hold the tears back and says she's not sure what happened but

she thinks that maybe someone grabbed her ass.

Maybe she tells the vice principal who the boys were and they get suspended. But she still has to accept their apology.

“Sorry.”

“He said sorry,” the vice principal prompts her.

“...Okay.”

Thanks for adding to the problem. Thanks for harassing her. Thanks for patronizing her.

Which story is true? Does it matter?

No.

Will they care?

Maybe, maybe.

Excuses

Danielle Watkins

Creatures of the night, predators of the day, sharks lurking beneath murky, dark water. Forced below these vile villains, required to feast on dirt and slink on my stomach, no wonder they scorn me. Displaying power over others, they think themselves superior. Lions will devour caribou, viciously, unmercifully, yet it is the circle of life. All these...excuses. A mouse snared is trapped inside me, a big ball of nourishment that balloons my body. Wishing to burst me open, these other animals yearn to salvage the innocent mouse. Praying for impossible peace. Healing holiness no longer present. And all I suggested was to take and eat. Curiosity kills, they say. They never mention the woman, the man, the animal that would become the devil incarnate. And, no one died, did they? Eyes were simply... opened. Mirrors into our souls shattered and revealed the dimmest truths. Bodies become hollow husks, worthless salvation, but I remain green as the Garden of Eden, my lush skin sparkling in the sun. Shedding my skin, I move on and slither into the underbrush. I dare you to take what once was mine.

Color of Love

Danielle Watkins

A spark, a glinting light in the dark. A glance, a mesmerizing stare that holds me captive. I want to turn away. But I don't.

I remain a prisoner in his eyes, an object of desire. He is so close now, I can taste his desire. He grabs me and pulls me close. His eyes say it all. My acceptance says more.

I remember another time, a time when I would wake up, the sun casting her rays on my body as I arose to the smell of fresh tea and him. He gently touched my soul, inviting me to stay in this moment. I see his eyes meet mine, the reflective colors dancing like the sun before him.

Today is different. I awaken to darkness with no stars in sight. No heat to light the fires of passion. The dull smell of my own bitter breath, the smudged lipstick on my lips, is uninviting. He is gone and I should be free, but I cannot fly away like a frightened bird, frantically taking flight.

I feel empty. I long for him and what he gave me. Yet I succumb to the lustful stares of strangers. I want to turn away, break their stares into tiny little pieces, shatter them into a million shards of glass. And maybe, just maybe, I can catch a remnant, a relic, with its sharp edges breaking my skin and releasing a fiery stream of red.

Coda

Danielle Watkins

This play, I have read before. Now, I read with a new perspective, a rejuvenated eyesight—I keep turning pages.

Melancholy music like the tiny bells of a music box seep into my brain from my earbuds.

Despair crept over me as death overtook the daughter, spilling over her pale skin like milk. I saw regret wash over the king, baptizing him with dark water. Born again into a world of despair. His constant child, his amaranth, now fading into darkness. The lachrymose music swells to a crescendo, somehow in tune with the text.

As the vocalist's anguished notes dwindle down to a mere whisper, she breathes no more. Yet, the piano reenters and continues to play, not joyfully, not triumphantly, but simply the same as before.

Even now, fingers glide, moving the piece to its destination.



Ballycastle, Northern Ireland

Jacqueline Kelley

Time To Rise

Gabriela Baron

It was the first time I had ever seen one. I couldn't look away from the orange trees, taking note of every leaf, branch, and fruit. Observing it like a painter. A bundle of three looked almost like a face. I finished reading a vignette from "The House on Mango Street" and picked up one of the oranges that had fallen. January was the peak season in Seville, so I figured I'd take advantage. I brushed off some dirt and peeled the rind in a spiral, the citrus juice spritzing onto me like perfume. When I popped a piece into my mouth, the first bite attacked me with flavor, and I scrunched up my face, unable to handle it. I spat the remaining orange bits in my mouth onto the floor. My new neighbors walked by on the busy street San Jacinto, greeting each other with two kisses on the cheek. As I was cleaning up my mess, I heard footsteps approaching me, tapping on the cobblestone floor.

"Hija, las naranjas de estos árboles están muy agrias. No son para comer." The woman had fluffy grey hair and pearls so large they were weighing down her earlobes. She looked just like my abuela. I asked her in Spanish if she could repeat that (she had said it so quickly) and I learned that these oranges weren't actually for eating. Whoops. They were too bitter to eat straight so you used them instead to make marmalade.

Café Americano

"Whoever said homework doesn't exist when you're abroad was lying," my friend Kevin remarked, squinting at his computer screen. Kevin and I went to Providence College and had been friends since we took Intro to Lit together freshman year. We bonded over our favorite things only New Englanders would understand, like how we miss watching the Patriots, drinking an iced Dunkin' in the winter, and how we can't stand when people confuse Rhode Island for Long Island. I was so happy when I found out we both wanted to spend our junior spring semester in Seville. Luckily his homestay was only a few blocks down from mine, so we were able to meet up and hacer la tarea, which Kevin realized we actually had to do abroad. Homework in Spain? Go figure.

Kevin and I both had earphones in, trying to block out the hustle and bustle that filled the restaurant "Café y Tapas." Besides a blonde girl in the corner who I recognized from my Tourism in Spain class, we were the only ones who brought laptops.

Our waitress approached us with menus. “Welcome to Café y Tapas, can I get you something to drink?” She said in perfect English.

“Two café americanos, por favor,” I answered for both Kevin and me. I hoped by the end of these three months I would stop speaking in Spanglish.

We scanned the food menu. The beginning looked promising: paella, patatas bravas, and calamari. But then I got to the last page: nachos, Caesar salads, burgers, and pizza. Yup, definitely a tourist trap. I confirmed this later once I saw about five other “Café y Tapas” around my neighborhood. Kevin ordered nachos, fries, and a chocolate ice cream sundae for dessert. The blonde girl was eating the salad. She was fit and tan and looked like someone who ate non-dairy, gluten free cookies on a cheat day. I pretended like I was deliberating my choice. After what seemed like an appropriate amount of time I asked for the Caesar salad with the dressing on the side.

The service was definitely not like Starbucks or Panera Bread. We waited for at least 30 minutes before we got our meals.

“Hungry?” I asked Kevin who was shoveling down his food.

“Oh, uh, I guess.” He looked self-conscious. “What about you, you eat before coming?” He said, staring at my full plate.

“Yeah, I had a snack before,” I lied, dipping a piece of lettuce into the dressing, careful to not to drench it. “How has your host mom been?” I wanted to change the subject.

“She’s good. 81 years old and still killin’ it— she’s always making plans to see flamenco shows at “Teatro Flamenco Triana” or host family dinners. She also loves musical theatre, so we watch a lot of operas together—last night she played Barber of Seville on DVD. And it’s kinda fun teaching her how to use her phone. I just set up a WhatsApp account for her last night, so I can text her when I’m coming home instead of calling. She’s even knitting me a blanket for my room since it gets so cold at night with only a space heater. How about Mercedes, how’s she been?”

“She’s really nice, but we haven’t really bonded yet. Can’t tell if she likes me. It’s all just so different here,” I said. Going abroad was my first time actually being away from home. In Rhode Island my family would leave the TV on for my Yorkie so she “wouldn’t get lonely” when she was home alone. Here, I could only take 5-minute showers and Mercedes already had to remind me twice to turn off my bedroom lights when I leave the house. And well, there was the food situation...\

“Don’t sweat it, we’re only two weeks in,” Kevin encouraged me. “This is only the appetizer.”

Trimmed and Toned

It had been a little over a month since I had last met up with Kevin. Between joining a gym, going to class, and traveling on the weekends, it was hard to make time. We met up at “El Rinconcillo,” the oldest tapas bar in Seville, founded in 1670. It was so packed there was no place to sit. Everyone just stood around the bar while the waiter frantically scribbled the orders with white chalk on the table. We had graduated from the tourist trap “Café y Tapas” and were now more willing to order dishes with names we couldn’t pronounce. I got espinacas con garbanzos y bacalao con tomate, spinach with chickpeas and a tomato and cod dish.

“Tortilla con chorizo, risotto de boletus y langostinos, y queso de oveja, por fa,” Kevin shouted his order over the noise of the room. Normally, tapas are all meant to be shared. But since I had no choice in what Mercedes made me, I liked to pick out my own food when I had the chance. Kevin’s pork sausage tortilla, shrimp risotto, and goat cheese dishes weren’t exactly the healthy choices I was looking for.

“Ana, you sure you don’t want any of this?” Kevin mumbled with a mouthful of food.

“I’m all set, thanks.” With the way Kevin had been eating, I was surprised he hadn’t put on any weight. In fact, it was just the opposite. He looked lean and fit, his leg muscles more sculpted and defined than they were at PC. It must’ve been all the walking. Universidad de Sevilla was about a 20-minute walk from San Jacinto, Triana— 25 minutes if you walked at the leisurely pace of the residents. Seville was such a small city that you could almost always walk or bike to your destination. The walking didn’t seem to make a difference for me, though. The sleeves of my shirts were starting to feel tight around my arms and if I stared in the mirror long enough my legs started to resemble sausages. I looked like that appetizer pigs in a blanket.

After my two dishes I was still hungry, but I was ready to leave. “La cuenta, por favor.” I eventually got the waiter’s attention. Check please.

Fried, Fried, and More Fried

I could hear the splatters of grease making popping noises from the kitchen. It was almost

11pm, and Mercedes was just fixing up my dinner. I wasn't supposed to help with setting up. I readjusted my position on the dining room chair, trying to feel more comfortable in my Lucky Brand jeans. A few months ago, they had fit perfectly. Now my fat puffed up and spilled out from the sides like a soufflé. I tried pushing it back in. Mercedes's high-heels tapping on the tile floor broke my concentration. She held a tray with three plates and a glass of water.

"Toma, hija, pareces cansada y enferma." Spaniards had a very direct, "tell it like it is" way of speaking. It wasn't meant to be offensive at all, but I couldn't lie and say being told I looked tired and sick didn't hurt at times. I scanned the display in front of me: tortilla de patatas, fried chicken, croquetas de jamón, and gooey yogurt for desert. I craved a vegetable. But it was all fried, fried, and more fried food. My stomach instinctively grumbled as if it was telling me "No." Mercedes served herself the same meal with slightly smaller portion sizes. I couldn't understand how she stayed so slender. Just like Kevin, she could eat whatever she wanted and still managed to stay fit. She was always out and about, never wanting to sit still. She was in her 60s I had guessed, but her sleek bob, red lipstick, and glowy olive skin gave her so much vitality she looked immortal.

"Toma, hija," she said again, urging me to start before it got cold. I took a few bites of each, chewing slowly, hoping it would make me full faster. Before abroad, the only time I ever ate unhealthy food was at my abuela's house. I was a sucker for her buttery rice, rich dulce de leche spread, and cornbread. She knew her cornbread was my favorite, so she would make an extra batch for me when she baked it for Thanksgiving. Even though I would indulge at my abuela's, I was never a girl who had to watch her weight. In fact, I was always made fun of in middle school for my small stature. But I heard some people say abroad weight gain was worse than the freshman 15, and as a girl who's only 5 feet, I knew the weight would show quickly on me. And it was starting to. At least, that's what it felt like.

While sitting at the dinner table Mercedes shared with me that I was her 9th host kid, and the first girl she had ever had. All the boys had such hearty appetites, she explained to me. They would always ask for seconds and thirds. She didn't mind, she clarified. She would rather give too much than not enough.

Homesick

I retched over the bathroom toilet, but I had been throwing up for 45 minutes and there was nothing left to come out. My throat burned, and it hurt even more to swallow. I reached for my toothbrush and Colgate mint toothpaste to brush out the horrible, bitter taste. I figured my recent weekend trip was the culprit. That past weekend, I had travelled to Paris with Kevin. Romantic, I know,

but our relationship was strictly platonic.

When we were in Paris, one of Kevin's friends recommended this fondue place, Le Refuge des Fondus, and we figured we would give it a try. It had amazing reviews and the line was out the door. It was a super cool vibe: the waitresses had septum piercings and tattoos, the walls had writings scribbled all over— I think I made out a few Beatles lyrics— and it was so packed all the tables touched because there was no more space. We had to walk on top of the table to get to the other side.

We ordered a cheese fondue as a dip for bread and apples, and then another pot had hot oil to cook the raw steak. As someone who only knows how to make Ramen and cereal, I definitely did not cook the steak right. Had my dad, an internal medicine doctor, been there, I know he would have warned me of the risks. Kevin showed the signs first and then a few days later it hit me.

I put the toilet seat down and sat on the lid. The cold porcelain on my legs sent chills down my spine. I brought my legs up and hugged my knees. Half my time in Spain had passed by and I couldn't stop thinking about home. After throwing up everything in my system I felt like there was none of me left. Everything I'd ever eaten was flushed out. I thought about the time my little brother Jack, who I put in charge of watching the Pillsbury Doughboy cookies in the oven, got distracted and we ate the cookies anyways, scraping off the burnt bits. I could almost taste my dad's carne asada that my abuela taught him, passed down from generations, and my mom's famous apple pie and homemade vanilla ice cream she served every fourth of July. I was empty now.

I heard Mercedes's footsteps walk past the bathroom. My phone lit up from a text from Kevin and I realized another hour had gone by. I felt I could make it back to my room. When I walked in, I got a whiff of Mercedes's Angel Schlessler "Femme" perfume. On my desk was a tray holding a plate of plain rice, a banana, and water.

The Beep

"Hey Dad, I think I have food pois—"

"Ana! I'm sorry kiddo, do you think I could call you back in a bit?"

"Are you still seeing patients? It's 7pm your time, I figured you'd be done with your shift."

"No, I- I'm not at work sweetie. It's just a little hectic, is all."

"Wait, why do I hear beeps then in the background? It sounds like your

pager?” “Well, I, uhm...”

“Dad, what’s going on? Is everything ok?”

“Ana, abuela’s at the hospital—”

“She’s what? Is she ok? What happened? Dad tell me right no—”

“Please don’t be worried, this is why I didn’t want to tell you. It’s okay. She’s okay.

Please don’t get worked up about this. She caught pneumonia, but I assure you, Ana, she will be ok. She is on antibiotics and will rest up here for a few nights until she regains her strength. Everything is going to be ok.”

The phone call went static and a piercing noise rang in my ear. “Dad?” I looked at the screen. Disconnected.

Dinner Guest

Mercedes told me we were having a dinner guest tonight at 9. I made my way to the table and right on time I heard Mercedes’s keys at the door. She was wheeling in a young man, maybe early 30s.

“Ana, *esté es mi sobrino, Alejandro*,” she introduced me to her nephew. I almost tried to shake his hand and then stopped myself and gave him two kisses on the cheek. Mercedes excused herself from the table to grab the dinner. Alejandro was wearing a pullover shirt, stretchy jeans with an elastic waist, and wide, Velcro shoes. His arms were dangling on the arm rest of his wheelchair and his hands were curled into a fist.

“*Conoces el encierro de San Fermín?*” He asked me, and I nodded in response. I had learned about the tradition known as “The Running of the Bulls” in Pamplona in my Tourism in Spain class. It was one of the most dangerous festivals in Spain. Roughly 10 bulls are released into the streets and people travel from all over to outrun them. Many don’t make it back home.

He continued in Spanish, “I went 5 years ago with my friends. We thought we were tough. It’s a different feeling when you realize how helpless you are. I knew when tourists started trampling me, I wouldn’t be able to get out of the way. My friends were lucky, they were able to sprint away from the bulls. I was luckier, though, because I survived.” I was amazed at his positivity. Mercedes put down a plate of paella with fresh mussels and shrimp, a side of bread, and lentil soup. I thanked him for sharing his story and told him I was glad he was here.

Mercedes crouched down next to her nephew, scooping the soft paella, and blowing lightly on the spoon before feeding him. She caressed his balding

head and gave him a kiss on his temple. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

The Call

I had been on a bus ride to visit Granada for the weekend when my Dad texted me,

Can I call you?

On bus right now. Can you text it?

He was typing back. After a few minutes, the typing stopped. And then popped up again.

The three dots mocked me on my screen. My right leg bounced nervously. On the bus, some of the American students in my program were singing off-key to classics like “Sweet Caroline” and “American Pie,” others who were trying to sleep rolled their eyes in response, some were playing would you rather, and one girl even yelled out, “Where the hell’s my prize?!” when she got to the end of her Pringles can that had promised her a “surprise” at the bottom. She shook the can up and down ferociously and peered inside once more to double check. “Ugh, this is SO unfair,” she said in frustration. I texted my dad again,

You there? Dad? Hello? Please answer.

After a few minutes had gone by, I dialed his number. “Dad?”

“Hey, Ana. I— I don’t know how to tell you this. It’s about abuela. Your abuela was doing okay, slowly healing, but yesterday it got very bad. It all happened so fast. She was so ill she had to be revived. And then everything got worse. She passed away peacefully with mom, Jack, and me by her side at the hospital.”

“No, p-please Dad, no, this isn’t tru—”

“Honey, she was an incredible fighter. Very few people would have been able to survive under these circumstances. This was no way for her to live. We love you so much,” his voice cracked.

“I— I don’t know what to say,” I said in between cries, my breathing was fast and jagged like staccato notes. “Dad, I want to go home.”

That’s Life

I couldn’t remember the last time I had slept more than 4 hours at night. My eyes were so

puffy and heavy from crying I could barely keep them open. It was like this every night since hearing the news of my abuela. The conversation between my dad and me constantly replaying in my head, hurting me more each time. I thought about how I would never see her again. How this whole abroad experience was for nothing. How it did not matter if I came back fluent in Spanish because I would never have another conversation with her. She would always ask me to speak to her in Spanish, saying it was her one greatest wish. And I never did, too shy to make a stupid grammar mistake. She didn't know I did this all for her. She didn't know I was taking Literature and Cuisine, so I could come back and bake her a Spanish dish, and she could teach me how to make her cornbread. Her cornbread. I would never know how to make it. She didn't write down the recipe; she never used measurements. And she would always sprinkle something extra when no one was looking. "Abuela, did you just add something?" we'd always ask her. "El amor," she would joke. Love. When was the last time I told her I loved her? I must've right before I left for Spain. Hadn't I? Did she know?

Three knocks on my bedroom door broke my train of thought. Mercedes walked in with a cup of chamomile tea to help me sleep. She kissed my head like she had with Alejandro.

"Hija... lo siento mucho." She said she was sorry about my abuela. She sighed, sitting down at the foot of my twin bed. "Es la vida," she told me. That's life. Her response was refreshing. She wasn't reassuring me that "she's in a better place" or reminding me that "she lived a long life." There was no philosophical message, no fluff. My grandmother was taken from me before I had a chance to say goodbye. No matter the circumstances, or wherever she might be, the point was that she was gone. It wasn't beautiful. It wasn't symbolic. And there wasn't a damn good reason that could make me feel better. It was awful. And that was life.

Just What I Needed

11:12 am. My Literature and Cuisine class didn't end for another 18 minutes. I had been hiding in a bathroom stall for longer than what would seem to be a normal bathroom break. I didn't feel like learning about food I had no interest in making now. And it didn't help how suffocating the small classroom was. It was May in Seville which meant just about every day was 95 degrees. The windows were cracked open, but it was no use. My dark brown, thick hair clung to the back of my neck in moist chunks and my underarm sweat drenched my cotton T-shirt. Inside the bathroom stall someone had written "somos mujeres fuertes" in black sharpie with the Venus symbol below. "We're strong women." Ha. Speak for yourself, I guess. I got out of the bathroom once class had officially ended.

Kevin was standing outside the door. He had gathered the books I left on my desk and was holding my backpack in his hand. “Want to grab some vino tinto at Ovejas Negras?”

A glass of wine was exactly what I needed.

Semana Santa

Holy week is a high holiday in Seville. Today marked the first day: a week before Easter. It was going to be my first Easter away from home— my first holiday in general away from home, I realized. Mercedes wore dark stockings, a black dress, and patent leather pumps. There were no pastel yellows and purples in sight. Not even an Easter egg. Everyone else dressed formal too; all the men were wearing suit jackets and ties. It was admirable considering it was mid-April and about 90 degrees out. Mercedes served us torrijas and we went out on our balcony to watch the religious processions adorned with candles, sculptures of Jesus and Mary, and bright flowers. It was solemn but comforting at the same time. I took a bite of the torrija. They were kind of like a Spanish version of French toast except absolutely drenched in honey. It was so sweet and sticky it stuck to my lips. I didn’t care about the calories.

After eating, Mercedes and I walked to our local chapel “Parroquia de San Jacinto.” Everyone gathered together like the candles in the votive stand. It was full, but not cramped. I had room to breathe. As the priest gave his sermon, I was surprised to find out I could understand most of what he was saying. My Spanish comprehension had significantly improved, and I knew my dad would be happy. When the sermon was over I dropped two dollars in the votive stand and lit a candle for my abuela. Mercedes’s loving energy radiated as she stood beside me while I prayed. Te amo mucho, abuela. I love you.

Carrot Cake

It was May 5th, Mercedes’s birthday. Mercedes invited Alejandro, her sister Marta, and her brother-in law Rafael to come over for cake. Marta looked very similar to Mercedes, except she had hazel eyes. The same as Alejandro, her son. Mercedes’s were a dark chocolate brown. The sweet smell of the cake baking in the oven flowed into my nostrils. She had made her famous torta de zanahoria, carrot cake. Mercedes brought out the birthday cake, coated smoothly with white icing and topped with coconut. We all sang happy birthday together:

“Happy, happy, in your day
Little friend God bless you

May peace reign in your life
And that you have many more years”

Mercedes put her arm around us and encouraged us to join her in blowing out the candle flames. Their light was bright. I stood between Mercedes and Marta; two strong women beside me. Mercedes squeezed my shoulder, as if confirming I was one too. She served me a slice of cake

“Feliz, feliz en tu día
Amiguita que Dios te bendiga
Que reine la paz en tu vida

Y que cumplas muchos más” the size of my head. “Toma, hija,” she said. I smiled and ate every bite. I served myself another slice, but I wasn’t even hungry. I just didn’t want the night to end.

The Key Ingredient

On May 10th, my last day in Spain, Mercedes knocked on my door as I was zipping up my bulging suitcase. “Hija, ¿necesitas ayuda con algo antes de salir?”

I nodded, standing up. I actually did need her help with something. “¿Sabes como hacer una torta de maiz?” Do you know how to make cornbread?

I dunked my spoon in the corn meal mixture, performing a taste test before putting the cornbread in the oven. There was something missing. The chopped corn pieces added nice texture and there was just enough vanilla extract, but I knew it needed something salty to balance out the sweetness. Mercedes saw my furrowed brow and took out another spoon to help detect what was needed.

“¡Ay! Me olvidé. Que tonta soy,” Mercedes laughed, realizing she had forgotten a key ingredient. She turned to the fridge and brought out queso blanco, a salty cheese. Mercedes chopped up the cheese in little chunks and I then dropped the pieces in the gooey mix.

“Pruébala,” Mercedes urged me to taste it.

“¡...Eso es!” I exclaimed. That’s it! It tasted almost exactly like my abuela’s famous cornbread. Mercedes hugged me with excitement and I breathed in her “Femme” perfume for what might have been the last time.

Mercedes placed the golden bread in the oven and together we watched it rise.

Smile

Michele Koh Morollo

Wah Ye Gau had had a bad week, a bad couple of years in fact, but he hadn't expected it to end this way. He didn't know why he did what he did. Perhaps his name compelled him to. After all, Gau meant dog in Cantonese. His parents, superstitious watercress farmers, had worshipped green skinned, four-faced gods. Afraid these celestials would steal their only son, they named Gau after an animal, believing this would fool those gods into assuming their child a village mongrel, and thus ignore him.

Gau's colleague and neighbour Fu was now in triage. Seated on a blue plastic chair – part of a three-seater waiting room bench – in Wong Tai Sin Hospital, the anxiety Gau's face could not express egressed through his maniacal scratching at a piece of scotch tape that sealed a crack in the seat. His dull, droopy eyes and thin, straight lips would not divulge the contents of his mind or heart. He took out his mobile phone and dialed 999. Being arrested would mean losing his job, but at least a jail cell might keep him safe from the loan sharks. Gau tasted iron as his tongue ran over a particle lodged between his incisors. He stopped scratching the tape and started picking at his teeth with the long nail on his little finger instead.

The week before Chinese New Year had started out like any other.

On Monday, Gau arrived at The Gallant and entered the staff room, which was located behind the concierge desk at the fifth-floor lobby. For the last twelve years, he's been working six-day weeks at The Gallant, one of the tallest and most exclusive condominium complexes in Hong Kong. At 8:15 a.m., fifteen minutes past the start of the day shift, he walked into the changing room, which was really just a long curtain hung on a curved ceiling rail in a corner, and changed into his uniform. When he stepped out, he saw Fu coming towards him with a wagging finger.

"You're late for work again! Me, I was here early, at 7:30 a.m., you know?" said Fu who took the night shifts from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, and the 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift together with Gau on Saturdays.

"Aiyah, ai chai, if you can't even show up for work on time how are you going to get anywhere in life? Whoever can be trusted with little things can also be trusted with big things, and whoever is dishonest in little things will also be dishonest with big things. Luke 16:10," said Fu in Cantonese.

“Here, I bought an extra char siu bao for you. Enjoy.” Fu pushed the warm roast pork bun into Gau’s hand.

Though Fu, who was sixty and more than a decade older than Gau, offered his advice and the breakfast snack because he felt it was the right thing to do, Gau perceived his gestures as patronising. Feeling pleased that he had been helpful, Fu then flashed Gau one of his dazzling smiles and, with hands clasped behind his back, sauntered out of the staff room and towards the elevators humming a Teresa Teng song.

“Why is he always smiling? What’s he got to be so happy about?” thought Gau, who over the course of their association had become increasingly agitated by Fu’s optimism and buoyant disposition. He imagined the old man tripping and falling on his face. Perhaps he’d hurt his hip, quit smiling, and start walking the way Gau thought someone Fu’s age should – slowly and with some level of discomfort. Though Fu was scrawny and his hair all white, he had a spryness about him that Gau had never had, not even when he was younger. A firm believer in “early to bed, early to rise” Fu was never ever late for work, but often early. Gau didn’t think there was anything wrong in being a little late now and then, but over time, Fu’s consistent punctuality made him feel guilty about his own tardiness. Gau didn’t like feeling guilt – in fact he didn’t like feeling feelings period, even good ones, but especially bad ones – so he decided that the problem wasn’t his inability to show up on time, but the fact that Fu was a sanctimonious and self-satisfied peacock.

