SIGMA TAU DELTA JOURNALS

INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

SIGMA TAU DELTA

RECTANGLE

Journal of Creative Writing

Volume 100

SIGMA TAU DELTA

REVIEW

Journal of Critical Writing

Volume 22

2025

SIGMA TAU DELTA | JOURNALS

INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

SIGMA TAU DELTA

RECTANGLE

Journal of Creative Writing

Volume 100

SIGMA TAU DELTA

REVIEW

Journal of Critical Writing

Volume 22

2025

Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle No. 100
Sigma Tau Delta Review No. 22

The University of Texas at Dallas
Richardson, TX

Published in the United States by Sigma Tau Delta, Inc., the International English Honor Society, Matt Hlinak, Executive Director, Department of English, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois 60115–2863, USA.

Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle and *Sigma Tau Delta Review* journals are published annually with the continuing generous assistance of Northern Illinois University (DeKalb, IL) and The University of Texas at Dallas (Richardson, TX). Publication is limited to members of Sigma Tau Delta.

Sigma Tau Delta is a member of the Association of College Honor Societies.

Subscription Information

Please email the Sigma Tau Delta Central Office
to request a subscription: sigmatd@niu.edu

Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle: ISSN 0888-4757 (print), ISSN 2471-3171 (online)
Sigma Tau Delta Review: ISSN 2471-318X (print), ISSN 2471-3201 (online)

2024–25 Writing Awards
for *SIGMA TAU DELTA REVIEW*
and *SIGMA TAU DELTA RECTANGLE*

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award
Emma Bare: "Interrogating Torture and Surveillance in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* in a Post-9/11 Space"

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award
Marley Ramon: "It Starts between Brothers"

E. Nelson James Poetry Award
Emma Harding: "한, I Can't Read the Air on the Dark Bay"

Herbert L. Hughes Short Story Award
Katherine Anne Thierfelder: "Helen, Reimagined"

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award
Alyssa Borelli: "The Women of Sabine"

Contents

RECTANGLE

Centennial Selections

Creative Nonfiction

Fiction

Poetry

REVIEW

Critical Essays

BACKMATTER

Content Warning

Manuscripts included in this publication may address difficult topics (such as death, assault, sexuality, and prejudice) that could cause duress in readers; to prevent unnecessary duress, we offer this warning and acknowledge the humanity of both our authors and our readers. We appreciate the writers' transparency in addressing sensitive topics.

The opinions presented in the published works of the *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* and the *Sigma Tau Delta Review* do not reflect the organization or membership but rather reflect the opinions, values, and perspectives of the individual authors.

RECTANGLE

Centennial Selections

Creative Nonfiction

Honoring My Own "No Name Woman"

BY CARMEN LOK

My family rarely talked about my grandfather's brothers and sisters. Most of his children hated his siblings, who were selfish, wicked, and mean people, as my mother has described them over the years. However, my great-aunt was one occasional exception. Her story was only brought up for two kinds of topics: love and ghosts.

It is said that my grandfather's sister ended her life because of a broken heart. Her boyfriend broke up with her, leaving her with an overwhelming sense of pain and hopelessness. Unable to deal with the heartbreak, she took her own life, which was always where the story ended.

My great-aunt's tale routinely made its reappearance during family gatherings and Chinese New Year's celebrations. When the adults and elders began reminiscing about their childhoods, the hauntings of my great-aunt would resurface. The conversations all stemmed from a lock of my great-aunt's hair, which was taken and kept to fulfill some Taoist superstition. My great-grandparents collected that lock of hair in a Ziploc bag and stored it in a hallway cabinet. Because the Chinese are usually superstitious, such an artifact from a dead relative started to create a chilling atmosphere in the hallway. The once-normal corridor that was crowded with boxes of snacks became a hair-raising haunted site, sending shivers down everybody's spines.

Soon, everyone who lived in or visited the house had their own stories about the hauntings of that hall. Nobody ever wanted to walk through it alone or at night. Furniture seemed to move on its own and noises creaked within the walls. My relatives had to convince each other to accompany the other down the hallway—as if the ghost were afraid of people in large groups. They would always hook their hands together and sprint to the other end. My mother never fails to mention how she had to bolt down that corridor so the ghost could not catch her. It was one of the many childlike beliefs she held to keep the ghosts away.

My father, who has acknowledged the fear of ghosts that permeated through my mother's family, also testifies to the eeriness of the space.

The ghost of my great-aunt seemed to have claimed ownership of the hallway—the troll that prevented travelers from passing over the bridge (Asbjørnsen and Jørgen). To this day, my elders swear that the corridor was haunted by her, forever bound to that lock of hair.

As my parents and relatives grew up or moved on from that hallway, my great-aunt faded from their minds. Her story was tucked away in a box labeled, "Aunt: Committed Suicide for Love." However, like Maxine Hong Kingston in "No Name Woman," I wonder about my great-aunt's story and the details buried behind years of whispers and avoidance. Although I was never provided many details, I felt like her truth was glossed over and ignored, just like the story of Kingston's aunt. Surely, there was more to her story than what we heard. I do not know her exact age when she passed, but I know that she was in her early twenties; she was young. Perhaps she had not yet been given the chance to explore the world, so she made her entire world revolve around her partner. *He* was what she pictured when she imagined her future. Perhaps he was her everything. Or had he given her false promises? He could have sworn on their love lasting forever with his pinkies crossed behind his back and then left her for another woman.

These assumptions about her and her relationship sound freshly plucked from a romantic film, and I wish that the reasons for such a situation came from these superficial issues. Realistically, and unfortunately, we live in a world where darker reasons hide. Did he take advantage of her? He could have forced himself upon her or exploited her for his benefit. She had no option or foundation for filing rape or assault charges decades ago; victims then were always silenced. She could have become so distraught with no one to turn to that she sank into isolation. I wonder if anyone tried to help her.

No one is left whom I can ask about the truth of her story. I no longer am in touch with my grandfather's siblings, and my grandfather cannot remember details. The vague accounts of her life and her passing lead me to wonder about our relatives who, like me, heard the story but refused to ask further questions. It is distressing to think that my family could also forget me so easily within a few generations. "The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living," Marcus Tullius Cicero says (138). My great-aunt died when she took her own life, but she was truly gone when her family and descendants began to forget her and her truth.

However, I believe in reimagining possible reasons for her suicide instead of chalking it up to a broken heart. She at least deserves the benefit of the doubt. Although I acknowledge that my reimaginations are biased in her favor, I can, in this way, empower my great-aunt, who is used only as a cautionary tale. I do not believe in Taoism, but I hope that remembering and speaking out for my aunt will benefit her in the Taoist afterlife. Shedding light on her story and the injustices against her might finally give her a voice to speak *her* truth. No longer bound to the dusty, empty altar or the hallway closet, she may instead be liberated from the tragedies of love, death, and oblivion.

Works Cited

Asbjørnsen, Peter Christen, and Jørgen Moe. "De tre bukkene Bruse som skulle gå til seters og gjøre seg fete," Trans. by D. L. Ashliman, https://runeberg.org/folkeven/021.html.

Cicero, Marcus T. *Select Orations of Marcus T. Cicero,* M. H. Gill Publishers, 1855.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "No Name Woman," *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. Vintage, 1989.

Fiction

The Valley

BY HANNA BESHAI

It's quiet out here. The wind floods my lungs, and I am a child caught in the sheets, clawing for air. I'm looking down into the valley, and I'm wondering where home is, only because it feels like a memory and that memory feels like a homecoming. But I'm not sure what that means or whether any of this could be real.

Four generations—maybe five—grew up here. I say maybe because growing is a tricky deal; if a seed is planted in one garden bed but is uprooted and moved to another, where does it grow? Here, or there? So maybe five generations but certainly four; although, my mother said only three. Only three because only three remained on the land. Lived and died on the land. Gave their life to the land.

We wandered here from somewhere far up north. Far up north as in Russia—Germans from Russia, from Ukraine, from Poland, and eventually to the Upper Midwest of the United States. Germans who fled and fled and fled, until they stopped here—at this valley—the lip of the world, a desolate place somewhat like the Ukraine and Russian wheat fields: the breadbaskets of Europe. A place called Turkey Ridge Valley because the Lakota, who lived here long before us, hunted turkey in the basin. It was hardly a valley, not like the valleys of the Swiss Alps my ancestors (before they were Germans, fleeing) had once inhabited for several generations. More than maybe five, maybe four, really three.

My great-great-grandfather built a home: the old farmhouse overlooking the valley—the place we no longer live. He was a strong man—the first one born in America, a mile from the homeplace, just days after my family arrived on Christmas. He was born in the valley, climbed to the top of the hill of the valley, and built a home on the lip of the valley. One day, he went down into the valley. It was hot and a day's work lay stretched out like a cat in the summer's heat. There was a small pond at the base of the valley, at the corner where my cousins live today. He thought it was a good day to go for a swim—he didn't come home.

He should've come home. The workmen carried his drowned body back up the hill to my great-great-grandmother (his wife) and the young child he left behind. His wife stood where I am standing now, looking out into the valley—the valley he was born in, grew up in, built a home in, died in—wondering whether any of this could be real. The child, my great-grandfather, clung to the skirt of his mother who didn't know what to do.

It's quiet out here, and I am remembering stories I thought were not mine. The wind blows through me like a hollow flute, and I hear voices and songs I didn't know could belong to me. I do not understand, so I listen. The man died, and the woman remarried; she remarried because she was too young, and so was her boy. My great-grandfather needed a father, so she married a man we call Barefoot John—a man who didn't want the boy, a man who made her send him away. *Where is home?* I listen to the echo howling through me, and I don't have an answer.

"We lived in this valley for five generations. Well, four, although really three. But in actuality, more like two and one half," my mother told me. My great-grandfather was sent from the valley to live with his mother's uncle, but one day, he returned. His uncle was a kind man but a hard man; he had a short fuse and drank often, but he had a soft spot for the outcasts—the unwanted—in the community. His uncle took care and worked hard so when my great-grandfather was old enough, he could return to the home his father built for him and his mother.

So he returned: my great-grandfather married and moved back to the house overlooking the valley, the valley his father was born in, grew up in, lived in, and died in. He and his wife started their own life with the birth of their first daughter, then second, and then their little boy—my grandfather. My grandfather was born in the valley, in the house his grandfather had built for them, with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. He lived here—played here, farmed here, raised cattle here—but he did not die here. So my grandfather lived on the land. He raised his two girls on the land and their girls, too. He planted trees out behind the house, pine trees that his girls could run between. He gathered kindling from the trees so his granddaughters could camp in the middle of the day, and he pulled out the loader and attached the bucket just so we could sit in it. It wasn't anything special, but it was special to us, and we still remember, even now when he is gone.

It's quiet and the wind is no longer whipping like a sail across my face, but I am crying now and I don't know why. I lean on this fence—the old wooden posts my grandfather hammered into the earth to keep the cattle in—and smell the rot in the wood seep out, the splintering wood cutting my skin like sandpaper. I drink in the sky. Birds are fish-surfing across the great, endless blue. Out here, the ocean is above and below the horizon. Waves of prairie grass create a mirage along the horizon. I tumble, my eyes somersaulting across the scene, so I ground myself on a distant plot of land: patchwork stitched into the prairie quilt of the valley. Bison stick out like pins in the fabric landscape. *When did the neighbors get bison?* I look at our pen, now empty, and remember the brown eyes that stared between the posts at me, peering in between my grandfather's legs.

My grandfather was strong and soft, just like his grandfather and like his father. He would take his daughters out to see and tend to the cattle. My mother loved his cattle and raised a cow of her own. "Bandit," my mother coos when she remembers. A little heifer. A little heifer whom she loved. My grandfather would take his granddaughters to see the cattle. We were young and it was the middle of the winter. He was wearing that big overcoat he always wore when he went to work in the field. My grandmother bundled us up, our mother gave us a kiss, and he took my little sister in his arms and called after me to follow. I was shy and followed slowly behind. He took us to the pen to see the cows he loved. He showed us their big brown eyes and their big wet noses and their tagged ears that flickered in the winter cold. My grandfather held my sister in his arms, and she nuzzled into the crook between his head and his neck. He turned softly to look at me standing a few feet behind, afraid to come closer, even though his eyes told me it was safe.

I close my eyes and when I open them, the memory is gone. The pen remains empty, and I wonder if it's because my grandfather is gone or if my great-grandfather let the cattle out again. When my mother was young, her grandfather lived with them because his memory was fading. At night, when his mind had convinced him that the open cattle gate was meant to be closed and the closed cattle gate was meant to be open, my mother and her father woke to find her grandfather and the cattle roaming across the valley. *Maybe they are in the valley*, but all I see are bison. I shake my head, and a different memory rolls in like pinballs rattling in my brain.

My grandfather was born on the land but didn't die on the land. Not quite. One day, my grandfather went out to the cattle pen to put in a new post. Winter was coming, and rot was wearing through the wood; he was doing the work he always did. He fell to the earth and made no sound. The land cradled his body for hours until my grandmother saw him through the kitchen window, lying in the field. My grandfather lived, although it was the beginning of a slow, unraveling end. His body was never the same after that, but bodies never are. Bodies age, and his body's decline meant the life we knew would only exist in memory.

So, we moved my grandparents off the land, away from the valley. My grandfather's body withered in a chair away from this place. His cheeks hollowed like the attic that housed the chests my family dragged across the sea; his bones stuck out of his skin like the posts sticking out of the emptying field.

"He is going with the house." I looked at my mother who sadly nodded. It took about a year to move my grandparents off the land, and as time passed, my grandfather mirrored the emptying of the farmhouse and the emptying of the land.

One day, my mother sat at the foot of my grandfather's chair. Toy tractors, which my grandfather played with growing up, were scattered around her. She was marking down stories, memories, and prices. She handed each piece to my grandfather who was too weak to hold the toy for long. He held it softly in his lap and smiled, remembering something that was a secret to us. He handed each piece back to my mother, and I sat in the chair across the room wondering who the child was.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and my grandfather sat in his chair, staring into the blank space between the TV and the air in front of him. I sat with him, listening to the drone of Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown and Beige* album playing in the background. We didn't speak; we only listened—the ritual we had nurtured since I was very young. I was getting older now, and I was learning to be less shy, less quiet, but I was only learning. My grandfather broke his gaze from the empty space in-between to speak to me. He asked me about high school; it was the August before my sophomore year. I told him I was learning to be less shy and to try things I was usually afraid to try. He nodded and smiled.

"Some of my fondest memories are from high school." His eyes trailed to the space between the TV and the air in front of him, as if those memories were living there. A long silence followed as memories I

could not see danced in front of him. He looked at me, and I think there were tears in his eyes. "Enjoy those years."

"I will, Grandpa. I will." It was a promise I intended to keep, and it is the only promise I ever did. I hugged my grandpa and kissed him on the cheek, which I hardly ever did, and said goodbye.

It's cold here, and I'm looking out into the valley wondering whether any of this could be real. I'm alone, and I'm convinced the house is gone because my grandfather's chair is empty. But when I turn, I am suddenly standing on the entryway rug outside the door we only used when family would return for Christmas. I am standing on the concrete edge of the steps where my mother sat and cried before letting herself into the empty house. And now, I am waiting here too.

I am returning, but only in memory. We lived here for generations, but we do not live here anymore. My mother grew up here, and so did her father, and so did his. They played down by the creek in the valley, the place where my great-great-grandfather died, and they were taught to remember. It is quiet and, for some reason, I'm barefoot, and the bristled outdoor rug is breaking the soles of my feet. I need someone to let me in. I am desperate for someone to let me in.

The door opens, and my grandmother looks at me with a face that is old and soft and young at the same time. And my grandfather is there, too, bending like a tree but somehow still strong. He is wrapped in that big overcoat—the one my mother sometimes wears now—because he is about to go out to feed the cattle. It is cold, and it is January. I want to ask my mother if I can go with him, but I don't.

In the house, the floorboards creak, and I can hear all the stories seeping out from the in-between spaces. The dirt and dust that never really leave a farmhouse stick to the bottoms of my feet, my body clinging to every piece of this place. My grandmother leads me to the kitchen—where I sit with her so she can teach me something new, where I played teacher on an old chalkboard with my sister, where we made chocolates and potato pancakes, where I told her stories and she listened. She stands by the sink with the small window looking out into the field and watches my grandfather tend to the cattle. She always knows where to find him.

I am sitting at the kitchen table that we now keep in our basement, and my eyes trace the strips of sunflower-wallpaper lining where the wall and the ceiling meet. I wrap my gaze around those fuzzy petals and sticky,

brown seed pockets, and all I see is yellow—yellow wallpaper, yellowing white walls, yellow ceramicware holding yellow elbow macaroni because it's my favorite and my grandpa's too. My grandma's hair is still yellow like prairie grass, even though she is aging. And when she cranes her neck from where she stands at the sink to look at me, she smiles with eyes like the endless sky.

I hear the squeaky hinges of the back door open now. They hiss and expel an exhausted sigh, the hydraulics worn after too many winters. Boots kick off and two large footsteps follow—*one, two*—and the door between the back entrance and the kitchen opens. My grandfather, glasses fogged over from the cold, lumbers in. He sees us playing, and he smiles. "Say . . . ," his voice rumbles like a thunderstorm hidden underneath folds of prairie sky. He teases my sister, who will eventually learn to tease him back and will keep on teasing in his place when he is gone. He smiles at me gently because he knows his teasing won't work—I'm too stern, too serious, even for a little girl—but he doesn't say this. He just finds another way to love me.

Works Cited

Ellington, Duke. *Black, Brown and Beige*. Prestige Records, 1943.

It Starts between Brothers

BY MARLEY RAMON

Lord
I fear I was bred for violence
That the same hands
That hit my mother and my sisters and me
Lay at the ends of each arm
That the hum in my veins
Won't ever quiet.

My father's first fight
Was at four years old
His tíos fat and tequila happy
Weighing a case of beer against a boy
Deeming what was worth it
Two toddling sons, put together in a cockfight
Their parents hooting, hollering above them
Teaching a child to kick and bite and gnash.

My dad lost for the first time that day
I think he's been fighting to make it up ever since
Still hot in the sleeves
Still scraped knees and bloody knuckles
Still a kicked down little boy
Maybe we're frozen where we first lost
Maybe all my dad sees is sunny days and dirt floors
Maybe that's why I can't really leave my childhood home
I'll drag some part of it alongside me
Like a kicked rib
Like an unwon case
Like a lost cause
Like a never-ending battle.

I am better than my father
Who carried his father's hands with him

Who took heirlooms to war and honed them
With heat and rolling magma and spitting fire like blood
I will hold hands bred for one mission
First daughter of uncounted sons
I will carry them and make something new

Creative Nonfiction

The Women of Sabine

BY ALYSSA BORELLI

For the three months when I studied abroad, I saw enough art for three lifetimes. Paintings in the Belvedere Palace, statues in the Louvre, local sketches on the streets of Positano. . . . Yet the one piece of art I remember most was five minutes away from my apartment in Florence.

In the Piazza della Signoria, about ten statues are on display. There was *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (Cellini) depicting Perseus, standing prideful with the severed head of the gorgon tight in his fist. Another statue of Hercules wrestling with Cacus (Bandinelli) displayed strength and power that I had never felt before.

There was one statue of three figures, all twisted and entwined in each other like serpents. One man knelt, and one man stood with hunger in his eyes above a woman struggling to free herself from his grip, her arm reaching up to the gods that would not save her. Giambologna sculpted marble into skin, making the scene feel real. It was called *Abduction of a Sabine Woman*, and it represented one of the many girls from the area of Sabine who were raped by Roman men after the Roman population of women dwindled. The piece was first commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici and, although the statue itself was beautiful, I could not imagine someone wanting to proudly keep such an ugly story in their private collection.

Through my travels in Europe, I began to recognize this common theme for most artists. The swan and Leda were depicted everywhere, quiet sadness painted across Leda's delicate face as white feathers enveloped her. Hell, even a painting of her rape hung in my hotel room in England. In The National Gallery alone, hundreds of gorgeous renditions of sexual assault were on display. I remember *The Rape of Europa*, who wore sunset yellows and pinks as she lovingly held a milky white cow. I was horrified by the painting's description, but when I turned around to see if anyone else shared my sentiments, I realized I was alone. Everyone was buzzing over Van Gogh's "Sunflowers," which suffered a soup splatter the day before. *Sunflowers,* I thought to myself. *If someone splashed enough soup on all the rapes of The National Gallery, would anyone pay attention?*

Later that day, in London, my friend Molly and I shivered through dark streets as we made our way back to her friend's dorm room. The air was crisp and cracked. Burnt orange leaves fell around us. It was a New England autumn, making me homesick for Connecticut hills set on fire by dying leaves. I missed being young, sitting in the passenger seat of my mother's Honda, as we went to pick sweet and sour apples at our local orchard.

All my memories came to a halt when we reached the building. Three drunken college students stumbled out of the doors. Two boys were laughing as they carried a girl between them. Her head lolled back and forth like a broken doll, and her heavy eyelids looked like they weighed more than her fragile limbs. The boys, who seemed to be her friends, helped her into an Uber, but there was little to no concern in their fox-like smiles. Maybe I was reading the scene wrong, maybe I had seen too many paintings, but whatever the case, I thought the girl at least deserved better care. But I did not give it to her. Molly and I watched them drive away.

I don't know why I didn't say anything. Perhaps my New England attitude told me it was none of my business. Or perhaps it was because my world seemed separate from hers. Her world was of staggering drunkenness and snickering men. I wonder if she woke up safe the next morning, chuckling about how drunk she had been the night before. I wonder if those two boys were actually her friends who tucked her into bed without laying a finger on her. I wonder if I should have stepped in.

I wish someone had stepped in a month later. On a freezing cold Austrian night, when the colorful leaves were long gone, taking my youth with them. I wish someone had noticed my struggle, noticed me reaching for help. But there were no gods in that dirty, bland apartment.

The painting of my rape would depict a girl lying on her side against linen sheets with tear-streaked mascara and dark tangled hair. Her hazel eyes are wide in shock and fright, but she stays still. She is frozen, as if she is staring at Medusa's deadly glare. Had Medusa frozen too, when Poseidon attacked her in Athena's temple? Was that the irony of her curse? Or was it not a curse at all but a perfect, just gift for seeking revenge?

I did not enact any revenge on my rapist. He didn't understand what he did, and neither did I for a while. Once I did understand, I was left with a monstrous ache for clarity or for a chance to rewrite my

actions. It was like a hundred snakes strangling my chest, all hissing words of blame and self-pity.

When I returned to Florence and saw the woman from Sabine again, I felt different. I didn't feel bad for her anymore; I was her. I was that London girl. I had joined their world because now I knew what it was like to be stripped of innocence and to mourn the child who just wanted to pick apples.

I began to question everything. How could artists depict rape with such beauty for so many centuries? It is *not* beautiful; it smells like cigarettes and Bailey's liquor, and it leaves you with sick, yellow bruises instead of smooth, marble skin. How come no one stops to look at that art and realizes that those myths still play out today?

I am better now. I truly did have a wonderful time abroad, even if it did end with my own Greek tragedy. Some days I am just angry and bitter. Angry for all the drunk girls, all the Medusas, Europas, Ledas, and Sabines of the world. I wish someone had painted one of them with anger. Maybe then I would have believed in art.

Works Cited

Bandinelli, Baccio. *Hercules and Cacus*. 1534, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

Cellini, Benvenuto. *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*. 1554, Piazza della Signoria, Florence.

Giambologna. *Abduction of a Sabine Woman*. 1583, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence.

Titian. *The Rape of Europa*. 1562, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA.

van Gogh, Vincent. *Sunflowers*. 1888, The National Gallery, London.

Favorite Color

BY ZACHARY BRADY

"Hurry!" she said as she jumped from the passenger door of my car. "We're gonna miss it!" Our day of hiking canyons and skipping rocks across lakes of glass had finally led to this moment. We scrambled along the rugged dirt path that ascended to the lookout point. With a significant shift from the earlier suffocation of the city to the crisp elevation, we had traveled far enough away from society for civilization's grasp to loosen, allowing the mountains themselves to breathe. Expanding my lungs with each step, sagebrush-filled air turned bitter with the sky. We were summiting the last couple of steps when suddenly, I was blinded. Piercing light radiated between the shores of the lake, creating a panorama that continued into its reflection. Sprawling ourselves in awe onto a rocky surface, I wrapped my arm around her waist and watched the brilliant colors of fire circle the sun and trace the clouds. It was only a moment before the sun sunk into the horizon— blues and purples lingering in the atmosphere.

The favorite color question. A conversation shared on many first dates, uttered between uncomfortable grins and licks of separate ice cream cones. A fun fact for class icebreakers that produces panic, as no one wants to give the wrong answer. A question asked by employers during interviews to assess "personality type." Embarrassingly, I had

never stayed consistent. Sometimes red, sometimes lime green, sometimes blue. Part of me never wanted to be tied down—having one color represent my whole being—until I mustered the courage to ask my high school girlfriend of one month.

We sat across from each other in class. Blonde hair, rapid-fire jokes—she seemed to have more than tolerated a few dates with me. Side by side, sitting in the grass one evening, I asked the question. With no hesitation, she seemed to have settled.

Orange.

From then on, orange was our answer. It shined as we traveled from peak to peak, chasing only the greatest sunsets. It surrounded us on her bedroom walls as we questioned the meaning of life and the existence of the next. She poked fun at me saying I stole her color. By the end of the summer, it felt more like we were sharing it.

My moving across the country to New York separated us and no doubt strained our relationship. Trying to make something long-distance work was heartbreaking, yet our color was still with me. Autumn in upstate New York generated a vast mosaic of fall-colored leaves. Each leaf conjured a memory, and every orange forest, a wistful fantasy. Sunlit dusk summoned glimpses of shared sunsets that I held onto for years, but sadly, transcontinental love had become too difficult, and our relationship unraveled.

My color became a symbol of inevitable endings. Vivid oranges of twilight—that seem to open windows to heaven—eventually fade and disappear into the dark. Trees painted with warmer and warmer hues exhibit autumn's brilliant requiem as life withdraws into a sterile winter. A colorfully curated relationship had curled in flames, leaving behind glowing embers that insultingly emitted the colors reminiscent of my pain. That pain lasted long after the embers hummed into darkness. After what seemed like an endless night, I perceived a glowing landscape on the horizon in the distance. Dawn slowly arose and shone familiar colors.

It's autumn again,
and it will be for a while.
I have come to accept that orange
is neither the color of love nor loss

but of bittersweet change—of inevitable liminality.
My wife and I sometimes reminisce on those days—skipping rocks and admiring sunsets. What I had failed to see was that a key piece of what makes orange so beautiful is its finity. Once a lifetime tied together passes, the first snowflake will drift down as the last swaying leaf touches the ground and freezes. We will have enjoyed our beauty and will descend into the horizon with the sun while lingering blues and purples dissipate through generations. My hope is that darkness is as finite as beauty. The dawn will one day appear, the sun will rise, life will return, and the cycle will end. If I could go back to my past self—sitting with her on that mountaintop—I would hold her a little closer, because orange is short-lived but always returns.

A New Path Forward

BY CRYSTAL LEA DILLING

It was another hot-as-hell day in Arkansas when I stopped by my twenty-two-year-old daughter's apartment to give her a ride to her college classes. The heat had been wreaking havoc with her Chiari malformation (a brain issue), so she was unable to drive for the last two weeks. For those who may not have heard that term, a Chiari malformation is a condition in which the tonsils of the brain descend through the hole in the base of the skull, which causes excess pressure on both the brain and the spinal cord and which can lead to a wide range of health issues, including memory loss, reduced mobility, seizures, and—in the worst of cases—paralysis or death.

I was not at all surprised that Luna began having issues with her Chiari again; it had, over the course of her young life, caused her quite a few problems. She had been in and out of a wheelchair, experienced seizures and memory loss, lived with chronic fatigue, and battled recurring issues with both her heart and her lungs. She had nearly died on more than one occasion and had struggled to help people understand that her Chiari malformation was not something that "goes away" or that she can just "deal with." It was a lifelong condition for which no cure has been identified, and the only relief available to those who experience it at the level Luna experienced was to have a piece of skull removed with the hope that it might take pressure off the brain and spinal cord.

So, there I was, sitting in the parking lot of her apartment complex and cursing the abominable heat of yet another Arkansas summer, when Luna slowly climbed into the passenger seat of my silver Chevy Traverse. After putting the cane she had used to make it the short distance between the apartment and car into the backseat, alongside the walker I kept for these occasions, she promptly started to sob in apparent misery.

My perpetual mom-brain, of course, panicked.

"What in the absolute hell is going on?" I asked Luna. It was not the most graceful way of saying it, but I was concerned that something awful had happened to her that I did not know about. Had she and her partner fought? Broken up? What would that mean for their living

situation? Did she forget to pay a bill and have her electricity or water shut off? My mind raced through a gamut of reasons for this emotional breakdown.

My daughter looked at me through her tear-filled hazel eyes and said, "I'm failing at everything, and I don't know what to do!"

I looked over at her in shock, knowing that my confusion was written all over my face.

"What in the world are you talking about?" I asked her, as I backed the car out of the parking space and began the two-mile trip from her apartment to campus. She continued to cry, her slender form heaving from the sobs that continued to wrack her body.

"Everything," she repeated. "I'm falling behind on my schoolwork because my seizures are kicking back in. I've missed work because I couldn't drive myself, and I didn't want to bother you because you have your school stuff to do." She paused to suck in a breath and wipe at her eyes and nose with the napkins I keep in the car. "And one of my professors said that maybe I'm not cut out for a class like his if I can't keep up with my notetaking and remember my maps and stuff for the geography parts."

I drove, stunned, as she poured out her fears and stresses, and I found myself slipping between sadness and anger. The sadness was, of course, because I was sitting there, listening to my child sob over thinking of herself as a failure. The anger was because I was upset that a professor would say such a thing, knowing that Luna had health issues because of the disability accommodation granted by the college. Her situation was so overwhelming that I found my own eyes filling with tears as I wondered what I could do to help my girl get through this.

Her tears lasted the entirety of the trip to campus. When we arrived outside of the building where her first class of the day was scheduled, I pulled the car into a parking spot. I looked over at her and felt my heart wrench at the circles I saw under her eyes and the paleness of her lovely face.

"All right, kiddo," I told her gently. I reached over and wiped tears from her cheeks. "Here's what we're going to do. You are going to go to your first class, and then you are going to your advisor's office to drop the professor's class."

She gave me a look of absolute horror.

"But if I drop the class, I'll be down to twelve hours."

"Yeah," I told her. "And it will be less stressful. The class can be taken again later with a different professor, or you can take a different class that will count toward the same prerequisite."

She welled up again and started to ramble.

"But then I won't graduate on time. My Chapter 35 will run out, and you and Dad told me I needed to be finished before then. It's just so hard because of all the hours and then having to work and being afraid that I won't be able to pay the bills. I'm trying to do everything that I'm supposed to do, but I'm sick, and I just can't do all of it like I should, and I'm failing at it all!"

My stomach twisted as a wave of guilt swept over me. *It was my fault*, I thought. I was, at least partially, to blame for the fact that my oldest child, my tender-hearted girl, was sitting there going through an absolute emotional breakdown. I had been the one who, from the time she was in elementary school, had stressed to her the importance of remaining strong. Of persevering and never letting her illness keep her from doing what needed to be done.

Her illness was a part of her life, I had taught her, but that did not mean that it should ever *control* her life. *You get sick, you keep fighting. Never let it stop you. Never let it keep you from supporting yourself or making your dreams come true.*

I felt a sharp sense of self-loathing because I had, inadvertently, caused her pain. I had not meant to hurt her; I only wanted Luna to believe in herself and have the education that would afford her the ability to find accommodating work for her Chiari. Instead, she had been bottling up these fears, and now she was falling apart before my eyes. One of the first things I learned as a parent was that parenting is hard as hell. At any age, you can be doing everything you can to get it right and still feel that you have done it wrong. At that moment, I felt that I had, indeed, done things incredibly wrong.

"You get in there, and you do your classes," I told her. "And you go and have your advisor help you drop that class." I cleared my throat and continued, "You will graduate when you graduate, and if that is *after* the last of your Chapter 35, then so be it. There are other ways that we can pay for whatever classes you need."

She looked at me, shock on her tear-stained face. I sniffled and smiled at her, doing my best to keep my own emotions together while I worked to help ease her mind and heart.

"I don't care if it takes you another *ten* years to graduate," I told her. "I know that your dad and I have said otherwise, but the only thing that matters to us is that you are happy and healthy, and if that means you don't finish school before the end of that G.I. Bill, then who cares? We will cross that bridge when we get to it, and you will not have to worry about crossing it alone. Make it through today, get rid of that damn class, and we will work out the other things come this time tomorrow, all right? You've got this, baby girl." I cried even harder as I called her by the nickname I have used since she was a baby. "You've always had this, and you have never ever been a failure at anything. You are the biggest badass I have ever known, and there isn't a damn thing you cannot do. You just remember to do it in whatever time *you* need, okay?"

She nodded quietly, wiped away her tears, and slowly started to get out of the car. I got out and pulled her walker out of the back, took it around to the passenger side, and placed her bookbag atop the walker's built-in seat. She offered me a smile full of gratitude and bravery, hugged me softly, and began to make her unsteady way toward the building's doors. I got back in the car, taking in the fact that my contact-shy daughter had just hugged me of her own free will. After a few moments of choking back on my own emotions, I made my way home to tell my husband what had happened.

My husband and I spent that afternoon talking about what had happened and, by the time I needed to pick up Luna to take her home that evening, we both realized that we owed our daughter, and all our girls, an apology. Although we know that they need to be able to take care of themselves, we never intended for them to feel that they had to do it *all* alone.

As we apologized to our daughter that evening, as we saw her let herself breathe easy for the first time in weeks, we knew that we were setting out on a new path of our own. One on which we listen a little more closely and love a little more empathetically. As we shared these new thoughts with all our beautiful, wonderful girls, we realized that allowing *ourselves* to keep growing was exactly the right path to choose.

The Rules

BY NICOLE MAUTONE

You can't crash and burn if you follow the rules.

The rules aren't always the same but are similar enough. They are a schedule, a ritual, a way to keep things upright.

Wake up. Wash your hands. Wash them again because the first time was a precursor. Wash your face, brush your teeth, wash your hands. Dry your hands with a paper towel and store the paper towel in your pocket for later.

Get dressed. You long for your comfortable sweatpants, but you know those are for the house, not the outside world. (You wear your less comfortable clothes, the ones you allow to come in contact with dirt and specimens that crawl around the outside world.)

Eat breakfast—a bowl of Special K with raisins, a banana, and milk. The same breakfast you've had for the past eight years. When you do not taste milk in the morning, the rest of the day is off its axis. Nothing can be specifically pointed out as off, but you know it is. So, you eat.

Go to class. Ensure to arrive slightly early to survey the seating. Wipe the desk down with a Lysol wipe (not Clorox—the smell bothers you). Let the desk dry. Place the laptop on the desk. (You don't miss this step because if you put your laptop on the table without cleaning then whatever was on the table before will be on your laptop and inevitably will be in your backpack when you return the laptop and then on your desk or even your bed when you get back to your room. Cross contamination.) Wash your hands.

You approach a door that cannot be propped open with your foot. You feel around in your pockets until you find it: your paper towel. Use it to open the door. Immediately discard. Your fingers brush the knob despite the barrier. You breathe. Hold your hand out and away from you in an attempted inconspicuous manner. Be careful not to touch your backpack, your face, your hair, or your clothes; if you do, then whatever was on the knob will be transferred. Beeline to the bathroom. Wash your hands. Scrub the specific spot, and then wash again once the spot feels the same as the rest of the hands. Wash one more time. Dry with a paper towel and save the towel.

When you run into a problem like the one above, the needed action will vary. If at school, you feel perpetually dirty and uncomfortable anyway, but the freedom of returning home in a few days will simmer in the back of your mind, so disasters are easier to handle. But when you are home, drastic measures may be needed to clean your space. A handshake, a shoe on the floor, a kiss on the cheek, all start to crack the foundation. Any miscalculated or unaccounted-for step might cause malfunction. It is easier to follow the rules.

Repeat the respected steps as needed until you can retire from the day, back in your room. When you finally get to shower, you shower; you wash until you feel clean—until you feel "just right." Some days, this feeling will never come. On those days, you resort to washing everything at least three times. At least three times will allow you to wager with yourself and allow entry to your bed. Tonight, this does not happen though; you feel "just right."

Get dressed and get ready for bed. You brush your hair, and your naked elbow brushes the hanging pair of pants on your door that you brought home from the store to try on. You freeze. You assess. You just cleaned every inch of your body, including this elbow. If you put the elbow down now, it will touch your clean pajamas and then inevitably your bed, and then the unwashed pants, whose journey you cannot account for before you purchased them, will be in your bed. You take a breath. With your elbow propped up, you return to the bathroom. You carefully lean over the tub and scrub your elbow until it feels "just right." But that feeling does not come. You sigh and lean on three. You wash (rinse) and wash (rinse) and wash (rinse) and then dry.

Return back to your room. Finally, you can get into bed. You are aware of the itching feeling on your elbow, but you must rationalize. You just cleaned it. It is in your head. You spend the next minutes on your phone, which you have properly sanitized to allow it to enter this space.

When you finally lie back, phone on the bedside table, you think. Perhaps you should pray, just in case. You ruminate on a few things and give yourself some options before you open the line. You do the sign of the cross, but you hover your fingertips over your skin, making sure to make no contact. You just washed your face after all. You start, speaking in your head, "Dear God—F**K SH*T B*TCH"—you are interrupted. It's a strange voice, from the back of your head; it likes to cut in at the

worst times to make you look (and feel) bad. Rude. You apologize to God, just in case, and wrap things up quickly.

Now it is just you and your thoughts. You consider the big, empty, numb feeling in your chest that has lived there for quite some time. You flop on your side. You remind yourself to call the dentist (a note you will continue to give yourself for about two months before you remember during the day). Flop to the other side. You ruminate about the logistical issues of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Eventually, you decide that the show is a good distraction, so you agree to ignore them. Onto your stomach now. You close your eyes and attempt to sleep.

You repeat more of the same the next day, and the next, and the next, and the next.

You can't crash and burn if you follow the rules.

Rodin's Eve

BY SYDNEY MOTL

I stand before Rodin's Eve, head tilted. My shoes sink into the grass; murmurs pass around me as gusts of air brush my shoulders. People walk by. They stop and stare at the Gates of Hell. Adam and Eve flank the carvings, their black marble bodies twisted like guilt, turned vaguely towards each other, reaching across a stretch that is impossibly vast, the uncrossable length of seven feet.

The sun is shining, and I feel a breeze. The air smells of croissants and coffee, the buttery and bitter smell of home, utterly out of place in this trimmed garden in the winding streets of Paris. The overlapping scents of espresso and sugar-sweet pastries drift through the trees from the museum café.

Rodin meant for the gates to be an entrance for a building in Paris—another museum maybe—to remind its visitors of their mortality as they cross the threshold to see the works of others' lives. That museum was never built. Instead, the Gates and their mournful guardians ended up where it all began:

A garden.

Eve stands, turned away from onlookers, her grotesque face buried in her arms. Forever, she regrets, bent and curled like the snake who doomed her. So they say.

But as I stand there, in the soft grass, my legs trembling underneath me as the ceramic mug of coffee warms my hands, wafting aromatic steam towards Eve's agony, I wonder.

It seems that, in every myth of every culture, a woman bites the apple or opens the box. Her curiosity, her thirst for knowledge for knowledge's sake, overwhelms the warnings and the well-meaning husbands.

The lock clicks under hesitant fingers.

The juice bursts between virginal lips.

Auguste Rodin, a French man, bearded and bold, carved Eve with round hips and softness, arms wrapped around herself in back-breaking anguish. But perhaps he is wrong.

All my life I have trudged beside Eve, behind her, before her, that smooth-skinned baby of a woman, never recognizing evil because she had never seen him before.

"She is blameless," they cry, yet she is all we have to blame.

God did not design his creatures as foolish. The snake that wound around the tree, scaled and sly, he is the myth. Eve was not tricked. Perhaps she became bored while Adam was off naming creatures and, although one of her ribs was settled content among Eden's lush foliage—it seemed to pull her down—the rest of her young bones yearned for more.

Do not give her the grace of ignorance. She heard the warnings. She plucked the fruit.

They want women to be wicked, and maybe she was, with greedy fingers and flushed cheeks, starved for the fruit of the forbidden. Fruit given freely doesn't taste quite as sweet.

Maybe she was sorry.

I hope she wasn't.

Works Cited

Rodin, Auguste. Eve. 1891, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

On Fantasy and Escapism

BY MICHAELA PLUMB

> Yes! "wish-fulfilment dreams" we spin to cheat
> our timid hearts and ugly Fact defeat!
> Whence came the wish, and whence the power to dream,
> or some things fair and others ugly deem?
> All wishes are not idle, nor in vain
> fulfilment we devise. . . .
>
> —J. R. R. Tolkien ("Mythopoeia" 87–88)

I have long been an avid visitor of distant realms woven by inky threads of fantasy novels—realms filled with magic wrought not upon the ground but upon the imagination—realms that transformed me into the "book wyrm" I have named myself. Like many other book enthusiasts before me, my journey began as a regular visitor to my local library, where I filled my backpack with as many books as my mother would allow and recited my memorized library-card number, despite forgetting my Social Security number to this day. (Though I now have traversed over a hundred fantasy novels, I must confess that I converted to the genre reluctantly, refusing the call to these special worlds.) A foolish little girl, I stubbornly believed only princess stories could interest me, relegating tales of dragons and knights as unappealing boy books. My brother valiantly badgered me into reading Donita K. Paul's *The DragonKeeper Chronicles*, mollifying me with promises of a female protagonist and sealing my fate. I tumbled in headfirst, losing a part of my soul to colorful worlds such as these where cat-sized dragons could ride on one's shoulder, where wardrobes led to coronations in shimmering castles, where elves walked under silver starlight, where friendly fire-demon-powered castles walked across the moors, where fey Paths led into the Wood Between to traps or destiny, where orphans found belonging in their adventuring companions, where devoted friends would carry each other up mountains to relieve their burdens, and where I could know another's heart through their despair and their hope of victory. I have never gotten that piece of my soul back. The call grew so strong that refusal to return became the more trying struggle.

I escaped into these stories, finding rest and relief from both the chaos and the mundanity of normal life. Like the protagonist of *The Ravenwood Saga,* Selene, who found rest from her own nightmares by sleeping in another's dream, I curled up in the imaginations of others to find peace. I was partially raised in novels, maturing through their narrative, stretching my emotional capacity, and finding friendship that I was too shy and isolated to find in life. Characters like Will from *Ranger's Apprentice*, Owen from *The Wormling*, and Kale from *DragonKeeper Chronicles* became friends whom I knew to the depth of their hearts, though they did not know me. Leaving my own cares behind to engage in theirs, I staved off my loneliness and anxiety, replacing my own emotions and troubles with theirs. Fantasy has given me these gifts of shelter through my most difficult days, yet at times it has been too cozy of a comfort. In my teens, I dove into book after book, series after series, world after world, surfacing to reality days later having immersed myself in the latest trilogy—now dizzy with new tones of voices and characters, lungs burning by the need to inhale reality's hard edges and stagnant colors again, skin itching at the grim restraints of my life, and joints aching with hints of meaning. One particularly striking remembrance of this decompression sickness came after a three-straight-days-and-one-all-night dive into Wayne Thomas Batson's *Dreamtreaders* trilogy, journeying with Archer across the realm of dreams as the boundary between dreams and realities crumbled. By the end of the final book, the line between dreams and reality had been restored and reality righted but not for me. I was left needing to recompress for a few days before acclimating once again to the solidity of reality. I've lost myself too well, too long in other worlds, losing touch with the beauty of my own world. Without my ink retreat, would I have been forced to make friends for myself, or would I merely have been lonelier? Fantasy has been a crutch on which I depended, but whether it has helped me grow my strength or allowed me to avoid taking steps of my own, I cannot say.

Escapism defines the fantasy genre, yet it is a shadow of concern and disparagement that looms over kingdoms, long ago and far away—fiercely defended but inscrutable to these same defenders. According to some, escapism is merely an avoidant coping mechanism, a refusal

to face or change life, or as a blog article by psychologist Jennifer Delgado pithily defines it, "The art of creating problems by running away from problems."

Escapism is the concern of parents who watch their children consumed by books and video games, more ready to imagine life than to live it, vanishing from reality for hours on end. Defenders of fantasy, such as myself, would bristle at such villainization of a genre that gave us fuller lives—infinite added to the single—clinging to quotes such as "a single dream is more powerful than a thousand realities," which is incorrectly attributed on the internet (e.g., Ventura) to J. R. R. Tolkien, the father of modern fantasy. These out-of-context quotes might have offered some authorial backing to my consolation of fantasy, but they could not alleviate my unease over the avoidance of escapism. Was it not irresponsible to declare a dream more powerful than reality? If a dream could be more powerful, might it be a trap rather than an escape? I brushed past this unease choosing to believe—to hope—that escapism had no flaw. I refused to embark on a journey of contemplation for the answer, too afraid of what that answer might be.

This weak defense of escapism may arise precisely because fans, like me, shy away from discovery, persisting in ignorance rather than confronting the threshold guardian. This ignorance extends to the very quotes used to support escapism, quotes tossed around with ease and complete lack of knowledge, ignorant of even their true authors. The quote of dreams and realities, when tracked down by Marcel Bulles in his blog *The Tolkienist*, appeared not in Tolkien's work but on a poster for the film *The Lord of the Rings*, perhaps referencing Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Fanshawe*, in which the protagonist is described with the sentence, "If his inmost heart could have been laid open, there would have been discovered that dream of undying fame, which, dream as it is, is more powerful than a thousand realities" (ch. II par. 29). This quote can no longer be used as a patch-over excuse to ignore reality and live in dreams, and it certainly cannot explain escapism's true value nor depict Tolkien's view, having its own context and weight. Weak and ignorant defenses must be cast aside to find any true worth.

True escapism in fantasy cannot devalue reality without devaluing itself. Fantasy depends on and recovers the world, allowing us through imagination to see "things as we are (or were) meant to see them," as Tolkien states in "On Fairy Stories" (373) or as he reiterates more

poetically in "Mythopoeia": "He sees no stars who does not see them first / of living silver made that sudden burst / to flame like flowers beneath an ancient song" (Tolkien 87). Fantasy must edify the world, draw forth the truth that is threatened and overlooked, and glorify it with the imagination, making it more—not less—real. Fantasy reveals the truth that is more than facts, as C. S. Lewis in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* implies, saying stars are more than their fact, more than burning gas, as "that is not what a star is but only what it is made of" (209). Like a star is more than its parts, the world is more than lifeless facts, more than it is made of, more than pain. Fantasy and escapism, used wisely, peel back the facts and pain to reveal the world's higher truths, truth so high that it can only be touched with imagination, that can only be even vaguely understood with the mythic.

Thus, my unease can be cleared with discernment. I have fled from the world to reject it, hiding in soporific delusions, yet not all I found in the escape was false. Rejecting this world and hiding from myself in fiction might have sickened me—blocking me from my own relationships, from building my own skills, and from triumphing over my own trials. Yet, these same escapes did shelter, mentor, and grow me as well. Some problems a child cannot face alone, and some isolation I cannot overcome with will, but these other worlds expanded my eyes to see new colors in the one outside of my pages; characters taught my heart to cherish those people I have.

Although most learn empathy from friends and classmates, I learned how to feel another's pain and to care for another's joy through those ventures. I found freedom of thought and emotion from the most oppressive days, temporarily released from the lies no child should be told. Fantasy showed me beauty and good that I can now find in reality—giving me words to appreciate an autumn breeze, a sunlit leaf, a drop of dew, a small act of kindness and bravery, the bonds of friendship and family, and innumerable enshrined treasures. The hero might start his journey in flight, but he must grow, change, learn, and find the strength to face the problems that lead him on his path or be destroyed by it. The line between cowardly flight and edifying escape still eludes me, but I know it exists. So, escape, yes, but escape into truth and beauty, into a greater appreciation of the world, into a greater reality.

Work Cited

Batson, Wayne Thomas. *Dreamtreaders*. Tommy Nelson, 2014–2015.

Bulles, Marcel. "Not a Tolkien Quote: 'A Single Dream is More Powerful than a Thousand Realities.' TThnsdwohatdw, Part 3," *The Tolkienist.com*, 9 Jan. 2024, https://thetolkienist.com/2013/04/24/not-a-tolkien-quote-a-single-dream-is-more-powerful-than-a-thousand-realities-tthnsdwohatdw-part-3.

Busse, Morgan L. *The Ravenwood Saga*. Bethany House Publishers, 2018–2020.

Delgado, Jennifer. "Escapism: The Art of Creating Problems by Running Away from Problems." *Psychology Spot*, 9 Dec. 2023, https://psychology-spot.com/escapism-psychology.

Flanagan, John. *Ranger's Apprentice*. Puffin Books, 2005–2013.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Fanshawe*. 1 Dec. 2004. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/7085/pg7085-images.html.

Jenkins, Jerry B., and Chris Fabry. *The Wormling Books*. Tyndale House Publishers, 2007–2008.

Lewis, C. S. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1980.

Paul, Donita K. *DragonKeeper Chronicles*. Waterbrook, 2004–2008.

Poster for film *The Lord of the Rings*. *IMDb*, 1978, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077869.

Tolkien, J. R. R. "Mythopoeia," *Tree and Leaf: Including Mythopoeia*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

———. "On Fairy Stories," *Tales from the Perilous Realm*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008.

Ventura, Chris. "50 Beautiful J.R.R. Tolkien Quotes." *Ventured*, 8 Nov. 2023. https://ventured.com/50-beautiful-j-r-r-tolkien-quotes.

Bugs and Beds

BY SARA REED WILSON

You need to be careful who you let into your apartment; there is a kind of everyday vulnerability in the act. As soon as I saw the little brown bug in my bed, I knew things had gone too far. I inspected it for a while, as I do with most bugs that aren't cockroaches, and googled what bedbugs looked like, just to make sure that I wasn't past the point of no return. Eventually, satisfied that this little critter was not a bed bug, I googled "little brown bug with yellow stripes" because that appeared to be who he was. (I am personifying the bug as male as he is an unwelcome and uninvited nuisance, which has very masculine energy to me.) The image that popped up on my bright phone screen seemed close enough, and I held the phone up to him just to make sure that the resemblance was enough to name him. Carpet beetle. Ironic that the *carpet* beetle was on my bed. The search results said that he was brought on by a lack of vacuuming and an abundance of soft goods in the home, and, although he would not bite, he might start a family that would eventually begin eating away at blankets and clothes. Satisfied that he would not bite me, I flicked him away and went to sleep.

My bed is a sanctuary. There is something that is so precious about the place you choose to lay your head. We are the most vulnerable when we sleep, and to reach that state of vulnerability, one needs to set the stage and the scene for sleep. For me, it begins with an old iron sleigh bed that I inherited from my grandma. Coils of creaking metal and slats and bolts that don't quite fit together are the foundation of my nights spent alone. Atop this convoluted behemoth is a mattress that came in a box. I remember unwrapping it and watching it rise like dough. I've heard that you're supposed to rotate your mattress every so often, but I wouldn't even know where to start with that, so I simply create a divot for myself each and every night, worn down like a stone in a stream until a cradle is formed, my sleeping body nestled like an unborn chick in a see-through shell.

I have two sets of sheets for my queen bed, both from Target—a white set with orange flowers, maybe tulips, splashed across, and a pale pink set. Both are microfiber. Both were bought with my mother's money. I have a light teal quilt for the warm months and a heavier tufted pink velveteen for the cold months. And of course, I have many pillows.

You can never have too many pillows. There are six pillows on my bed. There are always six pillows. They were acquired over time, and I have three sets of cases for them: blush pink, light teal, coral floral. The pillows were bought because a redhead from Bumble said mine were way too soft. And for some reason, I believed him. He drove us to Walmart and picked out two pillows, thick and firm, because he insisted that he could not spend the night at my place with pillows like mine. He paid for them, and I kept them, even though he didn't rest his red head on them very often. Out of the blue, he ended up blocking me two months later. It was for the best. Now the pillows sit, usually in the light teal pillowcases, at the back of my stack, as a way to fill the gap between my mattress and bed frame.

I am averse to killing things, even unwelcome and uninvited nuisances. In fact, spiders I welcome; I let them be. I am happy to have a spider in my home, as I know she will help to control the pest population, and I read E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* one too many times as as child. (I am personifying spiders as female here because I sense in them a kindred spirit, someone who is terrifying to others and lovely to me). However, my love for spiders extends only as far as my body and my bed. If a spider is in my bed or on my body, our unspoken boundary has been crossed, and she simply must go. It is a sorry matter when I have to kill a spider—or any bug. The easy pop of their thorax provides me with further proof of the fragility of all our lives. I see myself as an unjust god, choosing who lives or dies based on my own comfort.

If I am a god, then my apartment is my domain. Except I am not all-powerful and therefore must adhere to the rules and conventions of an even higher power: my lease. And when making calls to the office,

I pray that the phone is not answered by Amanda, who is a short and sassy Southern woman who refuses to answer my questions in a way that doesn't make me feel like a complete idiot. I prefer to get the brown-haired, younger girl to pick up if I've got questions or concerns. I don't remember her name because I don't have to try and avoid her.

Maintenance has a key to my place, and it upsets me to no end that they can come in here whenever they please, although their having a key is convenient with my busy schedule, particularly if I need a leak in my roof fixed.

I have a video doorbell for this and other security reasons, as I am a young woman living alone, and generally, one must take precautions. However, I often forget to charge it, so it is often dead, and I am left in the dark—no more a god than any man.

Cockroaches are my enemy. In my childhood home, my room had a little door in the closet that accessed the attic. This door was often locked, and I never walked through it myself, but looking back, I kind of wished that I had. As a child, I was obsessed with the idea of a magical door (although I had to put down Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, as it frightened me to the point of tears), yet the one in my very own bedroom frightened me, and I wanted nothing to do with it. That was where the cockroaches lived. At night, sometimes I would see them scuttle across the carpeted floor, made bold by the darkness, and I would hide under the covers, comforting myself with the false belief that they could not climb into my bed.

Even cockroaches I cannot kill unless provoked. Once, quite recently, there was one in my apartment bathroom, and I managed to somehow flip it on its back. Suddenly, I could not kill it (I am referring to the cockroach as *it* because I feel there is no way to personify this fascinating and ancient pest, to force it to adhere to human constructs of gender feels chafing.). It was vulnerable, belly-up, exposed to me in a way that felt both shameful and desperate, little legs moving frantically to try and maintain some stability. I saw myself then, not as the inhabitant of this place but as an intruder who has incapacitated another living creature and made it fear for its life. I could not find it

within me to deal the killing blow. So, I watched it for a while, and I almost started rooting for it to right itself again, even though I had cursed it upon first appearance. Eventually, it succeeded and scurried off to a gap in my bathroom wall, a great example of shoddy craftsmanship in my too-expensive apartment.

This apartment I live in now has much less character and charm than my first apartment. In the old place, I could tolerate the pesky shower and ancient kitchen appliances because they smelled like autonomy. The yellow walls seemed to radiate with my adulthood, even though the AC hardly ever worked when it needed to, and the wooden stairs were rotting away with each summer storm. There was also a surprising lack of bugs, so maybe it's true what they say about new buildings cutting corners. There's a sturdiness about places that have been around longer than you have, as if to say, "I came before you, and if you treat me right, I'll outlive you." Here, now, in gray walls and stainless steel, I have yet to hang any pictures, and there is always a mess somewhere that needs my attention. Of course, I am overwhelmingly upset with these messes because they are always of my own creation. I am always cleaning up after myself.

I have now found three carpet beetles in my bed, and I have started looking into ways of extinguishing them. *Southern Living* says I could spray a vinegar solution on the infected areas (Yarborough). Home Depot says to vacuum well and then go over with a steam cleaner (both of which are conveniently sold at their stores; "How to Get Rid"). HGTV says that a few drops of peppermint and clove oil will repel them (Fazio). All of these seem like too much work, so maybe I will wait until they cause damage, until they fire the first shot in this unknowing war, to do anything at all.

Works Cited

Fazio, Emily. "How to Get Rid of Carpet Beetles." *HGTV,* https://www.hgtv.com/lifestyle/clean-and-organize/how-to-get-rid-of-carpet-beetles.

Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. Harper Collins, 2002.

"How to Get Rid of Carpet Beetles." *Home Depot,* https://www.homedepot.com/c/ah/how-to-get-rid-of-carpet-beetles/9ba683603be9fa5395fab901cc10eadb.

White, E. B. *Charlotte's Web*. Harper & Brothers, 1952.

Yarborough, Kaitlyn. "What Are Carpet Beetles? And How to Get Rid of Them for Good." *Southern Living,* 11 Jan. 2024, https://www.southernliving.com/how-to-get-rid-of-carpet-beetles-7645765.

Fiction

Dominion

BY CAROLINA ATKINS

When you're staring into the abysmal eyes of a gang of wild swine roaming the grounds of an Italian château, you may find yourself reevaluating your place at the center of the universe. I had always found comfort in the idea that my human dignity gave me a kind of importance in the grand scheme of things. Maybe the sun didn't revolve around my every whim, but it was still heartening to cling to the concept that we're only a little lower than the angels. However, while throwing my dignity to the wind to flee from snuffling Calabrian pigs, I have to admit that humanity's position as master of all creeping things was wildly thrown into question.