As doormen at The Gallant, their hours were long, their work mindless and monotonous. They received low pay and no respect, so Gau didn’t see what Fu had to smile or hum about, or why he was always in such high spirits. Two years ago, Fu had converted from Taoism to Christianity, and since then, had acquired the habit of quoting Bible verses, which annoyed Gau to no end. Gau also detested the nickname “ai chai” – “shortie” in Cantonese – that Fu had given him at some point.

Gau was a head-and-a-half shorter than Fu and of considerable girth. Sluggish and flabby, always hunched and dragging his feet, Gau was a sorry sight next to Fu who always looked much spiffier than him in their black pants, white shirts, and red ties. Though not technically a dwarf, at four-feet-eleven-inches, Gau was unusually short for a Hong Kong Chinese adult male. He perceived his shortness as a terrible affliction and believed it made others regard him as less than a man. Fu calling him “ai chai” only made him even more self-conscious about his diminished stature.

Both Gau and Fu lived in North Point, which was eleven subway stops

from Kowloon Station, the station nearest The Gallant. On Saturdays, when they both worked the day shift, they would ride the train together to North Point before parting ways and walking back to their respective abodes.

Fu lived with his wife, his unmarried daughter, his son, daughter-in-law, and his two grandchildren in a spacious, four-bedroom apartment in Provident Centre. The flat belonged to the son, a successful corporate lawyer, who out of filial piety and brotherly love had invited his parents and sister to come live together with him and his family. Not only did Fu not have to pay rent, he also received monthly spending money from his two dutiful children.

Upon discovering they were neighbours, Fu had once invited Gau to a home cooked meal with his family. Out of politeness, Gau accepted, but it had been a tedious and awkward affair. He sat stony-faced as the Fu family laughed about the children's antics and shared stories of family hikes and holidays. He nodded like he was paying attention when Fu's buck-toothed daughter, a history teacher, discussed land reclamation in Hong Kong. She clearly received her gift for lecturing from her father, Gau had thought. Fu's son and Fu's wife had asked Gau about his family, but when he mentioned "divorced" and "living alone", the questions stopped. That was the first and last time he accepted a dinner invitation from Fu.

A taciturn man, Gau found Fu's loquaciousness draining on their Saturday train rides home. He had tried excuses: "I have to get something from the shop, you go ahead without me" or "I have to use the toilet. Why don't you just leave first?" but Fu would follow Gau into the supermarket or wait for him at the entrance of The Gallant like they were best buddies. There was no escaping the old prattler.

Fu's subway soliloquys usually sounded something like this: "You know ai chai, I don't really need to work, but I love working. My children tell me, 'Pa, relax with Ma at home. We have the means to take care of you. You don't need to work so hard anymore.' But who wants to stay home and watch TV all day, right? I'll get bored. The next thing you know, I'll become senile," Fu chuckled as he often did at his own jokes. "Plus, I love all the wonderful people living in The Gallant. I can practice English and Mandarin with them. And Mr. Wu is such a good boss. You know ai chai, we're so lucky to be surrounded by all these elegant and friendly people. It's so good to be able to serve. To give them a smile. Add a little extra happiness to their lives. Who knows? I may be the only example of Jesus they see. I want to give joy to the world," he'd start singing the Christmas carol and making a grand, arm-opening gesture, which made the hairs on Gau's neck rise.

Gau wished he had the option to stay home watching TV all day, but

that was a luxury he couldn't afford. He lived two streets down from Fu, in a 180-square-foot bedsit on the fourth floor of a hazardous-looking, mould-covered tenement building with no name. He had a microwave, a hot plate, a tiny aluminum sink, a lumpy mattress set on a makeshift plywood bed, a small television mounted on the wall across from the bed, and little else. The bathroom, which he shared with two other residents, was located along the corridor outside his bedsit. Every day, when Gau walked through the lobby of The Gallant with its shiny Carrara marble columns and crystal chandeliers, or when he did his rounds inspecting the sky garden and swimming pool, he was reminded of how very pathetic his own living conditions were. Unlike Fu, Gau did not think the residents of The Gallant were "wonderful," and to "give them a smile" or "add a little extra happiness" to their already golden lives was the last thing he wanted to do. Residents rushing to work frequently rolled their eyes at Gau, because he was always too slow opening the door for them. Because Gau never smiled or said hello like he ought to, no one ever smiled or greeted him either. Gau thought they were all arrogant and intimidating, and didn't like any of them.

When he was getting acquainted with Fu, Gau had disclosed a number of things about himself, which he later regretted. He had told Fu that he was once married, but had divorced about ten years ago. That he had a son, but didn't pay child support. That his favourite thing to do was betting on horses. Worst of all, he had told Fu that he didn't believe in any kind of benevolent, supernatural being or beings, and that people weren't much different from animals. Now, Gau is convinced that his early revelations had given Fu the impression that he was a godless man in need of pity and salvation, and reasons to treat him like one.

On Monday night, Gau received a phone call from his sixteen-year-old son Peng, the only person who could temporarily alleviate his perpetual glumness. Peng asked his father how he was doing and reminded him to eat more nutritiously, then gleefully reported that he had passed his A-Levels and been accepted into a local university. Gau was thrilled at the news and told Peng he was proud of him. Peng then reminded his father that he had promised to help with the down payment that was needed to secure his place at the university.

"Ma is paying for the school fees, but you said you'd take care of the security deposit, remember? It's HK\$21,000, and I have to pay it to the university registrar the day after *yun siu zit* at the latest. But if you don't have the money, just let me know. I'll try asking Uncle Chan for a loan if you can't help."

Gau had barely enough money to pay his rent this month, and he was already overdue on the HK\$19,520 he owed the moneylender, but the thought of his boy asking his ex-wife's new boyfriend for assistance made him bristle.

“No need to ask that man! Of course I’ll help you with the deposit. Don’t worry Peng, I’ll take care of it. I’ll have the money ready for you by then,” said Gau hoping some miracle would enable him to secure this amount by *jyun siu zit* – the last day of the 15-day-long, Chinese New Year celebration.

“Thanks Pa. You’re the best! I promise, once I’m rich and famous, I’ll pay you back,” Peng teased. “Oh, and Pa, Ma told me to tell you, this year we are not having *nin saa maan* at our place. We’re going over to Uncle Chan’s house instead. And...” Peng hesitated “Ma and Uncle Chan are getting married next month.”

When Gau was a young man, his parents had hired a matchmaker who arranged for him to wed their distant cousin’s daughter, a girl named Sansan who had just arrived with her family to Hong Kong from a farming village in Guangdong. Gau, who had never been with a girl till then, could not believe his eyes when he saw his pretty new bride. Sansan was kind, hardworking, and took good care of him. Being married to her was the happiest time of his life. Gau had always thought to thank his parents for arranging the marriage, but he waited too long, and soon poor health took them both. They didn’t even get the chance to see their grandson Peng when he was born.

As the eldest daughter in her own family, Sansan always cooked the *nin saa maan* meal for the customary family reunion that took place on the eve of Chinese New Year. Sansan’s parents, her younger siblings, nieces, and nephews would gather at her home to feast and usher in the New Year with her and Peng. Out of goodwill, and because she thought it was important that Peng stay connected with his father, she had always included Gau. *Nin saa maan* was the only night of the year when Gau didn’t have to dine alone. But as soon as the meal ended, so did the illusion of family, and he would return to his rathole, wondering why he hadn’t at least tried to fix things with Sansan before she finally left him.

The matter of the university deposit troubled Gau and kept him up all night. On less than four hours of sleep, he showed up to work on Tuesday morning looking more lethargic than usual. That day, someone had vomited along the common corridor on the 46th floor. Two of the cleaning staff had called in sick, so Gau’s manager, a well-groomed man in his late twenties named Wallace Wu – Mr. Wu to his staff – sent Gau to take care of it. With the mop trolley, Gau rode the elevator up to the 46th floor, and slopped the mop over the vomit, missing a few spots. Once he was done, he waited for the elevator to take him back down to the lobby. It arrived packed with residents. Rather than wait for the next carriage, he squeezed himself and the mop trolley into a corner. He stood facing

a lanky pubescent Mainland Chinese girl wearing denim shorts and a tight, neon pink t-shirt with a yellow smiley face decal on it. She was chatting in Mandarin on her mobile phone. As two more residents crammed into the carriage, Gau was pushed closer to the girl. The top of his head ended where her neck began, and his eyes latched on to the smiley face, which reminded him for some reason, of Fu's grating smiles.

Fu was always delivering long sermons on the importance of being more positive no matter how bad one's circumstances, and chiding Gau on his inability to smile. "I know you don't feel like smiling. But even you fake a smile, it can change how you feel inside. Try it. A smile is the first step to solving your problems," Fu had told him more than once.

Gazing absentmindedly at that big smiley face and thinking about how he'd like to punch Fu and turn his stupid smile upside down, he hadn't noticed that the girl was now glowering. Her arms jerked forward, almost knocking him in the nose as she wrapped them tightly across her small chest, protectively forming an X across the round, smiley face. When the elevator door opened, the girl yelled "Kan shenme kan! Bian tai. Ser lang," at Gau as she exited in a huff. The other people in the elevator glared at him. Gau lowered his head and hurried out with cleaning tools in tow. He understood enough Mandarin to know that the girl had called him a pervert and a lecherous wolf. In the last year of his marriage, his wife had called him a lecherous wolf every time he tried to touch her. So he had given up. After the divorce, he had tried meeting new women, but whenever he attempted a smile, his tense diffidence and unease would contort his face into a creepy grimace that immediately put them off. Accepting that love was not for him, he had retreated into quiet bachelorhood, and took comfort from gambling instead.

After work that night, rather than go home, Gau went to the Hong Kong Jockey Club Off-course Betting Branch at Quarry Bay and dropped HK\$500 into the pool. He was always convinced that the next race would bring him a big windfall. Every time he gambled, he believed he was a step closer to changing the course of his life. When he lost yet again, he told himself it was because the horse wasn't feeling well, the jockey hadn't eaten a good breakfast, or that he had arrived at the betting station at the wrong time.

He had started betting on the horses two years before Sansan left him. Despite his constitution and dour temperament, he had won himself a lovely wife, and they had produced a handsome and intelligent son, so surely luck was on his side. At first, he placed modest bets of about HK\$50 a day, but not long after, he was compelled to increase his wagers. Soon he was borrowing, then stealing money from Sansan to gamble. No pushover, Sansan refused to support a husband

who squandered all their money, so she eventually filed for a divorce. After he separated from her and moved out of his family home, Gau spent most of his time alone. His meals consisted of white rice with pickled mustard leaves or instant noodles. He grew fat, lost much of the hair on the top of his head, and developed a habit of mumbling to himself as he moped around his bedsit.

On Tuesday morning, while having coffee in the staff room, Gau overheard a conversation between two young doormen, both recent hires at The Gallant. They were complaining about how unfair it was that they had to give up their day shifts to the most senior doorman during the first week of the Chinese New Year. It was a practice at The Gallant that only the most senior doorman be given the privilege of taking all the day shifts on the first week of the Chinese New Year, tending the lobby at its busiest.

“The first four days of Chinese New Year are the best days to work. That’s when you can collect the most lai see,” said one of the doormen referring to the red envelopes with money tokens that residents give the building’s staff at this time of the year. It was common knowledge among employees: the doorman who worked during the daytime that week would haul in the biggest bounty.

“The people living in The Gallant are some of the wealthiest in the city,” said the other young doorman. “I heard that last year Ah Yoke got almost HK\$35,000 from all the red envelopes he collected.”

Ah Yoke had been a doorman at The Gallant for sixteen years, four years longer than Gau, but last month, Ah Yoke retired. Gau realised that this year he was the most senior doorman. That meant that all the day shifts on that auspicious week would be his. The Gallant has 75 floors, he calculated, with ten units per floor. The average amount in each resident’s lai see was usually around HK\$30, though some of the more generous ones might give as much as HK\$200. Gau realised that he could possibly receive close to HK\$22,500, maybe more. He ran to check the roster and clapped softly when he saw his name on the whiteboard calendar for the day shifts from Monday through to Saturday on the week of Chinese New Year.

That evening, he walked home from the subway station feeling relieved that he would have some money coming in soon. He still had his gambling debt to pay off, but that could wait. He was glad that he could now help his son. As he approached the door of his hovel, he smelled something foul. On the floor he saw lumps of dog turd. Painted crudely in blood-like, red paint on his door were the words “Sei Gau” – dead dog –, and a note pinned below it with a fish-gutting knife – a reminder from the loan sharks: “Wah Ye Gau, pay up by jyun siu zit, or we’ll break your legs.”

On Thursday, just before noon, Mr. Wu summoned Gau into his office. A Frenchman living on the 46th floor had complained that his golf bag, which he had left along the common corridor, had disappeared. “Mr. Legrand said he saw you mopping the floor before his bag went missing on Tuesday night. Did you throw it out by mistake?” asked Wu.

Gau denied having done any such thing, and told Mr. Wu that all he did was clean up the mess as instructed.

Mr. Wu harrumphed and rubbed his chin. He looked like a boy examining a spider, deciding whether to let it go or kill it. “Another thing Gau, I was informed about an incident in the lift. I heard you upset a young girl. What was that all about?” Gau’s ears reddened as he explained to Wu that he had no idea why the girl had reacted the way she did.

“I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt on both counts, but if such things happen again, you’ll be in serious trouble,” said Wu, not looking at Gau but at a logbook on his desk. “You’re really not suited to be a doorman. The only reason I haven’t fired you yet is because you’ve worked here for so long. Residents have complained to me about your poor manners. You’d better start smiling more. Say hello to people for goodness sake! Otherwise you shouldn’t be working here. Seeing your face puts me a bad mood.” Wu raised his head and directed his stern eyes at Gau. “Next week, I’m putting you on the night shift,” said Wu.

“But, but, Mr. Wu, I am the most senior doorman. I should be given the day shift.” Gau’s jaw dropped so his mouth hung open in a way that made him look not shocked, but strangely catatonic.

“Yes, but these things can be changed as management sees fit. Just be grateful you still have a job,” said Wu before he dismissed Gau with a flick of his wrist.

On Friday evening, Gau sat on his bed and was about to tuck into a cup of instant noodles when his mobile phone rang. When he answered, a menacing male voice told him that he now owed HK\$20,000 after interest, and that Gau could say goodbye to his legs if didn’t pay up by the last day of the Chinese New Year. Terrified, he dropped the cup of noodles. The hot liquid scalded his hands and seeped right through his thin mattress, which soon smelled like Spicy Korean Shrimp. When he got up to get a kitchen rag, the phone rang again. This time it was Peng calling to invite Gau to his school graduation ceremony. He also asked his father when he could come round to get the money for his university down payment.

“Son, I’m sorry. I don’t have the money. You’ll have to ask your Ma or her boyfriend to help you. Pa wants to help, but I don’t have the money. I’m so sorry Peng, I’m so sorry,” Gau felt himself shrinking, becoming even shorter, less of a man than he already felt.

“Why didn’t you just say so before? Why did you say you would help me in the first place?” Peng was infuriated. “You’re always lying! I don’t ever want to talk to you again.” Peng hung up.

On Saturday, Gau showed up at work feeling as if his bones had accumulated extra weight. Seeing Fu looking as jaunty as ever only made him feel worse. At the end of the day, they rode the train together back to North Point. For the first five minutes of the journey Gau, addled by his troubles, didn’t hear anything Fu said. Then Fu mentioned Mr. Wu.

“Ai chai, I heard you got a dressing down from the boss yesterday. What happened?”

“Wu is an asshole. Some Frenchman on the 46th floor couldn’t find his golf bag, and Wu is blaming me. But it wasn’t me. This is a total injustice,” blurted Gau. To make it through the day, he had lulled himself into a state of numbness. But Fu’s query churned his anaesthetised mind, and now he felt a strange and uncontrollable panic welling up within him.

“Was it a red and white leather bag with a bull logo on the front?” asked Fu.

Gau nodded.

“Oh-oh. I know what happened. I was inspecting the common areas. You know residents are not supposed to block the corridors with their things, right? The bag looked so old, and it was in the middle of the floor, so I took it and placed it in the garbage area,” said Fu. “I didn’t mean to get you into trouble ai chai. Don’t worry, I will tell Mr. Wu it was me who threw the bag away, not you. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

Gau didn’t know what to make of this new information. He felt an ocean of darkness rising within him – anger and disbelief at Fu’s stupidity, indignation at being wrongfully blamed, deep sadness at the loss of his relationship with his son, and terror at the thought of losing his legs – but this maelstrom of emotions couldn’t escape through his face, or his movements, or his words. “Yes, you better tell Wu the truth,” he said with a barely discernable scowl. “Who told you about my meeting with Wu anyway?”

“Mr. Wu himself,” said Fu. “On Thursday evening, when I came to work, he called me into his office. He said he wants me to do your day shifts all of next

week. I told him that you have worked at The Gallant longer than me, so day shifts that week were meant for you. But he told me he had given you a scolding. He thinks you don't deserve that privilege. He said that my personality is more suitable for the festive season than yours, so he insisted I take all the day shifts on Chinese New Year."

Clogged with a conflation of rage and other intensely unpleasant emotions, Gau didn't know what to say or do. He saw a vision of himself in the train with his eyes at the level of Fu's kneecaps. He looked up and saw Fu's face transforming into a giant, yellow smiley face. He looked down and saw that his own legs were now two stumps. He had to use every ounce of strength in his arms to move a few inches. Down the next carriage, he saw Sansan locked in an embrace with a very tall man. Gau could not see this man's face, but saw that he was clutching a stack of horse betting tickets in one hand. Then came Peng dressed in rags, holding an upturned baseball cap and begging the passengers for spare change. Peng spotted his legless father and started yelling. "Sei Gau. Sei Gau. It's all your fault. I hate you, I disown you!"

Fu's mouth was moving and he was wagging that finger of his at Gau again. "You must smile more ai chai. If you keep up that long face of yours, it's a matter of time before Wu fires you. If you don't make an effort to be more cheerful, nothing good will come your way, you know? Ai chai, are you listening to me?"

All Gau could see was Fu's wagging index finger.

The pointer bobbed like a cruel metronome, a taunting reminder of the loan sharks' impending visit. The bony appendage ticked derisively like the second hand of a faulty clock, signaling all the petty transgressions and crimes of impassivity that had shaped his wretched existence. In a daze, Gau lunged at Fu's animated digit, his jaw clamped down hard on the tip, and he heard a nail crack. He spat out the tip of Fu's finger. The taste of iron and Fu's scream jolted him back to his senses. At that moment, the train arrived at Diamond Hill station and the doors opened. Fu had gone limp from shock. Gau swooped up the severed fingertip from the floor, put his right arm around Fu and supported him as they shuffled out of the train, through the station, and up onto the street. Gau took off his shirt and wrapped it around Fu's finger, hailed a taxi, jumped in with Fu before the driver could notice the blood, and brought his friend to the nearest hospital.

Just as Gau finally succeeded in dislodging what was stuck between his incisors, the police entered the waiting room. They announced that they were looking for Wah Ye Gau. Like a schoolboy in class, Gau put his hand up. He stood

up straight and walked confidently towards the policemen, took a deep breath, and smiled the most beautiful, bloody smile.

V Formation

Sofia Amaral

I could feel the breakfast sandwich churning in my stomach the entire ride there. Being only fourteen, I did not have the luxury of driving myself to the field as many of the upperclassmen did. There I sat in the passenger seat of my mom's candy apple red SUV, nervously clutching my backpack that was adorned with the logo of my town's youth soccer club. "Farmington's League for Farmington's Future," it read. I had never gone out for any premier or elite soccer leagues, whether it had been out of fear of rejection or sheer laziness I'll never know, but I took advantage of the resources available to me and went through the motions of recreational and later select soccer from the time I was able to kick a ball.

My town consisted of a lot of suburban white people who were all entirely convinced they were raising all-star athletes. My father was one of those people, but he didn't stick around very long to see the result. Their children all played two or three sports each, living competitive lifestyles that required thorough fitness regimes and sugar-free cereals. I, on the other hand, grew up packing Fun Dip in my soccer bag and cutting across the field on the warmup lap when my coach's head was turned in a pathetic attempt to mask my overt lack of athleticism.

I loved the sport and my teammates; girls I had grown up with and knew me on a much deeper level than many of my other friends, as they had the experience of hearing me curse under my breath at the slightest request of being prompted to anything even remotely strenuous and watching me turn beet red from exhaustion after attempting to do so.

It hadn't always been like this for me. Until I was about ten years old, I was the star player on every team I had ever been on. At age nine, I was being recruited for premier leagues. I was the coach's daughter, got all the playing time, was always appointed to be starting center forward, and ran circles around the other girls my age. My jersey bore the name of my father's office; "Brady-Aldridge, LLC."

He was the sponsor of the team and of course the head coach, acting as though he was the Father of the Year all while demonstrating his social pull and socioeconomic status as a prominent lawyer in the area. He put on a nice front, but his temper always had the tendency to get the better of him. Girls would report back to their parents about the language he'd use on the sidelines in response to poor playing.

My mother was a recluse, whether that be by choice or as a result of when my dad left, and much of my lack of interconnectedness and socialness most likely was a result of her nurture. I never truly understood how things worked, especially in high school. I did not understand the necessity of being put together, both mentally and physically, social hierarchies, the art of networking and advocating for myself, or basic pop culture and social norms that so many other kids my age were familiar with.

From the seventh grade, I struggled with suffocating anxiety stemming from my overt awe at the harsh reality of the world, and the reality that was the nightmare I had thought I had been born into. By the time May of 8th grade rolled around, I would wake up begging my mom not to take me to school. The torture I described of Western Hills Middle School was enough to persuade my mom that I needed a fresh start at an elite private high school in a neighboring city.

Driving in the car that day on the way to captain's practice, my mind was racing, as I wished for nothing more than to possess that natural ability and confidence that I had once had as a child. It was my first year at a new school, having left my town's junior high school to enter a new private high school for the first time in my life. "La Salle Academy, a nationally recognized school of excellence!" rang the answering machine whenever you called up. I had received a substantial amount of financial aid and scholarship money; sometimes being poor and smart was a good combination to have. Besides, entities like La Salle thrived off of single-parent households, as it was a good marketing technique to publicize that all walks of life were accepted from different demographic backgrounds. I was aware that I was something like a charity case and in no way financially or socially able to compete with some of the likes of the community, but the familiarity of my sport appeared comforting to me, so I naturally took advantage of this opportunity. My estranged father was elated over such a prestigious acceptance.

Captain's practice was just that, an independently run, student-led practice in order to prepare us incoming freshmen for tryouts, and to warm up the rest of the returning team. It was no doubt simply an exertion of newfound power of the rising seniors, the first time they would be able to stretch their wings and take over their reign as captains of the team.

We pulled into the entrance of the state park where the practice was to be held, unsure as to where to go. Before us were a plethora of winding paved roads, open fields, and an overwhelming abundance of wooded terrain. There were no markers as to where to go or what was taking place in each area, so my mom simply stumbled upon the parking lot having seen a few faces of girls my age in soccer attire.

Mila and Abby hadn't gone to school with me, but I had known them both from soccer in years prior. Mila's older sister was the star of the team and she was only a grade ahead of us. A sophomore, her curly head of hair and toned physique made her the most desired girl of her class. Even upperclassmen knew who she was, exuding a natural confidence and athleticism that was practically magnetic.

Mila was even prettier than her older sister, and a better athlete too. I had always been intimidated by her from our preschool days when she used to bully me on the swingset of the playground at the church. Walking onto that field with my town team backpack on and fluorescent yellow ball, I felt the same vivid terror I felt when I was four, having been told I was not permitted to go under the slide with the self-proclaimed cool girls. I was intimidated to my core, but was comforted by Mila and Abby who were being overly friendly in an attempt to make friends and appear personable, social skills I had not quite mastered yet. I, on the other hand, hardly uttered a peep and stuck with the familiarity of their company, killing whatever down time we had desperately holding onto the tiniest shred of comfort I could grapple.

After a few basic dribbling drills that only minutely emphasized my lack of natural skill, the head captain suggested the warm-up run. She was the older sister of a friend of mine, a tall lanky brunette with legs probably close to the height of my entire torso and a \$30 LuluLemon headband holding back her brown locks in a tight ponytail. We were never very close, so for the sake of maintaining her ominous authority she pretended as if I didn't exist. Just as well, because after that afternoon she probably wished I never had.

"Oh my gosh, I'm dreading this," said a voice a little ways behind me as we lined up in pairs for the run. I was relieved to know that someone other than myself was not always up for recreational exercise. The line was about fifteen girls deep on each side, running in pairs to ensure that everybody was accounted for. Newcomers were towards the end, except for Mila who had already taken her rightful place towards the front of the line alongside her sister.

"Alright girls, remain side by side, today's run will only be a mile to get us all used to the area and then Thursday we'll up it to a mile and a half. Make sure you're all bringing enough water. We'll keep things a little easy today but the next few weeks won't be as relaxed" boomed the captain, addressing the entirety of the squad. Two shorter blondes stayed close by her at all times, one a junior and the other a senior, perhaps a couple of loyal minions she had accrued given her social standing.

We began running, and I held my own for the beginning. I ran alongside

Abby. It was reassuring to have her there and know that even if she was judging me, she'd never make it known.

Throughout the duration of the run, the lines shifted. Girls who were keeping up better made it towards the front as they began to run out of stride with their intended partners. Though it was just a warmup, us ninth graders felt the need to show our abilities in any way possible, including something that appeared as low-maintenance as this. Abby soon ended up a few paces in front of me, about two girls ahead. I could see the redhead she had paired up with and envied the effortless messiness of the way her hair was tied into its bun, lazy but showing no sign of falling out.

I, however, was both lazy and rapidly falling out of line. Before long, I was second to last, the only two behind me being goaltenders. The plush gloves they were wearing mocked me, giving them a free pass for their pace as their position obviously did not require the speed or endurance as mine.

About ten minutes in, my body could no longer push itself. My lungs were burning and I could feel the beads of sweat rolling off my forehead in the sweltering August sun. The voice in my head kept repeating that it's all just a mind-game and that this run would be over soon, but with no sign of the practice field we had begun at in sight things began to seem hopeless.

"I'll just stop and catch my breath for all of thirty seconds" I told myself. I have the tendency to grant myself little breaks as a reward for very small feats, a fatal flaw that has cost me my self-respect on numerous occasions.

Needless to say, this was one of those times. I stopped for what I told myself would only be a second to regain my composure, and before long I had completely lost sight of the rest of the line. I began to follow the imprints of cleats in the damp dirt until a variety of forks in the road proved to me something I had already begun to suspect moments prior; I was completely lost.

I walked along, ashamed and humiliated, but also reassured that at least I didn't have to endure that God awful run anymore with those rich and pretty snobs. My ponytail did not fall the same way as theirs' no matter how many times I adjusted it. I took my hair down and pulled it back into a low bun and trekked on.

I thought of my dad and what he would do or say if he was trotting there alongside me. He'd probably grit his teeth and say some things he would take back later during a moment of lucidity void of his bipolar disorder symptoms. I remember watching his girlfriend's daughter hide in the closet of their house when he was scolding her, and wondering if he had ever physically abused her or if her reaction was just embellished. He was a large guy, scary when agitated and

especially harsh when disappointed. Luckily I never really had to deal with much of him, as he grew to be virtually nonexistent in my world.

After an unknown amount of time had passed, I began to grow nervous that I in fact would not be able to navigate myself back to where we started and my mom had parked. I kept walking in an attempt to not let these thoughts get to me, as I knew I was overreacting due to the shame I felt over the situation. "I'll just go back and sneak into the drill they're doing and nobody will ever even notice I was gone," I thought.

Through the clearing of some trees, I could see a flock of black birds flying in a flawless V-formation. I couldn't help but take a lapse in stressing about my current situation to admire their effortless beauty. It was as though they had been born with the natural ability to fly perfectly in unison; everyone had their spot, and none were out of place. As I was captivated by the magnitude of the shape that flew by, I noticed a single stray bird struggling to keep up with the rest of the flock. It appeared desperate from a distance, and I silently hoped it would be able to reach its final destination alongside his fellow flyers.

My distraction broke as I heard the familiar crunch of leaves underfoot behind me and panic set in. Refusing to turn around, I picked up my pace and quickened to a slow jog out of fear that someone would judge me for walking leisurely while I was dressed in soccer apparel.

"Do you know where you're going?" a voice called out.

I turned around and to my surprise it was one of the goalies that had been behind me in line.

"Not really," I replied, embarrassed. "What happened to you?"

"I get dehydrated really easily- I threw up and told my friend to keep going but now I have no idea where to go. I was just kind of following you, what happened to you?" s he asked.

"I- uh, I play defense, not really in the best shape for a lengthy run like that. But, uh, if anybody asks, I'm going to say that you threw up and I stopped to help and we both fell behind, okay?"

"Sure, whatever you say. I'm Sara, by the way."

"No way, my name's Sarah too!" I replied.

We kept walking for a while and made friendly conversation. I learned that Sara was from a town that I had never heard of in my small state and I evaluated how sheltered I in fact was. I hadn't even realized that people drove so far to go to highschool.

Sara and I approached the road and a couple of joggers did a double take at us.

“Hey girls, is one of you named Sarah?”

“We both are!” we exclaimed in unison, almost like out of a cheesy sitcom.

“Well, your team is looking for you, they’re driving around here somewhere.”

I felt a pit at the bottom of my stomach. Sara remained calm and collected, letting this loaded news roll off her back as if she didn’t have a care in the world. I was mortified at the thought of returning to the field and having to face the others after something as embarrassing as this especially as we had been gone for so long.

A large silver F-150 pickup truck drove by almost immediately after our encounter with the joggers with a girl from the team sitting in its bed. “I found them!!!!” she bellowed into the cellphone that was pressed up to her ear. She gestured for us to get in the truck with her, and I hopped in fighting back tears.

By the time we made it back, practice had ended. In fact, they had cancelled practice and called the police because Mila and Abby noticed I had never come back and alerted the senior girls. In a weird way, I was flattered they noticed my absence. In another, more burning way, I have never felt the humiliation I did unloading from the bed of that pickup truck and seeing my mother screaming hysterically on the phone with my grandmother, causing a scene in front of the rest of the team. The older girls had even called their dads to come to the field and help do some damage control, as I later learned that I was one of the Cool Girl’s father’s expensive pickup trucks. I began a new high school with an unforgettably humiliating reputation.

Entering school a couple weeks later, I encountered Sara (no h) and could not help but feel the same sense of defeat and disappointment in myself that had somewhat diminished from the events in the woods that day. I saw that she had secured her spot in the lunchroom with the soccer team, as I was clutching my brown bag looking for a friendly face.

“Hey, Sarah, over here!” she called and motioned to the empty seat next to her.

I reluctantly approached her and sat down. A few questionable looks from the girls around me, not all squad members, prompted me to initiate fight-or-flight mode. I addressed it first. Laughing at myself was second nature, so why not project it and voluntarily make myself the butt of the joke? The table erupted in laughter. My sense of humor had always been rather dry, and the self-

deprecating nature of my remarks relieved the tension and the outcast status I had been feeling. I was The Girl That Got Lost in the Woods, and I embraced that for my four years of high school. Turns out it was a great conversation starter, and I quickly learned that high schoolers love self-deprecating humor!

My junior year I was sitting on the patio at lunchtime with a few girlfriends and saw on Twitter that it was Sarah's birthday. I sent her a text, reciting a version of the same message we exchanged every special occasion from freshman year, "Happy birthday bud! Have a great day, make sure to stay away from those woods! Love you!" I pressed send, and across the way I saw the prospective soccer team for the upcoming fall stalk across the campus turf field. Overhead I noticed the familiar view of the black birds flying in the same breathtaking synchronization I had seen that end of summer and every summer since. It was that time of year again, and there was always a straggler or two.

Apri L'occio

Delaney Mayette

“I absolutely CANNOT believe you would do this, Gwen, what kind of person does something like this?”

Her vicious words rang in my head over and over again like the monotonous bell tone of my alarm. Even though it's consistent rings usually never succeed in waking me up in the morning, they are still annoying nonetheless. Normally, I have no trouble catching Z's, but on this chilly October evening, the plague of replay was cycling in my mind with no break for a snooze. I bet my mind would rest more easily if I was able to remove myself from the situation and return back to my house off-campus. I could have made myself a cup of piping hot peppermint tea (my favorite) and cozied up on the couch to call my parents. After sips and a vent session, I could then retreat to my own bedroom and sleep peacefully knowing that I was home and okay. Tonight was different. Tonight, my stomach was churning, and not because I ate some cheddar cheese before dinner, but because my previous safe haven, was cold and lonely like a wartime trench.

The battle continued as I tossed and turned in my bed with no sense of comfort. Puts sheets on: way too hot. Kicks sheets off: now it's cold, sticks one leg out over the comforter and cradles the sheets close to me: still unbearable. Moving side to side, my head throbbing like a metronome. Hit right, hit left, hit right, hit left...please dear God make it stop. The movie in my head began reeling the replay of events and I saw my landlord. It was move-in day.

The first time I saw Mr. Donatore, he was on our front porch watching one of his workmen repaint the side of the house a new shade of white. He stood there wearing a wrinkled pair of khaki slacks, brown slip-ons, and a dark brown leather jacket. His curly, jet black hair was tucked in under a bright orange newsboy cap. He stood tall, about six feet, and had a wide presence about him, demanding attention instantly.

“Hi, you must be Gwendolyn. It is nice to meet you, I am Antonio, but you call me Tony.” He spoke with a thick Italian accent that one could detect well before knowing that his name is Antonio Donatore. “You know, I have a beautiful niece named Gwendalina, that's very close to Gwendolyn, here a picture.” Taking out his phone, he showed me a picture of a little baby girl in a light pink onesie smiling at the camera. “Isn't she Bellissima?” I had to hold myself back from letting out a giggle or two. I wonder if he is like this all the time.

“Hi Mr. Donat— ”

“Please, call me Tony,”

“I’m sorry, Tony, I am Gwendolyn, but you can just call me Gwen. Thanks for coming up to visit and fix up the house for us. I really appreciate it,” I smiled at him, hoping that he would like me, and maybe lower my rent. Like that’s gonna happen.

He simpered, “Of course, anytime you need me, you call.” Pointing to the man painting the house, “I send any of my men to come to fix the house for you. Toilet not working? You call. Heat is not hot? You call. Water no running? You call. You want my mother’s homemade gravy? You call. Anything. You call.”

“I will be sure to call, thank you,” I squeaked, using my best customer service voice. You know, the voice you use when you are trying to please people and your pitch jumps up like eight octaves. That voice.

My two roommates, Vicky and Hazel, came out to the porch, giddy with excitement at the prospect of living off-campus for our final year of college. Seeing me for the first time since the summer, their eyes lit up.

“GWEN! HI!”

“We missed you so much! Come here!”

They both grabbed my arms and pulled me in for a tight squeeze. I was never much of a hugger, but Vicky and Hazel would never pass on the opportunity.

“How was your summer? Did you travel or do anything fun?” Vicky asked, reaching for my hair to twirl. She always loved my reddish curls.

“It was good, I interned at the hospital and waited tables at Sushi Sam’s. What about you?” I shouldn’t have bothered asking, I knew Vicky didn’t usually work over the summer. Her shimmery tan, freshly manicured nails, and brand new Steve Madden wedge sandals said it all.

“No job this summer, I first went to Fiji with my mom and her new boyfriend. He paid for us to go on a cruise together. Then I spent a few weeks in Cali to visit some friends from abroad. It was SO fun. That’s where I got this!” She flashed out her hand and there was silver bangle wrapped tightly around her tiny wrist and sitting on top of it was a huge shiny pearl. Absolutely beautiful.

“Wow that is a really nice bracelet,” I muttered, trying to fight back the envy growing in me like ivy branches.

“Thank you! We went pearl hunting at Jade Cove and the dive instructor found this one for me. It’s so big and pretty.” She couldn’t contain the excitement

or be humble about it. Her reactions simmered in my mind and fed my envy even more. I wish I had the time or money to travel. Maybe next year...

Hazel chimed in, “guys, we’ll have time to catch up in a sec, let’s look at the house again and draw for rooms!!” She jumped up and skipped to the door ready to check out the new landscape.

The house was exactly what we were looking for. It was a small with a little green lawn and a delicate rose garden next to the front porch, which was held up by two large Roman-like columns; very Italian. There was a tall pole holding the American flag out front that tilted to the right just a little too much. The inside was fully furnished to the point where we didn’t need to bring items like dishes, pots, cleaning supplies, tools, or even decorations. Tony said that his family used to live in the house until “greater opportunities arose” and they were able to upgrade to a home out in Barrington, RI. The inside looked like a picture-perfect image of the 1980s. Decorated by Mrs. Donatore, her taste was, what I can only describe as, shabby chic. Teal green sofas with burnt orange throw pillows sitting next to a dark cherry wood tv stand and coffee table. Scattered across the walls were frames with random portraits of Italian characters or specific places in Italy that Antonio told us were places his cousins lived? All of our bedrooms had light wooden paneling and mint green walls with dark orange tweed curtains that blocked any light from shining in. This family really had no concept of color combinations. The house was chock full of basic necessities, nice accessories, and lots of random crap. Tony seemed like a very giving landlord, although we still didn’t know much about him.

After touring the house and settling in, we all gathered in the kitchen so Tony could give us his last few words of advice. As we sat down, he pulled out a dusty dark red bottle of wine that looked so ancient, it may have been made when the house was built. The cream-colored label on the front was peeling off because it was beginning to lose its stick, and the letters were faded, but I could just make out the name of the bottle: Buon Amico — Good Friend.

“This bottle...this for you ladies for celebration! Listen to me, ah ladies, this house...is special. Love it, care for it, and treat it like a daughter or son.” He looked longingly at this bottle of wine as if it was his most prized possession. “You are more than welcome to explore and use the house however you would like, I actually encourage it. This house is full of so much mystery and history,” he paused for a second with a smirk on his face, “you never know what you might find here, hopefully, something worth telling a story about...” he paused, “eh good luck this year, I know you will all do good,” and with that, he stood up and began to gather his belongings to head out. We finally had our long-earned freedom.

I jolted awake. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. How do I change this? How do I make things right? Why are they so upset over this? The siege continued as I lay there in my bed, completely motionless, ready to burst at any moment. What did I do wrong? I pondered this question for quite some time. I heard Hazel get up to use the bathroom. I wish I could have sat up to run out and yell at her for making me feel like this, but laziness always trumps will power. As my eyes got heavy, my head sank into the flannel sheet on my pillow. I looked for comfort in the warmth of my bed, but the night was still cold. The movie reel played again...

The leaves were changing colors to those beautiful, vibrant reds and yellows before they fell peacefully to the ground pleasing us with the crunching sound of our shoes crushing them. Usually, students don't have as many duties and responsibilities this time around and enjoy fun fall activities like picking pumpkins and eating freshly baked apple cider donuts. After a day of apple picking and shopping at the local farmers market, Vicky, Hazel, and I decided to go out to dinner. We went to Niente Come a Casa, or Maximo's as we called it after the owner. Maximo's is a quaint little Italian restaurant down the street from the house. We were almost regulars there, not only because we love Italian food, but also because none of us can cook as we all grew up with the privilege of having mothers who made dinner for us every night. With no will to learn to make food for ourselves, eating out was a regular occurrence, especially since the food at Maximo's is cheap and "Bellissima" as Tony would say. We also liked that the short walk from our house meant that we could have a glass of wine or two for dinner and not have to worry about driving back. A win for Hazel especially since their house chardonnay is her favorite. We sat down, ordering drinks and some pasta dishes per Maximo's recommendations.

Vicky slurped up a string of cheese from her four cheese gnocchi, "Wouldn't it be fun to travel to Italy? All the amazing food, and, of course, Italian guys!" As a girl who has been a lone wolf her entire life, Vicky's obsession with boys was quite comical.

"I personally would be interested in shopping," Hazel chimed in. "Valentina, Versace, Bottega Veneta, I would love to wander around and window shop all day long, maybe buy a sweet new leather purse." As one of the worst impulsive buyers I know, her online shopping addiction is one that I wish there was medication for.

"I think I'd love to see all the ancient ruins like Pompeii in Naples, or the Colosseum in Rome. I bet the countryside is so beautiful." I added, feeling like a

black sheep. The thoughts of Italy seemed so surreal to me. I often envision what a trip would be like. Sadly, I still have a bank account to fill before I can dump it all in on an overpriced plane ticket.

When we returned to the house, we all plopped onto the couch in the living room and got ready to watch Jeopardy, Vicky's favorite tv show even though she never gets any of the questions right. The light in the room made the darkness through the windows daunting, and I couldn't stop turning my head every time I saw a light drive by. The open space of the house was an odd feeling compared to your typical cozy corner in a dorm room. Something to get used to.

"Hey guys, should we open that bottle of wine that Tony gave us?" Hazel looked us with her eyes wide. "I'd be interested to try it..."

"I'm doooooown" Vicky slurred. She was already a few glasses in. They both stared at me waiting for a yes.

"I forgot about that bottle...does it look okay to drink?"

"Relax Gwen, it's just wine. How bad can it be?"

"Also it's free so who cares? We should totally drink it."

"Okay," I scanned the room. "Does anyone have a wine opener?" I knew we didn't. The only kind of wine we drank was the cheap crap you could buy at any gas station. Always with a screw top and a bitter aftertaste.

"Shoot, no." Vicky laughed. "Why do they have to make wine bottles with damn corks..."

"I don't either." Hazel's sunk into the old cushions giggling. "Gwen, can you look around the kitchen for one? I'm sure there is one somewhere around here."

"Um sure I guess..." Rolling my eyes and standing up from the warmth of my seat, I walked towards the kitchen.

All of the cabinets had not yet been organized, despite being a month into the semester, and dishes were scattered carelessly with pots among coffee mugs and mixing bowls. No sight for a neat freak. I winced as I pulled out every drawer and cabinet afraid that a glass or bowl would launch itself at my face or land on my toes, the worst kind of pain. With no luck in the kitchen, I ventured down the stairs to our unused, but furnished basement. There was a small kitchenette that we refused to use due to the mounds of dust and spider webs strewn across every surface. As I shifted through the messy drawers, I finally found a real bottle opener. Yes! I sure hope this damn thing works. I can't believe they asked me to get up and look for... my eyes peeled off the opener back into

the messy drawer where it once sat. Sitting at the bottom under piles of corks and vegetable peelers was a bulky envelope. The paper, once white, was matted and wrinkled soft. Written in scratchy ink was “Maximo’s” smeared across the front of the envelope. Pulling it out of the drawer, I opened the envelope to see a glowing wad of cash banded together with a black ponytail holder. I counted the cash. \$1,000.

My body bent forward in shock. The thought of that moment, looking at the green ball of opportunity, made my stomach drop like I was falling on a roller coaster. Reaching for some water at my nightstand, my phone dropped onto the floor. The bright line hurt my eyes that had been used to the darkness. 2:05 a.m. The night was not over yet. How can it only be 2:05? Laying back on my bed, staring at the ceiling, my inevitable misfortunes were forming tears in my eyes. How could things have gone differently? I tried to close my eyes, but the darkness could not shield me from seeing Vicky and Hazel sitting in the living room when I went back upstairs...

“Hey guys, I found the bottle opener, but I—”

“YES! Let’s open that damn bottle. I’m starting to lose my buzz.” Hazel leaps up from the couch with a sudden energy that she did not have prior to needing a bottle opener. Snatching the device from my hand, she pranced into the kitchen to retrieve the bottle.

“Wait, Gwen, what’s that?” Vicky points to the envelope hanging in my shaking hands. “That’s what I was going to tell you about. It’s an envelope with cash in it!”

“Wait, you found money!? How much!?” Hazel yells running back into the room. “Yeah Gwen, this is so cool! How much is in the envelope?”

“Well it’s \$1,000, but I think it might be Maximo’s or something shady related to Tony or—”

“\$1,000! This is amazing! Best day ever!”

“Guys, that’s like \$330 each!”

“But wait, hold on.” I sputtered. “I don’t think this should be split between us. First, I found it, and I want to keep it for a bit and do some investigating on where it came from.” “What are you talking about Gwen?” Vicky sat up, raising her eyebrows.

“Tony said that we can explore and use the house however we like;

he even encouraged it to us. I don't think he would have unintentionally left something here for us to not have." Hazel crossed her arms intrigued with what I was going to say next.

"No way. We shouldn't make a rash decision right now. This is quite a bit of money and I don't think this should be taken lightly."

"Well how about you split the money now, and we can all return it later if we find something wrong with it."

"Yeah, I like Vicky's idea. Let's do that."

"I'm not going to do that. The money is staying with me for now, until I figure out what it is." In frustration, I ran upstairs to my bedroom, not even bothering to listen to the whispers exchanged about me in the living room.

My puffy eyes peeled open again. I have to get out of here. I slid out of bed and fell limp to the floor. Putting on my slippers and a coat. I meandered my way down the stairs and out onto that front porch where it all started. As I sat there shivering in the cold, the wind prickling my face like needles, I couldn't stop replaying the scene of events in my head. After keeping the money with no luck of figuring out where it had come from or who it belonged to, Vicky and Hazel grew more and more cold like the days transitioning from fall to winter. November was approaching quickly. How can they turn on me so quickly? I've known them since freshman year.

When my body had enough of the frosty wind, I stood up and went back inside to my room in the hopes of getting some sleep during this restless night, but all I could think about was the fight...

"I absolutely CANNOT believe you would do this, Gwen, what kind of person does something like this?"

Hazel jumped in. "This shouldn't even be a big deal, Gwen." She spoke to me, but her eyes were looking towards the ceiling and never at my face. "You're the one causing all these problems and you need to make it right."

"I feel so disrespected right now." Vicky huffed. She glared at me, tucking back her long dark brown waves behind her tiny ears. Her nostrils flared in frustration.

We sat around the kitchen table with nothing but the envelope in front of us. Hazel and Vicky's chairs were close to touching while mine was alone across the table. Two against one. Always a losing situation.

"I...I...don't understand what, exactly, you're mad about. It's just paper. You aren't losing anything in this situation," I muttered, trying to shake off the sting of her piercing glare.

"Just paper?" She stood up leaning over the table so that she was taller than me. "You don't get it, Gwen, and that's a problem. Open your eyes, this is money we're talking about. You need to not be so selfish."

Vicky's face grew redder by the second. Her fists clenched tight as her long freshly manicured nails dug into the hot palms of her hands. That cannot be a pleasant feeling, I thought. She could break a nail with that tight grip. There goes sixty-five dollars down the drain. I looked down at my short, rigid, unpainted nails. Immediately embarrassed, I placed them under the table between my shaking legs. Please get me out, right now. Vicky chimed in.

"Gwen, listen, I hate that it's come to this, I really do, but the only way to make this right is by splitting the money. That's the only way..."

She stared at me with her brown eyes wide open and her head jolted forward with sass. Her hands open leaving her palms facing up. They were ready to receive.

"Um...um..." I mumbled. Was that really the only way?

Hazel cut me off. "Look, Gwen. Here's how it's gonna go. You found this money and kept it from us. Now you have to share."

"Okay, but I was the one who found it, I feel like I have a right to figure out what to do with it."

She scoffed. "That doesn't matter now. Maximo refused to tell you what the money was for and said to keep it. Now you need to split it." Still staring at the ceiling, she kept pointing her finger back and forth from my face to the envelope.

Vicky looked up. "Gwen, it's simple. This is our house. The money was found in our house. Therefore it is ours."

"That has nothing to do with this situation. I found the money and am deciding what to do with it. I just needed some time. I was thinking of—"

"It's not your decision Gwen!" Hazel was seething.

"You were just going to use it on yourself Gwen, we know that. You were gonna wait until we forgot about it, and then screw us over and keep it for yourself. That's selfish. You're selfish." Vicky's words slapped me across the face.

"It's not right Gwen, you didn't even want to live off campus, and you got the best bedroom, and now you get extra money too? That's not right." I remember getting a wasp sting when I was a kid running up the stairs to a water slide, but Hazel's words felt so much worse.

“I hadn’t finished what I was going to say, but I was planning on giving it to Tony or donating it to charity.” The intention was never to be selfish. That wasn’t me. How can they assume that about me so quickly?

“How could you say something like that? You clearly don’t get what the problem is here.” She laughed in frustration as if what I had said was the most idiotic thing she ever heard. “You’re only saying that to make us feel shitty for wanting a stake in the money. This isn’t about you G wen, it’s about us.”

“How could those be your choices? This isn’t what friends do.”

Did they really just criticize me for considering giving money to charity?

“Okay! Fine! If you want the money, we can split it...whatever. I’m going to bed.” I stormed up the stairs and slammed the door to let the stream flow from my eyes.

The scene faded out and I was wide awake again, shivering across my body. We had yet to turn the heat on because Hazel and Vicky didn’t want to pay for it just yet. Apparently, extra blankets should be enough to endure the brisk fall chills of Rhode Island in the nighttime. I found this to be easier said than done, but at least our bills are slightly lower. I can’t complain about that.

The thoughts filled my head again as I shifted positions. The throbbing continued to an unbearable state. I can’t do this anymore. I am done with this. Thinking back to three years of friendship. No success story of mine was congratulated. No struggle of mine was consoled. No good deed that I ever did or will do ever went uncriticized by them. I have no allies in this house. Was it all just superficial fun and games? I couldn’t take this anymore. I’m done laying in this trench. This is the final battle.

I shot out of bed and ran downstairs to the kitchen table, grabbing the envelope and putting it through the sleeves of my coat as I swung it around to the other side. After putting on my boots, I raced for the door and put my ammunition in place. Returning back inside, my roommates were still asleep, I made a cup of piping hot peppermint tea and curled up on the couch about ready to call my mom for another vent session.

As the sun began to rise, I watched from the living room window, facing the front yard, as the recycling truck pulled up to our curb. The giant claw reaching out to take the green bin with the neon blue top lifting it up and over into the abyss. Looking over at the flat envelope sitting next to me, I smiled. It’s over now. A fresh start.

Intrusive Thoughts

Josh Dhaliwal

If I could never think for the rest of my life, I'd probably be the happiest person alive. But here I am, trying to think of what boring shirt to wear with my boring pants. I also have to make sure my hair doesn't look like a mess but not too done or I'll be trying too hard. I grabbed my keys and got in for the worst 30 minutes of my Friday, my drive to school. It's bad enough that the road is so shoddily made that it's running the massage place out of business, but the traffic kills me. I'm inches away from a car at all times and the only place where I hit over 20 miles per hour is on the bridge. Every day I think about how easy it was to just turn the wheel and poof, that's it. The show is over. That's all folks. Thanks for coming. When I finally snap back into the real world, I forget that I've been waiting for a stop sign to turn green. Thankfully that's the home stretch of the drive and I was at school. It was just gonna be another day. A day that starts off like garbage, might I add because I have first-period gym. Because the first thing I want to do in the morning is lie about how many laps I ran and play badminton in a gymnasium that could use an AC or two. Last week, no one wanted to be the captains for the kickball team and our gym teacher asked why no one wanted to be captain. Some random kid said "well who wants to be in charge of the Titanic." It would also be great if our gym teacher didn't take his job as if he's training the marines. All I hear when we're running is, "Remember that there is no sadder sight than a young pessimist." I bet he couldn't even tell me who said that quote.

I take my time changing into my gym clothes because more time changing means less time playing badminton, an outstanding theory of mine. As I walk out of the locker room, I see everyone in pairs except for Janice. Oh, Janice. She was just that girl who would smile at you if you made eye contact. It didn't matter who you were, you couldn't hate Janice. Kids were always wondering how happy the family must've been at home, because they definitely had some cash to spend.

"Timmy you're with Janice. Come on chop, chop, we need to reach your target heart rate. Make sure you guys help each other stretch." I wished my target heart rate was zero. As I walked towards Janice I felt like someone whose phone went off in a movie theatre and everyone just stares. Each step was more awkward than the last. If I could jump off a building so I never have this walk I would take that deal any day of the week.