Why did I think learning Latin at a creepy Roman castle surrounded by pig herds would be a fun way to spend the summer? And why can't these pigs be more like Wilbur? I ask myself as I retreat down the grassy hill, hoping with every double-time heartbeat that I can make it to the black iron fence guarding the Italian palace that has now become a language school.

Is E. B. White a liar? Has my life come full circle, an ironic cautionary tale on the dangers of romanticizing farm animals? It's a little pathetic, but perhaps there are fewer interesting ways to go than by pig-mauling.

I almost want to laugh through the choking clod of fear in my throat. It's cliché to say that your life flashes before your eyes when you're dangling over Death's slop bucket, but all I can see now is the parade of farm animals who have passed through my life, leading up to this moment.

I should have seen it coming. I should have seen the clear foreshadowing. There was Wilbur—not E. B. White's but our own family pet that my father brought home one day and plopped into the wire pen in the backyard. Wilbur was small and soft and wonderfully pink. I can imagine Wilbur now, trying his best to fight off the large, bristly swine

of Italy. Wilbur was everything a pig ought to be. Calm and sweet and friendly. Someone who took naps with the dog on the porch. Someone who would eat the rest of your peanut butter and jelly sandwich if you didn't want it. Someone who persevered through trials, like that time a fox came in the middle of the night and tried to bite off Wilbur's ear. Wilbur wasn't afraid to call for help, to raise a mighty screech to the heavens so that he woke the entire household, and my father had to shoot a shotgun into the air to scare away the fox.

There was that day on a school field trip to learn about soybeans and petting zoos when I was trying to eat my cold ham sandwich at a dirty picnic table under a pavilion. Two large birds kept approaching me, with their strange, bumpy-looking feathers and horrible wrinkles under their eyes and long, knobby legs stretching to the ground. Their beady, glistening eyes were fixed on my sandwich; strange garbling clucks came from their throats; they shuffled their way closer, ruffling their feathers, poking their beaks. Finally, my mother said, "They're more afraid of you than you are of them. Relax, and don't make eye contact."

Could it be? If such a statement were true, it would mean a shift in my outlook on life. I stood. I gave a starting jump forward, waving my arms. The birds fled. I coaxed them back again with sandwich crumbs just to scare them off, exulting in my new power.

Such scenes of bravery and confidence are overshadowed, however, by a later instance of being chased by an angry bull up a giant pile of mulch. There is no time to jump the fence, so I scramble up the avalanching hill, getting thick shards of dirt in my socks and sneakers. Some cows don't seem to be more scared of you than you are of them, so maybe there is something to be said for running away and watching from the top of the hill, like a scared cat in a tree, while the bull tries to climb up after you. He bellows in rage for a while and then gives up and tramps away hotly for a drink of water in the barn.

There was the angry rooster. The one I had to water every day despite his hatred for me. And there was the friendly orange tomcat who died tragically when my grandmother pulled into the driveway and didn't see him. And there was the goat who ate the entire yard. And there was the huge rottweiler that my father brought home one day when I was three or four years old. I looked around and saw my sisters

were scared to approach it, so when our father told us not to be afraid, I pretended I wasn't and went to pat the dog on the head. She turned out to be the kind of dog that would let toddlers ride her like a horse. Also like a horse, she didn't mind stepping on you if you fell off.

Maybe now my thoughts are running away from me, while I'm running away from Italian pigs, and I have been warned that they may very well eat me, but I don't have *time* for them to eat me. I'm not even supposed to be out this late, and I have more language classes in the morning. With my heart beating painfully in my chest, tears trying to squeeze out of my eyes, and my neck stiff and frozen, afraid to look behind me, I finally reach the gate around the school.

I hoist myself atop the wall, certainly not looking very graceful, and dump myself on the other side. I look up from the ground. The pigs are in the distance, rooting around the orchard for apples that have fallen to the dirt. I pick myself up, shaking from the adrenaline. By some miracle, my autopsy report won't say "Cause of death: pigs," and I won't have to roll around in my coffin from sheer embarrassment. Maybe there's still a chance to die from a noble cause. *How did I even get here*, I wonder, *learning a dead language at a Roman school guarded by roaming flocks of pigs?* Why is it that wherever I go, farm animals are always peppered about, lurking in the shadows, forcing me to face my own mortality? Why are cats and strange birds and little pink pigs braver than me? Maybe we humans are rulers of all creation, and maybe human society is higher-minded than barnyard livestock, but they sure do give us a run for our money.

Do Not Cross the Road

BY JULIANN BIANCO

> "Then, when God asks him, 'Where is your brother Abel?' he arrogantly responds, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' In essence, the entire Bible is written as an affirmative response to this question." (Telushki 40)

"My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy."

It has been thirteen years since my last confession. I still think about this one, even though the event happened decades ago and she ended up being fine.

We were little, like seven and two years old or six and one year old. Jenny babbled a lot but didn't quite make words, except for my name and "Mama" and "Daddy." I should know when babies start talking, but it's a blurry age. Lord knows I've held enough babies that I should be able to keep track of their timeline.

I was supposed to be watching her for just a little bit while they went to see Mrs. Lonny for dinner across the road. (Mrs. Lonny died seventeen years ago, I think. People with attitudes live forever. Look at the nuns from St. Joe's—the same ones who smacked the hell out of Jenny and me are probably still whacking those girls today. Spite lives forever.) We weren't allowed to come over to see them because we were not allowed to cross the road. Harpswell is small enough that there's really only one of everything—that's why you call everything "the." The store. The church. The road.

Mama had it drilled into us early on not to cross the road by ourselves. From the way that I picture Harpswell, we lived on the left side of the road. When I see our house, I'm in the passenger seat of the car coming down the road from the town's entrance, and my house is

hidden a little into the sidewalk going down the left. Jenny is sitting on the front porch, leaning on our family dog Monster, waiting for me to get home from school and Daddy from work. Monster doesn't have any white around his face when I look at the house like this.

I was almost always a responsible young lady, as I was told by teachers and parents, and I took great pride in it. I don't know why I had trouble though when I was babysitting. I found cousins and other people's children easy because I only watched them for an hour or two. But when she was teeny, Jenny possessed an uncanny ability to irritate me, more so than anyone on earth. It was like she was born knowing everything about me and every way to get under my skin.

When I wanted to play with Monster, she wouldn't understand and she pulled his tail, ruining the whole thing. When I wanted to read my cartoons, she would knock over the cup on her chair and make a mess. If I was unlucky enough, the mess would be on the cartoons I was reading. I swear I could have tipped her over then. But, of course, I never would.

We had just learned in Sunday school about Cain and Abel.

On the walk home that day, the neighbor girl, Molly, and I talked. I wanted to talk about the story, but it hadn't stuck with her for some reason. I don't remember his name, but I know Molly had an older brother. Maybe that's why it didn't bother her. Part of being the good and kind younger sibling means that you're unsuspecting. That you're not afraid. Maybe part of being the older sibling means that you're always angry, and you're always afraid of that anger. I could not stop thinking of all the nights I spent awake because I was so damn mad at Jenny for being a loud baby and for keeping me up. In the late hours of the night, when it was just me and her in the crib in my room, she wasn't even my sister; all I could see and hear was the thing in the corner that was keeping me awake. I was mad, but then, the next morning, I'd look at her sweet face and feel awful about being mad. She'd look up with her gross snotty nose and two teeth and big, cute eyes, and I could tell she had no idea anyone had ever been upset with her. She had no idea anyone had ever been upset ever.

I think that's why Molly never gave that day in Sunday school another thought. Her brother was the same as me: briefly mad at a baby and then forever guilty of his horrible thoughts and little patience.

When Mama asked me what we learned, I told her the story. I think she could tell it was bothering me and, in her terrible cleverness,

she knew how to make it stick even more with me. She told me that all the evil in the world came from Cain being a bad big brother—that his mom and dad may have discovered the Devil, but what he did was so much worse because he was born knowing him and all that he could do. She told me that it wasn't fair to ever get mad at Jenny because she didn't know anything. Because I knew the rules and I knew what was good and bad, only I could be evil out of the two of us. Abel killed a lamb, but he wasn't evil; it was what God wanted. The lamb always has to die. The lamb will always be gone.

She knew how that would stick with me; I know she did. I don't blame her for using fear as a motivation for us. With how much they both had to work, my parents didn't have much of a choice. It's the same reason she made us terrified of leaving the basement door open (Those stairs were unforgiving if you fell.) and of crossing the road by ourselves. She didn't have time to teach us the nuances of traffic laws, or that some drivers are better than others, or that some may be piss-drunk. All she had time to teach us was that, if we tried to cross the road, awful things would happen. On the other side, kidnappers and perverts and dentists awaited us, if we even made it across. Most of the kids who dared cross the road would be mowed down in the middle, their brains splattered on the yellow lines.

My friend Katie was allowed to cross the road by herself. Mama said it's because her parents didn't really care about her and probably didn't go to church either. I never thought much about her response until years later.

I don't think it was true that Katie's parents didn't care about her. Her mom always looked a little shell-shocked, but her kids were always happy to see her. Isn't that a sign of a good mom? Besides, Katie was too good with kids herself to have been raised terribly. She did a good job with her many, many siblings. She is always so good to my Trish and Chrissie too; they adored her. As did I. She spent her whole life taking care of other people's children: her siblings, then mine, then Jenny's. I hope it made her happy. I hope we made her happy. Being a little kid certainly didn't make her happy, not like the rest of us. She seemed like she was born with this profound sadness—like she was burdened with some terrible knowledge that she could never share. Maybe it was from whatever horrors she saw crossing the road by herself that young.

Back to the confession, I was only supposed to be watching Jenny for a little bit, so I'm not exactly sure what bug was up my ass. All I remember is that I couldn't stand to watch her that night. She recently had learned to walk, and she'd wobble everywhere on her chubby little legs. It was really cute and exciting until I was alone with her. Being alone with a regular baby is scary enough because you pretty much have to keep them alive, but being alone with a baby who can get around on their own is something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Jenny learning to walk turned me into the youngest-ever gray-haired girl on God's green earth. She wanted to be everywhere at once, and I just couldn't do it every now and then.

Mrs. Bradley had given our class copies of *Charlotte's Web* to work on for the month. I just wanted to find out what was happening, so I went to the corner chair around the hallway to hide from Jenny. After a while of reading, I heard our parents come home. I hadn't realized I had done something wrong, yet—I was excited to see them. (I used to run as fast as I could to the front door when Daddy got home from work. I don't remember when that stopped. I wonder if it made him sad.)

I ran to them, and they asked where Jenny was.

How was I supposed to know? Was I supposed to watch her every move?

The look in their eyes told me that yes, I was.

Mama looked at the basement door that very next moment, and I knew I was cooked. It was only a few short stairs, but they were pretty unforgiving if you fell. Jenny was at the bottom of them with big, tearful sniffles and blood dripping from her cute curly bangs. I could see where her head had cracked against the loose tiles at the bottom. She stared at us with the biggest eyes I've ever seen.

She was usually so loud when she cried. She kept me up all hours of the night because she was hungry or because she had wet herself. Why had she cried so quietly now when she actually needed me? She was always calling out to me, always babbling in my direction, always nibbling on my hair or my hand or anything she could get her chubby little fists on. For lack of a better word, when we were little, she was obsessed with me. She made sure I was always aware of her exact location and mood. I knew how she was and what she needed at all times, even if I didn't want to know. I even knew what her different cries meant. That little "hraaaaaa" cry meant that she needed a change, and the gurgly one

was more of a hunger noise. The plain and simple screech meant that she was tired but couldn't calm herself enough to sleep. I knew when she needed to be calmed.

I always knew what she needed because she never cried quietly. Why was she so quiet now? I always knew what she needed. Why was she quiet? Why couldn't I hear her? How had she split her head open? Why did she cry so quietly? Where was the lamb? Where was the lamb?

I don't remember them taking Jenny to the hospital or what they said to me. I only remember that I heard ringing and saw black spots. All I know is that after we found her, I was told to walk to Mrs. Lonny's house.

In the moment, I thought she was just watching me for the night while Jenny got stitches, but my parents hadn't even left the house. They were still home with their good and broken daughter, casting the evil one off into the land of Nod. I was told to go out and cross the road by myself for the very first time. They didn't watch me from the porch as I went. I didn't understand that they were only sending me to Mrs. Lonny to be looked after before they left to take care of Jenny. All I understood was that the world was ending. I had disregarded the good and sweet baby sibling and struck her with a rock as hard as I could. She hadn't even brought a lamb as a sacrifice. She was a lamb. She is a lamb. And I struck her with a rock.

Now I had to cross the road by myself and wander into Nod. I was the very first big brother on earth and the very worst one too.

Works Cited

Literacy. William Morrow, 1991.

Mirrors

BY LAUREN FARRELL

Tonight, like every night, I sit on the edge of my bed, thinking of Anh.

I'm aware that I should be thinking about my boyfriend. He was walking me to class this morning, and I was unable to hold his hand. He reached out, and I just couldn't. I don't know what happened. All class, I thought about it. How I have lost all my friends. How I cannot bear to reach out to my family. How I looked at his hand and felt this overwhelming nothingness. How I can't see anyone, talk to anyone, be with anyone, not anymore.

My boyfriend and I had been together for almost two years. I loved him up until today, I think. He's done nothing wrong, and he's so worthy of love. I just don't have any left to give.

I don't mean to drive everyone away. I just can't seem to feign interest in their conversations, and I can't gather the courage to leave my room. I don't have the strength to open my mouth.

There's only one person I want to be around. And she's no longer here.

Here I am. Instead of thinking about him, I'm thinking about where my life went wrong, and somehow, I know it ties back to Anh. So, as always, I'm sitting on the edge of my bed, thinking about her.

Anh, my college roommate, was the first loss in a long string of losses.

That was July. Then came August, and I moved into my new dorm room. By the first week of September, my hairbrush disappeared from the vanity. Then, my favorite mug was missing from the cabinet. Loss after loss. Small things, at first. My laundry basket, which I accused my neighbor of stealing. My necklace, one that Anh gave me a year back, a gift from a family trip to Vietnam.

Small things. Then, big things.

Some kind of vacuousness settled into my body once the novelty of the new semester wore off. By mid-September, it was the big things

that were disappearing, the things that matter most. The vacuousness manifested in my feet walking away after my friends said, "We're worried about you." It manifested in my fingers as I ignored their calls over and over again. It manifested in my voice, devoid of emotion, when I told my parents, "I need space."

I look at the wall. It was once covered in photos: friends, family, my boyfriend, Anh. They disappear one by one in the night. Now, they're almost all gone.

I don't remember when I started noticing. The wall above my dresser used to be wallpapered in polaroids of friends, handwritten notes from my mom, signed band posters, my boyfriend's drawings, baby photos of me and my brother. Hardly anything remains. I haven't taken a single thing down, but they're gone.

I stand up. For the millionth time, I get up and check behind my dresser to see if they fell. They're not there, of course. It's the logical place they would be, but nothing's logical anymore, so they're not there. They're lost, like everything else in my life. My things. My feelings. My future.

I'm hyperaware of being watched. I glance at the mirror on the wall. Covered with the curtain, as always, but I don't feel safe.

I should look up.

I don't. I hate the idea of looking up.

One of the first things Anh said to me when we became roommates was that if the mirror I brought faced our beds, demons—in the forms of our evil doppelgangers—would come out of it and steal from us while we slept. It was a horror story she grew up hearing, maybe something her parents made up to spook her, as she speculated, or maybe folklore they carried with them when they emigrated from Vietnam. She said she felt ridiculous moving in and immediately asking a superstitious favor.

We covered the mirror with a curtain. We had an extra because neither of us specified who was bringing what, so now we had two of everything: two sets of curtains for our one window, two vacuums, and two rugs for our impossibly small dorm room. She was embarrassed to cover the mirror, but I sympathized; my Italian family was rooted in superstition. That first day together, we bonded by trading stories of the

beliefs and habits of our families: trips to fortune tellers, salt thrown over shoulders, the search for signs of luck in everything.

We had more in common than just family members we branded crazy despite adopting their practices. We both were planning to rush that semester and try out for the competition cheer team in winter. We both were daily Wordle players. It became part of our morning routine, playing together and comparing answers. She always got it in five, and I always got it in three, and when I tried to explain why my strategies were helpful, she teased that I was better just because I was an English major. We were both easily scared, but we loved horror movies. It became a tradition to see each new release on its premiere night. We made the three-hour trip to visit each other once a month during our summer and winter breaks. I managed her Tinder and took on the impossible task of finding men worthy of her, and she did the same for me. We traded stories of our girl-boy escapades with no details expunged. We dropped out of our sorority junior year because we felt the other girls didn't get us. We traded jewelry from our childhoods.

Our friends thought it was weird the two of us were still choosing to dorm for our junior and senior years. All our classmates were living in off-campus houses with their own rooms by then, but we were happy together. Our friends called it "playing house," called us "newlyweds," asked us, "Are you sure you're not in love?" We'd laugh.

We lived together all through college until she died in a car accident a month before senior year, leaving me to sit on the edge of my bed each night, like tonight, empty of thoughts, except for those of her.

I'm thinking about how we were unable to stop talking in the dark, hysterically laughing over the same old stories. How I woke her up when I had nightmares, how she got up to make sure the mirror-curtain was closed and the demons kept out. How she would hold me until I calmed down. How now I feel vulnerable. Unprotected.

I'm thinking about how much she would hate the little mirror glued to the ceiling by some weird, possibly freaky dorm tenant before me.

The mirror was the second thing I noticed when I moved into my new room. The first thing I noticed was the two beds. My mom, who was helping me move in, said I could push the beds together to have more sleeping space. I said I could never do that. We were uncomfortable.

Then, we noticed the ceiling mirror. My mom visibly cringed at it, complained about the maintenance employees, and said I should contact someone to come take it down.

Two beds. Two mirrors: the one I brought from home and the one on the ceiling. All in a room for one student.

Soon after my mom left for home, I covered the mirror I brought with me with my curtains. The mirror on the ceiling remains uncovered. I should have had someone take it down. I think about it constantly. I'm thinking about it now. I knew I would never call maintenance. I should have had my mom call them for me. It's too high for me to reach; I would have covered it with a tapestry or something otherwise.

Anh would've worried about the ceiling mirror and found it ridiculous at the same time. I'm thinking about how I'm now the same way because the second I get in bed, I force my eyes closed to avoid seeing myself above me, like a hovering demon.

I think of Anh every night. Tonight is different. Tonight, for the first time, I'm going to look at my reflection in the dark.

I lay down, eyes shut, shaking. I count 3 . . . 2 . . . 1. . . .

I stare at the demon above me. But it's just me in the mirror.

Me. Who loves her family, loves her friends, loves movies, loves cheer, loves playing the Wordle, loves her boyfriend. She's some lost soul. That's who is in the mirror. It's just me staring up at myself. There is no demon in the mirror. There never was any demon. It's all folklore, that's what Anh always said, nervous or not.

I don't know what I thought was going to happen.

Staring into my own eyes above me, I think, *you did this to yourself*.

My phone rings. I jump. My eyes dart to it. It says my boyfriend's calling. My breathing is loud, rapid. I stare at his name on the screen until it goes to voicemail. My breathing slows. He does not leave a voicemail. He tries calling again. I ignore it.

Instead, I look back up at the girl on the ceiling. I can tell, staring into my eyes, that she's empty. She's harboring love for one person, someone no longer here. It's the last thing she owns.

I won't let the mirror take away the last thing I have.

I jump on top of the bed. I grab the handle of a broom.

My scream is feral. It's shrill. It rings.

I smash the mirror above me. It rains down like knives. It reminds me of a car crash, a windshield breaking, a young woman screaming. The car's side mirror is ripped from its body. It flies across the highway. On it, it says, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." It hits the highway with an explosion of glass. Glass, everywhere. Like knives. Like the knives raining down in my bedroom. Now.

≈

The phone is still ringing.
I stand in the shattered glass.
I'm still.
I'm no longer screaming.
The phone is still ringing.
I'm still standing on top of my bed.
I'm still standing.
I'm still here.
Anh is not here.
I'm still here.
The phone is still ringing.
The phone goes silent.
I'm still here.

≈

I brush the pieces from the bed. My hands bleed. They spread blood over my white sheets. I do not care. The pieces fall. I don't clean up. I don't care. I lie down. Pieces I miss crunch and clink together underneath me. I stare at the ceiling, at the remnants of the glue that kept the mirror up.

I don't care.
I regret it.
I don't care.

I regret shattering the mirror because without my demon, I am finally, completely alone.

≈

I haven't been entirely honest. The wall above my dresser was covered in photos, the same ones, year after year. But when I moved in this semester, I didn't hang up any photos of Anh.

All the photos, notes, drawings, whatever. They're disappearing. But the photos with Anh didn't. I made those disappear myself.

I don't know why. I miss her so much; it's like a craving. Like a haunting. I chose to keep those photos of Anh and me in a box under my bed. The idea of seeing her face each day on the wall is nauseating. It's strange, I know. I want to see her face so badly, but I can't bear to look at it.

Tonight, for the first time in months, I'm not thinking of Anh. I'm thinking of myself. Or rather, the girl in the mirror. I'm wondering if she became the demon that haunts me, the one Anh warned me about. She, who has everything, stealing from someone who has nothing.

I leap out of bed. My feet are on glass. I don't care. I march across the room to my wall mirror and throw open the curtains. I stare at my reflection. My monstrous reflection stares back. It blinks when I do. My reflection, as much as my twin as Anh ever was. My hair, my eyes, my freckles, but it's her. Tonight, in the darkness, amidst the mystery of all that's been stolen from me, Anh's there, revealing she's never been lost. When I look at myself, all I see is her.

Anh, I'm not the demon. It's you.

I let her know that I forgive her for being my doppelganger, the demon twin stealing my life from me in the night. I let her know that she can take everything from me—my hairbrush, my necklace, my love. Anh, tonight, I want to lose myself to you before I lose my own mind.

I do not close the curtain. I walk over the glass. I lay down in bed. I stare at my reflection in bed then close my eyes.

Tonight, I will let her have my soul if she is willing to take it. I will allow her to take me away from here as long as I get to be with her again.

Nightmares

BY JOSH HAMMINGH

Alan was convinced that the worst thing about prison was not prison itself, but Miguel. Night after night, he lay on his hard bed, which hung from the wall with only one ridiculously thin mattress, and he thought about how unfair it was that he was stuck here with men like Miguel—men who corrupted, degraded, and destroyed his country, all without a thought for how it would affect people like Alan, people who wanted to live honestly, properly, and happily. But of course, Miguel and his selfish network of dealers and addicts had to ruin everything, spreading their misery to everyone else, even those who had always wanted nothing more than to live and let live. Alan was not so foolish as to want that anymore. It irked him to share a cell with someone who had stooped so low. The two of them were nothing alike.

Alan glanced at his cellmate and took in the man's sunken cheeks with the pitiful sprouts of a beard growing in here and there, and he seethed at what a careless fool his cellmate was that he couldn't even be bothered to shave that embarrassment off his face.

Miguel met his eye contact with a spark of happiness in his eyes, hoping Alan was trying to reach out, to finally connect with him. But then Alan looked away and refused to look back, and Miguel was forced to give up that hope. He so desperately wanted Alan's companionship. Life was lonely, otherwise. Miguel was not above befriending a failed bank robber. Without this human contact, he would be left entirely alone, to reflect on the family he had left back home, thousands of miles away. He had left to send money back to his family, hoping and praying that they would never find out how he obtained the cash and knowing they would cut him off if they did—that they would never accept his help or accept him home. Now that his imprisonment had ended the flow of money, his nightmare was that his family would find out what happened and shun him anyway.

To take his mind off his family's rejection and his cellmate rejecting him too, Miguel began his nightly ritual, whispering to himself the prayers his parents had taught him as a child, hoping those prayers

might help him find some solace, some consolation, some hope, some forgiveness for his past.

He started with the Act of Contrition: "Dios mío, con todo mi corazón, me arrepiento de todo el mal que he hecho y de todo el bueno que he dejado de hacer. Al pecar, te he ofendido a ti, que eres el Supremo Bien y digno de ser amado sobre todas las cosas." He knew he was supposed to finish the prayer, but somehow the plea that he might stop sinning always felt wrong to him. He was far too focused on his past to think much about future sins.

Alan spared Miguel another glance as he saw him pray, as he often did, trying to understand what his cellmate thought he was doing. There was something incongruous in that image of the imprisoned meth dealer crossing himself. For just a moment, Alan wondered if Miguel might genuinely believe in what he was doing, but he quickly rejected that idea. No, Miguel was simply throwing himself into a last-ditch attempt at gaining some inner peace. But Alan knew that peace was not something that could ever be found inside these gray concrete walls. Peace was something you only found with a big house, a couple of cars, and a happy family. Any circumstances poorer than that could never be anything but continual chaos and fear. That was what had driven them both to break the law, Alan recognized. Both had been in search of peace. The difference was that Miguel had crossed a line—he dealt in death. Alan had never actually planned to kill anyone: he brought a pistol to the bank only for intimidation. America would not have been crippled by his crime, but Miguel's was ripping America apart one addict at a time. Alan looked at Miguel's trembling lips as he started the prayer over again, this time in English, and he knew that Miguel was simply lamenting his great misfortune at being stuck in prison.

Miguel felt he was doing all he could not to tremble, buckling under the burden of wrath he carried every day. Miguel had always felt some sense of guilt, of divine disappointment, with each backstreet sale, but now, with no distractions whatsoever, he felt naked before the God of his childhood, and he knew he was wrong. He prayed all the confessional prayers that he knew, praying in Spanish and in English, but the weight never felt lighter.

Alan's judgment never made anything better. Miguel wished he could seek absolution—if not from God then at least from his cellmate. But all he ever received from either was silent wrath. He bore the weight

of this wrath every moment, from pulling himself up on shaky legs each morning, to eating in the mess hall with bad food and worse company, to the bone-aching labor of maintaining the prison entrapping him (sometimes filling the holes in the roof and other times replacing the flooring), to sitting in bed at night and wishing he could sleep but knowing that if he did, he would only have nightmares. In these dreams, he would see families grieving for loved ones they had lost because of him, and by the end of the nightmare, the family always morphed into his own and the lost loved one into him. He always woke up feeling somehow more exhausted than he had been when he had gone to bed. But he had to get up, nevertheless, and start the horrid cycle again.

Afraid of the night left ahead of him, Miguel ended his prayer by crossing himself one last time. It was the first anniversary of his incarceration, and he bore the weight of wrath heavier than usual. In his brokenness, he attempted a desperate act and broke the silence.

"Would . . . would you like to pray with me?" Miguel asked, uncertain of what to say, of what he could say to his cellmate, only knowing that he needed help.

Alan's eyebrow arched, a position Miguel had come to loathe, for he knew it was the signal that Alan was judging him even more harshly than usual.

"If there's anything to pray to out there, it's not worth praying to. All the good in the world and all the bad"—and here Alan settled his glare on Miguel for a moment before looking away again—"is our own doing."

"But if it really was up to us, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to redeem all of this?" Miguel made a sweeping gesture as if to refer to them, to their dark and cramped cell, to the entire prison complex, and maybe even to the whole world.

"This is supposed to redeem us," Alan replied dryly, staring at the dreary gray walls.

"But how?" Miguel asked. "I don't feel any better than the first day I was here. I feel worse!"

"Maybe you ought to."

"Do you feel any better?" Miguel grimaced. This was not going how Miguel had hoped.

"Even if I didn't, guilt wouldn't be the reason," Alan said before turning over in his bed to face the wall. "Good night."

Miguel was left alone with himself again, alone to spend the entire night with God's wrathful eye staring down on him, haunting him, minute after minute.

Morning always came as something of a blessing, for at least then Miguel could escape his cold, cursed bed. He could leave his cell and, for the day at least, he would be distracted. Distracted by unpleasant activities but distracted, nonetheless. Miguel felt the searing pain of God's watching, judging eyes throughout the day, but he was most conscious of this sensation whenever he was around Alan. The man's very presence was a rebuke, with a fire burning in his eyes and a scowl perpetually etched onto his face. Miguel found himself grateful, as usual, that Alan sat as far away from him as possible in the mess hall. Of course, no one *tried* to sit with Miguel nor did he *try* to sit with anyone else. It was just the way of things that everyone had to be crowded together at the tables, whether they wanted to be or not.