"Hi I'm Janice, it's really nice to meet you." How can someone be this happy? She put her hand out and I shook it and nodded. "Not much of a talker

are you?” She had a huge grin that you just couldn’t get rid of.

“Not really, princess.” She was taken aback by that and stood with a little less energy. We sat down and got ready for stretching. I can’t believe I have to grab the gross bottom part of the shoe so she can stretch her hamstring. I just made sure my eyes stayed looking at the ceiling so I wouldn’t be next on the cancel list that Twitter makes. Then I got behind her so I could stretch her arms out. As I’m stretching her arm I see a little tattoo DG. I ask her, “Dude why do you have a Dolce and Gabbana tattoo on your neck? That store sucks.” She laughed and sat up.

“It’s my dad’s initials.” She smiled.

“Oh, that’s nice. Where’s your mom’s initials? Do you not love her as much?” Those words are gonna swirl over my head in a couple of years when I have insomnia.

“Well, I don’t have my mom’s initials because I still get to see her every day.” Oh yeah. This is definitely a low point. What an absolute idiot I am.

“Oh shit I’m so sorry I’m a huge moron please forgive me.” Somebody really needed to get an AC for this gym because I was going to pass out soon.

She laughed and said, “Hey, don’t worry about it. You didn’t know. I don’t need to make a song and dance about it and let the world know.” I was glad she wasn’t upset but I continued to stare at her in confusion. I’ve seen her post pictures with her dad on Instagram for his birthday every year. “Are you wondering about how he’s on my Instagram?” Were my thoughts printed on my face?

“Oh yeah if you don’t mind,” I said with what I hoped was a less stupid-looking face.

“I got someone to photoshop me in pictures with him from years ago because I don’t really have any pictures with him besides as a baby.” She was a girl that at first glance seemed like her life was too perfect. She had a smile that was always attached to her face and a laugh that made you want to join. Yet her Instagram was full of pictures showing great memories that never even happened. There was so much to this girl I didn’t know, but it was oddly sobering to see her not as some perfect person but just as a little girl who wants her dad back.

Badminton is a pretty average game but it’s more interesting when the stakes are raised. In our game, whoever let the shuttlecock hit the floor would have to tell a fact or secret about themselves. It felt like some game you play at your first boy and girl hangout in 5th grade, but I enjoyed it. It was fun to learn so much

about someone. It's like a puzzle with so many little pieces making up the big picture. And who would have thought we'd have so much in common. What are the odds we only know how to play one song on the guitar and it's Enter Sandman by Metallica? I kept looking at the clock hoping time would go easy on me and slow down. I would've been fine with this badminton game with being the rest of my life but when the bell rang everyone stopped and started to put their rackets away. I walked towards Janice and put my hand out and she shook it. Did I hold for too long? I don't wanna be that guy who holds his handshakes too long.

"Good game Timmy," Janice said.

"Hey, who said you could say my name?"

"Oops sorry are we not on a first name basis yet?" She giggled.

"Not until you at least wine and dine me."

"Okay how about The Villa tonight at 8?" She asked.

"That sounds lovely." What. Just. What.

"Perfect, I'll see you there." She waved to me with just her fingers and it made me break out a smile.

The second period didn't have my attention for even a second. Was I actually going on a date with Janice? Of course not, it's just as friends. I think. Maybe she wants to meet one of my friends. Thinking about my friends, I have to tell them about this. As I walked to them, I thought about how they'd see me in a brand new light.

"Dude you're a fucking liar," all my friends laughed at me.

"I swear bro I'm going tonight I'll send you pictures."

"I'll bet you 20 bucks you're lying."

"Make it 40 then." Well, at least now I know how I'm gonna pay for this dinner.

The rest of the day flew by because I could not stop thinking about this date, or hang out, I don't mind whatever one it is, obviously.

But then I started to wonder, "how do I know I'm not being stood up?" Before those thoughts could take over my mind, one of Janice's friends came by and gave me a folded paper. I unfolded it and, in the neatest handwriting I've seen, read, "Can't wait to see you tonight. My number is underneath." It was definitely a date.

After being home for a couple of hours, I started to feel butterflies. It didn't help that Janice and I just texted to make sure we were actually going. This was really happening. Whenever I got nervous, I remind myself of a quote along the lines of "it's okay to have butterflies but you just have to make them in formation." Unless the formation was out of my mouth and into the toilet, I don't think the quote reigns true. As I was throwing up, the second thoughts started to kick in. I really shouldn't go. Those thoughts were interrupted to some keys jingling. I looked out the window and saw my mother's car. I prayed that she was in a good mood so I could go out. Once she opened the door, I asked the million-dollar question, "Hey mom can I go out tonight for dinner with some friends. I won't be back late."

"Yeah whatever don't be loud when you get back." My mom fell on the couch and broke open some of her special juice. At least that's one problem I won't have to deal with later. I walk upstairs and finally start to get ready. As I'm looking at myself in the mirror, I start to think about if I really want to go on this date. I feel incredibly weak from throwing up and it's a lot easier to just stay home and do nothing alone. But what if this date was the beginning of a beautiful loving relationship that lasts forever. Forever also meaning 2 years and 3 months. Why wouldn't I want to attach memories to songs and places when they'll become too painful to think about--

"Yo hurry up, I gotta take a huge dump." My brother slammed the door a few more times to get my attention as if I hadn't noticed. I was completely zoned out and didn't even realize I had just been staring at myself in the mirror for so long. I quickly put some Old Spice putty in my hair and hoped I found the perfect balance between flowing emo hair and gelled up boy band hair.

The restaurant she wanted to go to, The Villa, was in the middle of the city so I had to use New York public transportation, lucky me. New York is a melting pot full of oddballs and weird things. In any city, if a homeless person took his trousers off in a train and started to release the Kraken, the people would absolutely leave the train. In New York, you hand them your newspaper. Once I saw a car filled with smoke and a police officer trying to break the window open. I was worried someone had got trapped inside but boy was I wrong. It was just some guy hotboxing his car and he was trying to get rid of the smoke using his windshield wipers. That's New York.

The bus finally arrived and I saw an empty seat with my name on it. As I got comfortable, a well-dressed man in his 50s pushed his way next to me. He kept his briefcase on his lap and sat with a posture I could only dream of. He looked at

his phone and let out a huge sigh of exhaustion. To get my mind off of the date I decided to talk to him. “Rough day at work?” I asked.

“At work? No. Work is my sanctuary where I get to feel something at least. You want to know what’s really rough?” I wish I said no. What did I just get myself into?

“It’s rough having a controlling wife who always asks what you’re doing but if you ask she gets defensive and says I don’t trust her. And on top of that, she spends all the money I earn and I couldn’t even tell you the last nice thing she said to me. You know we don’t even sleep in the same room anymore.” Okay, this was just getting weird and way beyond my paygrade. “All we have is hallway sex.”

My eyes grew wide before I asked a question that I knew was going to regret. “What’s hallway sex?”

“It’s when you pass each other in the hallway and yell ‘fuck you!’” We burst out into laughter. “That sounds awful. I wish I could help but I’m going on my first date right now.” I couldn’t hold in my sly grin.

“Well let me tell you something son. A woman can make the rest of your life horrible until death or make you the happiest man on the planet. Just remember if this girl is the special one, be calm with her. One moment of patience, in a moment of anger, can save a thousand moments of regret. Now if you’ll excuse me, this is my stop. And have fun on your date.” He patted me on the shoulder and went on his way. The butterflies were finally starting to move into formation.

My stop came soon after I had to push through mountains of people just to get to the train station. As I’m walking, the person in front of me was yelling at his phone. He seemed Jamaican.

He yelled again, “NO NO LORD GOD FAWDA.” He composed himself before he continued. “Ajay can’t be dead. I just see Ajay last week.” This guy just found out someone, I assume, of importance to him just passed away and this is the first thing that goes through his mind. There’s just something so funny yet heartbreaking about that. The absurdity of the statement but how common it is. Like because he just saw his friend, he should be alive. The train was coming so I had to run. Although I’ll never see that tall Jamaican man ever again, I’ll always be thinking about him when I think about life.

I stood near the tracks when a 14-year-old walked up beside me. “Do you ever think about jumping?” He asked.

“Sometimes the thought pops in my head but I would never do it.”

“The same thing happens to me and I was scared there was something wrong with me.” “Hey, buddy there’s nothing wrong. My therapist told me it’s

called the call of the void. It only pops in your head because your brain is looking at all possible threats and checking them out. Your brain is actually showing you that this is something you aren't supposed to do." The kid stared at me, stunned as if I was the burning bush.

He ran back to his parents smiling and said "Mommy, daddy. This guy told me it's okay to have bad thoughts because it's normal. It's okay to think about jumping onto the tracks." You have got to be kidding me. The kid's parents face completely turned and as the massive, probably a world strongest man winner, dad walked towards me, I thought about jumping. Thankfully the wife stopped the man from bashing my brains in and I quickly got on the F train, safe and with no bruises, besides my ego.

While sitting on the train, I see a girl across from me crying hysterically. I thought she was just reading a really good story and had that melancholic ache in your heart because you don't know what to do now. But upon closer inspection, I realized the book she was reading the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, known as the DSM. She was reading a book full of mental disorders and crying. Either she was the most empathetic person and genuinely was hurt to see that people have these disorders or she was realizing all of them in herself. I wanted to hug her and tell her it's okay, but it's easier to just look away and act like nothing is happening. I mean it's New York. If you're having a shit day you can just cry and genuinely no one cares.

As I'm sitting on the train trying not to doze off, I heard a couple bickering at each other. I didn't want to look but it's hard not to. I peak over and see a built guy and his really short wife. If I squinted hard enough it almost looked like a dad with his daughter which made it so much funnier.

"I hate you! You're always mean to me when we're with my friends and you're mean to them too." I stopped watching them but kept listening. "I can't stand it anymore. You need me more than I need you and I've stuck by for too long." Jesus Christ this had to happen in the train. The built guy just looked at her baffled. He didn't say a single thing. He just sat back and looked out the window. The argument wasn't funny anymore but moreso heartbreaking. I never had a girlfriend before and it's hard to want one when relationships can end up like this. The awkward tension filled the air so I decided to leave a few stops early.

I could've waited for the train but I needed the fresh air. As I took the stairs outside, I caught looking at a man laying flat on his back and another guy on his phone next to him. "Hey is he okay?" I asked the guy on his phone.

"Oh him? He was cheating on his girlfriend for 2 years and last week she spent the night with another guy for the first time and he hasn't been the

same since. Pretty sure he hasn't touched a meal in days so he's just resting here." Suddenly I didn't feel bad anymore. I carried on my walk thinking about this guy. He was laying there looking as close to a corpse as possible but somehow slept like a baby when he was in another girl's bed.

I was only a block away and I felt a little too calm. Not like Hannibal Lector calm but a good type of calm. I saw The Villa from afar and realized I had finally made it. The day was already filled with memorable moments and this was the final huge moment. Relationships are a weird thing. I've always been scared but it feels different now. I saw the blurry figure dressed in white standing near the door. With each step I took, a clearer image started to form. At that moment, we locked eyes and she wasn't just that girl who seemed like they had it all going. Instead, I saw a future full of adventures and memories. And a future full of warmth, and without thinking about it, I walked up to Janice and smiled.

The Pink Bear

Eugene Franklin

It started like any other Saturday. Better, in fact, due to a rare dispensation from the sky's blockade of sunlight. Rob's seven-mile trek on the exercise bike usually only took around sixteen minutes, but the four heart palpitations that assailed him in the middle hinted that he'd be slow. Thirteen seconds slow. He'd had flutters every once in a while his whole life, but he'd never had them during a ride. Maybe he'd been more jarred by last night's discovery of his receding hairline than he'd thought.

Next came the novella submission. Due to an entry fee, he'd been waiting for weeks to enter his story in a contest. Money had been tight. With the credit card bill paid and reset for a new month, he was free to try his luck. As so often happened, though, eagerness got the best of him. He should've been on the lookout for his old nemesis: double spacing. It wasn't until after he clicked the button to submit that the nagging sensation of having forgotten to follow a rule stabbed him. He moved back to the web page, and there it was: entries had to be double-spaced. FUCK. He abhorred the format and never used it, but usually the literati demanded it. He'd even written himself a note on the spreadsheet document he used to keep track of all his rejections. Dumbass. Reminders only work when you check them first.

That's when his mood soured for good. He could've shrugged off the slow bike pace (he'd had slow days before) but the relentless battle to be published had been whittling his contentment. He'd already had an unpleasant ordeal with one unsympathetic contest staffer. Page numbers had done him in that time. He'd had to enter a second time and pay a second entry fee. He sent a message asking for a refund of the first, but all he received was a reply stating that they couldn't find his submission and asking what name it had been under. Despite repeated e-mails, he never got a response after that. So there it was on his online submission account: more than a year after the contest ended, it still showed that first entry as pending. And they'd kept his money. It hadn't been the end of the world, but it also hadn't been the kind of thing that made him feel he'd put his best foot forward. He'd begun to doubt he had any good feet left.

All he could do this time was send a message asking for a chance to resubmit. And of course it was Saturday, so he wouldn't get an answer for another two days at the earliest. He'd have to wait all weekend, wondering and worrying. He couldn't pay another entry fee, so he'd probably just blown his shot at the

whole contest. And outlets for novella-length stories were hard to come by.

Rob moved on with his plan to take Katrina to the food court at the mall. She'd suffered a hankering for a veggie sub and curly fries all week, and the mall had a vendor to satisfy each. Rob didn't want to spend the money, but Katrina had been launching the baby topic lately, and he felt bad about repeatedly shooting it down for financial reasons.

When they checked the mall directory, the day's theme continued: the curly-fry place wasn't listed. They walked down the corridor that had housed it, and sure enough, the façade was covered. There went the fries.

The sub place existed, but it didn't do much more. The sandwich artist moved like a tortoise, and he didn't know what vinaigrette was until it was pointed out twice. The girl at the register said they had only just put their bottled water in the cooler, so it'd still be warm. Rob canceled the water.

Katrina's shopping mission was to procure pillow shams, so that would leave Rob free to remedy his foul state of mind. Crane games had always brought out the child in him, and he'd spotted one in the food court. Reckless spender that he was, he was going to play it. There was a single dollar bill in his wallet, and Katrina donated her last four quarters. They never carried cash. Katrina scooted into a store as Rob surveyed his chances with the game. He had no desire for prizes; he just liked plucking them. The thrill of the hunt, and all.

The plush toys were tightly packed; none appeared easy to spring. He wondered if the arcade area had a machine of its own. It did, and a penguin sat enticingly disentangled. Katrina adored penguins. He squatted to insert his dollar but only found a card-swipe mechanism. He was getting old. No one stood at the counter. There wasn't a clerk to be seen in the entire room.

He left the arcade disgusted. In his day, those machines had taken real money. Sneering back, he noticed the kiosk that dispensed cards. He gave it his dollar. It dropped a card that he took to the crane machine and swiped. The claw jerked alive, so he maneuvered it to the bird, which wrapped up nicely in the curved tongs. As the crane pulled upward, the penguin flipped over but remained in place. Rob readied himself for his second try, but the mechanism stood lifeless. The screen below showed zero remaining attempts. Wow. Chances had once been fifty cents.

All he had left were the quarters, and at the going rate, that meant only one more try. He couldn't use the coins where he was, but the machine in the food court took actual money. When he got there, a small girl and boy were in front of it. They looked like siblings. The boy fished for boyish things even as the girl urged him to try for the pink bear on top of the heap. He didn't listen. Even as he

emptied his Velcro Spider-man wallet of its last dollar and tried again, he ignored her plea.

Rob hadn't noticed the bear in his first assessment, but the girl was right: it had the best position. He dedicated his last chance to winning the bear for her. It would brighten his pissy day. As the kids shuffled off, he considered regaling them with his plan, but he didn't want to get their hopes up. He put his coins in just in time for Katrina to return.

He said, "That little girl wanted her brother to get the pink bear, but he wouldn't do it. I'm gonna get it."

The claw went live; he carefully dropped it on target. The machine dragged the animal right beside the chute, but the bear slipped out a second too early. So close. One more attempt would do it.

Rob turned to Katrina and said, "One more and I can get it! Do you have another dollar?" She said, "No, I'm sorry. I'm all cleaned out. I gave you my last bit of money."

"Are you serious? You don't have one more dollar? I can get this girl her bear! Where's the ATM?"

He spotted it and they hustled to it. He'd always hated ATMs. Credit cards were fairly safe, but he was uneasy about using a card that was tied directly to his bank account. Too much chance of theft. But goddamn it, with the way his morning had gone, he wanted the girl to get her fucking bear. He got as far as putting the tip of his debit card in when he imagined logging into his online banking site only to find all their balances at zero. He wondered if the girl would even be around by the time he got back to the crane. Scruples assailed him. He pulled the card back. No bear.

He turned away from the machine dejected. The girl probably would've taken it home and forgotten about it in an hour, but maybe not. Maybe she would've gone the rest of her life touched by the moment when a total stranger won something for her at the mall. Either way, it would've at least made him feel like he'd done something generous amidst what felt like a life of inconsequence. It would've been enough to turn his day around. More importantly, it'd turn Katrina's. His cranky moods always wounded her. She deserved so much more than he could give.

Then another image struck him. What was next for him? He'd go home and brood for the rest of the weekend that he'd been too security conscious to do a really cool thing. He'd call himself an asshole. He'd blame identity thieves. On top of stealing bank accounts, they would've stolen his chance to be a little less

self-centered in a world of selfishness. Even worse, they'd have wrenched a really nice memory from a little girl. The more he'd think about it, the more pissed he'd get.

The dream he'd have that night appeared in his mind: an army of pink bears goose-stepping after him bearing fangs and claws to execute him for cowardice. A death by gnawing. Creepy little stuffed bears would chew him alive, and he'd jolt awake soggy with sweat.

He was weary of his pitiful life of fear, spending his energy avoiding all the bad things at every turn. Couldn't he do a good thing for once? Was he that inept? Something had to withstand all the snarky commentary there'd be at his funeral, when they'd all stand around venting about what a self-absorbed prick he'd been. He needed an innocent little victory, something to make someone speak up and say, "You know, he did do something really sweet for a little girl once..."

He turned back and plunged his card into the kiosk like a sword in the heart of a dragon. Katrina said, "You gonna do it?"

He gave a noble nod.

He typed his digits and got the money. They marched back to the crane, and he got to work.

The claw cradled the bear, went airborne, and plopped it down the slot.

His chest protruding and the animal in hand, he found the girl and tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned toward the fuzzy creature. Her eyes went wide.

He held out the prize and said, "Here ya go."

She said, "For me? Thank you! Thank you, thank you! Look Hayden, I got the bear! It's soooooo cute! See? Look at his little paws, and his ears, and..."

Katrina and Rob could still hear her babbling as they sauntered from the food court with healthy grins. Katrina squeezed his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. Their day had turned around.

As it turned out, their bank account was in fact hijacked a week later. They never used their debit cards elsewhere, so they knew the ATM had been the culprit. It had probably skimmed the card number. Rob had to cancel all their automatic deposits and withdrawals and set them up with an entirely different account. He had to get all new checks and debit cards. The whole ordeal took two months to get fully sorted out.

He was proud, though. That had been the day he'd found the courage

to seize what he wished his life would amount to: winning prizes for kids. And whether the checkbook was ready or not, that had been the night Katrina conceived.

Almost Everything Bad Is Green

Meghan Mello

The boy offered to let the girl drive his car after school. This is a bigger deal than it might seem given this boy's obsession with his beat up, green Impala. The car was given various names by the boys at the high school and at one point, this car became the girl's worst nightmare. For now, though, the car at this time was simply a car, and not a topic of discussion amongst the school.

The girl gladly accepted the offer to drive it although she didn't have her license yet. The boy said he didn't mind. The girl met him in the parking lot after school and was surprised to see Jed Odaire in the front seat. Jed had a reputation amongst the kids at the high school. The kind of reputation that makes for the reason why parent's "parent" in the first place.

Actually, one of the girl's teachers, a few months later, would stop the girl on her way to the cafeteria and tell her that she was wasting her time and talents by hanging around those kids. The girl knew the teacher was out of line but all she could do was silently nod her head and walk away, looking at her feet. The boy planned on confronting and screaming at the teacher about this after the girl told him. He never went through with the plan.

Both boys laughed as the girl approached the car. She pulled her sleeves over her hands, nervously.

"You're tryna drive this thing, aren't you?" The boy held one of those underpriced, oversized Speedway drinks in his hand, and takes a sip as he looks at her through the driver's side window.

The girl was taken a back. "I mean... you offered earlier, didn't you?"

"No, you asked. And I felt like being nice. Have you ever driven before?"

She lied and continued to observe Jed in the passenger seat. He had a messy, 2010 Justin Bieber hair-cut. His eyes were black and small. He had a smirk on his face, and smelled strongly of cheap cologne.

Jed Odaire told her to get in the back of the car and wait till the parking lot cleared. The girl noticed a bowl sticking out of his pocket. She was excited to be in the car. It felt wrong to be hanging out with them, so it gave her a sense of twisted confidence. McDonald's bags, water bottles, a basketball, and a random sneaker littered the car's wet floors. She noticed loose dollar bills in the cup holders and a cassette tape with a cord attached to the driver's phone. The girl amused herself by picking up a test that was crumpled on the floor, smoothing it out to see

the driver's handwriting. Smiling to herself, she laid it down on the back seat.

The boys were talking loudly over one of Jay Critch's songs playing out of the speaker of the car. They were gossiping about a boy in the grade. This reminded the girl of her and her girl-friend's conversations at a sleepover. They stopped talking and looked back at her. Jed spoke up, "You ready? You know my boy doesn't let just anyone drive his car... so you should feel honored."

The driver smiled. "That's right, I don't even let this idiot drive it." He tapped the shoulder of his friend at the time.

The girl laughed as she switched places with the boy. When she got in the seat she laughed again.

"Something funny?" The boy was smirking from the back seat.

"It's just so low, how do you even see?" She turned around to talk to him. She felt nervous with the boy being behind her.

"Hummina? That's the whole point. You're supposed to drive so the steering wheels in your line of vision. Just get it so it's lined up with your eyes." She looked at Jed Odaire to see if the boy in the back was messing with her.

"Yeah, absolutely," was all he said. He sounded annoyed.

At first, she just drove cautiously around the parking lot. Jed went on his phone and changed the music, impatiently, while the boy in the back told her what to do. "Slow down! Jesus! Speed up! Now, turn. The other way! Stop! Okay, now slow down..."

He would not shut up for the next ten minutes straight. Jed told his friend to screw off a few minutes in. The girl just drove silently, nervously nodding along to the boy's commands.

The boy yells, "speed up" and, she finally decides to change things up.

The girl screams back, "LIKE THIS" and takes off flying toward the wooden fence across the vacant lot.

Laughter that initially filled the car quickly turns to screaming as the girl continues on toward the fence, further pressing her foot down on the pedal. She decides within an instant that she wouldn't slow down. Not until they were an inch away from the fence. Heart pounding, she slams on her breaks at the very last second.

No one said anything at first. The girl was breathing heavily, hands still gripped around the steering wheel. She was starting to feel like an idiot. She just wanted to be funny. After what seemed like ten minutes of silence, Jed started to

laugh obnoxiously, putting his phone down for the first time. The boy in the back still didn't say anything, but the girl was smiling. Her knuckles were white but her eyes sparkled.

She asked the boy in the back what he thought, and he answered with another question, "You want a ride home today?"

This continued for a month or two. The two boys, the girl, and the green Impala. They'd formed an unconventional, tiny friend group. The three would drive around as the two boys taught the girl to differentiate between rappers based on their voices. They'd tell her about Bape clothing. Show her their favorite spots to play basketball with the rest of the boys. Teach her how to smoke. Coach her on how to throw a football and how to speak like them. They eventually showed her how to fight. One day in particular, the owner of the green Impala and Jed Odaire pulled off at a place they called Lost Lake. It wasn't too far from the girl's house.

"Come outside we're gonna teach you how to fight. You'll practice on us," the boy said as he took off his sweatshirt. Jed just laughed.

The girl, although uneasy, didn't protest. She follows the boys through a tight, overgrown trail for a few minutes. The trail finally opened up to a space with hills in the background. The boys led her up a deformed, rocky mountain structure. The top was flat and overlooked a small lake. Green glass shards covered the rocks surface. The girl took out her phone to take a picture.

Even though she knew they were being serious she decides to ask, "Why do you want to teach me how to fight?" She's standing facing the two. The boy said he had to teach the girl to be tougher, and Jed said it was because this was fun. Odaire decided he'd coach the girl and she'd practice on the other boy. She felt an adrenaline rush. She put her arms up and balled her fists. Bounced on her toes. Laughed.

"Are you scared?" The girl smiled at her 'opponent'.

"Oh, yeah... I'm... shaking," he smirked back at her. "Here's what's gonna happen. You come at me as hard as you can. I won't hit you back, I'll just defend myself."

The girl drops her hands. In a whiny voice not her own, she says, "If I'm doing this I want you to actually try, or else this is pointless. I have sisters at home who I could beat."

The boy seemed irritated with the girl arguing. "I can't hit a girl, bro. Odaire -tell her."

Jed spoke up, "Yeah, he can't really do that, but if you hit him hard enough he definitely will." He made his stupid laugh, again.

The girl's stomach turned a little bit. She pulled on her pony tail and giggled, "Are you sure you actually wanna?"

Jed cut off the boy before he could answer. Not looking up from his phone he grunted, "Can you two shut-up already and do this?"

The girl fell silent.

"Alright, let's just go," the boy said. He motioned for the girl to move closer.

Their strange friend group broke up on a Friday afternoon. The girl's sitting in physics class, front row, one leg perched on the bar under the desk. Her phone starts lighting up with text messages. Jed Odaire and the other boy were each rapidly texting her separately. Odaire told her to walk out with him after school, while the other boy sent a series of apologies. The girl's stomach practically fell onto the floor. The girl looked over at her best friend, Hay, and gave the phone to her.

Hay mouthed, 'what' -her face distorted with concern. The girl decided to ignore Odaire's texts and began responding to the other boy's messages. The boy was going to fight Odaire. Today, after school, which was in about thirty minutes. The girl begged him not to, telling him she wouldn't be friends with him if he did. The boy told her it didn't matter, that he had to do this. The football team already expected it to happen. They were going to gather a large crowd for the fight. The girl's body itched and she fiddled with her bracelets. One was leather and studded, the other a soft pink. She was sweating.

Class ended. Finally. Hay approached the girl nervously. "Everyone was looking at you, dude. I just got a text from Zach to meet him in the parking lot..."

The girl started talking gibberish. "It just doesn't make any sense! What do I do?! Should I tell Ms. Tedd? Where are the rest of the girls? Can you text them right now? They're not answering me!"

Hay went on her phone, immediately texting all of their mutual friends. The two-girl's five-year friend group had become some-what of a controversy amongst the school, lately. Half of the girls had distanced themselves from the girl at this point, and Hay had been one of the few to remain friends with her. Hay texted the old group anyway.

Everyone was piling out of the side entrance to the back-parking lot in a

hurry, pushing past the two friends. The girl reached for her phone but Odaire came up behind her and grabbed her hand. “You coming?” His face looked serious. He was rubbing his eyebrows with the back of his hand –which he only did when he was high or upset. The girl figured he was high. He always smoked before school.

“What in the hell are you thinking! Don’t do this... you don’t have to do this. Please don’t go out there. Let’s just go home and –”

Odaire cut her off, “Shut up and listen to me. If you’re not coming then get the f*** out of my way. Don’t mess this up, again.”

The girl’s face got hot. She didn’t know what he meant by again, and fell silent.

“F*** you.” Odaire pushed past her and rolled up his tri-colored sleeves, turning the corner to head outside.

When the girl looked up, Hay was gone. The hallways were empty. How does he expect me to watch this?!

Outside, the girl was met with a large group of students, seemingly the entire grade, forming a ring in the lot. She couldn’t see the boys within it. The girl hung back for a while unsure of how close to get. She tried to come up with a strategy of how to break this up.

Inside the circle, the boys had begun fighting. They were screaming profanities at each other while the crowd cheered them on and took videos. A notoriously “good girl” named Monica came charging into the circle, full speed, throwing her hands out so her body made the shape of the letter ‘T’. Within two seconds of her arrival Jed Odaire had knocked her to the ground, probably on accident. The crowd laughed and hooted as Monica got up crying and embarrassed. She screamed, “SOMEONE DO SOMETHING,” as the crowd pushed her to the back of the ring.

The fight ended without a victor. Both boys were left bloody, one without a shirt and Jed’s torn. The crowd started to disperse almost immediately and the boys made their ways to two separate cars. The owner of the green Impala jumped into a football friend’s jeep, and Odaire disappeared with a boy who had dropped out of school last year. The girl immediately got ambushed. Girls persistently questioned her about what the fight was over. Was it because of you?! Did you sleep with both of them?! The boys, on the other hand, laughed in the girl’s face, their fists turning into pretend microphones, mocking her as they asked how the girl was feeling. With tears streaming down her face, the girl pushed past everyone, wishing she knew where Hay went.

A few weeks after this happened, the girl, and two of her close friends sat next to her in class. Mackenzie shook the girl and Hay's shoulder shoving her phone in their faces. A text from Odaire was on the screen. It read: I'm going to ruin her life. If you don't believe me, you're fooling yourself. I know her and I know how to ruin her, and I will. Tell her to watch her back.

Jed Odaire was right. He did know how to ruin her. While his threats and harassment towards her started to intensify, the girl's relationship with the green Impala owner intensified, as well. Their relationship became somewhat of a mutual protection system, both emotionally and physically. They'd fight constantly (mostly about Jed), but they both gave each other what the other needed. After long, frustrating days with the school's officials because of another incident with Jed, the boy would be the one to hold the girl's head as she cried to him. The girl would help him go shopping for clothes, and the boy would buy her and her friends Four Lokos. The boy would sit with the girl's friends to watch the girl play in games, and the girl would hang out with the boy's friends after school, while they smoked. She'd let him cheat off her and he'd drive her wherever she needed to go.

It was a Friday afternoon and the girl had been crying to the boy after school. She sat on the edge of his bed. "It's getting worse and the school's not helping," she cried.

"I know. I know...just tell me what happened today."

Jed Odaire had been spreading nasty rumors about her, stalking her during school, and threatening her whenever he got the chance to in the hallways. He gets really close to her face whenever he talks to her, and she doesn't push him away out of fear of what he might do. Odaire has been going after the boy too, physically harassing him and pushing him to the limits of another fight. The boy would get suspended again if he fights back.

The school was monitoring the three of them and coming up with a plan to separate Jed and the other two so that they don't come into contact with each other on school grounds. Every single school official hated Odaire, but there isn't enough physical evidence to get him kicked out of the school permanently, yet.

"I think we should go away this weekend. We'll get a few people to come and go up to my camp. We'll get hammered and have a good time. F*** this school, they're not doing anything about this idiot. They can't do anything to help this."

The girl moved closer to the boy, "I think he's following me. I'm actually

scared of what he might do. Everything is getting worse.”

“You should go to the police if you’re scared, but I won’t let him hurt you.”

“No, not physically but he’s like... stalking me. Not just in school either. I see his car in my neighborhood and at work. I know he’s following me, he’s waiting for me to mess up.”

“Go to the police. I’ll come.”

“They’re not going to believe me, my parent’s and I already tried. I can’t get a restraining order, not enough evidence...”

“F*** this. F*** Odaire.” The boy laid down, hands over his face, “Let’s just go away this weekend. Come with me.”

The boy, girl, Mackenzie, Hay, and two of the boy’s friends were all piled in the green Impala. It was getting dark outside. They had been driving for two hours. “We’re almost here,” the boy said as he drove. The steering wheel was in his line of vision. He drove with one hand on the wheel the other hanging over the cup holders, brushing against the girl’s legs.

The music was crackling as they drove away from cell service, and the roads turned into unpaved, windy trails. One of the boys in the back opened up beers for everyone and passed it around. The girl whispered to the boy, “Just wait to drink ‘til we get there... we’re almost there.”

The boy pulled his hand away from the girl’s body and chugged the entire beer. He tossed the can by her feet. The girl looked back at her two friends, and Mackenzie laughed at the boy’s behavior, but Hay looked annoyed. They were all drinking in the back.

The boy finally parked the car outside of a small, dark green camp site. There were two camps on either side of theirs. Both of the adjacent house’s front lights were dark. And, across the trail was a long stretch of tightly packed trees. The lake was behind the house, and they could all hear bugs buzzing when they stepped out of the car.

“Who’s ready to get drunk?!” The boys all had back packs with them and ran inside the house. The girls were a little more slow-moving. As they grabbed their duffels and back packs out of the car, Hay asked if the girl and the boy were a thing. “I don’t know, honestly. Ever since the fight in the parking lot, we’ve gotten a lot closer.”

Mackenzie asked if the girl and boy hook up, and the girl looked down at

her feet.

“No way! They hook up... ew! You can do so much better...”

Hay told Mackenzie to shut up because they were at the boy’s place to-night.

Hay closed the trunk and looked at the girl, “Has he been texting you, lately?”

“Well yeah. We text every day, what do you mean?”

“No, I’m not talking about him... I mean Jed...” Hay looked sympathetically at the girl.

“I don’t know... can we please not talk about him tonight? I really need one night away from thinking about him.”

As the group started up the steps towards the house Mackenzie stopped the girls. “I just want to ask this one time because it’s been bugging me. Why don’t you ever share what goes on with you and Jed, ever? Me and Hay literally hear what happens through the school. We want to know the truth of it, not the stupid rumors.”

The girl snapped at her friend, “Because I don’t like talking about it, okay?!”

“Yeah... but you tell him and not us and we’re your best friends!”

Hay told Mackenzie to drop it for now, as the girl turned her back and walked inside. “She doesn’t like talking about her feelings, you know that.” Hay grabbed her friends hand.

“I get that but it’s just not right,” was all Mackenzie said.

Later that night, the girls had already finished most of their Four Lokos, while the boys were opening up their second case of beer. The boy had made a fire outback for the group, and they sat and laughed, listening to country music per Hay and Mackenzie’s request. To their surprise, the girl hated country music now. Even their signature-best-friend-country-anthem, got an eye roll from the girl.

They gossiped and made fun of each other, and then one of the boy’s friends brought up Jed Odaire.

The boy slapped the back of his head. “No one wants to talk about that. Just shut up, man.”

The girl started to feel weirdly emotional. She looked over at the boy and mouthed for him to follow her inside. He shook his head and said out loud, “Stay

out here, it's fun."

Hay and Mackenzie got on her for wanting to ditch them.

"Oh my god you guys! I just wanted to go inside for a sec, I'm freezing. I'm not ditching," the girl glared at the boy for exposing her.

"Whatever."

As the girl went inside the camp, her mind wandered to her and the boy's relationship. She started to tear up as she thought about the first time they had hung out. She remembered how he tried to look cool in front of Jed Odaire that day, and embarrassed her at the car. She thought about how the boy doesn't hold open the doors for her. Our entire relationship is built on Odaire wanting to ruin us, she thought to herself. She started to feel sick, a combination of the alcohol and her situation. Not thinking straight, she went out the front door to throw up, instead of going to the bathroom. As she sat on her knees, coughing and puking, she heard a car turn off. Her eyes were blurry from tears as she looked up at the trees across the dirt road. She stood up, her balance uneasy, as she looked for the car she had heard. The girl started to feel unsettled as she looked side to side.

"OH MY GOD. OH MY GOD. HE HAS A GUN."

Screams from the back yard filled the air. The girl felt like she was in a trance as she stood paralyzed, listening to her friends scream. Call 911. Run back there. Call 911. She reached for her phone which wasn't in her hand. F***.

That's when the girl thought of something. As her friends screamed for the girl and for help, the girl crept around the right side of the house. Her entire body was shaking. Her teeth were chattering. As she crouched down, she saw Jed Odaire's back facing her while the three boys were standing in a line, Mackenzie and Hay hiding behind them. The boys were screaming at him and Jed had his arms outstretched, hands holding a gun as he screamed back at them. He has a gun. A gun that he can use. The girl squeezed her eyes open and shut rapidly.

She was going to do this. She moved her hands along the cold grass, searching for a rock. That's when she remembered the dirt road. She ran frantically to the street and found a large, moss covered rock. She was listening for a gun shot. It's only talking. They're reasoning with him. This is good. She needed him to be distracted. She knew this was her chance. As she moved back to the side of the house she yelled Jed's name. "Come here! It's me! I want to talk to you! Come here, Jed!"

She put her back against the house as she tried to slow her breathing. She heard

Jed Odaire running towards the right side of the house. The girl's mind went blank. She didn't think. She knew what to do.

Gun pointed outward, Jed turned the corner of the house screaming the girls name. She didn't hesitate. The girl slammed the green rock to the boy's head as hard as she could and screamed as he fell to her feet. Fighting is fun isn't it Jed? The girl threw the now red rock to her left as Mackenzie and Hay ran towards her, their arms open. They stood hugging one another while warm tears streamed down their faces. The bugs outside were already buzzing louder.

Gathered Pieces Of The Sun

Obi Nwizu

Sharon deleted all traces of Afam's number from her cell phone while in bed, with blurred vision, and a willing right index finger. Her hand paused after opening the digital photo album. The most recent picture was a smiling Afam with his head snuggled into the space between her shoulder and neck. Sharon and Afam seemed happy then. They were happy then. Two chocolate faces and white teeth, an inner joy captured with a click. But a deep sadness encompassed Sharon now. The realization that sudden feelings drift. She let her phone drop from her hand onto the floorboards. She pulled the white duvet over her head and turned to face the wall.

The buzzing of her alarm was a shock to the spine. With heavy eyes, she sat on the edge of her bed and planted her hands on the mattress before taking them to her forehead to quench the pain of a nail hitting something hard, easing only if a promise was made—a promise that Sharon would widen her eyes to red flags, to the signs, the random women on television that preached time and time again to never separate what a man tells you from what he shows you, that no one can change a man, that when you see crazy coming dive into the nearest corner.

Afam said he didn't want a relationship. He didn't show it. But he said it. And Sharon had ignored it. Now the cracks in his behavior revealed themselves as the sun touched her face and illuminated her room; a morning where beauty encouraged tears to fall onto bare thighs.

"Relationships are like the Rubik's Cube," Afam told Sharon upon meeting for the first time. "They are complicated, complex, a real pain," he continued as she eyed him skeptically in the faintly lit lounge. "I don't understand why anyone would put themselves through it." His words sounded rehearsed to Sharon's ears like something frequently said that there wasn't a choice but to bow down and believe it. She didn't give a rebuttal. Her gestures turned to seductive smirks and shrugs with each sip of wine. Afam kept explaining, pausing with eyes unapologetically settling on Sharon's.

"Your place or mines?" Afam asked.

"Mine," she whispered. "We can go to my place."

At 32, Sharon didn't have a problem meeting men. Her appearance was unique—her slanted eyes and full lips. The tiny dot of a birthmark next to her ala. Her thick hair and flowing as if weightless. Men were in awe of the essence of freedom that accompanied her strides; a walk that breathed enough outward

confidence but hide quiet insecurities. When Sharon welcomed men in, she never deeply deciphered the true difference between what their eyes set to conquer and what her heart truly desired. She allowed that line to blur. For a blurry line equaled an absence of confrontation.

The next morning, Afam was gone—remnants of spontaneous intimacy known only by the two bodies and ruffled sheets, the night that bared witness. Afam left a text message. Had to go. Errands. Thanks for the night. You are beautiful. Laying naked on her belly under the duvet, Sharon smiled. She buried her head in the pillow. Her thoughts prepared for the unavoidable—the aligning of dreams with reality, a disregard of ill-conduct and a focus on charming attributes. Sharon mentally recounted their random first encounter. Each wink, seductive stare, graze of the arm, compliments of her hair. She replayed Afam asking the overused question, “Where do you see yourself in five years?” She remembered when the waiter opened the second bottle of Tempranillo, a Vega Sicilia Único 2005. Afam winked before filling her glass. Under the table, she ran her foot up Afam’s legs. She stopped when he jilted, cleared his throat, and willingly handed over his power until they left the dining area to return to the bar.

Sharon thought to ring him to say she received his message. A simple, kind gesture wouldn’t hurt. Men labeled her raspy morning voice sexy, even wished that she kept it. Surely Afam wouldn’t say anything different. She confidently touched the call button and listened to the ringing until it went to voicemail.

Three days passed before Sharon heard from Afam after that first night. And though disappointed and curious to know what kept him away, Sharon avoided speaking on his absence. She stored mental notes instead. Sometimes she jotted her feelings on the first available piece of paper to prevent spurting out obscenities at Afam’s lack of common curtesy. It was an unconscious play out of her mother’s ways to act like a lady playbook. Be upset, but not livid. Expose your anger to only those within your inner circle. Never, ever, to a man of your liking before he’s laced your finger with a ring.

Afam was oblivious to his absence. He and Sharon began to meet almost daily. They laughed around New York City like new tourists exploring its ins and outs, shutting their eyes to the familiar only to reopen them with new lenses. Both had grown into their looks from the unattractive teenagers that they once were. They were products of single parents. They held less than a handful of friends, and they claimed Manhattan as the only sensible place for a person to reside.

They went to the Natural History Museum’s butterfly conservatory. Afam gave Sharon space to enjoy the butterflies leaping off her knuckles before another

one settled in. He returned her smile when she looked over her shoulder, urging him to join her at her side. Within the same week, he took her to Bryant Park for afternoon coffee. Despite surrounding commotion—people playing chess, having drunk mid-day conversations and practicing Tai Chi—Afam smiled intensely into Sharon’s eyes as though they held her innermost sacred thoughts. In the second week, they shamelessly held hands strolling through Shakespeare’s Garden. Afam led the way to a tree with blossoming white flowers amid raging greenery. He paused, held Sharon before dipping her backward. He kissed her. A deep but meaningful kiss. Tongues intertwined that stragglers wouldn’t label a disposable make-out session amongst two strangers, but a rekindling of sorts, a reaffirmation of what becomes of a couple separated for too long.

Afam placed a simple kiss on her lips once her feet were planted on the ground. He looked at her, peacefully as breeze calming the rumbling of souls.

“I’ve got to run,” he said after he grazed his finger over her lips.

“Now?” Sharon asked softly.

“Yeah. But I’ll see you tonight?”

“Of course.”

She watched Afam walk away in unmatched confidence. He appeared to be hers on the surface. He knew the exact moments to lean in for a kiss, the precise second to interlock fingers, squeeze them, gaze into Sharon’s eyes. No woman would chance to lose such feelings. That is fear’s goal, she thought; to debunk faith in true happiness, unspoken miracles, promises unaccompanied by heartache. But optimism grew as she waited for Afam while dressed in a red plunging neckline dress, her skin oiled and resembling blackberries. Her hair was in its naturally curly state, sprayed for added shine. She sat on her couch and faced her front door anticipating the sound of the buzzer.

Half-past eight, 30 minutes after the agreed time of 8:00, she still sat alone. She twisted the cap off the Señorío de San Vicente and filled her wine glass to the very top. She took small sips all the while wiping her brown lipstick from the rim of the glass. The brink of intoxication fuels confidence and Sharon’s was short of a hundred. She lifted her phone and rung Afam number.

With each ring nervousness crept into her throat, traveling up and down until it came to a standstill as Afam’s voicemail began to play.

At the age of 13, Sharon began to feel the blight of walking where one didn’t belong. She attended St. Pius on 103rd & Broadway as long as her mother continued to care for the Johnson’s rambunctious toddlers from sun up to sundown. At St. Pius, boys passed Sharon in the hallway as one does a ghost. She

watched girls around her exchange glamorous laughs, turn their cheeks for boys to plant kisses on. Sharon tried to conceal her envy. She moved in silence, her eyes scared to gaze at all who's mere presence questioned what Sharon was doing there in her un-creased uniform, coiled hair, and books pressed deep against her chest.

But Sharon was smart, in the creative sense, able to craft paragraphs upon paragraphs in minutes, free of grammatical errors, filled with metaphoric expressions that astonished her literature and composition teachers. She learned to bury her loneliness in unspoken words. With a mother too busy to supply adequate attention, writing became Sharon's escape, her lines that couldn't talk back, couldn't give advice, but rather swallow all that rummaged through her thoughts. The more she refrained from speaking, the more she began to stutter when forced to.

When her last year arrived, Mr. Dellfane touched Sharon's palm. He was her literature teacher, her only advocate for verbally expressing herself more by constantly calling on her during class. His porcelain hand, absent of apparent blue and red veins or other signs of aging was like stiff ice comfortably resting on the melenated hand plastered on his desk. His eyes were locked on hers. Sharon didn't budge. Her body was rigid, unable to move even if she urged it to. But her eyebrows did furrow, questioning Mr. Dellfane of what exactly he was doing.

"You have a gift Sharon," he said.

Sharon lowered her chin to the floor.

"And if you don't realize it, you're going to waste it. That would be a shame."

Mr. Dellfane moved his hand to Sharon's chin, and slowly lifted it with his knuckles, making Sharon wonder why now? Here? At this very moment? Why even at all? She watched his lips with a sudden thought of how being kissed would feel, how being longed for, desired by anyone, even Mr. Dellfane, hoping that he would do the honors of being the first to taste her lips. The ability to read thoughts behind eyes had vanished. She closed her own, edged closer to the desk that separated teacher from student. The time to seal her entrance to normality had arrived. The idea of Mr. Dellfane and her living out their romance completed her. And all sense, age difference, and universally known boundaries flew away as though a bird carried it off to the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean. "Sharon, what are you doing?" Mr. Dellfane questioned in a way that made Sharon's eyes jot open. She stepped back, her face in horror before swiftly turning to gather her books from her desk and run out the door with Mr. Dellfane's calls of "Sharon wait!" falling on deaf ears.

The desperation of wanting to feel what others felt, to blend into

acceptable behavior, took away her only form of solace. She became fearful of what her thoughts would scribble down on paper, dodging writing assignments as much as possible unless they were completely unavoidable. And even then, the paragraphs that were once easily and beautifully crafted turned into a daunting and forced task. Mr. Dellfane continued to call on Sharon as if all was normal, even her refusal to answer by staying silent.

Word hadn't traveled around the school, for she was still being treated the same way. And when those duos passed, hand in hand, exchanging smiles, endearing gestures, Sharon still, ironically, held the belief that her own time would come. And as an hour and a half approached, she stretched out on the couch, her legs dangling off the arm and stared at the depleted wine bottle. She reached for her phone. Still, no call from Afam. She played back the makings of the day prior, then journeyed back further, trying to remember every minute detail, any loopholes that would justify why Afam would leave her dressed and alone. Sleeping with Afam was the only true possibility. Maybe, she thought, Afam saw no need to dine and cater to her for what she'd already easily given up. It was Friday night. Maybe he stumbled onto another woman on his way from the park and decided to end the night with her. "It's possible," Sharon told herself.

She eyed her reflection in the bathroom mirror like a foreign object, ashamed of its smeared black eyeliner, faded lipstick, and red puffy eyes from uninvited tears. Yet, Sharon's attractiveness didn't diminish. Her skin was dark and radiant. Everything on her face was evenly proportioned, youthful, challenging of her real age. She packed up her, tied it with a rubber band, splashed water on her face, washed it with black soap and didn't bother to pat it dry. She unzipped her dress, stepped out of it, left it on the bathroom floor. She swallowed two pills of Advil without water, pulled the comforter over her head and tried to forget about the nail pounding against her skull.

The next day, 5 pm exactly, the ding of her phone sounded. Afam wrote that he was sorry. Sharon tossed the phone back on the floor and returned to sleep. An hour later, another ding which Sharon ignored. Thirty minutes later, another one. It wasn't until the phone rang and vibrated against the hardwood tiles that she picked it up.

"Hello?" Her voice was dry as though it was morning.

"Hey," Afam said. "Did I wake you?"

Silence. Uncomfortable silence.

"Yes, I did."

"It's fine."

“Got caught up with some people and lost track of time.”

“You couldn’t call?”

“You’re right.”

“Or text?”

“I can come by tonight if you want me to.”

There comes a moment when a difficult decision looms, when it falls at one’s feet, forcing the intricacies of right and wrong, sensible and non-sensible to play out internally within seconds before an answer is voiced that affects the exterior. This wasn’t that moment.

“Sure,” Sharon said. Failure.

“Great, I’ll let you know when I’m on my way.”

Sharon feared being labeled pitiful, traditional or any other word that stripped women of common-sense decision making. And for Sharon, those other women resided in her book club—a compilation of fairly wealthy Upper West Side Manhattanites. After their discussions, the talk around the table ventured to men, specifically New York City ones and their inability to behave in the way women wished.

When Afam called to say he would arrive in an hour, Sharon rose from the bed and returned to the bathroom to shower and scrub the remaining bits of makeup from the night before. She dropped squirts of eye drops to get rid of the redness, pulled out her tightly fitted shorts and a sluggish grey T-shirt. She reapplied her makeup, ran her fingers through her hair, and painted her lips a subtle but inviting red which gave her already voluptuous lips a fuller pout. To calm her nerves, she cracked open a Hacienda López de Haro 2015 and filled her glass only halfway.

At the buzzer, she welcomed Afam up. She gave herself one last look in the mirror, readjusted her bra, made sure the perfect amount of cleavage propped up above her V-neck T-shirt.

“You’re not ready?” Afam said after their embrace.

“We’re going out?”

“Of course.”

“Let me grab my jacket.”

She straightened the lapel of her linen blazer and wiggled her feet into her red pump. Afam touched Sharon’s chin, pinched it softly.

“You look good,” he said.

“You think?”

“I do,” he said, leaning in for a kiss.

“Stop,” Sharon teased. She playfully shoved him back. “You’re going to mess up my lipstick.”

Large crystal-encrusted chandeliers hung from the ceiling of Le Chère. The lights were yellow and dim. The tables were covered with lace table cloth.

“You did this?” Sharon asked Afam.

“No. They did,” he said charmingly, pointing to the waiters.

Suddenly Sharon’s mind was made up. Afam would have a piece of her after dinner. His dreads were pulled back, revealing the height of his cheekbones. He reached for her hand and led her to the table. He was as perfect, in her eyes, despite not knowing him long enough to predict behaviors or fall in-sync with them.

“I like you,” she said before Afam finished draping the napkin across his lap. A pause sat between them; a silence waiting for Afam to interject.

“Thank you,” he said. Sharon waited for more something. “But you know, I’m not looking for anything serious.”

“I know.” She broke eye contact. breaking eye contact.

“Don’t look like that,” Afam said genuinely. “I have a good time with you. And that doesn’t have to stop.”

By the time they returned to Sharon’s apartment, minutes weren’t wasted on words. Clothes were ripped off, flung to land wherever they may. There were moans, giggles, genuine smiles, all infused with the residue of liquor, a mixture Sharon believed she could handle.

The following morning, Afam left. Sharon climbed out of bed, but sudden dizziness attempted to pull her back in. She found her purse tossed on the kitchen counter and saw that Afam hadn’t left a message on her phone.

“Afam?” she called. “Afam?”

Nothing.

She went to check the bathroom.

“Afam,” she called out again soon realizing that she was in the apartment alone. She hugged herself, saddened a bit at the thought that she’d allowed her desires to silence her voice, her words that spoke truth, even through alcohol.

Nothing about Afam was unreplaceable; the feelings that he gave were

replaceable, and that morning, like a bulb that is suddenly lit after dimming on a female's self-worth, Sharon deleted all evidence that Afam was real. How long that bulb would stay lit wasn't known, but for a moment it served a purpose to firmly stand in.

Her alarm when off, and she wiped her eyes before turning to face the flashing lights of her phone. She slid her hand over the screen and the loud buzzing stopped. She looked at the time. Her book club started in thirty minutes, leaving enough time to quickly run a toothbrush over her teeth, add on another layer of deodorant, slip her feet into her flats and rush out the door for the subway.

She appeared rather haggard but still decently put together when she walked into Ifemelu's living room and took the last empty seat. She took the Language of Flowers from her bag and sat up straight prepared to engage in the conversation that would somehow find its way into the discussion of gender roles or relationships.

"Long night?" Dora McKinley leaned over to ask.

"Huh? What, why do you say that?"

"Because you smell like sex."

She frowned at Sharon, and Sharon labeled her disgust an undisputable fact that Dora was too judgmental and stiff to have any man desire to put a stiff one into her.