Today, those around Miguel were saying that some big-shot pastor was coming to the prison, and the inmates were free to visit with him in the chapel. Miguel's heart skipped a beat as he took in this salvific news. Finally, he could confess to a priest and be absolved of his sins. But his mind descended back to earth when he remembered that these American pastors weren't usually like the priests back home. They didn't believe that humans had the power to forgive sins—at least not on God's behalf. These American pastors would not lift his burden. How the Americans got rid of their guilt at all was beyond Miguel. If only he could know how Alan could feel no guilt without any pastor, priest, or religion. Miguel ate the rest of his lunch feeling even more defeated than normal and having more questions than answers. He stared off into space, and it took effort to keep shoveling every bite into his mouth, to keep choosing to survive in this godforsaken place. However, to all around him, he was just another weary prisoner, already tired from half a day's bone-aching work, tearing up the stone tiles in the old bathrooms so that the flooring could be replaced because (of course) nicer bathrooms was what these prisoners really needed. To those around him, Miguel was just another tired face in the crowd, but as he finally got up from his seat to go back to work, he still felt entirely isolated from the rest of the world—isolated by his guilt, by his cellmate's hatred, by the wrath of God Himself.

That evening, he stared at Alan even more intently, scanning for any sign that he had lied the night before: a tear, a hunch, anything that might suggest he did feel guilt and he did suffer just as much as Miguel when left alone with himself and that he was too arrogant to admit it. But he could see no sign, and his search only served to annoy Alan, who still wished to be left alone by his cellmate so that he could brood uninterrupted.

"Would you cut it out?" he snapped after being scrutinized for far too long.

"Sorry," Miguel muttered and looked away for a moment. But finally, he could not contain himself, and he asked, "But how can you feel no guilt, none at all?"

"I didn't harm anyone."

"You don't know that! The people at the bank may have lifetimes of trauma ahead of them."

Alan blinked rapidly. He had not thought of that. "I'm sure they won't," he said, making his voice sound more confident than he had a right to be.

"Can it really be so simple as lying to yourself to avoid guilt? Is that really all it takes?" Miguel demanded.

Alan clenched his jaw. "I don't need to lie to myself. I know that I'm a good person, and I would never have done anything wrong if I could've helped it. I was only doing what I needed to. I hardly see that as wrong anyway."

"And how does that make you different from me? I was just doing what I needed to get by too."

"Because it's people like you that ruined my life!" Alan erupted. He looked bewildered, as if he had shocked himself. As if he had let out a secret he had never meant to.

"How?" Miguel asked, already knowing he did not want to know the answer yet somehow feeling that he needed it.

Alan glared at Miguel to make his every word like a dagger. "My son overdosed while out partying with his friends. My marriage, my work, my finances . . . it was all a downward spiral from there. Eventually, I had nowhere left to turn to. And it all started with someone like you cruelly preying on teenagers just looking for kicks. So no, I don't think it's my fault I'm here. I don't feel guilty for trying to help myself when my world had all fallen apart." He stopped, then thought better of it, and added, "And no, I'm not here to offer you any comfort.

There is no comfort in this world or in any other world. The only good is what's already behind me."

"I . . . I'm sorry," Miguel said. What else was there to say? It was pointless to try to compare their sufferings, to say that Alan's intense but recent suffering was equal to the squalor he had been living in his entire life, that he was only trying to help himself, too, and there had been nothing else in this country so consistent, so easy, and so lucrative as becoming a drug dealer. It was consistent and easy, and it provided money that he needed to save his ailing family. It was not what he wanted to do; he had no choice but to do it. But he knew that could never redeem him.

This night it was he who turned away in his bed, unable to bear Alan's gaze. And, as he turned away, Alan thought that he should recognize this victory, that finally Miguel was leaving him alone. But he only felt emptier, as if stirring up his past and dumping its poison onto his cellmate had done nothing to heal him after all. He hadn't cried once in prison, but that night he did. If Alan had bothered to look, he would have seen that Miguel was crying too.

Works Cited

"Act of Contrition in Spanish." *Siempre Spanish* https://www.siemprespanish.com/act-of-contrition-in-spanish.html.

Caroline's Garden

BY ALLISON HARMON

Walking into her garden was like entering a jungle veiled in a thick, perfumed fog emanating from the soil's most recent blooms. She frequently had people over on Sunday afternoons and, despite the muggy heat of southeast Texas, they enjoyed sitting on her back porch, overlooking her garden. Being the proper host that she was, she would always fix them a pitcher of ice-cold tea, or perhaps iced scotch, depending on the crowd. For hours, the men would perform liquor-fueled stories on that wooden deck while the women passed sugared rumors as if God himself took that Sunday evening off.

Caroline woke that Sunday morning to the sound of her husband Harold taking a phone call in the hallway. She sauntered across the bedroom to its adjoined bathroom, stopping in front of the porcelain sink to eye herself in the mirror. Every day felt the same. Every day, she would meet herself in the mirror and take note of what needed the most fixing—it was normally her eyes, as it was on this particular Sunday. They seemed tired and creased, and she felt a tinge of shame as she applied the tightening ointment beneath her lower lids. It took a few moments, but her eye bags perked up. She applied concealer over the ointment and continued to get ready. After church today, her and Harold's friends were coming over for another back-porch gathering.

She couldn't help but love these gatherings—or any gathering for that matter. Harold worked long hours at his law firm, consequently leaving her alone in a quiet house. Nearly ten years into marriage and she still wasn't quite used to the ironic isolation she often felt, but Caroline had known that this would be her life before Harold had even proposed.

At nineteen years old, she was in love with the idea of marrying a lawyer. He was young then, fresh out of law school and bar certified, but she was even younger with a recently acquired high-school diploma. Her family warned her about married life, but nothing could prepare a person for something other than its actuality.

Harold came into the bathroom as she finished applying her makeup and he kissed her cheek.

"I *just* applied my foundation, Harold," Caroline sighed. "I think you took some off."

"Ah, the cruelty!" Harold chuckled, wiping his lips. "It tastes like bad paint."

"Is there good paint?"

Harold chuckled. "You've made your point. Look, are you going to be ready soon? We need to pick up donuts for the group today."

"Shoot," Caroline muttered. "It totally slipped my mind—I'll be out soon, I promise. I still need to water my plants."

"Alright, honey. Just hurry up, please." Harold slipped out of the bathroom.

"It's a donut shop, Harold. I doubt it will take long. . . ." Caroline trailed off, realizing Harold's sudden disappearance.

After she finished getting ready, she quickly went out to the backyard to check on her flowers. The garden was comprised of six full-sized wooden pallets, each displaying its own distinct flower: hydrangeas, marigolds, peonies, begonias, lilies, and—her favorites—daisies. Caroline filled the metal can and delicately went through, watering her flowers. She paid particular attention to her beloved daises, which appeared to be uncharacteristically dry. As she finished the sixth bed, she turned to see Harold eagerly waiting on the back porch, his hands gripping to the railing. She imagined he would share this moment with his buddies over scotch later in the evening.

They left for church, stopping to grab donuts for the Sunday school group. But Caroline could hardly pay attention at all during class today; she kept thinking about her dry daisies. She wondered if she needed to alter their position so they weren't directly facing the sun. She knew as well as any other gardener that the Southeast Texas sun could fry a flower as much as it could feed it. The daisies didn't appear too discolored this morning, so she imagined it would be an easy fix.

After Sunday school, they attended worship service, and Caroline couldn't concentrate on Pastor Paul's sermon either. She sat in the pew, popping orange TicTacs into her mouth as she waited for his preaching to end. It was a different chapter, a different verse, but it was always the same sermon. Caroline felt like she was sitting in on the same algebra course in school: X=Y. To love God was to repent. To love God was to accept God. To love God was to obtain the key to Heaven. It was said in thousands of ways but nevertheless involved the same equation.

When worship ended, she absent-mindedly walked out of the chapel with her and Harold's friends, who were all talking about their jobs and picking on Harold for being too wrapped up in his work.

"Harold, you work to live, not live to work! How many opportunities are you going to have to travel to Jamaica with your friends? You won't be young forever," his friend Roger teased.

Matthew snickered. "He's already got the salt and pepper look."

"You wound me, friend." Harold mimed a gunshot wound to the heart. "But court is court—I can't just ask the judge to push the hearing back because I want to drink overpriced daiquiris on the beach and babysit Roger."

The men continued to squabble over theoretical vacations while Caroline rolled her eyes at the other two wives.

"Jules, when did Roger garner such passion for traveling to Jamaica?" Caroline sarcastically teased.

"I think Roger has a passion for doing anything that gets him out of work," she retorted.

The three couples each returned to their vehicles and began the drive to Harold and Caroline's house. As they drove, Caroline wondered why Harold hadn't wanted to take the trip to Jamaica. She imagined someone else from the firm could easily take his place at the hearing. *The court date was months from now*, she thought. *He could easily arrange to take off if he really wanted to*.

Before they married, she imagined being a mother would be her job, but as the years passed, the two of them rarely brought the subject up. Of course, like most couples, they would make jokes and hypothetical plans for their future imaginary children, though the conversations never continued. She and Harold witnessed others' pregnancies and birth announcements and they attended baby showers and birthday parties with a strange eeriness hanging over them. Eventually, Caroline became mildly irritated with people constantly asking her when she planned to get pregnant, so she took it upon herself to ask Harold when exactly children were to appear on their timeline. He had paused and looked at her for some time before simply asking, "Would they ever need to?" Caroline probably could have pushed the matter further, but she didn't really know what exactly she would be pushing for.

The couples pulled into the driveway, and Harold led the group to the back porch, while Caroline went into the kitchen to begin arranging

the refreshments. As she pulled out of the cabinet the wooden platter for the fruit, she discovered the wood was covered in scratches and cursed Harold for using her decorative dish as a cutting board. Waving off her sudden frustration, she took her time, delicately arranging the strawberries and slices of bananas, apples, and cubed watermelon onto the wooden dish, as if she were an artist painting fresh fruit onto the platter. By the time she finished, not one piece laid askew. Caroline arrived at the back porch as Harold was wrapping up his rendition of her lateness this morning due to her flowers, and the group laughed at Harold's dramatic reenactment.

"It sure is a beautiful garden though, Care," Matthew admitted. "I couldn't even keep a cactus alive."

"How do you keep your plants alive through the winter?" Megan asked Caroline. "Wouldn't they all die off anyway?"

"Well, yes, but if you're a bit diligent, some of them will rebloom in the spring. You just have to be mindful."

"Interesting. I guess I never gave any thought to it since we've only really been out here in the warmer weather."

"Yeah, there isn't as much to see out here when everything is all brown and dried up—"

"—so, essentially, Caroline's flowers rise like a phoenix from the ashes," Roger theatrically concluded. "Magic stuff, Care."

The men trailed off, regurgitating the same banter they always did. Harold worked too much, Roger was too childish, and Matthew playfully mediated between the two. Like the sermon, it was the same monotonous jokes and the same dull stories, just a different day. *Did they really have nothing new to talk about?* Caroline wondered. But at every gathering, she would watch these looped interactions as if she were repeating the same day over and over again, and she would play her role, because if these people had nothing new to offer, then neither did she. The day dwindled on until evening came, and the guests stood up and made their way to the doors. The kids needed to be picked up from daycare and put to bed, so Caroline walked the couples out to their cars with Harold.

After saying their goodbyes, Caroline retreated to the kitchen. She gathered the glasses and the remnants of the fruit platter and began washing the dishes, diligently rinsing each glass in the sink before placing them in the dishwasher. She grabbed the wooden platter and was

reminded of Harold's cuts on the wood. Caroline nearly called him to ask about it, but Harold would just offer to buy another when that really wasn't the point.

After she finished, Caroline went to their upstairs bathroom, showered, and changed into her nightgown. As she entered the bedroom, she heard Harold outside in the hallway on the phone again. She sat on the bed and began applying her nighttime moisturizer and glanced at the framed photo propped up on his nightstand. It was of her on their wedding day, minutes before she walked down the aisle. Caroline's gown had been the dress of her dreams, far more decadent than required for a wedding ceremony, but she loved the faint gasps it drew as the chapel doors swung open. The dress took enough space that later that night, Harold would have to awkwardly lean over her crinoline to have his first dance with her. But like the dress, Caroline glowed with ivory skin and silky pinned hair; she resembled a Da Vinci more than the everyday woman. Every eye followed her—like a moth lured to a flame—as she strode down the aisle, levitating from looks alone.

Caroline rubbed the excess moisturizer into her hands and worried her lip. Although she tried to listen in on Harold's conversation, she was too far away to make out the words. She looked back over to her photo, to her fiery eyes looking at an out-of-shot Harold at the end of the aisle, as if she were daring him to come to her. The memory of that woman enveloped Caroline's mind.

Harold eventually retreated into the bedroom, rubbing his tired eyes as he turned out the lamps and joined Caroline in the bed.

"Who was that you were on the phone with?"

"Roger. Apparently, he left his watch in the bathroom or something. I told him I would look for it later, but like the convincing bastard he is, he brought up the Jamaica trip again and suckered me into it. So, I called Patrick to see if he could handle himself at the hearing without me, and he said it shouldn't be a problem."

Caroline perked up. "Oh, Harold! That's wonderful! God, we could really use this! There *is* a world outside your office, you know," she teased. "I suppose I'll need to get my passport soon."

"Oh, love," Harold chuckled, "don't worry about that. Roger just wanted a little getaway, you know? Him, Matt, and me—it's just a trip for the boys."

Caroline's cheeks heated as she pulled the covers over her. "Oh . . . . well, okay. That's good, though. You could use a break from work; it'll be good for you."

Harold was quiet for a moment. "It's the same for you, you know," he replied at last. "You'd get a break from me, I mean," he softly laughed before sinking into the bed.

"Right," she replied, but *wrong*, she thought, as she sunk into covers at the edge of the mattress, leaving an aisle of a white, crinkled blanket between them.

My Fat Feminist Daughter

BY TAYLOR MORGAN KIRK

I'm fixing her hair in the bathroom mirror when she breaks it to me: "Mom, I think you might have an eating disorder." When she sees how completely blindsided I am, she barrels on and says, "I don't say this to offend you, I really don't. I'm just worried about you, and I think you should know."

That's when I choke on my own laughter, because wow, if she only knew how worried *I* was about *her* when she walked through our front door, all 179 pounds of her, forty over from when I first kissed her goodbye at her dorm two years ago.

I tell her what I know best: nutrition. I tell her about how she can't possibly realize how bad that deep-fried food is for you and how it'll stick to your gut long after it's been eaten. And really, Tal, it's common sense! You're better off avoiding dairy, sticking to tea instead of coffee, sweet potato instead of yellow, and always, *always* eating in moderation. It's why I was able to go from whale to 120 after my fourth child, after all.

She might as well go ahead and roll her eyes at me and make the faces she makes when I try to educate her. She won't listen, never does, and if she did, she wouldn't be sitting here telling me she thinks I have an eating disorder. Instead, she would be acknowledging that I'm the healthiest I could be and that I've finally got it all figured out at the age of forty.

"Okay, Tal, clearly you haven't heard *any* of what I've said about my sesame-and-dandelion tea. Didn't you hear me talking about how great I've started to feel after drinking that regularly?"

"I did, and I also hear how much you tell me my face and body look inflamed and also about how that one single Twinkie I ate yesterday is so bad for me that it's gonna wreak havoc on my body forever and ever." She shoots me a pointed look. "Just because someone is not model-thin doesn't mean they aren't beautiful. You have outdated views about women's bodies."

Well, this was a lot for me to take in. Outdated views? I was nineteen when I had her, and if life did right by me, we'd be put in the same nursing home together.

And don't get me wrong: I loved this version of Tal. When she was growing up, she was crazy insecure—understandably, considering that in the concerns of my own divorce, she turned to food and snuck a binge-eating disorder right under my nose. Easily, she ate her way to being one of the heaviest girls in her class, outranked only by three other girls whose mothers were all crackheads or something.

I had to grit my teeth a lot when she cried about the pounds she was putting on, her being twelve and self-esteem at that age being easy to demolish. I had to be delicate, suggesting diets we could do in solidarity so she'd feel less alone, like Mom would always be on her side because that's exactly what I would be.

"Tal, honey, take it from me. I'm a forty-year-old woman who's had four children. You're twenty-one with about five dollars in your bank account. I have been trying to get it right for *years* and I finally have, so just listen to me, okay? I think I know a thing or two. And what I know is that when I look at you, I see that little pouch at the bottom of your stomach and think about how inflamed your intestines must be from all that junk food you eat at college and probably alcohol too, right?"

"You mean the part around women's stomachs that protects their uterus?" she asks me, testing the waters for a fight.

"No, honey, that's not meant for that." I smile and motion to my own. "I have it now, but I'm working on getting rid of it because when I was your age, *I* certainly never had one . . . except right after I gave birth to you. Then I lost it after using the elliptical daily."

"Mom, I'm the happiest I've ever been *with* that pouch. I have great sex, feel confident in my clothes, and am taking better care of myself. So quit lecturing me and just *listen*."

But I won't have it. My fat, feminist daughter has consumed way too much of TikTok, or Snapchat, or Facebook with their constant stream of "fat positivity" content. Don't those people know what they're promoting? By the time they're fifty, they'll be miserable—maybe even sooner than that.

"No, *you* listen. I just want the best for you. Don't get me wrong, Tal, you look great, but I'm just trying to inform you to save you from a lot of heartache in the future. Do you know how *long* it took me to get in touch with my body?"

"Actually, I do know. I was there for the roughest parts of it." She glares at me, and a part of me feels like withering away from those eyes.

In moments like this, her looks are reminiscent of her father, right before he'd explode on me about the dishes not being done. "*I* was there when you bloated yourself with the alcohol, Mom. *I* remember."

My family just cannot seem to let this go, and I feel a flash of hot anger that causes me to yank the strand of her hair in my palm a little too hard. She grimaces, lets out an "ow, Mom," and squeezes her eyes in a way that makes me think of how she looked when she was nine. I ease up immediately, realizing my mistake, and apologize. She waves it off.

I was an alcoholic. It's true. I was going through my divorce and needed something to take the edge off. I'd never gotten to live my twenties out like everyone else because I had two kids at home, both under the age of six. It drove me crazy.

I took them out to my friends' houses and had a few drinks. My favorites were screwdrivers—orange juice and vodka, a clean combo compared to my pals' preferred rum and coke, or just straight beer. Our small town doesn't have Ubers, so what was I supposed to do? Make them sleep at those strangers' houses? Of course, I drove them home. Most nights.

But then I got charged with a DWI and was required to go to AA. I got my chips and showed up to court for my DWI charges. In the end, I got to keep my kids because the judge trusted me more than he trusted their father, who had a record of Child Protective Services getting called for the treatment of his other kid. He expunged my records and let me start with a clean slate because I am a *good* mother and I love my children, and he could see that above everything else.

I did my time is what I'm saying, and I regret what I had done, but my family doesn't think so. They use every chance they have to weaponize my past against me. It drives me crazy that all my love pales in comparison to the time I spent having a little fun with friends. Can't moms have fun, too?

But I must remind myself it wasn't fun when my body was inflamed and achy the next morning after a hard night of drinking. It wasn't fun when I'd get done shaking ass in the garage, and I'd turn around and realize that my two young children were watching. Talk about embarrassing.

"Tal, you have to understand—I was a different person back then. I was young and stupid. Hurt by your dad. Trying to drown the pain. I was out of touch." I inhale. "I feel like I can still show you that you aren't

that girl. You are smart, got into school, and found a great guy. I'm just trying to help."

Her hair is finished, and I pat her shoulder to signal to her that it's my turn to sit down and fix my own. This is one of the things we still retain when she comes home, this song-and-dance of her allowing me to fix her hair like old times, even though after she left for school, she finally learned how to do it herself.

"And *I'm* just trying to help *you*," she says as we trade places. "I wish you could hear the way you go on from my perspective. You sound like a textbook example. My healthy looks different from your healthy." She pinches her nose. "But I don't think this is healthy. You obsess way too much about your weight and your body image. That can be a disorder, too." My daughter's voice suddenly goes from harsh to gentle. "It's just that . . . I know what it's like to suffer with an eating disorder and I don't want you to have to go through what I did, Mom, at least not alone."

I contemplate her words as she quietly leaves the bathroom. I contemplate the small failures of the mother, how they reverberate through your children, and how the world can be so unforgiving of our unfortunate experiences. I contemplate Tal and the way she came from my womb. And then something beautiful happens. I catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror, turn, and stare. And I realize that not only is it my face, but Tal's face, the daughter I've given such a difficult time about inheriting . . . me. I blow a long, hard breath through my nose, tear up a little.

Oh, Tal. I am *so* sorry, my beautiful, radical, feminist daughter.

Antique

BY GRACE MACKEY

In Mindy's twenty years of experience on earth, she had learned that going for a walk was never the wrong choice; at its best, it worked wonders for the walker, and at its worst, it was a little tiresome. She stepped outside and was hit by a wave of humidity, resolving that today would be a mere stroll.

Mindy lived behind Antique Row—a street full of shops and stores full of the most random artifacts anyone could find. She had never done more than window-shop before; walking up and down Antique Row felt like walking through one big antique shop that exclusively sold other shops and, in the case of South Florida, rather strange shops. She never failed to get a kick out of the giant toucan outside of Sylvie's Shop. Mr. Toucan took up most of the sidewalk, and he didn't seem sorry about it at all.

Today, Mindy was attempting to slow down, and the heat made her feet drag. She imagined the worry that would form in her mother's eyes if she saw her in this state: overworked and underfed. Mindy walked into the antique store and wondered how a place with such a strong scent of mothballs could still be open. In the store, it was only her and an old woman who sat at the cash register looking grouchy.

Maybe she's just one of those old women who looks mad all the time, but if I actually talk to her, she'll take me in as if I were her granddaughter and teach me her secrets.

"Hello," Mindy said. "How are you today?"

"The 50% off sign by the door is three weeks old, so don't expect the discount," the old woman grumbled, her eyes not moving from her computer screen.

Is this the real Sylvie? Mindy wondered.

She gave up on her dream of an adopted Florida grandmother and realized that maybe one of the reasons she liked her grandmother so much was that she was not from Florida.

As Mindy walked around the shop, her eyes passed over gaudy silver rings, yellow-stained lampshades, and old porcelain dolls. She wanted to reach out and touch them all but was afraid that she'd knock something

over. A decorative hummingbird stared back at her and brought a flutter of nostalgia. It looked like the ones that used to hover outside the cabin window by the red feeder. To the right of the hummingbird sat a green and pink vase, covered in intricate images of springtime, including a grinning young woman in a long floral gown resting leisurely by a pond of frogs and flowers. Mindy could not look away, and suddenly, her world was forest and pond frogs.

Marianne sat on a quilt in the grass and took in the view of the pond. She could have sworn that the world had never looked this green before, and she would have lain there for hours if for months her mother hadn't been planning an elaborate dinner party. Also, the sun would set in a few hours, and once that happened, it would be too chilly to lie outside.

Springtime in the north was always that way, and she loved it. It gave her an excuse to change into a warmer gown, to get ready all over again, as if it were a brand-new day and she a brand-new girl.

"Marianne, look!" John yelled, standing knee-deep in the pond. He held up a frog by its leg, beaming as if he'd just won her a prize.

"For me? John, how romantic," Marianne jokingly replied. "I'll cherish it forever."

John laughed and, feeling especially mischievous that day, carried the frog behind his back while Marianne flipped through the pages of her sketchbook. When she turned around, her eyes sat inches away from big black frog eyes.

Marianne screeched, jumping up from the quilt as the frog hopped away. John stood keeled over, belly laughing.

"John, I'm gonna kill you," Marianne said, barely able to properly threaten John's life through her own laughter. "One of these days, I'll return the favor."

"Oh, I'm looking forward to it, Miss Marianne," John replied, grabbing her hand while she playfully shoved him away.

That was how it always was with Marianne and John. "You two are a pair of bickerers and snickerers," her grandmother used to say. John wanted to marry her, and Marianne had never wanted to marry anyone until John. It scared her. But lately, she was less and less afraid. Maybe it was because she was becoming a lady or spending more time with her

folks. Maybe it was John's wild eyes or their laughter by the pond. But deep down, though she would never say it out loud, she really believed that there might be something in the lake water.

For three weeks now, Marianne had been swimming in the lake every morning. She rose right as the sun did, slipped on her swimsuit, and walked shivering down to the lake. A fog almost always covered the glassy surface of the dark and inky water, and Marianne stood at the end of the dock for only a moment because if she waited too long, she might talk herself out of it. Her feet one at a time gently entered the water and then diving forward, Marianne submerged. The lake stole her breath at first, her half-asleep body shocked by the change in atmosphere. It was never a smooth transition, and in the moments after, she laughed a little at her own shock and then kept swimming straight out into the lake for as long as she could with no particular destination. Sometimes it occurred to her that the water was dark, and she had little idea what was in it, but she just kept swimming forward, taking in the pine trees and mountains. Eventually, Marianne's limbs grew tired, and she turned around and began the journey back to her cabin tucked in the woods.

Every morning on the return, Marianne saw a man walking toward her on the dock. She couldn't fully see his face for some reason, but it looked as if he was smiling. He almost resembled her father, but she knew it wasn't him; her father wasn't at the cabin this time of year. The kindness of his face made her want to swim faster.

"Do you plan on buying that vase or are you just going to stare at it all day?" the old woman said.

"What?" Mindy jumped slightly, not ready for her daydream to be interrupted. She looked at the price tag, unsurprised to see a number that she couldn't afford. Her mind began to flutter back to the lake, to the kindness. . . .

"I'll give it to you for 50% off," the old woman offered, "if you agree to daydream in a store that's not closing in two minutes."

Mindy paused, thinking she heard water in the vase—water and maybe the fluttering of wings. "Wow, thank you so much," Mindy said.

She purchased the vase and walked out of Sylvie's Shop, her steps very slow. Peering down at her new cherished item, Mindy found the images to be even more detailed than before, and a new figure had appeared by the pond: a familiar man, with kind eyes.

Mirror, Mirror, Mother, Mother

BY EVELYN MILBURN

She was always told she was beautiful. Since she was a baby, then a toddler and a teen, she was given more compliments than she could carry.

"Oh, what beautiful eyes!"

"What full lips!"

"What luscious hair!"

"What a sweet nose!"

"What straight, white teeth!"

"What clear, plump skin!"

So many compliments written in letters, cooed in her ears, slapped onto her skin like gold star stickers. Each year as she aged, she amassed more and more until she shone like a disco ball. A spectacle. A reflection of every sweet, wonderous, resplendent thing in the world.

From age ten, she wore lipstick. Petal pinks, bubblegum pinks, bunny-tongue pinks. . . . Soft, sweet, and glossed. Mother would pick her up a different shade from the drugstore after each errand run, pride bursting from her full chest when others would look admirably upon her daughter.

She closed her ears to the whispers at PTA meetings and condemnations at the grocery store.

"Beauty is brave," she would say. "And you are beauty."

At twelve, she tried red. Rose, poppy, cherry, and strawberry hues that brought out the baby flush in her cheeks. She was beginning to fill out. Mother told her the red suited her well.

Mother closed her eyes to the sneers of older women at the church.

"People fear beauty," she would say. "And you are beauty."

At thirteen, she was wearing eyeliner and mascara on her doll-like eyes. Blush on her cheeks. Gloss on her lips. She dressed in frills, lace, ribbon. Layers of pink and cream and blue—Lolita incarnate.

Mother refused to acknowledge the leers of older men. The priests. The teachers. The fathers of her classmates.

"People admire beauty; they're drawn to it," she would say. "And you are beauty."

At fifteen, Mother gave her bleach for her upper lip, wax for her brows, a razor for her legs and arms. When she cried at her raw skin and whimpered when the razor stained red, Mother would smear on some aloe and slap on a Band-Aid.

"Beauty is pain," she would say. "And you are beauty."

For her sixteenth birthday, Mother gave her a silver mirror. On its back was a face. It was molded beautifully: long flowing hair, little flowers etched into the strands. The face had a soft nose, full lips, high cheekbones. An idol. A siren. A goddess.

"Look at yourself every morning," Mother said. "And every night. Never forget that you *are* beauty."

And she was.

The girl floated through life, through her teens to her twenties, on a cloud. It was like she was blessed with some goddess's gift—every man, woman, and child who laid eyes on her was spellbound.

In elementary school, she had a collection of love notes tucked into her desk, ones she found stuffed in her backpack or taped to her locker. While out on the town, every door was held open for her. Every red light turned green. For every handkerchief she dropped, three more were handed back to her.

But, for every minute of heaven, basking under the warm gazes of admirers and devotees, there were hours of hell.

When she was fifteen, riding home from school on the bus, she felt a hand slither up her skirt. Thick, grubby, sweaty hands gripped a chunk of her growing ass, blunt nails breaking the baby skin. She felt hot breath on her lower back, drool on the ruffles of her skirt.