She shrugged her off and flipped open the front flap of the book. She'd read it a few months back and hated it. The winning of a teenager and her blatant disregard for things that most take for granted was of no or little interest to her. But the bookclub served as a release, an escape that for 90 minutes there were no men around. And as annoying as Dora and her prying were, she could leave the embarrassment she felt for spreading her legs open for Afam behind her or at least bury it in the deepest part of her brain until the book discussion was over.

Ifemul snapped her fingers paired with a soft call for her nanny to enter and offer the ladies a pitcher of mimosa. Sharon knew it was starting. She gulped her own salvia and tried to conceal the emotions on her face. Dora turned to her, scoffed a little then returned to the group.

"I don't see why Victoria wallows in self-pity and continued misery when she has a man that wants to love her," she said.

"Well, that's if you believe love is something that someone else can offer," Ifemul said.

"Of course it is. What kind of absurd statement is that?"

“Self-love is there for a reason,” Janet softly chimed in.

“Self-love, partner-love, marriage-love, whatever. It’s all the same,” Dora said.

“Umm, it’s not,” Janet said.

“The only reason such classifications, or rather useless compound words exist are to try and make people feel like love holds different levels. And it doesn’t. That’s why women can’t recognize love when they see it.”

“Oh, is that the reason,” Ifemelu said through a chuckle.

“Absolutely.” Both women shook their heads like Dora was a lost soul that would remain lost beyond her 42-years.

The ladies were four; sitting around the living room on vintage chairs that cost more than every piece of furniture in Sharon’s apartment. All weren’t necessarily friends but found each other on an online group for book lovers in Upper Manhattan above 72nd street. And on any given Saturday afternoon the attendance could change, as no one was required to attend except Ifemelu, the usual host.

Her nanny set the pitcher along with four thin glasses on a wooden extension of the tufted coffee table. She then disappeared in her normal manner as though her presence wasn’t needed until Ifemelu snapped her finger for her to reappear.

“You’re not drinking?” Ifemelu turned to ask Sharon.

“No. Not today.” Sharon said.

“Long night?”

“No...Well, kinda.”

“She had sex,” Dora interrupted, already halfway done with her glass.

“Really Dora?” Janet said.

“What? It’s not like she was going to tell you if I didn’t.”

Sharon imagined slugging Dora on the cheek with her bag.

“You know you can’t mind her,” Ifemelu said.

“I know,” Sharon said calmly.

“But if you do want to offer us more details, then go right ahead. Hell, I haven’t had sex with David since snow fell on the ground.”

“There isn’t much to say. It’s like Victoria. In the book. She wanted to deeply belong to someone, to something that when she got a taste of it, she

destroyed it and created dismay in other's lives."

"Maybe she was using those around her until she was strong enough to continue on her own," Janet said.

"Maybe," Sharon whispered to herself.

"If she believed in independence in the first place, which she didn't. She's been in foster care all her life," Dora said.

"Victoria's story is like life imitating art or vice versa," Janet said. "You take these single, broken men in New York City and you try to fix them, to build them back up. But in the end, you're the one that ends up more broken while they get to move along to the next woman."

Sharon didn't quite understand the correlation Janet was trying to make.

"Well, that's because you haven't found the right man to mold," Dora said.

"Is that right," Janet said raising her glass.

"Of course. It's all about searching for Mr. Right in all the right places."

Dora caught sight of Sharon rolling her eyes.

"What? You think I'm wrong? Let's see how soon Mr. What's His Name makes you his girlfriend."

"Dora, that's enough," Ifemelu said.

"There's no need to be nasty," Janet said.

"Oh, she knows I'm only kidding," Dora said mischievously. She reached for the pitcher to refill her glass while Sharon sat, her back pressed against the back of the chair.

"But what if he doesn't exist? Mr. Right," Sharon heard herself say before she could retract her words.

"What do you mean 'doesn't exist?'" Dora asked. "Of course he exists. If he didn't, why was his title even created?"

"To trick us!" Janet blurted out.

Sharon was in too deep of a thought to laugh.

"To be serious," Janet said. "It's a false sense of hope that women have been given. The more something seems unattainable, the more you reach for it. It's human nature. The idea of Mr. Right is nothing but a ploy to make us feel we aren't good enough to live fulfilling lives without him."

"Janet, please," Dora said. "That's what single women say who can't find a

man.”

“Sharon,” Ifemelu said. “You seriously don’t believe in Mr. Right?”

There was no escaping the question, there was no alleyway Sharon could run, no open door that she could rise to and dash out of.

“I don’t. Not anymore.”

“And why is that?”

“One day you realize that the world that holds the person you imagine can’t be real.”

“David’s pretty real to me.”

“I mean. You search and search and you search, whether directly and aware, it doesn’t make a difference. But you search, and you compromise with yourself because you won’t let life choose your destiny. But in the end, life wins. It always wins. Like it did for Victoria.”

“Fuck Victoria,” Dora said. “This is about the man you had sex with last night...or this morning. Was it this morning?” Dora leaned in to smell Sharon but received a face to return back to leaning in her seat.

For a moment the ladies were quiet waiting on Sharon to answer. Each was several glasses of mimosa in and had shed whatever manners they held once the book club began.

“Soooo...was it?” Ifemelu said.

“No. No, it wasn’t,” Sharon said curtly.

“Oh, come on Sharon. Stop it. You know you can tell us.”

As much as Sharon wanted to unlatch the weight of shame from her chest, she couldn’t bring herself to confide in the women. They were asking all the wrong questions, saying the wrong things. Sharon needed to hear the sound of own her voice, not probed by questions, but by inner truth, undeniable, ready to turn the gears into uncharted territory. No, it’s not okay to give what belongs to me, her thoughts came. No, it’s not okay to lower my standards to subject my body to men that don’t want my mind. Yes, I do love myself. No, I don’t think highly of myself. Yes, I do want a relationship. No, I’m not sure I believe in love anymore.”

The Silence

Madison Palmieri

I couldn't tell if there was a piece missing from the stained glass window behind the altar or if the afternoon sunlight was just particularly strong. Either way, the wooden crucifix that hung from the rafters was illuminated in a way that my mom would've called miraculous. Muted laughter echoed through the pews as well-dressed churchgoers jostled their way to the best seats like animals clamoring for passage on Noah's Ark.

"Are you excited?" Grammy beamed.

I nodded. "Yeah, I am."

She squeezed my hand. "Thanks again for choosing me to be your sponsor, sweetheart. It means the world to me."

"You're welcome, Grammy." My choices were her or Grandma Margaret, and I figured that the woman who posted racist memes on Facebook wouldn't be the best person to help me become an adult in the Church.

I toyed with the skirt of my dress and eyed the girls sitting in the pew in front of us. One of them wore a little red dress with a deep neck and puffed sleeves and dainty buttons that I had seen at Abercrombie, but Mom talked me out of purchasing. "It'll show far too much skin," she insisted. "We have to follow the instructions on the handout, remember?"

I wanted to ask her why the Church cared if my skirt fell five inches above my knees when the children who'd been abused by all those priests had without a doubt been dressed far more modestly. "Oh yeah," I feigned ignorance. "That's right." We tried the women's department at Macy's, which smelled like cheap perfume and looked like a funeral home. I settled on a white dress with peach flowers and a sash around the waist. It was the sort of dress worn by the girls in my class who didn't get asked to dance at homecoming or invited to Sweet Sixteen parties.

"I really like this on you." Mom approved.

I stared at my reflection. "I bet no one else will be wearing it."

No one else was. The girls' section was a sea of spaghetti straps and long legs. I folded and unfolded and refolded the red program in my hands until its paper was worn with creases before realizing I'd forgotten to pray. I sank to my knees and made the sign of the cross and clasped my hands together like I'd been taught in Sunday school all those years ago.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Today I'll receive a certificate and take a picture with the Bishop and go out to eat and get lots of money. Amen.

"Those must be the Knights of Columbus." Grammy gestured to the back of the church, where men dressed in military-like regalia stood as sentinels guarding the priests and the altar servers.

I nodded, but could only think of how Columbus was not a good man, and that a good man is hard to find. I cast my eyes on the wooden crucifix. Jesus was a good man.

A burst of sound from the choir loft silenced the church. "Good morning," Mr. Isaacs intoned. "Today we celebrate these young people as they prepare to receive this most Blessed Sacrament. Please join in singing our entrance hymn, number 568 in Breaking Bread, 'We Are Called.' Number 568." I could picture his arthritic fingers tap-dancing their way across the creaking keys as he played the familiar melody.

Everyone stood, but I could hear only Mr. Isaacs' raspy tenor sing of our Christian duty to act with justice, to love tenderly, to serve one another, and to walk humbly with God. Grammy opened the hymnal to number 568 and moved a finger across the page with every note. I muttered the lyrics under my breath.

I wondered what Mr. Isaacs would've thought if he saw me silencing my voice before the Lord after all those Decembers when he lectured me - and the other kids whose parents convinced them to perform in the Christmas pageant - on the gift of song. We'd sit on the plush red carpet by the Giving Tree as he led us through "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Joy to the World," and "Silent Night." By the time I was in fifth grade, I knew his speech - and the Latin verses of "O Come All Ye Faithful" - by heart. "God gives everyone gifts," he'd tell us, "and we don't all get the same ones. That's what makes us unique. He gave us all a voice, though, and we thank Him for our voices by singing to Him." With these words, Mr. Isaacs always pointed up at the ceiling. "You've gotta sing loud so He can hear you all the way up there."

Mr. Isaacs was most certainly singing loud so He could hear him all the way up there, but if God was hoping for the good people of St. Luke's parish to join him, He must've been disappointed.

The Bishop's grimace suggested that he was. He strode up the aisle between the pews in blood-colored robes accompanied by the Knights and the priests and a pair of altar servers who I recognized as two of the girls who bullied my sister in fifth grade. The Bishop genuflected and kissed the altar before sitting erect beneath the tabernacle.

“Why isn’t he saying anything?” the girl in front of me whispered to her sponsor.

Her aunt, cousin, family friend, or whoever the blonde woman was shrugged her shoulders in response as the Bishop made his way to the lectern, welcomed us, and recited the opening prayers. I whispered the familiar chant, but by the time the church fell silent once more and we sat to listen to the First Reading, I was not thinking about how I had greatly sinned in my thoughts, and in my words, and in what I had done and in what I had failed to do, but about whether I remembered to record *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* on my television at home.

A boy in the first row rose from his seat, bowed before the altar, and approached the lectern. I recognized him from my Biology class. He looked like a scarecrow in a suit that was several sizes too large. I couldn’t remember his name.

“A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.” He leaned too close to the microphone and I winced as the feedback whined over the sound system.

“But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, A Spirit of counsel and of strength, a Spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord.” He paused, sniffing and swiping at his eyes. “Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide, but he shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land’s afflicted.” His voice sounded clear and convinced. There was no doubt that today’s ceremony was a mere formality: his faith in God was already confirmed.

A couple of years ago, the church held a special middle school mass. The flyers advertised faith, fun, and friends. Only twelve or so kids and their families showed up. My mom volunteered my services as a lector, and I stood before the people of God and delivered the same passage as Scarecrow Boy. I tried to speak as though I was a sprout from the stump of Jesse who knew the Spirit personally, but even with my acting experience - as Angel Three, Shepherd Two, and Narrator One - I lacked his conviction.

“You did great, sweetheart,” Mom had assured me on the car ride home.

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t.”

The beat-up minivan in front of us stopped with a jolt. Mom slammed on the brakes and swore under her breath. “Idiot,” she hissed. The idiot took a left and Mom accelerated to a good fifteen miles over the speed limit. “You did fine. Really well. No one would ever guess you’d never done it before.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

She eyed me through the rearview mirror. “Do you think you want to lector again?” “No, thank you.”

Mom was silent for the rest of the drive home and never repeated her question.

The bellows of the organ drew me back to reality as Mr. Isaacs’ melodic chant of the

Great Amen rang throughout the church. I was startled to realize I hadn’t paid the slightest attention to the Responsorial Psalm, nor to the Second Reading. I looked up at the crucifix.

Half the crowd rose to our feet. The other half exchanged confused glances before following suit. The Bishop floated to the lectern, flanked by our pastor, Father Bob, and a visiting priest. He grasped the sides of the wooden podium with a pair of white hands barely visible at the ends of his wide sleeves. “A reading from the Gospel according to John.”

I traced the sign of the cross on my forehead, lips, and chest. “Glory to You, O Lord.”

The Bishop cleared his throat. “Jesus said to his Disciples, ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments.’” He coughed into the microphone. “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you.’ The Word of the Lord.”

I smoothed my skirt and sat down. “Thanks be to God.”

The Bishop remained standing for the Homily. “Brothers and sisters,” he addressed us, “we are gathered here today to celebrate these young people, who are about to embark on a new adventure in their journey of faith. They have spent the last year and a half preparing for this moment, eager to come to a greater understanding of our loving God.”

Eager was hardly the word I would use to describe the students in my class. Held in a dreary classroom on the second floor of the church’s elementary-middle school every Sunday afternoon, it almost led one girl to convert to Scientology.

She made the mistake of saying so in front of our leader. “How disrespectful!” the retired substitute teacher shrieked. “I can only imagine what

Jesus would say if He was here!”

“But ma’am,” a boy raised his hand, “isn’t Jesus always here?”

Our leader ran a hand through her wispy grey hair. Frown lines settled in on her wrinkled face. “Can anyone tell me what the purpose of Confirmation is?”

I exchanged a glance with the potential Scientologist. She rolled her eyes and shrugged.

Our leader sighed. “No one?” She opened her copy of our guidebook.

“Turn to page three. You,” she pointed to a boy in the first row, “read the second paragraph.”

The boy pulled his baseball cap over his eyes and leaned back in his seat.

“In the, uh, sacrament of, um, Confirmation, Catholics receive the, er, Holy Spirit that enables them to um, more truly practice their, uh, faith.”

“Good, very good.” She turned her gaze on me. “Margot, what does Confirmation mean to you?”

“I’ll...be sealed with the Holy Spirit.” I wanted to believe that there was truth to my words, that somehow, this ceremony would silence my inner Simon Peter, and I would deny Jesus no more.

Our leader beamed. “Excellent, Margot, excellent. I can tell you’re well-prepared for the big day.”

I now turned my gaze to the front pew, where she sat with the other religious education teachers. Her hair was somewhat curled and tied back into a bright red bow. I wondered if she had ever spoken at the lectern.

“-Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Amen.” The Bishop turned back to his seat beneath the tabernacle with a flourish.

“Grammy,” I nudged her arm, “what was the homily about?”

She shook her head with a laugh I recognized from the time when her labrador retriever ate a whole box of crayons. “Today’s an important day. You’re about to become a lot closer to God. You have to go forth and spread the Good News.”

“Amen to that.” We listened attentively as the Bishop and the priests asked for the candidates and our sponsors to form a line to be presented and anointed. I took Grammy’s hand in mine as we stood in the main aisle, a sudden surge of excitement rushing through me.

I kept my eyes on the crucifix, but our Lord and Savior remained motionless. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but today was supposed to be a

miraculous day.

The Bishop laid a hand on my shoulder and I winced. No one had made any accusations against him yet, but I wasn't sure that he was a good man. He pressed an oily thumb to my forehead and looked at my nametag. "Margot Rose," he intoned, "be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit."

I forgot my line, but there was no director who could cue me or end the scene. "Amen?" "Peace be with you."

"And with your spirit." Grammy placed an arm around me and we made our way back to our pew. I paused as something tickled my throat and filled my lungs. No longer would I bemoan attending weekly mass; no longer would my mind wander during the readings and responses and homilies and hallelujahs.

This inner triumph was interrupted by Grammy's coughing. "I really wish they wouldn't burn all that incense," she sighed.

The pungent aroma was soon absorbed into the perfumes, colognes, and unidentified scents of the church, and with it dissipated my momentary euphoria.

The congregation trudged through the Prayer of the Faithful. My voice was hollow as I affirmed my belief in one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. I began to sweat under the watchful gaze of the wooden crucifix and stumbled through the general intercessions, slowly sinking to my knees as the Bishop consecrated the bread and the wine.

My breathing became heavy and I ignored Grammy's worried glances. I hastily shook hands with those around me during the Sign of Peace and listened to the words of the Our Father. Was He really in heaven? Was His name truly hallowed? Would His kingdom come, His will be done on Earth as it is in heaven? Would He give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses? Could we forgive those who trespass against us? Would He lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil?

"Our Communion song is number 371, 'The Prayer of Saint Francis.' Number 371." Mr. Isaacs plucked the familiar hymn on the organ as the priests and the Eucharistic ministers prepared to serve the congregation. The Bishop, too important for this task, perched in his lofty chair and supervised.

Father Bob held out the Eucharist to me just as he did every Sunday since my first Communion. "The body of Christ."

I took it like a child stealing candy from a convenience store. "Amen." I made the sign of the cross and then felt the urge to vomit until the Bishop bade us to go in peace, that the mass was ended, and to glorify God by our lives.

Grammy and I pushed through the crowds to rejoin the rest of the family. I was passed from uncle to aunt and sister to brother in a string of neverending hugs and congratulations. “We really should head over to the school gymnasium,” Mom interrupted. “There’s already going to be such a long line for pictures with the Bishop, and the traffic is going to be terrible getting out of here, and then we might be late for our lunch reservations.”

We moved towards the exit and blessed ourselves with Holy Water before bustling down a flight of stairs and into the parking lot, where a black Mercedes-Benz honked three times at a white Range Rover and shouted something sacreligious.

The driver of the Mercedes-Benz wore a red ribbon in her hair. “I think that’s Mrs. Connolly,” I said to no one in particular. My religious education teacher cut in front of a red Audi and took a right turn out of the parking lot. I watched the black car make its way up Washington Road until I could no longer see the “What Would Jesus Do?” sticker on its rear window.

What would Jesus do? “I left my purse inside, I’ll be right back.” I dashed off without another word, my ballet flats flopping on the concrete. I ran past the sea of long legs and spaghetti straps now posing by the church’s entrance sign. My Instagram feed would soon be filled with their “#confirmed” and “#blessed” pictures.

I took more Holy Water and reentered the now-empty church. My feet guided me to a pew in the back, where I supposed my imaginary purse would be waiting for me, but I resisted the urge to hide behind the barren rows and slowly strode up the aisle like a bride on her wedding day until I reached the pews closest to the altar. I made the sign of the cross and kneeled and clasped my hands together.

They say that I’ve been sealed with the Holy Spirit and fully welcomed into the Church, but I can’t make myself believe it, God. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that You sent Your only Son to die for us and the Spirit to sanctify us and did all the other things I’ve been taught, only for me to defy You. I’m sorry that I couldn’t sit and smile and nod when Sister Jean told us that rape victims should be imprisoned if they abort their pregnancies or join in the chorus of cheers when

Brother Gregory explained why all homosexuals go to hell. I’m sorry I could only ask why You, in Your infinite glory and power, turned the other way as these women were abused and why You formed queer people in an image other than that of divine heterosexuality. I’m sorry I couldn’t be a good Catholic like Marcia Davis, who cheats off of me in chemistry and knows Corinthians by heart, or Asher Lucas, who beat up a freshman and volunteers at a homeless shelter

every weekend. If that's what You want from me, God, I can't do it. I know that I'm a hypocrite and that if Dante is as reliable as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there's a special circle in hell reserved just for me, but if there's a chance for me to be saved, God, give me a sign. Confirm, one way or another, whether or not I am beyond redemption. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Amen.

I stared at the crucifix. Something. Anything.

The overhead lights flickered on and off. The opening lyrics of Mr. Isaacs' favorite hymn filled my mind: I will come to you in the silence. God had heard me, after all. I just needed to trust in His timing. I opened my mouth to speak to Him, but could not find the words.

Somewhere in the back of the church, a door creaked open. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" The church's seminarian strode up the aisle to where I sat. "I didn't realize anyone was still in here! We're supposed to turn all the lights off right after mass to save money."

"That's alright. I was just leaving."

"Oh, well, sorry again. Congratulations, by the way!" He muttered something about needing to speak to Mr. Isaacs before making his way to the other side of the church without pausing to genuflect.

I still couldn't tell if there was a piece missing from the stained glass window behind the altar or if the afternoon sunlight was just particularly strong, but no matter what my mom would've said about the way the wooden crucifix was illuminated, nothing about its cruel silence was miraculous.

If I Should Die

John McCann

Could it have been me, Leon questioned, hands trembling as he let the morning paper slip down onto his lap. The last thing he remembered was leaving the bar at Rittenhouse Square and driving to Olde City, the reported scene of the accident. After that it all turned hazy, intermittent. There had been an argument at a sportsman's lounge with a stranger wearing a velour sweatsuit, something to do with quarterbacks for the Philadelphia Eagles; a woman he had danced with at another club, not particularly attractive but good-natured and responsive - she, too, was lonely, she told him. He had thought it a sure thing, but then she was gone.

"God! What if it was me?" he said aloud, and the words shattered the stillness of the empty house. "I'd rather be dead than do a thing like that." He thought of the prayer his wife Angela prayed each night with their two sons as they made ready for bed.

"If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

But He hadn't, the Lord that is, and even if someone had, wouldn't have been Him

When first he woke earlier that morning, it had seemed not so different from any other morning-after: the dry mouth, the queasy stomach, the throbbing head. It was a price he had long since been willing to pay, that is, all except for the blackouts: the horror of waking up and not knowing where he had been and with whom, what he had said or done, how he had gotten home. Images without context, void of beginning or end, would flash across his consciousness - hitting on a best friend's wife, being "asked" to leave a favored bar - and fill him with dread at the unknown. And with it would follow that all-too-rote rituals: examining his wallet to see how wasteful he had been, looking out the window to make certain the car was safely parked in the driveway, checking his shirt for lipstick traces or his underwear for the telling scent of unfamiliar perfume.

"Christ! I've done it again," he reprimanded himself as he made his way to the bathroom. And hadn't he promised that this time it would be different, that on leaving the office he would have no more than one or two drinks, would be home in time for dinner with his family? But like so many other promises lately, it had come to naught, his sole consolation for the moment that this particular morning, he had awakened in his own bed, that there was time to pull himself together before his wife and children returned home. All he needed was a drink, just one, to settle his nerves, and he'd be fine. What he did not need was the note waiting

for him on the kitchen table -he had seen enough of them these last months - his wife's exacting penmanship announcing she had gone to her mother's with the two boys for the night, and wasn't it about time he started thinking of them and not just himself all the time. It pained him that once again he had failed her, that a woman like Angela, a wife and mother beyond reproach, should be made to pay the price for his failings. What a far cry from that first night on the beach at Guadeloupe when she confided she had never met a more gentle, giving man, and that she could love no other!

"No, it couldn't be me; I could never do such a thing," Leon protested as he read the article for a second then third time, examining each sentence in the hope of finding that one detail that would absolve him of any possible involvement. There was nothing.

"Driver Flees Scene of Fatal Accident," the headline announced, the article then detailing how a witness had observed the driver pull over to the side of the road, drag the victim to the rear of the car and stuff the body into the trunk. When asked to describe the car or owner, the woman acknowledged she had been much too dumbfounded to take down the license number.

Unwilling to believe himself capable of such a thing, Leon tried once again to piece together the events of the previous evening. There had been a first drink at his favorite in-town bar the Blue Boar. He had watched the lemon rind sink to the bottom of the martini glass, studied the gin's oily transparency against the dark polish of the mahogany bar, and wondered, in spite of all promises to the contrary, where the drink would take him in the end. That this time it had taken him home to his own bed was now but slight comfort in light of the article; what he needed to know was what had happened in between. It was like the morning he awakened in a hotel room in Atlantic City and found a note on the bureau, a woman's delicate script informing him how their night together had been the most memorable of her life and how grateful to him she was, while what he last remembered of their time together was feeling for her breast in the elevator on the way up to the room.

Keys in hand, determine to appear the casual suburban homeowner on a Saturday morning deciding whether the car warranted washing or not, Leon stepped from the house and circled the Buick Sabre. He found nothing - no dent, no broken headlights, no blood stain. And yet something unsettling - the fear that comes

from not knowing what he did or did not do, shame that once again he had broken his resolution to his wife not to drink too much - would not let him rest until he found out for certain whether the trunk was truly empty.

But not here in the driveway, Lawrence cautioned himself, not where a neighbor or passing motorist might witness the result. It would be better to go some place secluded, and he thought of the abandoned prison farm not far from the house. He knew its fields and woods well, its empty barns and neglected roads. He had first gone there with his sons on Saturday mornings to fly kites or ride mini-bikes. More recently it was where he went when he needed to be alone, where at times he found some measure of peace walking its cloistered trails, sitting by the gentle valley stream waiting for some kind of answer as to what had gone wrong in his life.

And yet, he reminded himself, at least up until a year or so ago, hadn't he always thought of his life as a good one: there was the law degree from Penn State, partnership in one of Philadelphia's most up-and-coming firms, a devoted wife along with two healthy children. It was all he had ever hoped or planned for, all he had worked to achieve, and yet, having achieved it, had come up feeling empty, separated. Separated from what, he did not know. Once as a young seminary student, he would have called it God, but now he could find no name for it, no antidote except those initial shining moments that came with taking the first drink.

The drive to the prison farm seemed to take longer than he remembered it. Still shaky from the night before, he had driven slower than normal, cautiously abiding stop-signs and traffic lights, heedful of some errant child chasing a ball into the street. And yet, he had to acknowledge, in spite of the apprehension he felt at the seriousness of the situation, there was as well the thrill of his "little game with fate," the reluctance to surrender uncertainty, suspense and wonder, for the predictable emptiness of yet another "morning after."

When at first he could find no place remote enough to guarantee privacy, the need for secrecy, he drove deeper into the labyrinth of neglected roads and derelict fields that had once fed the entire City's prison population. Some ten minutes later, at the tail of a dead-end road, he came to a stop, got out of the car, and scanned the abandoned farmland. There was no one, no sound except the cawing of a crow in a nearby field, the rustling of forlorn cornstalks in the late morning breeze. He lit a cigarette only to put it out after a single puff.

"What the fuck am I waiting for?" he chided himself.

"There's nothing in the goddamn trunk and I know it." And yet, hand sweating, head pounding, he stood over it as if whatever there might be inside could rise up, Lazarus-like, from its unlikely tomb and denounce him.

"God help me," he heard himself pray aloud, but no sooner had he done

so than he questioned to whom or what he was praying. He tried to remember when he had last called upon some supreme being, had petitioned a god with the ease and certainty that comes with knowing you are one of the chosen, but he could not.

Leon stared hard at the handle of the trunk: What if there really were a body in there? Would he go to the police? Or would he drag his victim into the maze of untended fields, let time and beast turn what had once been a fellow human being into an unsolved mystery? It was a question no man should ever have to face and for which he had no answer.

Leon bent down,hesitated,then threw open the lid of the trunk.

“I knew it; I knew it all along,” he congratulated himself and laughed aloud, a nervous self-directed laugh of relief. “I just knew it couldn’t have been me.

”There,where but moments before loomed the possibility of a dead body, lay a spare tire, several rusty tools and the two baseball gloves he bought early on in the season for his sons but had neglected to give them. Leon lit a cigarette, inhaled,then released the smoke. With relief came gratitude; he was free to go home, to start up life again as he had once known it, as the husband and father for whom summer meant family camping trips to the Pocono Mountains and winter skiing in New Hampshire. He was being given a second chance and he knew it, this latest escapade all the warning he needed to face his problem and make the necessary changes. First off, he would cut back on the drinking, or even, as drastic as it sounded,quit altogether, and he pictured himself consulting the family doctor or, perhaps more fittingly, his best friend from seminary days,the Reverend Luke Benton from the nearby church of Saint Andrew in-the-Valley.

It won’t be easy, he told himself, especially at the start, but with the support of others and proper discipline - exercising regularly at the gym, improving his diet - he could do it; he knew he could. It would take time,but with hard work and determination he would pull himself together, regain the confidence of his colleagues at the firm and, even more importantly, win back the love and respect of Angela and the boys. People would sense something different about him, some new inner strength. He would, with God’s grace, become the man he once knew he could be. It was time to go home and put the morning’s turmoil behind him like the nightmare it was, but as he started to close the trunk,he caught sight of a small tinfoil packet partially hidden beneath the baseball gloves.

Leon shook his head in self-disgust.

“I won’t be needing these anymore,”he said and threw the offending purple and gold package with its guaranties of “protection” far out into the field.

As he watched the tell-tale evidence disappear into the stalks of corn, he felt a first flush of virtuousness sweep over him, the instant delight that comes with doing the right thing. But no sooner had he commended himself on his good intentions than a second and more powerful wave, this time of shame, flooded him with images from the past each one more degrading than the other- making love to a woman in front of her husband; fondling the inflated breasts of a young stripper who, at a fixed price, served up the anonymous “passion” of a lap dance; letting an older man buy him drinks at a club only to wake the next morning not knowing how he had ended up in the stranger’s bed.

It was remorse such as he had never known, overwhelming and damning, for what he had done to himself and others - friends’ confidences he had betrayed; bar bills he had not seen fit to pay; commitments he had failed to honor. Above all it was the hurt he had inflicted on his wife and children, the times, more than he would like to remember, he had left them alone at home not knowing where he was or with whom, not knowing when, if ever, they would see him again while he was off somewhere promising “everlasting love” to a woman whose face and name would wane just as inexorably as the night itself.

“I need a drink. Just one,” he told himself, overwhelmed with self disgust, then remembered the bottle beneath the driver’s seat. Surely one drink won’t hurt, he determined, just to settle the nerves, help him take that first step toward a better life, a life of honor and dignity. Leon drank slowly, deliberately. At first the bourbon burned his throat, but in no time he felt it spreading its benevolent warmth throughout his body, calming the dread, silencing the unrest at the pit of his stomach. Once again, only this time without thinking, he raised the bottle to his lips and drank. It was then it happened, just as so often in the past; something within him began to stir, something that was dead seemed to come alive - dispelling doubt, quieting apprehension, soothing the conscience. And with its assurances came a totally different set of questions: Had he overreacted to the newspaper article? Was he really that bad a drinker? Didn’t most people he know think of him as a good man at heart, a decent provider?

That he needed to moderate the use of alcohol and learn to drink sensibly was evident, but he could do it on his own, he was sure of it; it was simply a matter of will-power, determination, and hadn’t he always achieved in life what he set out to do?

He would begin tomorrow; somehow Sunday morning seemed an appropriate day for starting anew. He would get up early, go to Mass with his wife and children, take them on a picnic to Lorimer Park. But for now, since no one was waiting at home and nothing was scheduled for the rest of the day, he might just as well sit by the creek and think things through like making a list of people to

whom he owed amends, preparing a set of resolutions he would undertake in the days and years to come. In time, he assured himself, his drinking would be but a memory, forgotten by most, dismissed by others as a good man's failing, a mid-life crisis. It could happen to any one of us, he could hear them saying as raised the bottle to his lips.



Out of Ink Andrew Acord



Summer Memories

Andrew Acord



Natures Color Palette

Andrew Acord



Beach Days

Andrew Acord



Sinking Sunshine

Andrew Acord

An Interview with Eric Bennett

Conducted by Andrea Reyes, Chris Sebastian, and Gianna Simoncelli

Eric Bennett grew up in Michigan and attended Deep Springs College and Harvard College for his undergraduate years. He later received his MFA in fiction from the University of Iowa, subsequently receiving his Ph.D. in English from Harvard University. Bennett now lives in Providence, Rhode Island and is a novelist and an English Professor at Providence College. His areas of expertise are concentrated around 20th Century American Fiction & Poetry, Modernism, Postmodernism, and Cold War History. He is the author of new, published novel, *A Big Enough Lie*. His other works include, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War*, . Bennett's work has been featured in, *A Public Space*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*.

Interviewers: In your first novel, *A Big Enough Lie* (2015), we found it very interesting that there is a novel within a novel. What was the inspiration behind this style of writing? Was it hard to distinguish between the two styles of writing (your writing vs your main character's)?

Eric Bennett: In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey offers a compelling series of observations about the dilemma of creative artists over the course of the twentieth century. A central one is the near impossibility of reconciling disparate frames of human experience within a single text. For instance (my example, not his), a novel about divorce in Connecticut in 2010 will probably involve people whose hearts are getting broken. But presumably those brokenhearted characters wear clothing and sit on furniture and operate kitchen appliances manufactured far across planet earth by people with very different kinds of hardship in their lives: with very differently broken hearts. How on earth, Harvey asks, do you capture in art that kind of diffuse interconnection?

Interviewers: The convention in much American "realism" is simply to bracket and ignore the problems of the sweatshop workers in China. For the sake of a good read, this is wise. But the question matters, and some of my favorite works of contemporary American fiction find solutions to it. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* solves the problem in one way; Lisa Halliday's *Asymmetry* (with that suggestive title) solves the problem in another. Much of George Saunders's fiction

and their creative writing at the University of Iowa and Stanford after World War II. What influences and ideas did the World War II period have on the development of Creative Writing? (Or what do you think is the most important idea was to come out of this World War II period on the development of creative writing?)

EB: The early creative writing programs promoted above all one dimension of modernist poetics. This is the idea that the particular matters more than the universal and that the senses are virtually the only avenue into good writing. They are an avenue into good writing, but hardly the only one. The highest question for writers is or should be how individual experience relates to collective experience.

The United States in general in so many of its cultural forms encourages a trivial, sensationalistic, and bogus idea of how the individual relates to the collective. Reality shows like *Survivor* create situations in which libertarian or egoistic instincts cultivated in mass society are put to the test under conditions that, in any other dispensation, would encourage fellow feeling and good tribalism. We lie to ourselves that our voices are louder than they are and that we can go it alone more than we can. Social media encourages this orientation, and our current president reflects its ascent as an ideology. Ferocious selfishness is the last bastion of putative authenticity. I don't blame this on American creative writing in particular. But its handbooks lay yet another foundation for it. People are trained to regard their sensations as important in themselves and not trained to reflect on how those sensations pertain to larger social groupings. This, of course, is a gross generalization with many exceptions. But a survey of contemporary fiction from other countries contains much more sophisticated and subtle explorations of the relationship between individual and group. Catholic texts and Marxist texts both interest me more than blogs and Instagram accounts.

I: What was the most unexpected or interesting fact that you discovered while researching for *Workshops of Empire*?

EB: That the CIA gave a little bit of money to the International Writing Program at Iowa in 1967.

I: Can you recall, or take us back, to the moment when you realized you wanted to be a writer?

EB: Calling oneself a writer strikes me as similar to calling oneself a movie star. It's in poor taste to say so even if you are one. And it's in especially poor taste if you're aspiring to be one and not one yet. Another way of putting it is that "writers" are people with audiences, rather as "husbands" are people with wives, and "senators" are people with constituencies. I would say that Stephen King is a writer, and Toni Morrison was. They stirred in the United States a deep hunger for their writing. But even if I had a much larger audience than I've had to date (and I'd love it), I'd be reluctant to call myself a writer. When I write my subservience is to the excellence of the manuscript that is coming into existence. That excellence seems to exist outside and beyond me—to have a source in language, and in the nature of reality, and in the rules of good writing. I don't own any of that. And the part of the process that centers on "me," well, that's not very interesting to me. I don't have an identity that I wish to promulgate by expressing it in words. I have a desire to talk to those who have moved me by writing beautifully. Most of those people are dead. And I can't imagine that their angels are interested in "Eric Bennett, the writer." I imagine that, if those angels are interested in anything, it's in the ongoing conversation that belongs to nobody but welcomes everybody and centers on varieties of startling virtuosity. My idea of heaven would be a library containing the canon of world literature published without authorial ascription.

I: What authors have influenced your writing? For what reasons?

EB: John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* encouraged me to leave my hometown and not look back. Of course, I can't stop looking back.

I: In what ways has teaching here at Providence College affected your own writing?

EB: As a non-Catholic at a Catholic institution, and a progressive at a center-right institution, I feel like an outsider—almost entirely in a good sense, though, like an outsider graciously welcomed. Similarly, my students resemble very little the kind of undergraduates that I knew during my own college days and probably that I tried myself to be. There are relatively few artists or aspiring bohemians here, and those that exist appear visible more in contrast to their natty peers than in comparison to artists and aspiring bohemians elsewhere—and often bring with them religious habits of being that are different from my own. So, in general I

similarly refuses to draw tight domestic boundaries around the sphere of action. My colleague E. C. Osondu (a student of Saunders) also masterfully modulates between cultural frames. In my case I wanted to put, within one novel, the very different ethical pangs and urgencies of creative writing workshops in the Midwest and combat in the Middle East.

Regarding your last question, I don't think I distinguish in that way between "mine" and "my main characters." It presupposes a kind of earnest baseline, an "authentic" voice, and that's not my understanding of great writing. That said, I did think about differences in tone between the two halves of the narrative.

I: As part of the novel within a novel, the main character writes a memoir of his time in Iraq. What struggles did you face while writing about this topic? Is this experience based on someone you personally know?

EB: My initial excitement for the project was based in that challenge: in writing a convincing account of combat in Iraq having never been there or served in the Army. I read everything I could about the war (which was really not that much, in 2005, when I started work) and also received help from a veteran who wished to remain anonymous.

I: A character in *A Big Enough Lie* (2015) is the character of John Townley. How did you come to develop this character? Is this character based on someone in real life that added to the development of Townley?

EB: In the *Poetics*, Aristotle conceives of character in terms of action: we are what we do. Modern conceptions of psychology and character lay a far greater emphasis on interiority—some essential self that persists regardless of external behavior. I understand what this is and means and feel as though I and the characters I write have "personalities." But I find fiction easier to write if the starting point for character is external action. (Also, for what it's worth, I enjoy life more if I don't obsess about my inner essence; and the less you obsess, the less it seems to exist). I knew there would be a character who fabricated an Iraq War memoir. That was my starting point. So how do you get such a person to tick?

I: *Workshops of Empire* focuses on the careers of Paul Engle and Wallace Stegner

feel like I'm half on Mars, half at Disney World—and, if I get a third half, half in Vatican City—and, if I get a fourth half, half in the Connecticut suburbs. Which I love. The fiction I enjoy most and that I most aspire to write captures the friction between radically different value systems and ways of being. I take very seriously the values and ways of being even of those students and colleagues I least resemble. It's not that I regard every interaction with an anthropological mind. It's just that there's a kind of feeling of chronic exile being here, and the part of me that wishes to write about chronic exile (which is basically the modern condition) savors it.

I: Being a practicing writer, published author, and English professor at Providence College, what advice would you give any college student aspiring to be a writer? Do you have any tips for student writers trying to get their work out there?

EB: This feels like being asked to tell you how to prepare for nuclear war.

An Interview with Jonathan Dee

Conducted by Adam Kearing, Hannah Langley, and Matthew Mazzella

Jonathan Dee, a Pulitzer Prize nominated author, has written seven successful novels over the course of his career, including *A Thousand Pardons* and *The Privileges*. Originally from northwestern Connecticut, Dee moved to New York City shortly after graduating from Yale University. During his years at Yale, Dee studied fiction writing and learned from some of the best fiction-writing practitioners. Dee writes mostly fiction and he has been very successful doing so. The move to NYC influenced the rest of his career, as Dee spent most of his time working in writing and publishing as a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine* and senior editor of *The Paris Review*, as well as a National Magazine Award nominated literary critic for *Harper's*. His novels revolve around the idea of class struggle and present the trials and tribulations upper middle-class men and women go through and how they cope with everyday problems and struggles. Dee also played a key role in creating the infamous April Fool's joke about the imaginary baseball pitcher Sidd Finch in *Sports Illustrated*. He has won several awards including the St. Francis College Literary Prize, the Prix Fitzgerald. He has received several fellowships, consisting of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. Dee currently resides in Syracuse, NY, where he also teaches creative writing at Syracuse University.

Interviewers: At what point did you decide you wanted to become a writer?

Jonathan Dee: When I was young, maybe nine or ten, I had what seems now like a foreshadowing habit: whenever I read a book I liked (at that age they were mostly books about sports), I would take one of my father's pencils and yellow legal pads and sit down and try to re-write the book myself, from memory, as if it had been my idea in the first place. I didn't really get serious about writing until college, particularly senior year when I took a writing workshop with the late, great John Hersey, one of the truly formative figures in my life. (I still catch myself copying his teaching style today.) But even after I knew that a writer was what I wanted to be, all my career "plans" centered around my likely failure; I knew I wouldn't forgive myself if I never even tried to write a novel and get it published, so I figured I'd try, and fail, and then move on to whatever the next thing was. (The next thing would surely have been something in publishing or academia, some job that still involved spending as much time as possible around books and other people who loved them.)

I: Knowing your previous work experience at The New York Times Magazine and The Paris Review, what made you decide you wanted to become an English professor at Syracuse University?

JD: I'd already been teaching for many years – at Columbia, NYU, Brooklyn College – though not full-time. Basically, I just felt ready for a change. New York is great, it will always be my home, but it's also uniquely exhausting; even the simple things there, like parking a car or sending your kid to school, are ridiculously complicated and expensive. I always say that New York is the ideal place to live if you're either in your twenties or a millionaire, and I am neither.

I: Did growing up in New York City inspire any of your stories? If so, what moments or characters did you base off real life experiences?

JD: I was born in New York City but didn't really grow up there: when I was five, my family moved to a very small town in northwestern Connecticut. But I moved back to the city after I graduated from college, and stayed there more than 25 years, so it's had a big influence on my life and my fiction. The little totems from those years that I've re-purposed in my novels are too many to mention: the hippo-playground in Riverside Park in the first chapter of *The Locals*, the incredible penthouse apartment overlooking the planetarium in *The Privileges*, the gala party on the deck of the *Intrepid* in *The Privileges*, etc. etc. Usually places, though, rather than people. The only characters I ever base outright on real people are minor ones, often people who just appear in a book once. In *The Privileges*, for instance, there's a scene where April is shocked to discover a friend's dad alone in his study on the top floor of his townhouse, reading the paper while a bunch of drunk teenagers trash his multi-million-dollar home below. That's a real guy.

I: In “*The Privileges*” and “*A Thousand Pardons*,” your characters have to make some deep ethical and moral decisions. Was there an instigating incident in your life that inspired the decisions these characters had to make?

JD: No, there was no one big defining incident, though life is certainly a succession of smaller ethical and moral crossroads of that kind. The instinct to put characters through some kind of moral crucible is probably born more of reading,

to be honest, than of living; that's what's thrilling, in fiction — to see characters' mettle tested, to see their response, and to empathize with the humanity of that response whether it's brave or not, smart or not, moral or not.

I: Being that you grew up in New York City but now live in upstate New York, do you share anything in common with your character Helen in “A Thousand Pardons”?

JD: Probably. It's hard to write a few hundred pages about any character without some of you bleeding into them, and vice versa. Usually, though, the commonality between my main characters and my real life is a matter of small-scale stuff: incidents, anecdotes, lines of dialogue. I'll give you one example: remember how Helen's daughter starts skipping soccer to go on little city adventures, and then goes home and gives a fake account of the game? I coached my daughter's weekend soccer team in Manhattan for years, and one year, one of her teammates did exactly that. (She got caught, though; I accidentally busted her when I emailed her mom to make sure she was okay.) As far as your question specifically about Helen: my brother and his family moved from Brooklyn to Chappaqua many years before *A Thousand Pardons* was written, and it's their house I was picturing when I wrote about Helen's. Please don't tell him.

I: In both “The Privileges” and “The Locals”, your characters face tough economic circumstances and decisions? Was any of this based off your own experience or the experience of your friends and family with the stock market crash and recession in 2009? If so, could you briefly explain what happened?

JD: It's very much based on my own experience, yes, but it goes back way further than the crash of 2007 – back to my family and the circumstances of my childhood. We were pretty well off, and then over the course of just a few years, as a result of a combination of alcoholism and mental illness, we lost everything. The great author William Maxwell was once asked what made writers become writers and he answered, “Deprivation.” (Maxwell's own mother died in a flu epidemic when he was a child.) I wrote about this directly only once, in a personal essay called “Pre-Existing Condition” that appeared in an anthology called “Money Changes Everything.”

I: Being a professor of creative writing at Syracuse University, what advice would

you give to any college student aspiring to become a writer one day?

JD: I don't have to think too hard about that one, because I give advice of that kind to students practically every day: writing isn't really even about writing, it's about re-writing. People think it's about sitting around waiting for the muse to gift you with a fantastic idea, and it is about that, sort of, but the gap between that moment and an actual good book, or even just a good sentence, is long and workmanlike. A lot of young writers want to give up on a project if it comes out badly the first time, but it always comes out badly the first time – you have to make yourself push through that. (Oh, and read as much of *The Paris Review's* interview series, "Writers at Work," as you can. Those books were graduate school for me.)

An Interview with Lisa Gardner

Conducted by Alia Spring, Kate Ward, and Max Waite

Lisa Gardner is a #1 New York Times bestselling thriller and mystery writer. She has published over thirty novels including *The Perfect Husband*, *The Killing Hour*, *The Third Victim* and *The Survivors Club*. Four of her novels were transformed into TV movies including *The Perfect Husband* and *The Survivors Club*. She has made personal appearances on a couple of television channels, including TruTV and CNN. Additionally, Lisa has written several romance novels under the pseudonym, Alicia Scott. Originally from Oregon, she now lives in New Hampshire and dedicates her time to writing a new novel every year.

Interviewers: Your books are filled with specific details about police procedures and criminal activity. What kind of person were you as a child and have these topics always interested you? For example, did you watch a lot police shows on television?

Lisa Gardner: I've always been fascinated by puzzles and things that go bump in the night, so mysteries were a natural fit. I grew up reading everything from Nancy Drew to Erle Stanley Gardner to V.C. Andrews. So yes, the mystery/police procedural aspect of my career is organic. I can't imagine writing a book without a gruesome crime (which I guess says something about me).

KW: Many of your books are of the mystery and thriller genre, including the FBI and detective stories. What research have you done to become more connected with these genres, in order to get more of a specialized understanding?

LG: In the beginning of my writing career, I didn't have the confidence to reach out to law enforcement to refine my novels. When I wanted to write my first thriller, however, *THE PERFECT HUSBAND*, real-world research became critical. In this day and age, readers expect plausible fiction—the crime may be over the top, but the investigative procedure should be authentic. Having no police contacts, I took the plunge and cold-called my local police department. It turns out, as long as you're a taxpayer, you have the right to ask away. Let them know up front it's for fiction, and everyone relaxes. In the course of my career, I've now spent time at the FBI Academy, visited the Body Farm, worked with

cadaver dogs, toured countless prisons, and learned about fugitive tracking. Each experience started with a phone call, hey I'm a writer working on a fiction novel, can I ask you some questions. No one ever recognizes Lisa Gardner. It's simply a matter of taking that leap of faith, being professional and proving you are willing to learn. Most experts help in the end, because they are tired of the inaccuracies they see in books and TV. So tell them you want to get things right, and doors open up.

MW: How did you come up with the individual personalities of Detective D.D. Warren, Flora Dane, and Kimberly Quincy? Perhaps from people in your own life?

LG: To be honest, I don't know where my characters come from. I have to work on research and plot. The people in my novels, however, they simply come to me. Yep, I'm that crazy woman who listens to voices in her head. I don't do character charting, bios, favorite flavors of ice cream. I just listen, then write. Yeah, freakish. I know.

AS: Could you point to a particular incident that made you decide to become a writer or more specifically a mystery writer?

LG: I don't think you become a writer. I think you are a writer. It's just a matter of finding the courage to take the plunge. I wrote my first book at 17. I can't tell you why. Maybe because at 17 it's more like why not? Then it sold, so I wrote another and another. Your first few novels are for love, not money, that's for sure. Eventually I realized I liked writing more than I liked being a Boston business consultant. So then the question became, how could I make enough money to support myself in a profession famous for poverty-level income? The solution: write something with a bigger audience, e.g., a mainstream suspense thriller. I came up with the idea of *THE PERFECT HUSBAND*—a serial killer who escapes from maximum security prison in Massachusetts to extract revenge on everyone who put him there, including his wife. I gritted my teeth, did the research, survived the rewrites. And the rest, as they say, is history.

KW: Do you have any favorite thriller or mystery writers of your own?

LG: Tons. Where to begin? Lee Child, Karin Slaughter, Tess Gerritsen, Gregg Hurwitz, T. Jefferson Parker, John Sandford, Nora Roberts, Riley Sager, Chevy Stevens, J.T. Ellison. I read a lot. Still my favorite past time.

MW: You write a book a year, which is incredible. How do you come up with fresh ideas for plots? Is it difficult to come up with new ideas or does it come naturally?

LG: Sadly, most of my books have been inspired by true crime, and there's no end to that kind of inspiration. My January 28, 2020 release, *WHEN YOU SEE ME*, has to do with the discovery of skeletal remains which connect with a serial killer's "asterisk list." Basically, all serial predators have the murders that have been proven, then the additional victims police believe were killed but can't prove it, often because they never found the body. For example, I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, hunting grounds of Ted Bundy. They never found all his victims. So there are families out there who've still never had their missing girls returned, but get to live out their days believing their daughters died at the hands of a serial predator. How awful is that? Given that, when remains are eventually discovered, even if you're 90% sure it was the past work of so and so, the family needs/ deserves closure. So, that's where my book starts. A cold case investigation to provide closure in a fifteen-year old missing persons investigation. Needless to say, fresh murder and mayhem ensue.

AS: Following up that prior question, how do you escape burn out while writing a new book per year? It must be difficult to be on that constant grind of coming up with new ideas, plot, and characters.

LG: Once you become an established author, deadlines are real. You learn what works for you. I live in the mountains, so I often go hiking when I'm stuck. Active meditation, I believe they call it. Helps me brainstorm. Then there's long car rides, thinking of a plot problem right before you fall asleep and waking up with the answer... At writers' conferences we often compare notes. There's definitely something about being on the move—car, walk, whatever—that seems to assist the creative process. Whatever the block, there is a solution. The best novelists listen to their inner voices and adapt along with them. Huh, we may be back to the freakish part. But because I'm successful, I get to use the word eccentric instead. I'm very, very...eccentric.

KW: Do you have any advice for college students who are aspiring mystery and thriller writers?

LG: What are you waiting for? I was published while in college. And I'm not alone. Age is no barrier to entry, young or old. Writing is organic. Read. Research. Write. Just do it. And yes, the first results will be crap. But then you rewrite and it gets better. You gotta log your 10,000 hours just like everyone else. Oh, and read Anne Lamott's BIRD BY BIRD and Stephen King's ON WRITING. Then you're ready. Go for it.

An Interview with Joseph Scapellato

Conducted by Kathleen Grennan, Katya Horne, and Clara Howard

Joseph Scapellato lives in Lewisburg, PA with his wife and daughter. In his most recent novel, *The Made-Up Man* (2019), he mixes humor with an alluring plot line that entralls the curious, self-reflective mind, and reaches the heart of what it means to ‘know oneself’. Scapellato is an assistant professor of English at Bucknell University, working within the Creative Writing department. He has also written other works, including his debut novel, *Big Lonesome* (2017), and a wide variety of short stories published throughout various literary journals including *Gulf Coast*, *Green Mountains Review Online*, *Kenyon Review Online*, and *North American Review*, and *LUMINA*.

I: Is Stanley’s journey in your novel *The Made-Up Man* in any way autobiographical?

Joseph Scapellato: Thankfully, no! I’ve never been the subject of a sinister performance art project; I’ve never KO’d an artist on the street; I’ve never dropped out of an archaeology program; my family is much, much, much kinder than Stanley’s. That said, the novel did initially emerge from my own experiences. In 2005, when I was 22, I backpacked through Europe for a month with my buddy Andrew. (His dad’s graduation gift was tickets for him and a friend to go abroad—I got to be the lucky friend who went with Andrew.) We toured cities we’d already heard of, but also decided, on a recommendation from Andrew’s dad, to go to Prague. It was a place we knew nothing about. When we arrived, we were entranced. Prague was gorgeous and strange and cheap. Andrew and I agreed that Prague would be a spectacular place to shoot a film noir. At some point, we started to co-narrate our Prague experiences in an over-the-top film

noir/detective voice. I don’t remember the specific jokes very well—things like: “That building sure is old.”/“Yeah, a little too old.” But I know for sure that we found them funny only because of how we told them: in that faux-gritty, goofily elevated, “hard-boiled” voice. As soon as I returned to Chicago from this trip, I prepared to move to Las Cruces, New Mexico; I was about to begin an MFA in Fiction at New Mexico State University. Larry Watson, who I’d studied with in undergrad, had said that it might be wise to start a new writing project before I moved southwest. Something to maybe use for my first workshop. With this

advice in mind, I wrote a few pages of a piece based on the voicey film-noir inside joke from Prague. That was the earliest draft of what eventually became *The Made-Up Man*.