She was frozen, small hands tightening their grip on the bus's handlebar above her. Across the aisle, she caught the eyes of a woman maybe thirty years her senior. The woman's gaze darted from the hand up her skirt back to her face.

The girl waited for her to say something. To pull her away. To glare at the man. But instead, she turned to look out the window.

For a moment, her reflection in the glass looked like Mother.

Years pass. She glides through school with average grades, plenty of friends, lots of locker-room-parking-lot-park-bench sex. University follows. It is more of the same, but locker-room rendezvous becomes office-hour encounters.

Mother comes to graduation. She brings a new lipstick and plenty of criticism.

"This gown covers your figure," Mother laments. "Probably for the best. Your lunch is showing."

She moves back into her childhood bedroom with Mother just downstairs. It is like no time has passed. Their home, much like their faces, is frozen in time.

When she receives her degree in the mail, Mother tucks it in one of the crowded kitchen drawers.

"You can take it out once you have a husband to show it to," she says.

Mother sets her up on dates with rich, suited men that smell like whiskey and wood. Whose eyes and minds wander. Mother sits close by, smiling at whatever the moguls say. Whatever they croon in her ear. After one particularly uncomfortable date, she explodes.

"I can't! I can't do this, Mother," she cries. "These men—"

"These men are your only hope in this world," Mother says, dismissing her anger with a flick of her wrist.

"But beauty—"

"You think beauty will last?" Mother scoffs. "Foolish girl. Soon you'll become frail. Your skin will tear like paper. Your eyes will sink into your empty skull."

"Mother—"

"Your hair will fall out, clumps in your hands."

"Please—"

"Your breasts will sag. You'll become dry, barren."

"But I'll still have—"

"Nothing!" Mother shrieks. "You'll have nothing. Nothing worth marrying. Nothing worth loving."

But a wedding day never comes. Mother's health deteriorates. All the creams, masks, oils, tape, and lasers can't thwart fate. Her mind wanders. She grows even more irritable, yelling and screaming, taking her daughter's face into her hands, clawing at the pores and scratching at the newly propagated spots of stress.

Once she gets Mother to sleep each night, she lathers her face with medicine. Ensuring that each blemish is erased, eradicated. A clean slate for the next morning, one that will keep Mother serene. Remind her of her little girl, the sweet, pink-lipped girl; the frilly-skirted girl; the rosy-cheeked girl.

But every day, there is something new, something for her to screech about.

Mother screeches all the way through the gates of the nursing home.

She gets the call in the dead of night. A cloud has covered the silver-dollar moon, bathing the bedroom in a chilling darkness.

"Your mother," the voice says, "didn't make it. I'm sorry."

"She . . . ," the girl swallows. "She didn't make it."

"No," the voice says slowly. "I apologize. I know this must be shocking. . . ."

"It is," she responds. "It is shocking. I'm shocked. How could this happen?"

"It was her time," says the voice. "Her time was up. It was clear. We could see it on her face."

By the time she hangs up the phone, the moon has broken through the clouds.

Mother's mirror sits on her desk, shining in the moonlight like a beacon. From her bed, she can see the shadows and highlights of the raised facade. Those hollow eyes stare up at the ceiling. In the darkness, she wonders if they will move to settle on her.

It brings memories, distant and recent, of plucking, tweezing, pulling, yanking, painting. . . . Nights when she would wipe her face clean of the cake drying in the tiny crevices of her pores, the black goop that clung to her spider-leg lashes, the drying cream that paved the cracks of her lips.

Mother would check her bare face every evening. For blemishes, wrinkles, moles, freckles. . . . Her sharp, manicured nails scraping along her cheeks, picking and prodding.

"I see the beginnings of a crater, darling," Mother would coo. "And you *must* keep that handlebar in check. You're positively woolly, dear."

"But I just—"

"You just *forgot*," Mother would grip her jaw. "Forgot what you *are*."

Now, at the witches' hour, the moon shines down on her coverlet, illuminating the dips and curves of her frame where it is tucked under the white sheets. She smooths the fabric down over her legs. Rubs more lotion on her hands. Adjusts the curlers in her hair. Fixes the satin mask over her eyes.

She turns on her side and goes back to sleep.

She doesn't host a funeral. The pews would have been empty, anyway. Mother wasn't the most affable of souls.

Instead, she stays in bed from sunrise to sunset, burrowing under the covers. In silence. Solitude. She wonders what to do now. Well, there are Mother's belongings. Her closet of cosmetics, her drawers of expensive silks, the heavy drapes on her windows to block out the sun's wrinkling rays, the cabinets of pills she ate like sweets. But after all of that, after the cleaning and reorganizing, what will she do? Mother always said she could be on the cover of magazines.

"Not the slutty ones," Mother would glower. "The refined, high-brow, classic publications. The ones that value true beauty."

Or . . . she could do something else.

She could travel. Wander snowy fjords, scuba dive. Get cuts and scrapes on her knees and hands, grappling rocks like some primordial beast and swinging up ledges like a mountain goat. She could write. Get ink stains on her fingers, blue, black, and red under her nails. She could take more classes. This time, she would raise her callused hand, speak loudly, proudly. Take classes in the lab. Cover her face with large goggles, adorn herself in a long white coat.

She could cut her hair. She could dye it. Pink, purple, orange, green. She could pierce her nose like some of the girls in her class. Get a tattoo—a rose or a butterfly. Paint her toenails.

Under the coverlet, she admires her satiny hands, picturing them painting in every color of the rainbow. Her doll-arched feet. She pictures them stained with grass. The smooth expanse of her thighs. The plush globes of her ass. Her pillowy chest and silky nipples. What if they were pierced? Her glossy forearms and fragile shoulders decorated with dark lines of ink. Her swan's neck wrapped in some trendy choker.

Her hands wander to her face. Her cheeks. The curves of her jaw, the arch of her brows, the sendal of her eyelids. . . .

Her fingers freeze. A line. A thin and folded line at the corner of her eye. She pulls. She prods. She smooths. It's still there.

In the soft glow of the moon, she finds herself propping up the mirror upon the smooth mahogany of her vanity.

A wrinkle. A wrinkle, like some mocking cat-eye wing. Her heart drops to her stomach.

She brings her face closer. Closer. Her nose brushes up against the cool glass.

Mother's nose.

She blinks, going to rub her eyes, but remembers how rubbing brings wrinkles.

Mother's eyes stare back at her.

Swallowing thickly, she moves until her spine presses against the back of the chair.

No. . . . She must still be sleeping. Her grief is catching up to her, creeping and crawling into her mind, unbothered by her weak defenses.

She shakes her head. Looks away and looks back.

But there, in the dark, a face smiles back at her. Its skin is stretched across its face. Tight in all the wrong places. So tight that the rounds of its eyeballs are visible. Angry violet veins cut through the sclera. The iris was muted as if it was veiled under some cloudy membrane. Its tear ducts shining a gummy rogue, fluid oozing over the cracked and dry lower lid. The liquid dripped down its cheeks, dribbling over cheekbones ready to slice upwards, tearing through paper-thin vellum. And its nose. Its horrid, broken, bruising nose. The bridge snapped, inflamed, crooked. Gore congealing around the nostrils, skin dry and peeling, flakes raining down like sickly ash onto engorged lips. Lips caked in drying blood, mottled with purple and yellow and green and black. Spittle frothed and bubbled in the corners, tinted maroon fizzing like the remnants of some forbidden cocktail. Its teeth poked through those ballooning lips, brown and rotting, chipped at odd angles. Crimson lined each root; cracks decorated each crown.

Her hands fly to her own face, shaking in fright.

"What— What are you?"

"I am you," the face says, teeth breaking as they clack against one another. "And I am your mother."

"Wh-what?"

"I am you," it repeats. "I am your mother."

"No," she spits, peering at the frightful face. It peers back.

"Yes," it says. "I am you. And I am your mother."

"Stop saying that," she shrieks, scratching at her face, trying to feel for any semblance, any similarity, to the monstrous visage. "Stop it, stop it!"

The face just smiles wider. The skin tears further around those bloated lips. Its front teeth crumble. Gunk weeps from its wrinkling, blistering eyes.

"I am you, you, you," it shrieks back. "And I am your mother, Mother, MOTHER!"

Her nails gouge into her cheeks, their pink paint staining carmine. She tugs at her ears, feeling the tissue rip, the tunnels tear. She scrapes her lips, tearing pieces of dead skin. She pries at her gums, checking for lacerations, but creates them in her frenzy. She squeezes and pinches the pustules on her chin. They pop and burst with discharge. She gags at the look, catching sight of her chipping teeth in the mirror's glow.

Her fingers tunnel into her eyes, trying to drag the vision out of her consciousness.

"I am yOU, yOU, YOU," the guise cackles. "And mOTHER, mOTHER, MOTHER. . . ."

She takes the mirror by its gleaming handle and flings it away from her, scrambling away on her hands and knees, a child playing hide and seek.

The glass shatters, its sparkling pieces sending fractals across the room. In each fragment, her reflection screams back at her.

"YOU, YOU, YOU
MOTHER, MOTHER, MOTHER!"

Seen

BY SARA RABINOWITZ

Miss Mildred Monroe did not speak. Or nobody heard Mildred speak. Or Mildred did not speak to anybody that could hear her. She spoke to the people hiding in her empty room. She spoke to the faces she saw as she sped down the highway. But besides that, Mildred did not speak. The students of West Grove High did not notice Mildred's lack of speech. In fact, to the students at this school, Mildred was a dream. Mildred wore low-cut sweaters and short, pleated skirts. Mildred made her cheeks rosy with soft pink blush and painted her lips with juicy glitter lip gloss. Mildred *click-clacked* down the hallway in her white kitten heels and rested her hands politely in her lap as she sat at her desk and waited for class to begin. Though Mildred did not look around the room, she knew the faces were there. She knew they were watching her. She felt their stares. She knew they read every word she wrote down. She knew they hitched a breath every time she adjusted in her seat. She knew even the crossing of her legs would catch their attention, that every brush of her hair would make them jolt.

At times, the faces terrified Mildred. Their eyes were bullets, and one wrong move would leave her dead on the floor, blood staining the snow-colored fabric of her silk sweater. Occasionally, she would remain frozen in her seat, even when she had a funny itch on her neck. Other times, she would wait for the perfect moment to turn the page of her notebook, even when she had already run out of room for her notes. When everything was being watched, nothing could be overlooked. No movement was too small. No breath was too quiet. Mildred existed within the rules of the faces that watched her.

Though Mildred did not talk to anyone, she knew people talked about her. She saw their mocking snickers when she awkwardly adjusted her top. She heard their content sighs when she delicately tucked her hair behind her ear. She knew they were talking even when she did not know what they were talking about. If Mildred existed, she knew there was something to talk about. Standing still was a statement. A single breath meant more than words could describe.

Despite her lack of speech, Mildred was popular in a certain way. Mildred did not have any friends, as those types of things usually required an exchange of words between both parties. However, people talking to Mildred was a frequent occurrence. They were usually boys, tall creatures that would tower over her and cast a dark shadow in their wake. Mildred was always wary of them. They would catch her in class, in the hallway, or on the street. They would call her "Millie," even though that was not her name. They would always ask her various questions about what she was doing, where she was going, what she was doing later, *who* she was doing later, and if she would do them later. They would laugh after these crude remarks, as if she said something funny, even though she did not. Her inquisitors had highly advanced hearing technology that created a response from Mildred even when she did not produce one. Mildred did not have to speak for the boys to hear an answer.

Though wary, Mildred was also fascinated by watching these people. They took long, casual strides with their hands in their pockets. They laughed as though they were trying to wake an ancient god from its slumber. Their t-shirts hung naturally on their shoulders and caused no distraction. Shirts were just shirts. Pants were just pants. Everything was simple, casual, and effortless. They stood as though the entire earth was beneath their feet. They seemed to exist solely for themselves, and Mildred nearly wept at the idea of it.

Mildred did not partake in any after-school clubs, but she did have a job at a bookstore in town. Every day after school, Mildred would leave her school's campus and walk toward the bus stop. Most of the patrons on the bus were strangers, but Mildred began to recognize a few faces due to her routine. One of these faces was a young girl who could not have been older than ten or eleven years. She rode the bus every day at the same time as Mildred, and her pristine school uniform indicated that she went to one of the private primary schools in the area. Every day, the little girl passed the time by doodling in her pocket-sized purple notebook that she carried with her. The few times Mildred glanced, she saw drawings of ice cream cones with three big scoops and butterflies resting on five-petal flowers. There were kittens next to balls of yarn and little girls with big smiles. All her drawings were in the same glitter purple ink from the pen that came clasped to her little velvet notebook.

In the bookstore where she worked, Mildred had various duties. Sometimes, she would man the cash register, one of the more boring

jobs because few people frequented the bookstore. When the store traffic was slow, Mildred usually would read a book to pass the time. It was never exactly relaxing. Mildred still felt the faces around her, even though the only occupants in the store were her and the owner, and he was tucked away somewhere in his office. She could not help but see herself from the point of view of the faces. She saw how she perched her head over the book resting on the bar, her hand casually placed beneath her chin, holding up her face as her fingers rested delicately on her cheek. She saw how her eyebrows slightly scrunched together when the character in the story made a dire mistake and how she would purse her lips together to contain a smile when the undeniable tension between two characters became too much to bear. As the faces watched her, she watched herself through them, which only made the faces stare more. The longer they watched, the more she performed. She made sure to keep her eyes on the book even when they grew tired, so as not to disrupt the scene that she created. She kept her movements light and gracious. She sat poised as though an invisible painter stood before her, capturing every detail, every so often walking up to her with a microscope to inspect each crevice of her skin, to transfer the exact texture of it to the paper properly.

On the weekends, Mildred's parents would let her borrow the car if she needed to run errands and did not want to take the bus. She enjoyed these meaningless trips: picking up groceries for dinner, getting supplies for her mom from the drugstore, or just buying coffee and a snack. Mildred did not mind being alone, and in being alone, she was able to talk to the faces. When she was alone, secluded in her own private bubble of a vehicle, the faces felt different than the ones that stared when people were around. In public, in front of others, Mildred had to be careful. Her performance was being watched by those who were real enough to reach out and touch her. However, when she was alone, her performance could be everything she wanted.

She imagined driving in a car and seeing it: a beautiful girl, hair billowing behind her, shades on to block the sun. She had dangling bracelets on her wrists that gleamed in the light, as she used one to hold the wheel steady and one to rest beside her, occasionally brushing it through her wild hair. She imagined stopping beside the girl for a second and hearing an indie rock band blasting from her speakers as the girl sang along: her heart twisting with the music, the words erupting from her effortless

smile. She saw the scene as she drove, and she told the faces about it. She told them about how she must look like someone's dream. It did not matter if someone only saw her for one passing second as she drove by. All Mildred needed was to exist for one moment in the mind of someone else.

When Mildred was done with her errands, the light was dimming over the horizon, and the music coming from the speakers began to feel too loud. Mildred turned the music down and rode in silence. In the absence of sound, with no music or voices or images of a beautiful girl flying down the highway like a streak of light, Mildred felt a terrible sense of realization. She stared straight ahead at the road, her hands suddenly feeling limp on the wheel. There was a silence that she had never experienced. There was an emptiness that threatened to tear through her stomach and shred herself from within. As quickly as the moment came, Mildred shut it down. She raised the volume of her music and drove home singing.

When the week began once again, she would follow her same routine. The day passed as it usually did, Mildred *click-clacking* through the halls, her eyes straight ahead, her mind forcing her legs to take each step. She avoided all eyes yet begged for them at the same time. She feared the stares yet feared who she would be without them. Mildred wondered if she was the human embodiment of a walking contradiction.

That night, Mildred stared into the darkness of her room. She had attempted to go to sleep hours ago, yet she could not bring herself to close her eyes. Mildred had never snuck out before. She had never even thought about sneaking out before. However, after tossing and turning for the umpteenth time that night, she was directed by something to walk into the kitchen (where her parents' car keys were sitting on the counter), grab the keys, and head toward the car parked outside.

Mildred drove down the empty roads in eerie silence. At 3:00 a.m., no one was on the roads—not even the hint of headlights coming in the distance. She could have been the only person for miles. Mildred knew that she was truly alone. When nerves began to hit, she turned into the parking lot of a gas station, planning to turn around and head back home. Instead, she parked and looked around into the darkness. Mildred thought back to her moment in the car on her way back home. She remembered the silence of the moment. She remembered

the shame. Mildred was not stupid. She told herself this. Mildred was not insane. She tried to tell herself this. She knew the faces were not real. She knew that when she sat alone in her car in an empty parking lot off the side of the highway and screamed until her throat went raw no one could hear her. She knew that when she stared at her reflection in the fluorescent lights of her home bathroom in the early hours of the morning no one could see her. Yet the realization was more terrifying than if it were all real.

Mildred saw through her performance. And yet, she did not know how to retire from the role. Even while aware that they were not real, she could not help but feel their presence. She thought about school, about the eyes that watched her there. She saw the boys with their unwavering grins and their hidden stares. She knew they did more than just undress her with their eyes. They peeled back her skin. They tore open her heart. They did not know the power they held. Or maybe they did. She was always seen, even when she did not want to be. To live in her body was to be seen. Eyes would always follow, even when there were no eyes around. Yet even as Mildred sat in the empty parking lot, acknowledging that she was utterly alone, she felt terrified. She wondered if there was a comfort to the faces if being watched by something within and all around at least meant that you were not alone. Mildred did not know if it was worse to be invisible or worse to be seen.

The next day, after the long day of school, Mildred took her seat on the bus and saw that she was sitting across from the little girl with the purple velvet notebook. She saw how she sat with her backpack stuffed in her lap. She saw that ever so often, she would wiggle and adjust herself in her seat to find a better position. She would smile when she finished a drawing and scrunch her lips to her nose when she was thinking of something new to draw. She noticed that one of her white school socks was pulled up all the way to her calf while the other was rolled all the way down to her ankle. Mildred could not help but smile as she witnessed the carefree nature of the young girl.

As Mildred's eyes glanced around at the passengers, she noticed an older man a few seats down. She saw his eyes pointed at the young girl. Frozen, Mildred watched him, and a few moments later, the man removed his gaze and accidentally locked eyes with Mildred. The man averted his gaze and slunk back into the shadow of his seat; his eyes

pointed to the floor. Mildred brought her eyes to watch the blur of the road as the bus continued to move forward. Her eyes were beginning to water, and her nose was beginning to burn.

She knew which one was worse.

The Standstill

BY ROWEN SLEPIAN

Traffic jams are fairly common on large highways. Every so often, a blue sedan or black SUV will be a little slow merging into the passing lane, or a fly on a dashboard will produce just enough fear to warrant a quick stop, or some other minute insignificance will cause a chain reaction of swerving, breaking, and profanity until the world itself churns to a crawl. It's proof that driving is an act of trust, that each stranger on the road has a subtle authority over life and death. This Friday, the highway stands still about a half hour outside Philadelphia, close enough to where the evening sun reflecting off the Comcast Center gives the whole city a tangerine tint.

A school bus sits in the middle of this particular traffic jam, sporting the usual school bus colors, an array of squeaky voices rattling away despite it all. Classmates packed two to a seat yap about the day's provided lunch, the *smack* of mint chewing gum is muffled by pop hits blasting through off-brand wireless earbuds, and those perched above tire guards are granted a reprieve as their neighbors hoist themselves to the middle to catch up with someone two rows back. Snacks are opened, gossip is spilled, and boredom is imminent.

In the third row on the driver's side, two boys are locked in a heated duel of I-Spy. The one by the window holds his backpack in his lap with both hands, shifting its weight back and forth every few minutes while the one by the aisle has his knees sinking into the seat, and is guessing at random while staring at a girl eight rows back. He wonders if she's thinking about the note that he left in her locker that morning after the first bell had rung and the slapping of shoes against linoleum had begun to die down. Fearing discovery, he turns back to the front, slouches forward, and snorts.

"I don't know, dude," he says, cracking his knuckles like someone with nothing to hide. "I give up." He agreed to play to take his mind off things, but he doubted anything could at this point; a meteor or alien spaceship could appear five feet away and it would barely register.

"C'mon Ray, I know you aren't paying attention." The other boy, Charlie, is attempting to hijack Ray's avoidant gaze with his

own. "There's a world outside this bus, you know. Hint, hint," he adds sarcastically.

"Just thought you were looking back there when you started," Ray replies. Charlie hates when Ray metagames, hates his mocking jokes, and hates his inability to keep Kacey out of his mind and enjoy the company of a friend like a normal person. In protest of all three, then, Ray climbs back on the seat and makes an exaggerated sweeping motion with his hand to his forehead, a salute to their fellow students. "I spy . . . with my . . . little eye. . . ."

"I get it, I get it! Just guess," Charlie interjects, laughing.

"Something . . . blue!" Ray takes one last greedy glance at the eleventh row, but its inhabitant looks up, and for a moment they lock eyes. He turns back around.

"Very funny. C'mon, one more and I'll tell you," Charlie says.

"Fine. Is it the car next to us?"

"It is! I'm surprised you got it since you were busy making heart eyes at Kacey."

Ray blushes.

"Your hint was way too obvious," he says, clearing his throat and pointing at the Beetle that's had its turn signal on for the past five minutes. "Sometimes I think you don't want me to figure it out on my own. I'm bored, dude, no more."

They sit in silence for a few moments, Ray suddenly feeling awkward in his collared shirt and cargo shorts. Behind them, the bus only gets more disorderly as people file out from their seats, eager to forfeit their alphabetically assigned prison, which prompts the unibrowed bus monitor to pull out a whistle and attempt to corral a group of boys double her size. They argue by the emergency exit while everyone else rearranges themselves as they see fit.

"How about chopsticks?" Charlie says confidently.

"I just want to sit right now."

"Hangman?"

"I said no, dude. Take a hint."

"C'mon, please? Look outside," he says, peering out the window, his face tilted up as if snooping over a low wall. "We haven't moved. I'm bored too, you know."

"I'm not bored. I just—" A breath. "I'm gonna go talk to her. I mean, I should, right?"

Charlie shoots him a concerned look.

"I *said*, I'm gonna go talk to Kacey. I can't take it anymore. I have to know if she read my note."

"Wasn't the point of the note that you wouldn't have to talk to her?" Then, muttering, "You could at least tell me what it says."

"I told you already. I just asked her to go out on Sunday to the Roxy. It's none of your business, anyway."

"What? You've gushed about her for like, forever. You finally do something about it and I'm left in the dust?"

"I wrote it on this letter paper I found in my mom's room. It has flowers on it. It's *romantic*."

"You know that's not what I said."

"Well, that's what you're getting."

Nothing more is said on the matter. Charlie fiddles with a keychain on the side of his bag; Ray stares past him out the window. After half a minute, Charlie perks up once more.

"We don't have to play a game if you don't want to. Want to start on the homework?"

"Why do we always have to be doing something?" Ray replies, a bit louder than he meant. A few heads swing around, but the argument is brief. "Do you have something against Kacey and me? Don't answer that, actually. I'm going over to her."

"I—whatever. Good luck."

Ray gets up and squeezes by his chittering classmates blocking the aisle, his grip on the backrests that he passes leaving a faint outline in the cracked bus leather. Breathing deeply in time with his steps, he moves through a group of girls passing around a cell phone and laughing, over two students playing a card game on the damp floor, and around an arm-wrestling match between the unibrowed bus monitor and one of the boys she was arguing with. With sweaty palms and yet-regained composure, he approaches Kacey, who's complaining about her recent debate meet with her seat partner, a girl in his math class whose name he forgot.

He calls out, "Kacey?"

The other girl looks up and raises her hand in a brief greeting while Kacey stares out the window and continues to talk.

"Kacey?" he repeats. She says something about "campaigning against her interests" and "the fun of the sport," and an image flashes

through Ray's mind of him at her competition, holding a big sign and cheering louder than anyone else. She asks a question to her friend who, clearly holding back a laugh, begins to respond and he cuts her off, practically yelling over the din of the bus.

"Kacey!"

She turns towards him and looks up.

"Oh—what's up, Ray?" Their eyes meet, and she holds his gaze.

"I was just wondering if you got my letter. The one I left in your locker?" he asks. She pushes up her glasses with a palm that covers her mouth for a split second.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see any note. I haven't been to my locker since lunch." Her somber tone doesn't match her pursed lips, which barely part as she continues.

"Can you tell me what it said?"

At that moment, a complete silence befalls the bus and Ray panics, believing his classmates to be hung on his every word. He looks at Kacey, hoping to find solace in those blue eyes that have not left his since he last spoke, but she just stares at him like a monkey at the zoo. He's trapped in a cage for her amusement. The words *Charlie was right* come to mind, but he pushes them aside to come up with what to say. It occurs to him to simply repeat what he wrote on the note, but he finds he's forgotten every single word.

"Oh, um, the note. The note says, I meant, I wanted to know if you wanted to go to the movies on Sunday. To the Roxy. Together." Somewhere in-between *Sunday* and *to*, the tranquil din returns with a cough and a "it's so weird when that happens" near the front. Kacey looks surprised, at him or the noise he can't tell, and after a beat she breaks her gaze to rummage through her bag, taking care to hide whatever she grabbed in her lap. At the same time, the bus begins to move, stuttering at first and then creeping down the highway towards an exit into the city. Ray's eyes wander toward his reflection in the window—his bedhead, his apple-red cheeks—before returning to her, to the back of her hand covered in doodles. She blinks, but upon recalling the situation, he would swear she batted her eyes.

"I'm busy on Sunday. Sorry, Ray." Crushing dismay, but then, "here, take this though." She pulls out a piece of letter paper embroidered with a trio of roses in the corner, the reds and greens faded from disuse. The whole card embodies a sense of antiquity save for the ten digits inked

in glittery teal. "That's my number—call me tonight." Ray accepts the gift, the stock smooth as silk in his grasp, and they both linger in the exchange until her friend coughs and Kacey releases her grip. He thanks her, though maybe only in his head, before turning to the empty aisle, the beating of his heart drowning out his peers who whisper like the wind as he walks.

"So," Charlie points at the note, now damp in Ray's hand, before he even says a word. "You did it, huh? Don't forget about me for your girlfriend." That word—*girlfriend*—feels strange being used in reference to him. Like white crayon on printer paper. He stares at the roses ever in bloom, tracing their vines in his mind before turning the card over. *Dear Kacey, I've had a crush on you for a while and couldn't wait any longer to tell you how I feel. If you like me too then wait for me by your locker before the bus comes tomorrow.* He turns to his seatmate as he clambers into the row, describing what just occurred. The girls behind them overhear his soliloquy—before Monday, the whole school will know the story.

"She likes me, right? Why didn't she just wait by her locker?"

For a moment, Ray hears Charlie's voice in his head—*So now you want my advice?*—but his friend just shrugs.

"She didn't say no, did she? I wouldn't be complaining."

Ray's head swirls with feelings, explanations, stray thoughts, but he finds he can't compound them into words. Kacey's phone number, the roar of the bus's engine, *sometimes I think you don't want me to figure it out on my own*, Hangman, his essay due at the end of the week. The rest of the ride passes in silence, and the roses smudge under the weight of his thumb as the bus pulls into its first stop.

A Pirate's Life[1]

BY MADISON STAHL

With his long, unkempt hair and an eternal hankering for rum, Dad was a regular Captain Jack Sparrow.[2] My Captain Jack Sparrow. That's how I described him when he walked me into the first day of second grade. He stagger-stepped. No cane. What he wanted was a staff, something with an eagle's head on it in silver chrome. Mama offered to have one made for him. One of her work gals had a husband who worked at a woodshop in Lilburn, GA, and she was sure he could come up with a genuine, one-of-a-kind creation. "Make you feel like somebody," she winked.

But he'd huff the thought away each time. "His cheap tools are liable to give me splinters."

Dad described himself as a pure patriot. Blood in his veins as red as the stripes on the flag, and green, hard-earned money that only purchased items with USA stamped on them. We went apple picking five miles away at Daley's Orchard every Saturday morning because we knew exactly where they were coming from. "Daley needs the money anyway, the old goat," he'd say.

"Don't the Lord know it," Mama would reply.

Dad served two tours in the US Air Force, one that led him to Mama and the other that sent them home to Georgia. His wide, toothy smile enveloped Mama on his three-day pass to Jacksonville. "Lost his upper canine in a beach volleyball match," she had blushed, pointing at the black speck in that faded Polaroid. His lanky frame topped with a close-cropped flattop stood hip to hip with Mama in her polka-dotted swimsuit and cat-eye sunglasses.

"I thank God every day for happiness, health, and you, little Riley, for gettin' your Mama's looks," he'd say when the sun hit my face just right or if the room got too quiet.

[1] Inspired by the Reedsy.com prompt: Write a story including the line "I can't say it."