I: What drove you to write so extensively about Performance Art, an artform which, arguably, isn't discussed or known as much as others; have you ever experienced or done a performance art piece yourself?

JS: I've always been interested in performance art—I love the bravery, strangeness, transgression, and surprise that's so prevalent in the best of it. Although Performance Art isn't as "mainstream" as other forms of art, there are quite a lot of smart and fascinating people saying smart and fascinating things about it. It's widely discussed in art circles. In fact, that's something that I really enjoy about performance art; how it lends itself to discussion, how it aggressively invites a reader to make meaning out of it. I've never done any real performance art, myself, though I've gleefully participated in activities that, in a way, have some proximity to it. In high school, for example, I pulled a number of elaborate public pranks for a radio show; in college, I regularly orchestrated the same sort of thing for an improv comedy group that I was a member of and for the TV shows that I was involved with. I'm not calling any of that pranky stuff performance art—definitely not!—but it employs some of the same techniques, and it certainly goes for some of the same effects (especially the way that the audience doesn't know that they're the audience, at least not right away).

I: In your collection of short stories there's a bit of a focus on American Western culture, what is the significance of that for you?

JS: I grew up watching Golden Age westerns with my mom—Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Neville Brand, Randolph Scott, Claude Akins. The good guy dudes who do no wrong, who shoot the guns out of the hands of the villains. Much later I started watching the stylistically wild and violent films of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah. Perhaps because of that, I've always loved the mythology of the West. When I realized that I was writing a story collection about the west—when cowboys started showing up in my work—I started to consciously investigate and challenge that mythology.

I: How did writing and publishing the collection of short stories compare to your

debut novel? How were the creative processes different for you?

JS: On the most fundamental level, the writing of the two was very similar—as a writer, I’m always trying to find the emergent intentions of the work. I want to be surprised by where it’s going, on the level of the sentence, on the level of the passage, on the level of the narrative shape. As far as publishing goes, I feel that there’s more respect and prestige for novels, in general. Not many people read story collections. Next time you’re at a family party, ask everyone when they last read a novel; then ask everyone when they last read a story collection. I can guarantee you that many people will tell you that they’ve never, ever read a story collection.

I think that story collections are harder to read than novels. As my editor once pointed out to me, with a story collection, you have to start over with every story. You get that initial period of readerly disorientation over and over again. For the record: writing a story collection and writing a novel, for me, are equally challenging, and reading them is equally rewarding.

I: Most of your stories occur in regions far from your place of origin and where you currently live, do you travel a lot in order to gain inspiration from places? If so, what part does traveling play in your writing?

JS: Most of the stories in *Big Lonesome* take place in the west/southwest, that’s true, but there are a good number of Chicago stories in there. And half (or perhaps more than half) of *The Made-Up Man* takes place in Chicago/Chicagoland, where I grew up. One thing that makes sense

to me, though, is that as soon as I’m away from a place, I feel more permission to write about it. For example: I started writing *Big Lonesome* not when I was in the southwest or Chicago, but when I moved from Las Cruces, New Mexico, to Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. As soon as I moved, I found that every story that I was working on wanted to be set back in the southwest. I began to feel a preservative urgency, a need to get something of the experiences I’d had in the southwest into my work. I wanted to hang onto what I’d felt when there, the big feelings you get in a big landscape. Hemingway (I think?) said that you can’t really write about a place until you leave it. That’s not true in a literal sense, of course, but I do think that once you leave a place, the place becomes imaginary. When you return to that

imaginary place by writing about it, you participate in the re-creation of it, and through this process, you open yourself to the possibility of being newly surprised by what the place meant to you, means to you, and might continue to mean to you.

I: In *The Made-Up Man*, you focus on self-discovery. In what ways have your life experiences influenced the ways in which you understand the world as a writer, and how do you go about implementing your discoveries into your writing?

JS: I think that as a writer, you can write towards yourself or you can write away from yourself. You can also do both (in the same project). What I mean by this is that you can start a story or a scene or a moment with your life experiences—a seed of something that you actually experienced—and fictionalize away from those experiences as you proceed, allowing yourself to change character, setting, occasion, theme. Or you can start a story or a scene or a moment with completely fictional situations and write towards little embedded (and slightly modified) fragments of your own life experiences. For me, this helps keep the process surprising, interesting, and true.

I: Finally, a broader question: what drew you to writing as a career and what is the most important skill or bit of wisdom you've gained from putting thoughts to paper?

JS: Just a quick note of clarification: writing is only indirectly my career. Being a professor is directly my career. That's what gets me my salary. However, to be a professor of creative writing, I need to be a published writer. So maybe it's most accurate to say that writing is not my career, but it supports my career. But writing is also the thing that I've been doing for much, much longer than I've been teaching. What drew me to writing is unknown to me. I've simply always loved it. I've been writing since before I could write—when I was a little kid, I would draw comic books, make a big space for the words (because I knew comic books needed words, even though I couldn't read them), and then I'd dictate to my extremely patient and kind mother what words should go there. What drew me to teaching: when I went to get my MFA, I taught classes as a graduate student. (This is how you go to grad school for free.) I'd always been interested in teaching—my dad was a gym teacher at a K-8 in Chicago—but I wasn't sure if I'd be any good at it or enjoy it. I ended up enjoying it immediately. I realized that, just like writing, it

was a life's work—that it was worth devoting my life to learning how to do it as best as I could. The writerly wisdom that's been most important to me is the idea of the writer's intention vs. the work's intention—that whenever the emergent, surprising intentions of the work are in conflict with your initial intentions for the work, you need to abandon your initial intentions and revise towards the work's intentions, because the story is smarter than you. It's a way of following what is most alive in the work. I am very grateful for this teaching. It continues to guide me.

An Interview with Lisa See

Conducted by Emma Paxton, Molly McCarthy, and Kate Picone

Lisa See is an author of young adult novels that all incorporate the experiences of Chinese people, particularly the relationships between women within families. Although Ms. See is not completely Chinese, her grandfather was and she has felt very connected to this part of her family. This connection has inspired her to create best-selling novels such as *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *Shanghai Girls*, *Dreams of Joy*, and many others. Although these books focus on family, Ms. See also incorporates notable time periods, such as World War II, and how those significant moments in history affect her characters to depict the ways these events affected people's lives in real life. Before she started writing books, Ms. See was a freelance journalist whose writing has appeared in *Vogue*, *Self*, and *More* along with many book reviews. Ms. See was honored as National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 2001 for her continued efforts to represent Chinese-Americans throughout literature.

Emma Paxton, Molly McCarthy, Kate Picone: Your novels are notably set in or are about characters from China. Aside from your own heritage, what is it about China and its history that interests you so much as a writer?

Lisa See: The obvious answer is that China has 5,000 years of continuous history and culture that most people know very little about but that fascinates me. But it's more than that. My personal history is inexorably linked to why I'm interested in China. I'm part Chinese. My great-great-grandfather came here to work on the building of the transcontinental railroad. My great-grandfather was the godfather/patriarch of Los Angeles Chinatown. I don't look at all Chinese, but I grew up in a very large Chinese-American family. I have hundreds of relatives in Los Angeles, of which there are only about a dozen who look like me. All writers are told to write what they know. My family is what I know. And what I don't know—the women's secret language that I wrote about in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, for example—I love to find out whatever I can and then bring my sensibility to the subject. I guess what I'm trying to say is that in many ways I straddle two cultures. I try to bring what I know from both cultures into my work. The American side of me tries to open a window into China and things Chinese for non-Chinese, while the Chinese side of me makes sure that what I'm writing is true to the Chinese culture without making it seem too "exotic" or "foreign." What I want people to get from my books is that all people on the

planet share common life experiences—falling in love, getting married, having children, dying—and share common emotions—love, hate, greed, jealousy. These are the universals; the differences are in the particulars of customs and culture.

EP, MM, KP: Another common theme that your novels have is that they center around relationships between women—mothers/daughters, friends, sisters, etc. How important is it to you, and perhaps to readers, that you have these kinds of relationships in your stories?

LS: There are millions of fresh ideas about women's relationships still to be told! Let's remember that women writers haven't been getting published for all that long. Yes, there are the women writers that we all know about—the Bronte sisters, Emily Dickinson, George Sand, Virginia Woolf, and some others—but really, they were few and far between. This means that in the great body of the world's literature most female relationships—mothers and daughters, sisters, friends—have been written by men. I find it extremely exciting to read about women through the eyes of women, and, again, this is still a relatively recent phenomenon. And there's such range to that, right? Women who shop, tough women detectives, flawed women, brave women, poor women, rich women, women from other cultures, religions, cultures, and traditions. As a writer, I'm drawn to women's friendship because it's unlike any other relationship we have in our lives. I'm especially interested in the dark shadow side of female friendship. We will tell a friend something we won't tell our mothers, our husbands or boyfriends, or our children. This is a particular kind of intimacy, and it can leave us open to the deepest betrayals and other failures in courage.

EP, MM, KP: Co-writing with one other author seems like a daunting enough task on its own, but what was it like cowriting *Lotus Land* and *110 Shanghai Road* with not only two other authors, but your mother, Carolyn See, as well?

LS: My mother, John Espey, and I had so much fun working together as *Monica Highland*. John was 21 years older than my mother, and my mother was 21 years older than me, so we had three generations working together. I feel in many ways like those were my deep apprenticeship years. I learned so much from the tow of them.

EP, MM, KP: Your mother is a fellow writer, how has she influenced your writing

style or vice versa? What other authors have influenced you as a writer?

LS: Wallace Stegner, especially *Angle of Repose*. I used a couple of lines from this novel as the epigraph for my first book, *On Gold Mountain*. I didn't realize when I used them that they would come to symbolize how I see myself as a writer. He wrote: "Fooling around in the papers my grandparents, especially my grandmother, left behind, I get glimpses of lives close to mine, related to mine in ways I recognize but don't completely comprehend. I'd like to live in their clothes a while." And that's what I've been trying to do in my work—live in their clothes awhile. E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*. OK, so this is one of the greatest novels ever written, but I read it for the first time when I was falling in love with my husband. Forster so delicately, yet eloquently, addresses issues of class, nationality, and economic status. "Only connect!" which he used as his epigraph, may be the two most quoted words in English literature, but people often ignore what comes soon after. "Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer." You can see how besotted in love I was. James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential*. I love, love, love this novel. It's set in Los Angeles. It's got romance, mystery, corruption, and violence. It's got cracking great language, because Ellroy is a genius when it comes to the voices of cops, bad guys, politicians, and prostitutes. The various plots are complicated but dazzlingly interwoven. I'd like to add that the film is one of my all-time favorites too. I always say that the book is better than the film. (Who doesn't?) But this film is a great for lovers of the novel, because, while the script can't include all the intricacies of the novel's various plotlines, it hints at them brilliantly. Last, Nina Revoyr's *The Age of Dreaming*. This novel, which takes place in Hollywood, goes back and forth through time between the present day and the silent film era. It's based loosely on the true story of Mary Miles Minter, a young and popular silent film star, who was involved in the still-unsolved murder case of director William Desmond Taylor. The main character, Jun Nakayama, is based, also loosely, on Sessue Hayakawa, the first actor of Asian descent to become an internationally-known star. The mix of mystery, period details, racism, and the whole unknown—at least to me—world of the silent film era is both thoughtful and captivating. I recommend this novel at least once a week.

EP, MM, KP: In the novel *Shanghai Girls* the character, Joy, runs away to China to try and find her dad. What inspired you to make this choice for the character? Were you worried that this choice was controversial?

LS: Joy is idealistic. It's 1957, the PRC is still a very young country, and she's very excited about what's happening there. She has also suffered a great loss. Her father committed suicide after being targeted during the Confession Program and being accused of being a communist. To me, it is only natural that she would want to go to the land of her blood and abandon the place that has been so cruel to her family. But it's one thing to be idealistic and quite another to arrive in China in 1957 as a Chinese by blood but also as a naïve girl who grew up in Los Angeles. To me, the end of *Shanghai Girls* is a new beginning. With *Dreams of Joy*, I had the opportunity to write about a period in China that Westerners know very little about. I love shattering preconceived notions of what China was or is.

EP, MM, KP: In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* there are many references to ancient Chinese practices such as foot binding and matchmaking. Did you find that it was hard to make these practices authentic for the book?

LS: There are many theories about how the practice started. One of them is that there was a courtesan who used to wrap her feet when she danced. Obviously she wasn't breaking her bones or else she wouldn't have been able to dance. Nevertheless, it was said that she looked like she had little fox feet when she danced. She became hugely famous for this, and all the men wanted to see her. Pretty soon other courtesans were binding their feet. Now all the men wanted to see them. This resulted in a lot of wives saying the Chinese equivalent of "How am I going to get Harry to come home?" That's how foot binding made the jump from the courtesan culture to the culture of fine upstanding women. Foot binding wasn't difficult to research. What was hard was putting myself in the room with Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Third Sister as they had their feet bound. I kept wondering how a mother could do that to her daughter. This question stayed with me. I wanted to look at foot binding from a mother's point of view, which is what I did in *Peony in Love*. This doesn't explain why it lasted so long – a thousand years! There are several reasons for that. First, it was a terrific economic status symbol for men. A man could say, "I'm so wealthy that, look, I have a wife with bound feet," meaning she didn't have to work. Or, "I'm so extraordinarily wealthy that even my servants have bound feet." Now that was an extremely wealthy man. Second, men are men, so there was a whole sexual component to bound feet. Anything you could imagine they did with those bound feet, they did, and more. But that still doesn't explain why it lasted so long. This was something that a mother did to her daughter. It was passed down through the centuries. I think this is the hardest thing to understand – how a mother could inflict such terrible pain on her daughter. She did it because it was the one thing she could do

to possibly give her daughter a better chance at life. If she could give her daughter a pair of perfectly bound feet, then maybe her daughter would marry into a better family and have a better life. If that was the only way you could help your daughter, wouldn't you do it too?

EP, MM, KP: What is your advice to English majors and young writers?

LS: Look at writing as a job. That means you get up and you go to work. I don't wait for that moment of inspiration. By now, I do a lot of things—I write, I do a lot of speaking, and I do other fun—rather, what I consider to be fun—projects. But the most important thing is writing, so that always comes first. When I get up, the first thing I do is write. My rule is one thousand words a day—just four pages—that isn't very much. Life is short, so be passionate about everything you do.

Contributors' Notes

Andrew Acord is a 21 year old photographer currently attending Bristol Community College. He enjoys photography as a hobby which allows him to capture and convey a variety of emotions to the spectator while telling a story that draws them in evermore.

Sofia Amaral is a junior Biology and Health Policy & Management dual major at Providence College. She is planning on attending graduate school for advanced practice nursing, and to specialize in neonatal and obstetric care. She is excited to have her piece published in *The Alembic* this year.

Gabriela Baron is a Creative Writing major and Spanish minor. She has published fiction stories and poems in the portfolio section of Providence College's newspaper, *The Cowl*. Her poem "Anxiety" was produced as a short film entitled "Disquiet" which screened at the 2019 L.A. Shorts International Film Festival and the 2019 Rhode Island International Film Festival. Her favorite book is *The House on Mango Street*, which has inspired her to write fiction in the form of vignettes.

Jalynn Booker is a senior here at PC and has been pursuing photography for a few years now. This photo included in this edition is one of many that means a lot to her. She loves capturing the essence of special moments and times, and hopes to keep pursuing a life in portrait photography after her time at PC

Robert Cooperman's latest collections are *THAT SUMMER* (Main Street Rag Publishing Company) and *THE DEVIL WHO RAISED ME* (Lithic Press). Forthcoming from Kelsay Books is *THE GHOSTS AND BONES OF TROY*.

Josh Dhaliwal is a sophomore English major with a Film minor. He hopes to pursue a career in screenwriting with a focus on comedy. But for now, he is still creating and developing his own voice with lots to learn at Providence College.

Eugene Franklin is passionate about introspective and philosophical narratives. He has contributed to *Christianity and Literature*, *Philosophy Now*, and *Iconoclast*.

Erika B. Girard is currently pursuing her M.A. in English and Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry through SNHU. She graduated from Saint Leo University in Florida in 2019 with her B.A. in English Literary Studies and a minor in Hospitality Management. Originally from Rhode Island, she derives creative inspiration from her family, friends, faith, and fascination with the human experience. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Edify Fiction*, *Iris Literary Journal*, *Sandhill Review*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and more.

E. Laura Golberg emigrated from England to America at age 21. She won first place in the Washington, DC Commission on the Arts Larry Neal Poetry Competition. Laura's poetry has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Spillway*, *RHINO*, and the *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, among other places. Her web page is: elauragolberg.com

David James has published eleven books, two in 2019: *A Gem of Truth* and *Nail Yourself into Bliss*. More than thirty of his one-act plays have been produced in the U.S. and Ireland, and he teaches writing at Oakland Community College in Michigan, the third coast.

Jacqueline Kelley is a senior Political Science major at Providence College. She is an advocate for people with disabilities both on- and off-campus and is involved in several student organizations such as Student Congress and Dance Club. In Spring 2019, she studied abroad in Dublin, Ireland through IFSA. Through the program, Jacquie traveled to Northern Ireland for a weekend and was immediately introduced to magnificent scenery. The photo that she submitted to *The Alembic* is of Ballycastle, Northern Ireland. She has never witnessed such vibrant blues, greens, and yellows. The picture reminds her of the awe she felt when she turned around and could see the whole Island. However, she says, the place itself will always be more beautiful than any picture taken of it.

Josh Mahler lives and writes in Virginia, where he was educated at George Mason University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Red Earth Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Plainsongs*, the *Evansville Review*, *Exit 7*, the *Carolina Quarterly*, the *Broad River Review*, and elsewhere.

Delaney Mayette is a senior Health Policy and Management major with a triple minor in English, Sociology, and Women and Gender Studies. She has previously published her work in another literary journal titled *The Paladin* and is currently working on a chapter about the privatization of Veteran's healthcare for a book titled *Healthcare Issues: Democrats and Republicans* to be published by ABC Clío in 2021. Next year, Delaney will be pursuing her Master's in Health Administration at UNC Chapel Hill.

John J. McCann is a retired professor of French at La Salle University in Philadelphia who has published short fiction in *Sonora Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Mississippi Valley Review*, *Descant*, *Double Gun Journal*, *Karamu*, *Seattle Review*, *Round Table*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Four Quarters* and *Chelsea*. Currently, he is at work on a novel, *Katúah* that, among other things, deals with the forcible removal of the Cherokee Nation from its tribal lands in western North Carolina and north Georgia.

Meghan Mello is a junior Finance major and an Accounting and Writing minor from Syracuse, N.Y. She loves to write in her free time, and plans on starting a clothing company as well as continuing to write creatively about her experiences and observations in life. She has a great group of friends at school as well as a loving family back home. She feels very blessed and grateful to have her work published in *The Alembic*!

Michael Milburn teaches English in New Haven, CT. His poetry has appeared recently in *Slant* and *Mudlark*.

Michele Koh Morollo is a Singaporean journalist and author who lived in Perth, Makassar, London, and Boston before moving to Hong Kong, her present home base. She is the editor of "Behind a Glass Wall" – a memoir by Dorothy Schwarz, a contributing writer to "Boutique Homes" – a coffee table book about architect-designed vacation rentals, and author of creative non-fiction collection "Rotten Jellybeans". Her latest work, short fiction collection "Without: Stories of lack and longing", was published in 2018 and launched at the Singapore Literary Festival. She was a National Arts Council of Singapore Arts Creation Grant recipient, and is the Secretary of the Hong Kong Writer's Circle. Her stories have appeared in six fiction anthologies.

Elisabeth Murawski is the author of *Heiress*, which received The Poetry Society of Virginia Book Award 2018, *Zorba's Daughter*, which won the May Swenson Poetry Award, *Moon and Mercury*, and two chapbooks. Recent publications include *The Yale Review*, *The Hudson Review*, and *The Carolina Quarterly*. A native of Chicago, she currently lives in Alexandria, VA.

William Norine studied law and music. He has been a professional jazz drummer and composer, a college music teacher, a Boston cab driver, a Wall Street lawyer, and served 10 years as a District Attorney. My poems have or will appear in *The Kansas Quarterly*, *The Antioch Review*, *the Lyric*, *The Coe Review*, *the GW Review*, *Aileron*, *The Mankato Review*, *The Midwest Poetry Review*, *The William and Mary Review*, *The Pacific Review* (wherein I was featured poet), *Red Cedar* (3 times), *The Amherst Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *Candelabra* (London), *Karamu*, *Offerings*, *Poetry Motel*, *Poem*, *the Willow Review*, *the Cafe Review*, *The Black Fly Review*, *Cornerstone*, *Touchstone*, *Ancient Paths*, *the Avalon Literary Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *Chiron Review*, and numerous other journals. He won the *Nassau Review's* "Best Poem of the Year" award in 2005, and have been featured poet in other journals.

Obi Nwizu is a Nigerian-born, Atlanta-raised writer and English professor. She served in China as a Peace Corps volunteer and completed her MA in Creative Writing- Fiction from Bath Spa University. She is currently at work on several projects including a novel, short story collection, graphic novel, and several screenplays.

Jose Oseguera is an LA-based writer of poetry, short fiction and literary nonfiction. His writing has been featured in *Emrys Journal*, *The McNeese Review*, and *The Main Street Rag*. He was named one of the Sixty Four Best Poets of 2019 by the Black Mountain Press. His work has also been nominated for the Best of the Net award (2018, twice in 2019) as well as the Pushcart (2018 and 2019) and Forward (2020) Prizes. He is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection "The Milk of Your Blood."

Madison Palmieri is a sophomore English and History double major with a Marketing minor in the Liberal Arts Honors Program at Providence College.

Kenneth Pobo has a new book out from Duck Lake Books called *Dindi*

Expecting Snow. His work is forthcoming in: North Dakota Quarterly, Switchback, Paris Lit Up, and elsewhere.

Dan Sieg was born and raised in Detroit, educated at Wayne State and Adelphi Universities and Hunter College, and worked over 25 years as a senior therapist at a psychotherapy clinic in The Bronx. Currently he works as a literacy volunteer. Previous poetry has appeared in Lullwater Review, The Lyric, Old Red Kimono, Blueline, Plainsongs, Pinyon, Poem, and elsewhere, currently in The Paterson Literary Review and Evening Street Review, and forthcoming in Wayne Literary Review and Exit 13.

Christopher Stolle's writing has appeared most recently in Tipton Poetry Journal, Flying Island, Edify Fiction, Contour, The New Southern Fugitives, The Gambler, Gravel, The Light Ekphrastic, Sheepshead Review, and Plath Poetry Project. He's an editor for DK Publishing and he lives in Richmond, Indiana.

John Tustin began writing poetry again a dozen years ago after a hiatus just as long. You can find links to his published poetry online at fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry.

Danielle Watkins graduated with an English/Creative Writing degree from Providence College and recently earned her initial teaching license. Danielle has been published in Barking Sycamores, Red Fez, Wilderness House Literary Review, The Offbeat, and Boston Accent Lit. When not dreaming about becoming a published novelist, Danielle enjoys reading literature (well, mostly teen dystopian novels, let's be real here), watching nerdy TV shows, and singing some classic Justin Timberlake. If she had the soaring, operatic voice of a European soprano, Danielle would be the singer of a female-fronted symphonic metal band, but she's an alto and is probably more the choir type. You can find out more about Danielle on her website: <https://dani210w.wordpress.com/>

Editors' Notes

Eliana Lopez is graduating Providence College in May of 2022. She is looking to pursue a career in fiction and poetry writing. The works featured in the *Alembic* over the years have inspired her to continue to write and chase after the perfect string of words to spell her life story. She is honored to have been apart of this publication.

Elena Bibilos: is a Providence College alumna, who graduated with a marketing degree with the class of 2021, and is thrilled that the 2020 edition of *The Alembic* is finally making it to print. Following graduation, she joined Mediahub Worldwide full-time as an Assistant Media Planner in the Boston office. In her spare time, she loves spending time with family and friends, reading good books, and even goes Greek dancing on Monday nights.

Clara Howard was one of *The Alembic's* senior editors during the 2019-2020 school year, and while she was at PC, she absolutely loved being a part of publications such as *The Alembic* and *The Cowl* and getting to work with such dedicated groups of editors, writers, readers, and friends. As a Creative Writing major, Clara felt free to explore her passion for writing and hone her editing skills. These days, Clara is back in her native Baltimore, Maryland, working as an immigration law paralegal and still writing out story ideas and pieces of poetry on the backs of Starbucks napkins.

Alexsia Patton: A recent graduate of Providence College who graduated summa cum laude and awarded highest concentration in her major, Alessia Patton is a camera production assistant in Chicago, IL. Since graduating in May, 2021, Alessia has worked as a camera PA for Lollapalooza, Pitchfork, and a Red Bull Soundclash Concert featuring Rico Nasty and Danny Brown. She aspires to be a camera operator and maybe work her way up to director of photography in the entertainment industry, while writing scripts in her freetime and spending time with her cat, Jerry Berry.

Jason Welch is an English major and Political Science minor at Providence College. He is an avid reader and writer and plans to pursue a career in editing and publishing upon graduating.

Caitlin Bartley is a sophomore from Staten Island, New York currently studying English at Providence College. She enjoys writing poetry and

short fiction when she gets a break from schoolwork. She loves lattes, long walks, and online shopping. And she hates writer's block. Her love for reading and writing comes from British literature and her favorite female authors (shout out Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath). She hopes to one day become a publisher and own her own apartment in New York City.

2
0
2
0
2
0
2
2

• william norine • josh mahler • erika girard • laura e goldberg • elisabeth murawski • christopher stolle • michael milburn • jose luis oseguera • david james • kenneth pobo • john tustin • dan sieg • robert cooperman • danielle watkins • name name • gabriella baron • michele koh morollo • sofia amaral • delaney mayette • john mccan • josh dhaliwal • eugene franklin • megan mello • obi nwizu • madison palmeri • eric benet • jonathan dee • lisa gardner • joe scapellato • lisa see •