[2] Character Jack Sparrow originated in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which is listed in the Works Cited

One thing he kept that the pictures didn't was his blue eyes. A mysterious shade of blue—not too bright, not too piercing but catching, encompassing. The eyes of someone whose hands hovered inches above an electrical failure, whose ears captured the high-pitched buzz that crescendoed from the engine and whose legs propelled him forward until he reached the woods where a rope caught his ankle and brought a sharp pole down upon it. His eyes carried dust particles, remnants of the hangar, his plane, his mission.

Dad was always searching for some sort of treasure and fighting obstacles along the way. Many obstacles were the ridiculous kind. The unnecessary roadblocks just furthering the plot like a kraken or a ghost ship. When Jack Sparrow's out there on the water, don't the waves under his ship pose enough of a threat? Hell, isn't *he* enough of an obstacle for himself?

I was Dad's ultimate treasure. He'd tell me that every night when tucking me in, after I'd throw the same pirate story from under my pillow into his lap. He did the voices, and I provided the sound effects. It started with the poor little man who fell asleep one day on the boat where he worked.

I'd close my eyes and snore as loudly as I could. Dad would hush me through a chuckle, whispering that Mama wouldn't find it so funny if we woke her up.

The poor man slept until the clouds in his dreams turned to waves and the soft pitter-patter of imaginary sheep turned into rattling buckles and boot-heel clicks on wooden boards.

"Arrrgh! Now you try," he said.

"I can't say it."

"Sure you can, sport. Just drop your jaw and raise the back of your tongue."

The lamplight reflected the gold tooth in his open mouth, the one he said the tooth fairy delivered him special for not touching his tongue to the hole.

I opened my mouth. Nothing but "ahhs" as far as the ear could hear. I might as well be at the dentist. Dad gingerly tilted my chin upwards. Pink tongue, most of a healthy set of teeth, slightly enlarged tonsils. Everything in its place.

"Well, you got all the right parts in there," he said, accentuating each 'r' as if it held its own meaning. It did to me. A kid in the American South who couldn't say rowdy, or rural, or Roy Rogers, or Riley.

We hardly ever reached the end of the story. A maiden on the ship sings the poor man a lullaby a couple of pages before the end, and it nearly always worked on me. I preferred that ending, anyway. The one where the poor man peacefully falls back asleep, no trials, nothing heavy to carry. Just contentment.

That was Dad's greatest pursuit: contentment. Not just for himself, but for everyone he loved. Most of the time, that was just me and Mama, but he also loved the nation like a dear friend. So, when his military service was through, and he no longer had the means of protecting her, he became lost. He tried to bottle it all up, but it came pouring out at least once every week. Sometimes past midnight, my bedroom door would creak open. He'd stand there, a roughly cut silhouette masked with a bitter aroma. He'd forget he was still carrying his cigarette, and smoke would billow around him like a wrestler before the stage lights hit him.

"Goodnight, sweet girl," he'd whisper, kissing my forehead. I'd wait for him and Mama's door to shut before getting up to wipe it off. The rum smell irritated my nose and kept me up all night if I didn't.

In a way, my life was also Dad's greatest obstacle. If it weren't for me, he could've fallen asleep in his big, green recliner and dreamed whatever he wanted, like the poor little man. But I was his reason for living, he'd tell me, and he wouldn't let anything hurt me as long as he was around.

For my eighth birthday, Dad built me a pirate ship. Three of its walls were made of wood scraps repurposed from the deck he never finished. The fourth wall was the side of the shed. "It's your captain's quarters, Riley," he said when he gave me the tour for my approval. It looked nothing like the one in the book, but it fit me perfectly. I named it USS Liberty.

I invited my entire second grade class to the party. About ten of them showed up, but that didn't matter to me as long as Ritchie Calloway was there. He brought me a gift wrapped in brown paper and blue painter's tape. "Pops said that's all he had," he muttered.

Inside was an eagle head. Silver. Hand carved with a glossy spray paint finish. I'd passed him a drawing of an eagle days before when he

asked me my favorite animal. I kissed him on the cheek right before the rest of my guests bombarded the ship.

"Wily Wiley loves Witchie!" They chanted, shoving us closer together. My eyes burned. I thought my tears would scorch the eagle if they fell, so I handed it back to Ritchie and ran. I carried myself to the very back of the yard and hid behind the scrap metal pile.

I could see Dad's head between a rusted saw handle and broken pipe morph from concern to fury in seconds. He yelled so loud the trees rustled, and my guests ran home. So ferociously he broke into a cough he couldn't stop. I ran toward him as I saw his face turn red. Sirens rang in my ears. I was getting closer, but he remained distant.

I collapsed, but he wasn't there. In my hand was the silver eagle, covered in dirt, fingerprints, and hot tears.

"It's respiratory," the doctor said. Dad vowed to quit smoking a year ago on my seventh birthday when I told him what I'd wished for, but the damage was already done.

The one thing that separated Dad from Jack Sparrow was the screen. On that screen, Jack Sparrow narrowly escaped his fate without much more than a scrape. When it was more than that, the scene would cut to another character ready to tag in for him. But I watched Jack Sparrow well after the series ended; there was no question he'd be back.

Dad named his hospital bed USS Sparrow on my recommendation. He told me it felt like a ship the way it rocked if he turned too quickly. The silver eagle sat on his nightstand. When he looked at me, the eagle distorted his reflection, and I'd giggle.

"Pirate life ain't what it used to be, little Riley," he paused. "Well, I guess you're not so little anymore."

"Dad, do you believe in ghosts?"

His eyes were clouded. Fading. "Do you, sweet girl?"

"Well, Jack Sparrow believed in ghosts, so I guess I do too."

He reached for my hand. It was cold. "Let me tell you what I believe in," he began. "I believe in our Lord, this nation, and you, little Riley. You are my hope."

It rained the day I last saw him.

Mama stood close to me. "I'm sorry, baby. We'll come back after this clears up."

"Mama, I can't say it."

I felt her eyes on me, then her tears, slowly, then all at once, as she leaned into my shoulder.

Two red roses lay atop the soil, stems crossed in an X. I placed the silver eagle head above the stems, its beak facing west. Dad said it didn't matter what side of the bed we woke up on as long as we were in our right minds by sunset. Everything was golden at sunset. A warm blanket to tuck us in at night, as our dreams carried us into our next adventure. He'd be there too, in my dreams, guiding our ship wave after wave.

Works Cited

Verbinski, Gore, director. *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl.* Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.

Wake Up, Ellis

BY JULIANNA SWARM

"It's time to wake up, Ellis!" Ricky chimed, walking in from the hallway. In the corner of the bedroom, lace curtains fluttered, releasing dust and pollen across the morning rays. Ricky watched as tiny particles danced through the sunlight, dipping and twirling like fairies until disappearing into the shadows of the room where his little brother lay asleep. Mother never allowed them to leave the window open overnight; she worried about the night air giving him a cold. But she wasn't there, and it was summer; summer nights were warmer than any winter day. Plus, he only got sick in the winter.

He stared at his brother, who lay, eyes closed on the right side of their parents' bed. He had let him sleep in again; he couldn't help it. The pale pastel-pink bedspread appeared to bring color back to his face, which reminded Ricky of what Ellis looked like before he fell ill when his big brown eyes still gazed up toward him. Whenever Ellis was away from the pink hue, the colorlessness of his skin became increasingly apparent.

Ricky had been up since eight that morning, and Ellis should have been awake too. But Ricky got distracted with building a whole new track for the newest 1938 Hornby toy train set—a gift Father had purchased for Ricky's eighth birthday before Father went overseas. Now it was almost ten o'clock, so Ellis needed to wake.

"Ellis, come on," Ricky said, attempting to mimic his father's stern tone, the one he would use when playing Army with them while at home. "Time to get up." It was to no avail; his voice wasn't deep enough. Ellis remained asleep. "Mommy's going to be mad at you." Nothing. "She told me to wake you up!" The fabricated threats were pointless. Ellis knew Mother wasn't here. If she were, she would be the one caring for him, not Ricky.

Ricky felt anger rising inside of him. He missed Mother.

"Okay, Mommy's not here, but I'm your big brother which means I'm in charge! You have to listen to me! And I'm telling you to get up!" Overtaken by frustration, Ricky began to shake Ellis's shoulder, harder the longer he was ignored. It was usually Ellis who woke him up like this. "Come on, Ellis! Get up already!" The desperate shaking loosened the

bandages wrapping Ellis's head, causing strands to fall, revealing Ellis's wound. Ricky immediately stopped. He had gone too far, again.

The wound appeared worse. The large gash that had once only existed at the edge of Ellis's hairline had expanded down to his temple, changing from its original shade of bright red to a purplish black. The bruise was spreading too, seeping into Ellis's brow, blending in with the dark brown hair. It would be reaching his eye soon.

"Come on, we need to change your bandage," Ricky whispered, hoping that if he covered the wound, the colors would stop changing and stop spreading.

In the kitchen, Ricky set out a bowl of oatmeal consisting of cold milk covering dried oats. He didn't know how to use the stove. Scooping up a big spoonful of grape jam, Ricky plopped it right in the center of the bowl.

"There you go. Just how you like. Jelly oats!" he said, raising a spoon of three-fourths jam and one-fourth oats. Ellis's mouth remained shut. "You need to eat," Ricky said, pushing the spoon against closed lips. The thick glob of jam slipped and trailed down the side of Ellis's cheek, falling to the floor. It looked like blood. Ricky instantly felt ill. He could see Ellis's gash reflected in the color of the fruit preserve. "We'll just wait till you feel like eating."

Ricky pulled two books out from the bookshelf, The Tale of Peter Rabbit and Peter and Wendy—one his, the other Ellis's. Mother always read them in the early afternoon.

Ricky stared at Peter and Wendy (Barrie); Tootles, one of the Lost Boys, had just been convinced to shoot Wendy down from the sky. Ricky still didn't know if Wendy had survived her fall, and he desperately wanted to find out.

Ellis sat silently waiting for him on the living room sofa. Looking over, Ricky imagined his brother well again, eyes wide, staring up, begging for Ricky to read to him. But now, his eyes remained closed. Ellis couldn't have read Peter Rabbit himself if he wanted to, so Ricky decided to read to him.

"Once upon a time, there were four little Rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail, and Peter," Ricky read aloud, trailing each sentence with his pointer finger, stopping at the end of every page to look at the pictures. Ellis's head leaned against Ricky's shoulder, like always when he was following along with the reading.

By the end of the book, Ricky felt sick of words: he needed the sun. All he had done was sit inside with Ellis all day. Ellis should be fine to go outside, right? Mother always said healthy boys needed plenty of fresh air.

"I'm sure we can go out just a little bit, right? What do you think, Ellis?" He swore he caught sight of his little brother's head falling forward into a nod. With this sign of agreement, Ricky lifted Ellis, and the two boys were engulfed in the heat of the summer.

Arms and legs stretched out across the front lawn, bathing in the September sun. Ricky lay belly up to the blue sky framed in leaves, Ellis mirroring him to his left. A thick oak forest surrounded them; the creaking and cracking of weighted limbs filled his ears. It was just the two of them for miles. Ricky wondered when Mother would be getting home; this was her second day away. Maybe Mommy went into the city to get a doctor. Or maybe somewhere even farther. Grammy and Pappy are about a day train ride away. What if she went even farther than that? Maybe she went to go get Daddy. That was it: Mommy had gone to get Daddy.

Ricky flipped over to Ellis, shaking his arm. "I know where Mommy went! Mommy went to go get Daddy! Ellis, you're going to be all better soon. He's going to fix all of this! He can fix anything. Remember my toy train or Mommy's dish? He can make you better. We'll be able to play together again. We'll go down to the creek, run around the house, climb the biggest trees—" Ricky stopped, his last words echoing in his head: climb the biggest trees. His eyes peered over to the old oak that stood at the edge of the woods of their front yard. It was the biggest tree he knew of, his favorite climbing tree, and the one he couldn't have waited to climb with Ellis.

It was only two days ago, he could still remember Mother's words of warning perfectly before she headed inside the house. Only two days since she was here and when Ellis was alright.

"Alright boys, I'm heading inside; supper won't take too long, so start wrapping your game up. Oh, and Ricky, no climbing, especially not that oak! I don't like when Ellis follows you up the bigger trees. He's still little."

"Okay, Mommy!" Ricky called, but as soon as the screen door snapped, his eyes went to the old oak tree. Beneath it sat a large stone,

providing a perfect launching point to get up to the good climbing branches. He looked over to Ellis, who was still entirely absorbed in their tiny green Army battle.

"Take that! And that! Bang! Bang! Pow! I got your tanks! Surrender now!" Ellis yelled, pointing one of his gunmen at Ricky. However, as his big brown eyes met Ricky's enlarging, he could see his brother had other plans.

"Wanna race?" Ricky asked, nodding toward the old oak. It would be a surefire win for him; Ellis was still a beginner climber. Ricky had the fullest confidence that he had taught Ellis well, not well enough to allow himself to get beat, but enough for a challenge.

"In the big tree?" Ellis asked, jumping to his feet.

"Yeah, whoever makes it first to a squirrel's nest wins! Ready?"

"Ready!"

The boys lined up, side by side.

"Remember you have to knock down the nest to win. Got it?"

Ellis nodded vigorously, practically bouncing where he stood. Ricky dug his front foot deep into the dirt, and a wide smile filled his cheeks.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . go!"

Ricky sprinted forward, feet flying as he leaped onto the stone, launching himself to the first sturdy climbing branch, then to the next, and higher after that. He climbed as if he were a squirrel himself, fighting to succeed in keeping his territory from another squirrel who wished to take it.

Searching through the thick path of branches and leaves, Ricky caught a glimpse of a nest, three branches up and to the left.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. He turned ready to gloat about his success. However, Ellis was nowhere to be seen. Just a second prior, Ricky swore that he heard Ellis trailing behind him. Was he just hearing himself? he thought. Had Ellis even made it to the tree?

"Ricky!" Ellis's voice bellowed. He had found a nest, lower down and to the right. How could have Ricky missed that? With a sweep of his hands, the squirrel's nest detached from the tree, a clump of leaves, mud, and twigs falling to the ground.

"Ha Ha! I win! You lose! I win! You lose!" Ellis chanted, pointing his finger straight up at Ricky.

"Shut up! Just go down already!" Ricky shouted, beginning his descent of shame.

"Ha Ha! I beat you!"

Ellis, never having beaten his brother in anything, waited for Ricky. As soon as he was passing, Ellis yelled, "I win! You lose! Now you get a big bruise," slamming both his fists into Ricky's shoulder, a sign that he truly had won.

"Ouch!" Ricky's blood was boiling. "Don't touch me!" he yelled, swatting at the small hands and retaliated with a sharp shove.

Fogged by familiar jealousy, the one rule about tree climbing—"Always keep one hand on the tree."—slipped from Ricky's mind. One moment Ellis was there next to him, and the next, Ricky was grabbing for his ankle.

He missed.

"Ellis!" Ricky screamed, watching his little brother fall through the tree, down to the ground as though he were Wendy falling from the sky. Except Ricky was the one who shot the arrow.

CRACK!

Ricky scrambled down the tree, calling to his little brother, "Ellis! Ellis! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you." Ellis's face lay against the large stone.

"Ellis!" Ricky jumped down next to him and turned him over, holding him carefully. Blood poured out of a massive gash on Ellis's forehead. "Ellis! Ellis! Open your eyes!" Ricky pleaded, shaking him. "Open your eyes! Please wake up. Wake up, please!" Ellis didn't move. He didn't speak, didn't open his eyes.

"Mommy!" he shrieked, releasing an ear-piercing cry from within his throat. "Mommy!" It was the loudest Ricky had ever screamed. It hurt, almost burned. "Mommy!"

In an instant, their mother ran from the house, potato peeler in hand. Seeing them, she sprinted over to her boys; both were covered in blood.

Tears rolled down Ricky's face. "Mommy, it was an accident, I swear! I didn't mean it. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Their mother tugged her son's trembling, sobbing body away from her other son's still and silent one.

"What did you do, Ricky?" she shouted, folding Ellis against her, hands, arms, and chest already becoming coated in his blood.

"I'm sorry, Mommy. It was an accident! I'm so sorry!"

"Go in the house! Go grab the first aid kit! Now, Ricky! Now!"

"Ellis, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," Ricky sobbed, running to the house as fast as his legs could carry him.

Hot tears rolled down Ricky's cheeks. The sun had disappeared behind the tree line. It was already changing into a shade of orange. Ricky quickly, yet discreetly, wiped his face; he didn't want his brother to see him cry. He wasn't a baby. Ellis was going to be fine.

"Okay, Ellis," Ricky said, choking lightly, "let's head in." Without waiting for an answer, he picked up his little brother, pulling him close to his chest. "Pee-yew, Ellis, you need a bath." Then craning his neck to smell himself, Ricky realized they both better take one.

Steam rolled up around Ellis as Ricky lowered him in the hot bath. The water stung Ricky's feet as he stepped in, bubbles with the scent of his mother's lavender soap submerging him whole. Grabbing a wash rag, Ricky cleaned himself all over then moved on to Ellis. This was the first time in days Ellis felt warm to the touch. Ricky wondered if the tub was a little too hot, for Ellis's skin seemed delicate, peeling in a way. The water slowly colored to a tannish yellow.

Finally, it was time to sleep. Ricky quickly ran to fetch some new pajamas from his and Ellis's own bedroom. He didn't want to go in there; the moon was full and illuminated the darkest of corners.

Ricky averted his eyes, but he could still see the deep red blood-stain on Ellis's pillow; it appeared almost purple in the moon's blue hue. Even after two days, the fabric still looked wet. That was the last place he had seen their mother; she was kneeling beside Ellis's bed, sobbing over him while he slept. She wouldn't allow Ricky in the room. She wouldn't allow him near Ellis. Ellis had always been hers; Ricky was his father's . . . .

By the time Ricky had awakened the following morning, his mother had left, leaving the front door open. She had left her shoes. He remembered thinking that she would be back soon. No one could go far without shoes. Plus, she wouldn't leave Ellis. She couldn't live without him; she said so herself repeatedly last night.

Ricky went to Ellis, who was cold; the warmth of the bath was gone. Entering his parents' bedroom, Ricky tucked Ellis into bed. Ellis's cheeks were cold again.

The lace curtains were still fluttering in the wind, just as they had been the morning before. However, Ricky could no longer see any dancing fairies. He walked over to the window and shut it, closing him and his brother off from the night air.

Works Cited

Barrie, James Matthew. *Peter and Wendy*. Wisehouse Classics, 1911.
Potter, Beatrix. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. F. Warne & Co., 1904.

Helen, Reimagined

BY KATHERINE ANNE THIERFELDER

"I hear it all the time, you know." Helen takes a long drag, holding it in for a moment, flakes of ash catching the wind and disappearing into the New York diaspora.

"Hear what?" her doctor asks. He sits on a low-backed couch, his chin resting in his fingers, elbow propped on the cushioned arm. A gas firepit filled with black, ceramic rocks stands between them. He wears unframed glasses and a pinstripe button-down that is the color of the Aegean.

Helen blows the smoke out through her nose and lets her head fall back.

"I'm the luckiest woman alive," she whispers slowly. Her blonde hair ripples in waves down her back and glints in the mid-morning sun. Despite being on the north end of her fifties, she hasn't a single strand of gray, touched by Midas at birth.

"Imagine being so wanted that your lovers are willing to go to war for you. What I would give to have a husband who shows his devotion to me in such grand ways." She taps her cigarette on the glass balcony railing. "That's what people whisper in shadowed corners when they think I've passed."

Below her, Central Park is a neon green canvas with black specks pushing strollers and walking dogs. She wonders if her ash will disintegrate before it makes it down to the little lungs playing tag in the grass.

The doctor hums. He's always humming.

"How does that make you feel?"

"It's all bullsh—" Helen stops herself. She's working on being more precise. "Irate," she corrects. It doesn't have the same ring to it.

"Is that so?"

He narrows his eyes. The doctor only ever asks questions, and Helen actually prefers that. She didn't think she would like to see a male psychiatrist, but women make too many assumptions.

She whips around. Her pink pashmina shawl sails through the air like a skirt around her arms. Her stilettos click on the concrete as she walks to the chair opposite the doctor and sits down, crossing her legs.

The chiffon of her skirt falls to her mid-thigh. She takes another drag and lets her hand drape languidly over the arm of her chair, cigarette dangling between her pointer finger and thumb.

"I'm sure you've heard what they call me. 'Temptress.' 'Witch.' 'Whore.' And those are the nice ones." Helen casts her doctor a close-lipped smile. Her peach lipstick highlights her fair skin like marble.

He can't see her eyes; they're shrouded by round sunglasses, but anyone can tell that her smile hasn't reached her eyes for a long time. "But that's not all they call you, is it?"

Helen throws her head back, peals of laughter ripple through her body, shaking her shoulders. "No. No, it isn't. There are too many to count. Tell me, what's your favorite that you've heard?"

The doctor sighs, looks down at his hands, then up at Helen again with a shake of his head. "I heard someone call you a goddess once. Aphrodite, specifically. I thought that was pretty flattering."

Helen swats the comment away. "Yes, yes. Helen the Beautiful. Helen the Gorgeous. Helen the Stunning. Queen Helen of the Upper East Side."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Helen points at him with the cigarette. "Tone, doctor. Tone is everything. A man can call you beautiful, but whether he says it with his eyes, or with his teeth, or with his hips changes the meaning altogether."

The doctor squints, rubbing his chin. "I'm not sure that I follow your meaning."

"No," Helen says, her voice trailing. "You wouldn't."

A beat passes before he asks, "How's that letter coming? The one for your daughter."

"I've gotten as far as, 'Dear Hermione.'" Helen runs the hem of her skirt between her fingers and notices that it's about time to get her nails manicured again. She's been trying to write the letter for nearly a month.

"That's further along than you were at our last session," the doctor says. His voice perks, as though he's proud of her. "What are you finding so difficult about the process?"

Helen shrugs as a gentle breeze whips up the whisps of hair around her face like feathers. One strand gets caught in her lipstick. "I don't know. Something about the words and having to come up with them and write them down."

The doctor waits while Helen traces hearts on the side table. It holds a porcelain ashtray covered in painted gold leaves. "I just don't know what to say to her," she whispers.

The doctor leans forward, threading his fingers between his knees. "Well, what do you think she would say if she were here with us today?"

Helen scoffs. "I'm sure that all the censorship in the world couldn't dampen the obscenities she'd fling at me. And I wouldn't blame her. I probably deserve most of them."

Helen's lips quirk softly at the corners. It's almost a smile. She's thought often about that exact scenario, what Hermione would say should they run into each other on the street one day or in a few years at a funeral. It used to make her heart shrivel up at the corners to think about it, but somewhere along the way, Helen's heart had dried out too much to shrivel anymore. It's like chapped skin in the wintertime, but she'd gone so long without lotion that she'd grown used to the sting.

"Perhaps an apology then," the doctor suggests.

Helen shakes her head once. "No. I can't apologize. I'm not sorry for what I did."

The doctor raises an ungroomed brow. "Oh? Why is that? Do you believe you've hurt your daughter?"

"I'd say ruined is a more accurate term. Pompeii probably looks like a resort destination in comparison to the baggage Hermione carries because of me."

The doctor opens his mouth, closes it, and then asks, "But you're not sorry?"

Helen puts a hand over her mouth. She's tapping the toe of her shoe fast enough to power a small-engine plane. A thumb-sized ache begins to spread over her quickly tightening throat.

"I remember that the hardest I've ever wept was when I gave birth to Hermione. They put her in my arms and I just—" Helen's words splinter. She takes a sharp breath through her nose. "It was her pale eyes. They pierced me like an iceberg, and it was then that I knew the gods hadn't listened."

"The gods hadn't listened?"

She nods. "I prayed every day of my pregnancy to whoever would listen that she would look like her father."

It happens as quickly as a flinch, and he tries to pass it off as though it was just an itch, but Helen sees the doctor wrinkle his nose.

"I know," she offers. Helen keeps her tone light. She doesn't blame him. "What kind of mother wishes their child will be ugly?"

The doctor's face stays as blank as an overcast sky.

"I actually shuddered, you know. Shuddered when people remarked that she took after me."

He cocks his chin. "Why did that scare you?"

She hesitates. "It's not what you think." Helen looks at him out of the side of her eye. "Despite popular opinion, I'm not that vain. It wasn't a fear of losing my place. I just. . . ."

Tap, tap, tap. Helen's foot starts up again as she thinks. She crushes the withered butt in her ashtray.

"Every time I looked at her, I experienced something like an out-of-body experience, like I was a fly on the wall of my own childhood. She was so beautiful that she blinded me, and the more she grew, the more I felt like we were tiptoeing through life on the hilt of a sword, and any day now, we'd reach the blade."

"Maybe it would help to speak in more concrete terms. Name your feelings and fears," the doctor suggests.

"If it were that easy, then I'd have a letter for you, wouldn't I?" Helen says more bitterly than she means to. "I'm sorry. I'm just struggling to articulate."

"That's alright. Take your time. If these things were easy, I wouldn't have a job." The doctor's expression is warmer than the late-May sun. Deep-set crow's feet splay on his ruddy cheeks. Helen has never been able to figure out if he actually cares about her or if he's just really good at what he does.

Helen tries several times to explain herself, but her thoughts trip over each other and fall away. She starts with the only thing solid enough for her to speak out loud.

"The older that Hermione got, the more I could only see one thing when I looked at her: a bright, little girl who still loved to dance, who was too young to stop loving it."

Helen can tell that the doctor needs more, so she says, "There was a time when I loved to dance too." She stares out at the buildings rising around the city, windows sparkling in the daylight.

"What changed that?"

She closes her eyes and lets memory fill the dark.

Helen is a teenager again—too young to be hip to hip with undulating strangers silhouetted by low neon lighting. Her hair is shoulder-length and blown out in thick curls that stand tall around her head. She's wearing a hot pink satin halter dress that cuts down almost to her belly button and knee-high white boots, a holdover from the previous decade. She's whipping her hair in time with the bass that overpowers whatever lyrics might be in the song, and then the tune changes. It's something slower, more somber. The bodies around her turn to molasses as arms and necks go limp.

Helen puts her hands in the air and starts swaying. She came alone. She's not supposed to be there, but there is nowhere else she can go where she can dance unhindered, uncriticized.

She wishes she had worn something longer. Some of her favorite things about dancing are how her skirt whispers at her ankles and how the air fills up her limbs until they are weightless. Dancing is as close as she can get to flying. When she dances, it's just her and the music and nobody's expectations.

Then she feels it; his fingers slither around her waist, and his breath is damp on her ear.

"I like the way you move," he whispers.

Helen's voice hitches in her throat, and she turns around, but that puts her face an inch from his. His eyelids droop, and his smile sags. He moves like he's going in slow motion, but his grip on her is cast iron. Before she has time to tell him "no," his mouth is crushing hers, and he's pushing her backward.

She squeezes her eyes shut and tries to focus on the music, wishing its vibrations would numb her nerves. When she opens them again, he's pushed her into a dark corner behind a curtain. Nobody can see them.

"Dance for me again, little one." His calloused fingertips scrape her neck and catch on her hair.

"No," she gasps. "Stop," she pleads. "I can't," she squeaks.

"That's alright." He presses closer. "I will show you how."

Over forty years later and the crawling feeling—as if her body is covered in spider eggs that all hatch at the same time—hasn't gone away.

"And I haven't danced since," Helen tells the doctor.

He's heard a lot of her stories, but it's the first time she's told him this one.

"Thank you for being willing to share that with me," he says. "Was this something you were worried would happen to your daughter?"

Helen swallows around the lump in her throat. She lights another cigarette to stop her hands from trembling.

"I could already see it happening." Helen's voice pitches so high it cracks. "There are things you don't notice when you're a child. Things you shouldn't need to notice. Things that your mother definitely notices, like where a person's eyes drift when they tell you that your daughter is beautiful. I was always latched so tightly to her so that no one could ever push her into a dark corner. I begged my husband to move us out of the city, somewhere safer. These buildings," Helen throws her hands up at the ones towering around them, "they loom. It's suffocating!" She takes several quick puffs and stands up on the balcony again, her arms crossed tightly over her stomach.

"Is it the city you were worried about?"

Helen chews her lip. "I know it's stupid. I know predators are everywhere, but I just thought—" She covers her mouth as a gasp cuts off her words.

"Maybe if you left the city, you could take her somewhere safer where she could try to be a normal girl," the doctor suggests softly.

The tears stream down Helen's cheeks now. They track black mascara lines across her chin. She doesn't turn to face the doctor, but he's right.

"He couldn't do it," she breathes. "This is where his life is, his empire is, so this is where his family must be. That's what he always told me, so when . . . when I met Troy and he offered to take me to Paris, I thought, *This might be my only chance to make sure Hermione never stops dancing*." A raw laugh bursts through Helen's lips. "And you see how well that worked out. She didn't have time to think about anything when she was caught in the middle of her mother's mess."

"You aren't the only one responsible for the fallout of your divorce," he says.

Helen shrugs. "Maybe not, but I understood my husband. He only knows one way to be a good man. He believes in never giving up on what you want. It's what built him such a successful enterprise." Helen shuts her eyes and takes a breath. "At the end of the day, he's the one who walked her down the aisle, and I'm the one who didn't even get an invite."

"I suppose that really bothers you."

Helen sits down again on the edge of her chair and takes off her sunglasses. She turns them over in her hands and says, "Hermione posted a video about a week after her wedding of my husband spinning her around during the father-daughter dance. He's blubbering all over her shoulder." Her eyes crinkle underneath and her lips pull up at the edges as she thinks about it. "I don't think I care that she's dancing with him instead of me. The important thing is that she hasn't stopped, and for now—" Helen looks up with a sigh. Her vibrant eyes reflect the sun like sapphires. "For now, I think that's enough."

Burn the Man: Flash Fire

BY SEAN WANG

I received the phone call last November. It was a call directly from the American Humanist Association. The woman on the other line told me that a team of lawyers representing a death-row inmate needed a chaplain. I was sitting in my leather recliner when the call came in. The weather on the south side of Long Beach hadn't dipped below the fifties yet, even though the days had grown shorter. My floor was covered in an Arabesque rug, and my walls were decorated with punk posters from the 1970s. I loved The Clash and the Sex Pistols, and these black and hot pink posters matched perfectly with the mahogany floors and tanned walls. This is to say that the room was cozy, possibly too cozy for autumnal weather, but it made the cold air on the other side of the line all the more frigid. I asked for the inmate's name, and she told me plainly that his name was Marshall. Marshall Brody, the same man who stole six hundred lives five summers ago. She told me that Marshall requested a chaplain of three qualities:

First, that he needed to be patient regarding unsolicited calls.

Second, that he must be at least forty-five years of age.

And third, that he could not be a man of God.

I accepted his request. It was a fool's errand in retrospect, but I couldn't think of leaving any man to die alone, regardless of his history. I may have diverged from God's will, but that did not mean I should bear the same to a fellow soul.

Our first phone call was the weekend before Christmas. I was sitting by a burning fireplace with *American Gods* in my lap, waiting for Maria to come home with the kids. The sky was an inky black that evening; daylight had all been snuffed out. When the landline rang, I forgot all about the darkness that approached from the horizon.

"Good afternoon. You've reached the Hernandez residence. How may I help you this evening?"

I felt the same frigid cold from the other line. The breathing was so weighty and thick that I could feel goosebumps along my neck.

"Hello, Mr. Hernandez. I assume you already know why I'm calling?"

"Ah yes, Mr. Brody. I've been expecting you for some time. How are you doing this holiday season?"

I heard a sigh on the other line. "Yes, this is Marshall. And thank you for the wonderful letter you sent me. I really appreciate the gesture."

"Oh, it was my pleasure, Mr. Brody."

When I made the decision to act as Marshall's chaplain, I mailed a handwritten letter in advance to his cell in Terre Haute. I wrote that I was more than happy to act as his spiritual advisor. Whatever services he needed of me, whether it be counseling, meditation, or Socratic dialogue, I was more than ready to offer them. But after I sealed the envelope, I hesitated to walk to my mailbox. It is not my responsibility to condemn his crimes because that is the duty of justice and the law.

I was taught in my residency at Denver Health to hold open arms for all in need of guidance. We are merely apostles of a public body, not the saint. But I deeply wanted to express my genuine despair at his crimes, because I was almost one of his victims. After holding a theological seminary in Jacksonville, I would have arrived back in LA the very day of the shooting. I might have stared down the barrel of Marshall's machine gun if my taxi driver hadn't made a wrong turn on the highway, or if the TSA didn't inspect my carry-on for toothpaste. I booked another flight for the following day, but by then, everyone in Florida was in hysteria and all forms of air travel were postponed. Two days after the shooting, I finally flew home to Burbank's terminal.

"What would you like to discuss this cheery evening," I continued. "I hope it isn't much colder in Indiana."

"I'm . . . I'm unsure, actually; I've never spoken to a chaplain before."

"Well, we can speak of anything. You've requested an atheist as your chaplain, so I assume you aren't interested in religious texts. What books have piqued your interest lately?"

Marshall chuckled. "This may sound bizarre, but I've been perusing a copy of the 4th edition of *Player's Handbook*, which I found in the repository."

"So, you enjoy TTRPGs? Well, I was quite an avid player myself in the 80s. How are you enjoying it so far?"

"I love it! I've played a lot of 3E and 3.5E in college, so I was excited for the new edition."

"Quite a shame that you're kept behind stone walls and barbed wire. I would've liked to roll a campaign with you." There was a certain irony in choosing D&D manuals as your literary pastime. All of that updating of new rules, monsters, class abilities, and worldbuilding, but without anybody else to enjoy the role-playing. But Marshall seemed oddly content in his circumstances. Perhaps, in his solitary confinement, he was imagining a fantastical world for his mind to wander. A world where he'd walk up to the Adventurer's Guild and take notice of any new contracts. A world where he'd fight ne'er-do-wells on the road to the Underdark. It's highly probable he imagined himself as a hero when he'd finally destroy Orcus and his undead army in the Abyss. I too sometimes imagine a world where I was a hero.

Our second call came two months later in February. Marshall called and told me about a winter storm that hit Terre Haute that morning. It has never snowed during my time in Long Beach. It felt like early summer, in fact, and I sometimes wished I could drive up to Seattle around this time with Maria and the kids. Marshall and I talked about new books we've been reading. He'd been enjoying *The Stranger* and *Metamorphosis*, *Crime and Punishment* and *No Exit*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Musashi*. I was happy he took my recommendation and started reading *American Gods*. Even a skeptic like him couldn't resist the writing of Gaiman.

"I'd like to ask, Marshall," I began. "We've talked so much about literature and philosophy for a very good reason. It may be obvious, but why did you ask for an atheist to be your chaplain?"

I held my flip phone close to my ear. Maria was vacuuming our basement, so it was likely she couldn't eavesdrop on my conversation. I nevertheless remained vigilant and even locked the door to my private office for security.

On the other line, Marshall responded: "It's a very embarrassing answer, but I'd like to be frank with you, Mr. Hernandez: I am afraid of God."

"A skeptic like you? Color me surprised. That is quite an embarrassing answer coming from you."

"You'd think I wouldn't but there is good reason for me to fear the Almighty. After all, my life is in his hands now. The longer I spend in

my cell, the more I've convinced myself that God is dangling my soul on a yo-yo. I have nightmares that any moment now the ground beneath me will open above the flames of Inferno. I am afraid of that monster."

I presumed it was about time we spoke of the afterlife. His belief in the afterlife still shocks me today. With all of our talk regarding Camus and Sartre, Dante was the last name I'd expect to be on his mind.

"So, you chose me as your advisor because you fear the abyss that waits for you after death. By talking to a man that believes in no such realm, does it bring peace that your soul can still be saved?"

"My soul cannot be saved by men of God. They do not trust me, and they all wish for my death, regardless of repentance. You, on the other hand, do not fear me. You really are the only one I can trust with my life."

"I'm truly flattered, Marshall."

June was the first time we met in person. It was a warm morning when I took a smoke break in my motel room. I smoke even today because of "sinking feelings." When I grow nervous, it feels like my lungs and stomach sink into the earth itself. I'll hesitate and procrastinate. Sometimes my mind will wander elsewhere while the rest of my body stands paralyzed. Smoke in my lungs, ironically, makes me feel lighter. It gives me the courage to move my frozen legs. I lied to Maria and told her that I would resort to therapy for these "sinking feelings." I also lied about meeting with America's most-wanted terrorist and told her I was going on a business trip, which it technically was. She still had nightmares about my death at the hands of Marshall's terrorism, so I could not bring myself to tell her the client I was traveling to was him.

The taxi ride to Terre Haute eased my senses a bit. I enjoyed the sight of pines instead of palms in the Midwest. Terre Haute looked like a scar on the open earth. The guards were vigilant when it came to my safety; they checked my handbags and pockets, discovering cough drops and *Either/Or* in my possession. A man in Kevlar followed me to the visitation room. Instead of my recliner, I sat in a high school chair with rusty metal legs. The guard stood behind me by the door while we waited for my client to emerge from the other side of the plexiglass.

When Marshall finally came in handcuffs, I was shocked by his appearance. He was miserable with an unruly beard and a swollen face.

He had a large body, but he trudged like a backpack of bricks was heaped upon his shoulder. When he sat in his chair, he gave a bad smile with rotten teeth. I couldn't imagine this was the same man that I held philosophical inquiries with nor the man that orchestrated America's deadliest shooting. I grabbed the phone line, and Marshall reached for his line on the other side.

"Good morning, Marshall. How have you been?"

Marshall still held his dirty smile from the other side of the glass.

"It's been a couple of weeks, Mr. Hernandez."

"You can call me Jaime," I offered. I dug into my bag to pull out my copy of *Either/Or*. He'd spoken repeatedly of his lack of interest in Kierkegaard, but it was during our first meeting that I felt he needed his wisdom more than ever. I dropped the book into the drop box on my side of the plexiglass. "Talk to me, Marshall. Have you done any more reading recently?"

"I gave up on it," he sulked. "I can't bring myself to read anymore. If I read another word, I think I'll suffer a seizure. What have I been doing with my life?"

"Breathe, Marshall. You have to catch me up on what's happened. Why does reading hurt now?"

"It hurts because it can't save me. All it does is deny what's waiting for me. Death and suffering, pain and misery. I am going to Hell, Jaime! I'm afraid of the Inferno!"

Marshall held his bruised hand against the glass. He so badly wanted to hold me for spiritual aid, but we were blocked by the plexiglass window.

"My own mother won't even talk to me," he continued. "She's afraid of me. And my younger brother hates me. He wishes for my death the most. I don't want to die alone."

"What is it that you ask of me, my friend?" I lined my hand along his imprint on the window.

"You are the only one who doesn't fear or hate me. Pray for me. Pray that I can escape the Inferno one day."

After I left Terre Haute, I pondered the contradiction of his request. It seemed ridiculous that a skeptic like Marshall could so suddenly fear the wrath of God. It seemed an oxymoron that an atheist chaplain was now asked to write a prayer for his salvation. But the cruelest irony was his trust in me. As servants of the state, we chaplains are obliged never to

let our personal histories and emotions cloud our empathy and spiritual advisory. It's been almost three summers, and I've done my best to turn the other cheek. But like Maria, I still couldn't escape the fear I felt that day. It must've been fate that brought me to be Marshall's chaplain. It must've been God's joke that I was being asked to return to my religious roots. My friendship with Marshall was built upon coincidences and lies. He was never my friend because I still hate him even now.

It was another warm November when I watched the television that morning. Marshall Brody was murdered by Malik Mustafa at 6:17 a.m., while the two were cleaning the showering area. I didn't speak a word to Maria. She must've been relieved that my potential killer was finally dead. Instead, I returned to my office and pulled out my personal journal. I did not think of Marshall as a terrorist, friend, or victim. He was just another client to be recorded in writing. I thought of writing a prayer, but I also thought of writing a eulogy. There were many subjects I could write about: his crimes, his intelligence, his fears, or my perception of his dying moments. I ultimately decided not to write about him at all. In his recording, I chose to write about myself. Like the future where I would've died because of him, I wrote of a future where he would've been saved because of my spiritual aid.

I was dead with him in Inferno.

I was his guide in its many burning layers.

We found a way to escape the flames.

The same night I completed my eulogy, my two daughters pointed at a news report regarding wildfires in the Appalachians.

They burnt those mountains for three continuous days.

Works Cited

Dante, Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy.* Trans. Robin Kirkpatrick. Penguin Classics, 2013.

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods: A Novel.* William Morrow, 2011.

Kierkegaard, Soren. *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life.* Penguin Classics, 1992.

Mearls, Mike, Rob Heinsoo, and Robert J. Schwalb. *Player's Handbook* 4th edition. Wizards of the Coast, 2010.

Poetry

In the Backseat with Benny

BY CAYLEIGH BAILLARGEON

"That's here because the Hudson River
made the Hudson Valley a natural fortress for
the Continental Army," I tell Benny as we exit
the brewery and hop all the potholes
that sit across the street from President
Washington's headquarters,
but he's more interested in his monster truck.

"I bet I can beat you to the car," I tell him.
"Imma kick your butt, Auntie," he says in his little voice,
so I let go of his hand and let him win.

The way back to New Haven from Newburgh
is 84 and winding back roads through depressed,
once-thriving river towns and streets named for Eli Whitney.

I have to stop myself from telling him about
how Whitney ruined everything and
why I want to burn the museum down
and why it'd be important for him to watch,

but he's only three and doesn't have the hand-eye
coordination required to play with fire.

I want to tell him something age-appropriate,
but now we're driving through Sandy Hook
and have had enough history for the day.

Petunias

BY CAYLEIGH BAILLARGEON

As the sun sets over the statehouse,
throngs of people in masks
are kettled towards the common's center.

Posters held in earlier hours
now line the length of the pathways because
we need our hands to carry water,
to record, to defend, to serve,
to protect each other.

Once the sun sets, you learn the reason for their military gear
is to protect them from the military weapons they turn on you—
an acknowledgment that their guns can't control which way the wind
blows.

The tear gas is thick and your nose
is running, but you have
water, washcloths, oven mitts,
and your wits about you.

Pushing past the police
who touch shoulders like Red Rover,
you can't help but realize,
they underestimate how many
games you've won, how many bullies
you've bashed in the past just for kicks,
that you have the day off from work
tomorrow, plenty of time to get detained.

You make it to the Freedom Trail
and remember Crispus Attucks
as a canister of chemicals hits
a planter box right next to you,

then falls at your feet,
tangled in petunias.

You take a knee,
scoop it up with your mitt,
and aim for the first sclera you see.

Suburb Trains

BY BRODY ELDRIDGE

Metal train tracks a mile from my home
twitch and sing a rumbling, revolving opera
of cart wheels running through the night,
through the suburbs of northeast Texas,
across the plains, maybe
to the fields of Oklahoma,
these boxed cars pilgrimage away
somewhere else than here—Fort Worth at
3 a.m.—I can hear it all from my bed.

I was ten, but still I'm still vigilant for those suburb
trains. You tell me about the tracks that carve
through West Chicago, Illinois—you've heard
the same haunting squeaks, a deep hum
thrumming through, miles of bricked
and wood-paneled homes—across developments
diverse and into long-lasting tones,
I like to think the tanker cars
shooting across Midwest lands, through the Rockies
and plains—the same train I exalted
during insomnia nights—I like to think it
sang its trumpet horn, blowing air through
brass, blowing smoke. I like to think it
beat me north to Chicago, singing in your ear
before I could play a similar tune.

ESIDARAP

BY TAKIER GEORGE

Dystopias birthed from the
misguided dreams of my mother's
mother, tongue-heavy with
scripture
Cross burning holes through her
Chest like the bedsores
That took her out

Thought she could find a
Heaven like the ones outlined
in those pages.
Must've forgotten
Even the Garden of Eden was earthbound
Before it became just another
patch of land lending its wealth
To everybody but us.

There are ruins on her pillow
Graves for every one of her
children she hoped would make it
out—make it to her
But didn't.

Try telling a dying woman that
dreams are just a made-up concept
from American films
That she made it all the way
here just to die without a
gravestone.

For her pockets could not
Outweigh fancy rock
Nothing to engrave to remember her by

Only the free whispers of her daughter's daughter.

Janet, Janet, Janet, I
say this must be
enough—
Three generations later yet
These words are all I can
afford.

Yearning after Maria

BY VERONICA GOMEZ

When it comes to old sewing machines,
You have to find your own rhythm with them.
It's like a spinning wheel
Or the rumble of your car engine.

It's like dancing with an old man
You bought as a pet
Off Facebook Marketplace:

He's got knobby knees,
And his hands can't grab things all the way,
But his thrice replaced hips
Still got a swing to them, you know?

There's a beauty to old things
Where you can just sink your teeth
Into the skin of their first owners.

See, back at my abuela's house,
A house half-smashed
By a hurricane and yet to be fixed,
My father once smiled down at our old Singer

Like she was his high school sweetheart.
"I hope you're still gentle to me, my love,"
He said, "As I had been to you."

And into the night where the frogs
Sang their ballads of love and terror,
He fucked his treadle machine
Like his wife wasn't there.

Really. He hunched over it
As though it could've disintegrated in his hands,
Like the white sand on our island's vanishing beaches.

Golden Fish and Butterfly Marble

BY WILL GRASSO

I'm thankful I inherited the
golden fish and butterfly marble
from my Grammy.

She really did know how to pick them.
She's resting easy now,
and I wonder if she ever really forgot my name.

Relearning flute fingerings
ten years later and
seeking that shiny adolescence.

Her slender fingers coaxed
jazz from the piano—my favorite.
I hear the pedals pressing but her notes gone.

It's all there, coded in love letters.
She kept my
grandad's—through his eyes.

Midnight NYC trains back to
her dorm room.
How he remembers her

twenty and running.
I want to know how she soared
and floundered for the right notes.

What Lies Eat You Alive?

BY WILL GRASSO

I hang gratefully from the branch of my granddad
and I wish for a day of silencing wind,
for a chance where I, an honest mess,
tell the truth over the space between us.
I ask him the questions the doctors ask me—
What do you hear when it is quiet?
Is your Zoloft working?
How often do you feel like you are driven by a motor?
My questions lurch into infinite limits—
When are you a child? When are you a teenager?
Will you smoke with me? What can I do?
What can I give back? Will there be anyone
when you are gone? What songs make you
cry? What lies eat you alive? Is your Zoloft
working? When do you feel steady? When
do you think about your father?
Never can I forget you or your child, who became my mother.
Sometimes I show the tenderness of a wary child.
Often, I hear a name and then shaking, static reverberating.
Very often there is a hand squeezing me, family or family,
And I am between generations, silent.
Always I am from here. Right here.

한, I Can't Read the Air on the Dark Bay

BY EMMA HARDING

> *"Honouliuli, near the town of Waipahu on the Hawaiian island of O'ahu, is best known as a World War II internment camp for Japanese Americans. The camp also was the home of approximately 2,700 Korean prisoners of war from 1943 to 1945. These were largely non-combatant civilian laborers who had been forced to work for the war effort by the Japanese colonial government in Korea and were captured during the Pacific islands campaign."*
>
> — Center for Korean Studies (Abstract)

As an immigrant, my words are weeds
in English lexicon's lawn,
plucked and sprayed in my sleep,
a snore away from slamming me
into the dirt. I drool prayers

but taste no solace in 제비꽃
nor cough traffic-light blades.
Dialects pound my doldrums
as I curl in my mother tongue's cradle,
harsh, nonsensical winds rocking me

like 답답해 brown noise. My 꽃밭 rumbles,
but it's not really mine, like this war. I packed
my mother's dirt in my stomach, tasted 짜장면
and army stew, wept at the sight of meat—
I couldn't tell the soldiers why. They thought

I was Japanese because they knew I was not
    미국 사람 but gook, not
    white but yellow, not
    sown but reaped, not
good enough to call their soil my home,
hoed from the ground if my roots grew

too deep. My tongue licks the dirt off my nose.
It tastes like 똥, so I eat more, spout off
army chants until they're like sand, lost
and indistinguishable to the lips they leave.

Work Cited

"Korean Prisoners of War in the Honouliuli Internment Camp, 1943–1946." Abstract. *ScholarSpace*, Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1 Nov. 2015, https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/71a5df3e-7cf2-4705-afb5-a7c92dcd95f7.

Dear Fish in the Sea

BY LORIA LEE HARRIS

Age is just a number,
not an invitation
today.
Your sparkling face
demands reciprocity.
My face is my handshake.
I keep my words to myself,
silent as slippers at night,
and answer repetitive
questions, more pleasing
with each practice,
pleasing
each
practice.

Congratulations on a
conversation. Do you look
like your picture?
Are your tits real?
I hope we can connect
over politics, Jesus.

Jesus, I can't.
I've talked to you before,
but I can't
with the rest
of the men
anymore.

Would you like to meet?

Yes, It Floods

BY LORIA LEE HARRIS

The sun burns the water back into its place
even while we walk.
Crawdads wiggle and worm on concrete and grass,
swamped into new havens.
Their shells crunch under the crackers;
their muscle boils into meaty chew for our tongues.
After floods.
A kid's imagination—the world doesn't really flood, does it?
Yes, it floods, LeeBee.
And crawdads?
We would gather them, every time.
I had to ask to know
Louisiana really happened.

Stranger in French

BY MARLEY RAMON

I will never learn to speak Spanish
Textbooks and videos will never feel
Like home is supposed to
Like warm food and flickering hearth
Like quinces and traditions
I will never learn my grandma's recipes
Or speak to my grandfather
Without a glass wall between us
Learning now hurts too much
Speaking Spanish makes my heart ache

I'll take French instead
Or Dutch or German or anything else
To speak with a visitor's tongue
A guest's welcome incompetence
Trip over new stairs and use the wrong fork
And smile through the loss

Travel somewhere where my last name
Doesn't mean I'm pieces short
Forget how my parents used Spanish
To keep secrets from my sisters
Forget how the only words I've learned
Are foods and random syllables that
I have approximated meanings for
Words I've held tightly when my family
Let's loose lips slip them through the cracks
I'll hold my words like gold
Forget that their abundance lets them lose so freely
Forget that when my grandmother died
I swayed to a funeral I could hear but not listen to
To songs I could feel in my skin but not in my throat
Forget that she died grandmother and not abuela

Forget that it's one more place
I'm too late forever
I can never learn Spanish early enough
Blisters on my feet and wine clumsy shoes
I will make new memories
Footloose and light
Tread ground my family hasn't worn in
Look out windows and open doors where no ghosts linger
I can live as a stranger in French
But I will never shake the grief in Spanish

House

BY ADAM WILLIS

doors busted hinges
vacant windows
a mouth of razors
broken glass in
painful panes a
view of emptiness
and darkness within
the rotten planks the
cedar siding overgrown
weeds the phragmites
and aster the vines
climbing veins pumping
spite thorns of
lath around the
bricks and mason hands
who laid the first
stones whose flesh
tore with splinters
the nail and the sawhorse
coffee rings sweat rags
bottled amber golden dust
nests needing eviction
saplings needing cut
energy spent blood
poured down the drain
with old grease from
rusted oil cans the fields
needing tilled the
calf needing slain
labor never finished
work never done
the land never healing
echoes with our shouts
the death kept within this place
the death kept without

REVIEW

Centennial Highlights—Alumni Interviews with Editorial Interns

Micah Dean Hicks: A Life of Storytelling

BY SARAH POULIOT

Micah Dean Hicks, PhD, hailing from southwest Arkansas, is a renowned fabulism, science fiction, and fantasy author, often inspired by fairy tales and the rural South.

Completing his undergraduate degree in English at South Arkansas University (SAU), he was inducted into SAU's Epsilon Theta Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta in 2006. He continued to stay active in the Society as he attended graduate school at the University of Southern Mississippi to study Creative Writing. Hicks presented his writing at each annual Sigma Tau Delta convention from 2006 to 2010 and published his poem "King of the Ghosts" and his short story "The Gospel According to Mark" in the 2010 edition of *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*.

As a 2020 creative-writing Fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts, a Calvino Prize winner, and a two-time Nelson Algren Award finalist, he has transformed his writing from a childhood dream of seeing his "book on the shelf of a bookstore" to a professional career with critical acclaim (Hicks 2024). He currently lives in Tampa, FL, with his wife Brenda Peynado (author of Sigma Tau Delta's 2023 Common Reader, *The Rock Eaters*) and teaches creative writing at the University of South Florida.

Hicks debuted his writing with an engrossingly eerie 2013 collection of short stories, titled *Electricity and Other Dreams*, and, more recently in 2019, he published his novel *Break the Bodies, Haunt the Bones*. Blurring the lines between fantasy and realism, he cultivates imagination and magic to peer deeper into the intricacies of the human experience—of our relationship to one another and the world around us. In considering his writing, Anne Valente (author of *Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down*) notes that, in the midst of his fiction, Hicks explores the very real topics of "economic uncertainty, the violence of bigotry and hate, and the tremendous weight of the past" to investigate our place in the present and hope for the future ("Praise").

As he reflects on the power of storytelling to nurture connection and transformation, Hicks states, "Maybe art is what is worth defending,

the reason we get out of bed in the morning and try to make the world a little better" ("English faculty").

You stated in an interview with Nancy Stebbins from SmokeLong Quarterly that you "love characters who can be casually cruel to each other, especially to their loved ones" (Hicks, 2011). Can you talk about your writing process for creating complex, realistic characters and family dynamics?

My best trick for characters is to give them a very specific emotional core, and then I try to filter everything else in the story through that. Therefore, if a character's emotional core is loneliness, everything in her world is going to be filtered through that feeling. Everything she notices, every place she goes, every conversation she has narrows to the ache inside her. Doing this helps the story feel thematically unified, and it also helps me write more vivid, more emotional language.

I also look for ways to cut against type, so if a character seems a little too standard or is doing expected things, I give her details that play against that. With family dynamics, I try to make a lot of ties and little connections between characters. So instead of it being her middle sister, it is the sister her parents loved more, or the sister who betrayed her, or the sister who always lets her down. With these connections, I try to focus on something that hurts, even if it is a small, forgivable hurt.

What books are you reading right now?

I just finished Anne Leckie's *Translation State* and Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Certain Dark Things*, and both were incredibly fun. This semester, I am teaching several books that I have not read before, so I am excited to dive into Charlie Jane Anders's *Never Say You Can't Survive* and Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*, among others. I am also excited about Brenda Peynado's *Time's Agent*, which was released this month (and not just because I'm married to her! This book is explosively imaginative, sad, and strange.).

When did you discover your passion for writing? What steps did you take to turn that passion into a career?

I cannot remember a time when I was not obsessed with making up stories. I have loved writing ever since I was a kid. And I always hoped to one day see my book on the shelf of a bookstore.

As far as steps to make that happen, I started reading books on the craft of writing, sought out feedback on my work, and assigned myself exercises to stretch my writing muscles when I was in high school. In college, my university did not have a creative writing degree, but I had a wonderful writing mentor—Shannin Schroeder, who also introduced me to Sigma Tau Delta—and I took as many classes with her as I could.

After that, I went to graduate school for creative writing. But perhaps the most important thing in terms of steps I took was just trying to write as much as possible.

You mentioned in an interview with Jessica Reidy from Quail Bell Magazine that Gabriel García Márquez inspired your collection of short stories Electricity & Other Dreams *(Hicks, 2014). From which other authors do you draw inspiration?*

There are so many that I hardly know where to start. Fairy tales have always been hugely influential for my work, full of magic and cruelty. I learned from John Edgar Wideman's sentences and structural playfulness. Karen Russell, Kelly Link, and Aimee Bender gave me models for the kind of work I wanted to do. Lately, I have been thinking about what Kameron Hurley is up to. Her book *The Stars Are Legion* is a new favorite.

What do you find most appealing about the genres of magical realism and fantasy?

I want books to take me places I have never been before. I am drawn to magical stories, science fiction, and fantasy because of the rich, strange settings. It is nice to spend time somewhere that is not a strip mall, or a parking lot, or a red light. My favorite realist writers are the ones like Lauren Groff who lean toward historical fiction and really roll around in those settings (her sentences are also small masterpieces all on their own).

But I also like rural stories that remind me of where I grew up. Deep forests, the absence of people, things strange and wonderful waiting in the woods.

You received an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Mississippi and a PhD in Fiction at Florida State University. How have these programs transformed your writing process? Do you recommend aspiring writers to seek higher education in creative writing?

My experience was really positive. Every teacher I worked with had something new and unique to offer me that helped deepen my understanding of fiction. I was exposed to books and ideas that I might never have found on my own. Also, working closely with a group of peers just as dedicated is invaluable. Looking for the flaws or missed opportunities in someone else's stories is the best way to build the muscles for revising your own.

I definitely recommend aspiring writers get a creating writing degree, provided they get accepted to a program that fully funds its students. You should not go into debt to get an MFA.

If you do not get into a funded program or cannot relocate for grad school, or an MFA just is not something you are able to do (for whatever reason), there are still plenty of resources: online classes, craft books, local critique groups, library author events, year's best anthologies, etc. For speculative fiction authors specifically, the SFF Online Writing Workshop is incredibly inexpensive and has some great member success stories.

What advice would you give to current members of Sigma Tau Delta who are seeking a career in the book publishing industry?

If you are interested in writing books for publication, first of all, write and read as much as you possibly can. Read everything. Read poetry. And when you are ready to pursue publication, Kim Wright's *Your Path to Publication* is a slim, quick, information-packed book that has helped me so much.

If you want to work in publishing, I understand the publishing certificate programs at Emerson and Columbia help people break into that industry.

Neither writing nor working in publishing pays very much, though. The vast majority of writers never earn *any* money for their writing. Working in publishing in New York is hyper competitive, and the people who do that work are grossly underpaid. So first and foremost, take care of yourself and have a backup plan. Writing and stories and books are so, so wonderful. But you need to make sure that you can survive.

Works Cited

"English faculty Micah Dean Hicks named 2020 NEA Creative Writing fellow." *CAH News*, 28 Jan. 2020, https://cah.ucf.edu/news/micah-dean-hicks-nea.

Hicks, Micah Dean. Interview: "Anachronism and Collage in Magical Tales." Jessica Reidy, *Quail Bell Magazine*, 2014.

———. Interview. Author. 12 Aug. 2024.

———. Interview: "Smoking with Micah Dean Hicks." Nancy Stebbins, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, 2011. https://www.smokelong.com/interviews/smoking-with-micah-dean-hicks.

"Praise for *Break the Bodies, Haunt the Bones*." *Micah Dean Hicks: Author*, https://micahdeanhicks.com/break-the-bodies-haunt-the-bones.

Lee Conell:
Sigma Tau Delta Alumna and Author

BY BAYLIE JETT MILLS

Lee Conell is an award-winning author of a novel and story collection, and her writing has appeared in numerous literary journals. She joined Sigma Tau Delta's Pi Tau Chapter in 2009 at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz.

In this interview, Conell discusses how Sigma Tau Delta influenced her career as an author and what led to her decision to become a writer. She also shares which authors have inspired her and provides advice for aspiring writers.

In 2010, your short story "Our Ancestors" (Conell) was published in the Sigma Tau Delta Review. What did being a member of Sigma Tau Delta mean to you and how did it influence the trajectory of your career?

When one of my favorite professors told me about Sigma Tau Delta and encouraged me to become a member, I remember being thrilled to learn about an organization dedicated to encouraging and supporting college students like me in our love for stories and words and weird moving sentences.

Until college—and honestly, even a little past college—I often kept my writing a bit of a secret. It felt like something that was just for me. This feeling was important to have at that time, but just as important was to move on from it, to get a sense of a bigger community of people who also deeply cared about literature. I do not know if I could have kept writing without that sense of a bigger community of people who cared about books.

You were awarded the Wallant Award for your 2021 novel The Party Upstairs and The Story Prize's Spotlight Award for your 2017 story collection Subcortical *(Conell, "Lee Conell"). Your short fiction has received the* Chicago Tribune*'s Nelson Algren Award and you have had your work appear in* The New York Times, The Paris Review, Oxford American, The Kenyon Review, Glimmer Train, American Short Fiction, *and*

more (Conell, "Lee Conell"). You have even had stories shortlisted in Best American Short Stories *and the Pushcart Prize anthology (Conell, "Lee Conell"). What led to your desire to become a writer and which authors have inspired you?*

I always wrote to figure out what I felt about things, to puzzle through surprising images or sentences or characters. I cannot remember ever not having a desire to write, though that may be different from desiring to be a writer! I have been inspired by many authors—lately have been thinking a lot about Grace Paley, James Baldwin, Mavis Gallant, Toni Morrison, and Yoko Tawada.

In 2010, you were pursuing your MA in English. Since then, you have earned an MFA in creative writing and taught fiction at places such as Tufts University, Vanderbilt University, and Sewanee: The University of the South. What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

I would encourage aspiring writers to chase their curiosities (and to stay curious), to read as much as they can, to try to find the space they need to play on the page, and to not be afraid of their own personal strangenesses in writing.

What are some of your favorite books?

A favorite book question is *so* difficult and it always makes my brain go blank. I feel like my answer so often depends on what I am writing or thinking about at any given moment.

Because I wrote "Our Ancestors" (Conell) in college, maybe I can answer in terms of the books I remember discovering and being really meaningful to me at that time. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* made a huge impression on me in college. So did Toni Morrison's *Sula*. I also discovered W. G. Sebald around that time, and his book *Austerlitz* still makes me want to think harder about how we frame stories, history, and the ghosts of a place.

Works Cited

Conell, Lee. *Lee Conell*. WordPress. https://leeconell.com.

———. Interview. Author. 7 Aug. 2024.

———. "Our Ancestors." *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, vol. 85, 2010, pp. 53–58.

Notable Sigma Tau Delta Alumni: Marion Quirici

BY MIRANDA MILLER

A recent, notable alumni is Dr. Marion Quirici, whose experiences with Sigma Tau Delta's conventions helped bring her work to new audiences and inspire her in further accomplishments:

> Attending the Sigma Tau Delta 2008 Convention, during my senior year of college, was a transformational experience. Just preparing my essay for the convention challenged me to learn how to structure a piece of literary analysis, something I always had a hard time with before. I was double majoring in psychology and English, and my paper was on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and its construction of what I called a "social unconscious." This conference would be the first time my writing would have a real audience other than my professors. The opportunity to see my ideas received by a room full of smart and encouraging listeners, and to engage with their feedback, was more meaningful than I can say. It was equally stimulating to be in the audience for other students sharing their incredible work, including the friends I had traveled with."

Sigma Tau Delta provided her an opportunity to get recognition for the skills she was honing. She added,

> We had the privilege, that year, of meeting Suzanne Lori-Parks and Naomi Shihab Nye. The convention ended with a closing reception, and I was shocked to hear my name and paper title being announced for an award. As a working class, first-generation college student, I had always struggled with low self-esteem and imposter syndrome, and this was the first professional accomplishment that gave me confidence in my potential.

After winning the Isabel Sparks President's Award at the Convention, she continued to develop her craft by revising the critical essay, titled "'Behind the Cotton Wool': The Social Unconscious in

Mrs. Dalloway." She submitted it for publication in the 2009 issue of the *Sigma Tau Delta Review*, and it was published and won the Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award.

She continued her accomplishments as she pursued her MA in English Literature and Irish Studies at Boston College and then her PhD in English at the University of Buffalo. Her interests expanded beyond Irish Studies to include critical disability studies and modernism. In 2015, she received a nationally competitive dissertation-completion fellowship from the American Association of University Women. Later, she also won the Adele Dalsimer Prize for Distinguished Dissertation from the American Conference for Irish Studies.

Dr. Quirici is an example of Sigma Tau Delta alumni taking passion into the community. In addition to teaching writing courses themed on disability studies at Duke University from 2016 to 2022, she took her expertise to the stage. In 2019, she gave a TEDx Talk titled, "Student Activism for Disability Justice and Holistic Access," where she discussed the limitations of current accessibility practices and explained the idea of "holistic access," which is a broader framework to look at accessibility that includes disabilities that are not visible. She also served as Faculty Advisor for the Duke Disability Alliance, Founding Director of the Disability and Access Initiative for Faculty, and Co-Director of the Health Humanities Lab.

In 2022, Dr. Quirici received a position as an Assistant Professor of Disability Studies and Global Anglophone Literature in the Department of English at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, where she continues to teach courses surrounding her varied interests.

Dr. Quirici has published since graduating. She recently published a chapter on James Joyce's Modernist Disability Aesthetics in the 2022 collection, *Joyce Writing Disability*. Her work also has appeared in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, *Éire-Ireland*, and *Joyce Studies Annual*. The newest publication is her upcoming (2025) monograph published by Syracuse University Press and titled *Fitness for Freedom: Disability, Degeneration, and Modern Irish Writing*.

Sigma Tau Delta benefits from alumni like Dr. Quirici, who are lighting the way for new accomplishments by Sigma Tau Delta members.

Works Cited

Quirici, Marion. Interview. Author. 17. Aug. 2024.

Embodying Sigma Tau Delta's Core Values: Sueanna Smith

BY RAISA HARRIS

Sigma Tau Delta alum Sueanna Smith, PhD, began fueling her exemplary English career by publishing her work in the 2010 and 2011 editions of the *Sigma Tau Delta Review*. Her essays were titled, "The Transcendence of Class Ideologies in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" and "A Battle for 'Cherl' Masculinity in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*." Since receiving her BS in social sciences, Smith has earned her MA and PhD in English, specializing in African American literature and history.

The South Carolina resident contributes much of her success to the Sigma Tau Delta publications, stating, "Having my essays selected for publication in the journal is really what opened many doors for me in terms of getting accepted into a PhD program and securing additional publication opportunities." Today, her work can be found in several Gale and Sage reference volumes and the *San Joaquin Valley Journal*. Her 2010 publication in *Sigma Tau Delta Review* was a work featured in Cengage's Literary Criticism Series in 2021.

The accomplished academic and educator continues to expand her portfolio, working alongside an HBO executive in an upcoming documentary exploring the life of the nation's first Black magician. She will be ". . . appearing in the documentary to provide historical context surrounding race and freemasonry," a niche topic in history on which she has dedicated much of her research.

Most recently, she has released her PhD dissertation, "Reimagining Prince Hall: Race, Freemasonry, and Material Culture in Boston, 1775–1870," in which she explores cultural and racial intricacies and implications of freemasonry as an institution.

Her focus and dedication to Black American racial history and freemasonry has driven her to her current role as an instructor for the University of South Carolina's First-Year English Program, a program that Smith describes as having "extremely popular courses themed around topics such as American sports culture, constructions of race in popular culture, and my favorite one: protest, activism, and social

justice." Dr. Smith enthusiastically describes the program, also doting on the writing sector of the course, which focuses on racial profiling and instances of race-based violence. "The great thing is that students get to see how different genres of texts—articles and documentaries; films like *American Skin* and shows like *Grown-ish*; as well as popular hip-hop songs and music videos, like Childish Gambino's 'This is America'—all engage this critical conversation in unique ways."

Her work is not quite done though, as Smith is also an instructor for University 101 courses, which provide community to first-year students and acclimates them to university life. Simultaneously, Smith begins her role as faculty mentor for the university's new First-Gen Center, which she describes as "a learning community and resource center for first-generation college students." Smith explains, "As a first-gen student myself, I understand the unique challenges that these students often face, and I want to help them adjust to what can be an extremely intimidating new world."

Dr. Smith has received prestigious awards and funding in recognition of her research, including the Lapidus Dissertation Fellowship from the Omohundro Institute for Early American Literature and Culture, the Kate B. and Hall J. Peterson Fellowship from the American Antiquarian Society, Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship from the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Bilinski Fellowship from the University of South Carolina, which awards upwards of $40,000 for exceptionally driven and qualified graduate students.

Her dedication to fostering English is what makes her a stellar Sigma Tau Delta alumna, one who reflects the Society's mission through her work and who has found guidance and utility through her membership. When she's not excelling in her field and being recognized in academia, Dr. Smith winds down by watching women's basketball and is particularly fond of the basketball program at The University of South Carolina Gamecock.

Works Cited

Smith, Sueanna. Interview. Author. 18 Aug. 2024.

Critical Essays

Breaking the Cycle of Transgenerational Trauma Transfer in Coates' *Between the World and Me*

BY BOOKER ATKINS

Ta-Nehisi Coates crafted *Between the World and Me* in 2015 during a period of enhanced racial unrest in the United States. When police violence led to the death of Freddie Gray in Coates' hometown of Baltimore, MD, there was significant "discussion about law enforcement's relationship with black communities" (Pinard 1). When Coates witnessed this traumatic event through news reports, he feared that he and his son Samori would lose their bodies to the police. He realized that he needed to join this conversation to teach his son to secure his body as a person of color in the United States. Coates "thought it would be wrong to comfort [Samori]" when these murders seemed like an interminable and unsolvable problem (11). Therefore, he wrote *Between the World and Me* as a personal letter to Samori to reveal the truth about growing up as a person of color in the United States: to teach Samori how to resist a marginalized status.

Frequently, when scholars analyze *Between the World and Me*, they analyze how Coates demonstrates that people of color yearn for a safe space free from racism's effects. Scholar Nicolas Rautenberg writes that the "existential differences between Blackness and Whiteness" that Coates depicts results in searching for places of refuge (3). Scholar Simon Abramowitsch adds that people of color attempt to enter the refuge of "white spaces" but fail to secure their own bodies (473). Leslie Larkin claims that Coates shows how people of color feel they "belong to a world different from" mainstream white society (10). Although scholars note the spatial disconnect that people of color feel, they overlook how Coates shows that trauma in the United States is transmitted continually to future generations, furthering the feeling of not belonging. Scholars also ignore how Coates teaches Samori to resist this oppression, writing *Between the World and Me* to break a cycle of transgenerational trauma and to document how Samori (and people of color) can resist oppression by creating homeplaces in society's margins to repel potentially damaging effects of the American Dream.

Coates suggests that he feels unwelcome in the United States because of the "transgenerational haunting in which an individual's psychic development is shaped by an unspeakable drama" (Simine 145), created when colonial Americans exhausted themselves to establish the nation's foundation. He writes that the United States' system developed through the "pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs" and "the sale of children" (8) and further explains that slaves' (typically people of color) bodies "fed the tobacco," and their "spirit was the blood that watered the cotton" (104). In creating a nation, early Americans traumatized generations of people of color. People of color have experienced transgenerational trauma because the American system and the American Dream thrived from these people's enslaved conditions. Thus, Coates refers to white spaces as distant "planets, space, galaxies, [and] the cosmos" (Larkin 2) and expresses that he "belongs to a world different" than white people because of the trauma of slavery, which provided no home for people of color (10). Thus, Coates reveals that people of color do not feel at home in the United States because their bodies built a country that failed to provide them with places of belonging outside of the institution of slavery.

Coates then shows that the American Dream further transmits transgenerational trauma because its promises ring hollow to people of color who continue to live in constant fear of losing their lives. He writes that the American Dream promises "pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks" (Coates 20), which seem foreign to people of color when the system "dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, [and] breaks teeth" (10). The omnipresent reality of fear that Coates experiences cause him to feel further alienated from the United States because people of color cannot participate in the nation's luxuries when they grapple with the threat of losing themselves. He shows that, because the United States has not created a space for people of color outside of the institution of slavery, the country has not invited them to participate in the American Dream. Coates reveals that "everyone of any importance, from Jesus to George Washington, [is] white" in American culture (43), and the American Dream continues trauma because it fails to represent people of color in its system and values.

Coates then reveals how this transgenerational trauma—of having no place in the system—causes people of color to beat their children,

sustaining the cycle of physical trauma within communities of color. Abramowitsch contends that Coates's acquaintance of Prince Jones and his deadly attempt to assimilate into the upper-middle class, a predominately white space, illustrates why people of color continue to experience fear in the United States. Abramowitsch writes that, although "Jones is a figure of black striving, achievement, and grace" (473), his murder at the hands of police indicates that people of color are not privy to "position outside blackness and within whiteness" when they attempt to assimilate into white spaces (470). Although Abramowitsch notes that people of color fail to find refuge in white spaces, he does not explain how murders like Jones' perpetuate the trauma cycle in communities of color.

Coates argues that the reality of losing one's body in the United States impacts these communities by sparking trauma transfer, which occurs when victims "speak out about their own experiences" and pass secondhand trauma to their audiences (Pederson 106). Coates shows that this transfer happens when parents witness murders like that of Prince Jones. Coates writes that his friends' fathers "slammed their teenage boys for sass" and mothers "belted their girls" when they caught them with drug dealers (16–17). He reveals that, when these parents witness murders of people of color, they try to teach their children to respect life and to guard their bodies. Thus, Coates concludes that the transgenerational trauma of brutality against people of color sustains the cycle of physical trauma transfer within communities of color.

Coates explains why beatings perpetuate fear in communities of color and how parents can break this violent cycle of trauma transfer. He and his friends employed the "darkest humor to cope" with the trauma of being beaten because they became "afraid of those who loved [them] the most" (17). He contends that, when parents beat their children, they transmit the fear which they feel for their children's safety. Although parents intend beatings as lessons of caution, the children learn to fear their parents and a new cycle of trauma develops. Coates shows that a different form of trauma transfer is necessary when he addresses the book to Samori; trauma transfer continues to be necessary because people of color must learn "what it means to lose [one's] body" in the United States (1). This method to deliver trauma differs from how most parents of color teach their children to guard their bodies. Instead of physically beating Samori, Coates strips Samori of his innocence and teaches him the dangers that

he will experience. This gentle way to transfer trauma to Samori allows Coates to break a cycle of physical harm and to teach his son about the reality of living as a person of color, particularly when he names Samori after "Samori Touré, who struggled against the French colonizers for the right to his own black body" but ultimately "died in captivity" (68).

Coates teaches Samori to fight for his life, even though the shadow of the American Dream will never completely diminish. Coates does not comfort Samori about these life-threatening dangers "because [he] has never believed it would be okay" (11). Even though he teaches Samori that racism's threat will surround him, Coates provides his son with hope that he "must find some way to live within" the United States (12). Coates therefore reveals that the purpose of his book is to teach Samori how to live as a person of color who can lose his life at any minute while simultaneously breaking cycles of physical trauma.

Once Coates demonstrates that people of color can break the cycle of violent trauma in their communities, he illustrates how to create a homeplace of resistance in society's margins to further resist the American Dream. Coates indicates that the space beyond the margins is where resistance can occur because those spaces are beyond the Dream's narrative.

Scholar Patrick Keane notes that Howard University is a significant space in the text because, at this university, Coates "met the woman he would later marry" (3). Because Coates developed a lifelong connection with his wife (including through their son), Keane establishes Howard University as a safe space of fond memories for Coates. Howard University also functions as a homeplace in the margins because the university is beyond the Dream's reach. In college, Coates learns to resist the Dream—experiences that he uses to teach Samori how to also resist the Dream.

Spatial theorist Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as bell hooks, defines homeplace as "a safe place where black people [can] affirm one another" and "heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination" (hooks 421). She contends that a homeplace in the margins is a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" because people of color are free from oppression in society's margins (149). Because Howard University is a homeplace away from mainstream society, Coates illustrates that people of color can celebrate their identities on campus because they are not under the threat of losing their bodies. When people of color can celebrate themselves authentically, they can resist the Dream.

In safety in the margins, people of color feel safe and can highlight their diversity and resist the injustice that the American Dream may inflict. In the margin of Howard University, "seemingly endless variations" of people of color co-exist—groups that Coates never considered to be possible (40)—and this diversity creates a vast space "of black people across space-time" (40). Coates explains that people of color form their own society at Howard University, constructing a space for themselves outside the Dream's reach. Therefore, they can freely resist oppression by forming diverse communities without the Dream's looming threat of taking their bodies. Coates illustrates that the congregation of a diverse range of people of color on campus allows Howard University to function as a "machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body" (40). The diversity at Howard University functions as a rehumanizing space in the margins for people of color, and the campus is a safe place to resist oppression by celebrating authentic, diverse identities.

Returning to Howard University, Coates notes that "the birthmark of damnation fades" when catching up with old friends at football games, dances, and other alumni activities (147–49). Howard's space in the margins allows Coates to resist the American Dream because he forgets the fear that the Dream inflicts. As he forgets the overbearing fear of losing his body, he shows that he can establish spaces where threat has no power, and he demonstrates that the social construct of turning people of color "into a race" vanishes at Howard because people of color "have made a home" in society's margins where they are not subject to white society's constraints (149). Coates argues that, when people of color forget the label of race, they resist their oppressors by casting off labels that the American Dream creates and uses to suppress them. Then, they can experience re-humanization in homeplaces in the margins.

Coates demonstrates that people of color can eliminate the labels that white society places on them by creating spaces, and he teaches his son that the fight to resist racism is not hopeless. Although he reveals that transgenerational trauma is still an ongoing problem in the United States, causing parents to transmit physical trauma and fear to their children, he adds that people of color can cast off oppression by congregating in society's margins and expressing their true identities. As a result, they can end cycles of trauma within communities of color by

ending the perpetuation of physical trauma. Reading this lesson as one of resistance is significant, and writing a counternarrative to the American Dream, Coates uses *Between the World and Me* to teach parents in communities of color that, if they end cycles of trauma transfer and establish homeplaces in society's margins, they can experience re-humanization and healing.

Works Cited

Abramowitsch, Simon. "Addressing Blackness, Dreaming Whiteness: Negotiating 21st-century Race and Readership in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*." *CLA Journal*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2017, pp. 458–78. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26557006.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 2015, pp. 145–53.

Keane, Patrick J. "Beauty and Fear: Ta-Nehisi Coates's: *Between the World and Me*." *Salmagundi*, vols. 190/191, iss. Spring/Summer, 2016, pp. 10–23, 178. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2016701002&site=ehost-li ve.

Larkin, Lesley. "'Then Her World Exploded': Science-Fictional Reading and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*." *MELUS*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2022, pp. 89–111. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=202330575147&site=ehost- live.search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=202330575147&site=ehost-live.

Pederson, Joshua. "Trauma and Narrative." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 97–109.

Pinard, Michael. "Holistic Suffering: Freddie Gray in Context." *University of Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender & Class*, vol. 16, no. 2, Sept. 2016, pp. 145–52. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=123418443&site=eds-live.

Rautenberg, Niclas Jonathan. "Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*: A Phenomenology of Racialized Conflict." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2023, pp. 168–84. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2022.41.

Simine, Silke Arnold-de. "Trauma and Memory." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 140–52.

Interrogating Torture and Surveillance in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* in a Post-9/11 Space

BY EMMA BARE

After the 9/11 (2001) terrorist attacks on the United States, J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*—which was published in 1982—appears to be "haunting the Western culture and political imaginary" with its relevance (Boletsi 355). The United States' response to 9/11 and the subsequent detentions and torture that took place in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay prisons parallel (McClintock 50–51) certain themes of Coetzee's novel, such as the use of torture and surveillance in interrogating a constructed enemy to define an empire's power. Torture, both within the novel and in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, are imposed by those positions of power within the empire on those who are suspects or "detainees"—to extract truth and thus defining the interrogator's power. The ambiguous Empire of Coetzee's novel engages in strategies of torture and punishment to define itself as a powerful entity by applying Michel Foucault's concept of the "panopticon" (a method of surveillance used to discipline and punish), which is employed as just one technique of managing the Empire's nonexistent enemy—the barbarians. Coetzee's Empire derives its meaning from the ideological construction of punishment on the barbarians; the United States seems to mirror that meaning as an undefeatable force through the punishment of those imprisoned after 9/11. The new methods of punishment implemented by these two empires reveal the inhumane lengths to which an empire will go to maintain a sense of power over its enemies, real or imagined.

Before Coetzee's Empire can access the true barbarians who it wishes to subject to its rule, the Empire finds another group of "savages" to detain (Coetzee 20). These savages are confined to a yard that leaves them entirely exposed to both the elements and the scrutiny of the town Magistrate, and "[f]or a few days the fisherfolk are a diversion" to the Empire's need for a true enemy (Coetzee). Upon the arrival of the prisoners, the Magistrate remarks, "I spend hours watching them from the upstairs window (other idlers have to watch through the gate) . . . and from my window I stare down, invisible behind the glass" (Coetzee 21). The imprisonment of the fisherfolk is the Empire's first attempt

at defining an enemy that then defines its power. However, the central enemy of this text, the barbarians, almost immediately replaces the fisher people as the sole focus of the Empire's imperial attention. There is a parallel here between Coetzee's Empire's fixation upon the fisherfolk and the barbarians as potential enemies and the imprisonment of people from places like Saudi Arabia and Yemen, whom the US Government detained and interrogated following the 2001 terrorist attacks on America (Worthington 11–13).

Once the fisherfolk are suppressed, Coetzee's Empire is incapable of waiting for another enemy to present itself, which is why the Empire must create an enemy in the barbarians. To wait for the barbarians is to wait for meaning, suspending the Empire in a fragile state of powerlessness. Scholar Michael Valdez Moses addresses Coetzee's fictional empire, desperate to correct interpretations by writing that "the barbarian Other generally appears in the novel as a blank slip onto which the Empire engraves itself; that is, the Empire gives itself form by writing on its subjects" (120). This power of engraving meaning on a constructed enemy—suffusing the Empire with meaning once more—is limited by its accessibility to only a few members of the Empire. The Magistrate, who runs the Empire's small outpost—a base for further conquering, is the only one with an unobstructed view of the prisoners detained in the yard. Furthermore, the prisoner's view of him is entirely obstructed to the point that he is "invisible behind the glass" (Coetzee 21).

This mechanism of observation calls to Foucault's panopticon, which he discusses in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. A panopticon is characterized by cells in view of a central tower, so those who are trapped can be watched by the prison guards but are not allowed to watch the guards in return (Foucault 200). It also relies on "[f]ull lighting and the eye of a supervisor," because light can "capture better than darkness," and darkness "ultimately protected" the prisoners because "[v]isibility is a trap" (Foucault 200).

The prisoners of the Empire have nowhere to hide because they must "stay in the yard"; the Magistrate does "not want idlers coming in to stare at them" (Coetzee 20). The prisoners constantly are exposed to the elements and to the scrutiny of the guards and the Magistrate but never to the public. Meanwhile, the Magistrate is protected by the walls of his home; he is allowed to view the prisoners anytime he likes through his window, without ever concerning himself with the risk of

being scrutinized in return. In this way, the Empire can claim its existence as a threat by reducing its opposite—the people it has imprisoned and belittled—to helpless, suppressed creatures trapped in a cage they cannot escape, as the guards have been instructed to "keep the gate closed" (Coetzee 20).

This construction of the prison and the Magistrate's discreet surveillance of those detained is reflective of the overall structure of Coetzee's Empire. The center of the Empire is not the outpost but an unknown external location that rules the outpost from afar. This invisible power sends agents of the Empire to manage the Magistrate's outpost, an example of which is Colonel Joll, who is meant to lead the interrogation and torture of the barbarian prisoners. The Magistrate instructs his staff upon Joll's arrival that he is "from the Third Bureau . . . the most important division of the Civil Guard" (Coetzee 2). After making this comment, the Magistrate thinks about how rumors stem from "gossip that reaches [them] long out of date from the capital" (2), implying that the center of the Empire is a distant, removed entity, and yet it is constantly watching the outpost and moving pieces around, as if controlling a chessboard. The people who live in the outpost therefore are surveilled like how the Magistrate watches the prisoners, revealing how a panopticon not only exists within the carceral apparatus of the outpost but also as a vein threaded throughout the entirety of the Empire.

An examination of post-9/11 tactics used to manage prisons and interrogate prisoners reveals how the real world draws frightening parallels with the methods used in Coetzee's novel, such as the panopticon. Anne McClintock's "Paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib" examines the chain of command used to control the manifestation of torture and interrogation at the Abu Ghraib prison, where suspected 9/11 sympathizers were detained and punished. According to McClintock, "External conditions for torture at Abu Ghraib were governed and choreographed by a long chain of political and military command that authorized the violence from the highest quarters" (70). These conditions of torture utterly dehumanized the prisoners: "[they] were filthy, often stripped naked (a violation of the Geneva Conventions), or dressed only in ragged prison garb, blankets, or hospital gowns" (McClintock 69). The passageways through which commands reached the prison mimic the chain of command used by Coetzee's Empire: a central power entirely separate from the carceral system decides how

the prisoners will be handled and communicates those orders through agents of the central power sent to the outposts or prisons. Two-way communication does not exist, with no way for the guards in the prison, who are "at the bottom of a long chain of command," to respond to the orders given by the center of power found in the US Government (McClintock 69). The language of torture and surveillance is completely controlled by the central power structure.

Colonel Joll's ideas about how to torture and interrogate prisoners contain hints of tactics used in real prisons like Abu Ghraib, tactics meant to pry whatever truth the Empire deems most useful from the barbarian prisoners. Before Joll arrives, the Magistrate explains, "We do not have facilities for prisoners. . . . There is not much crime here and the penalty is usually a fine or compulsory labor" (Coetzee 2). However, Joll's strategy for torturing the barbarians follows a process: "first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth," upon which the Magistrate remarks that "Pain is truth" (Coetzee 6). Joll is an agent of the Empire sent to inflict pain upon the barbarian prisoners until they reach their breaking point and spill whatever "truth" the Empire seeks, a "truth" with a purpose that is nothing more than to confirm the power the Empire has over the barbarians.

In the world of Coetzee's empire, the Magistrate begins to push back against the power of the Empire by sympathizing with a barbarian girl he finds huddled in the town square one day, who he strong-arms into living with him in his private rooms. The Magistrate becomes fixated upon the sights of torture visibly marring the girl's body, such as her mangled feet and a peculiar grey spot on her eye. The girl finally explains them to the Magistrate:

> "It was a fork . . . with only two teeth. There were little knobs on the teeth to make them blunt. They put it in the coals till it was hot, then they touched you with it, to burn you. . . . That is where the iron touched me. It made a little burn." (Coetzee 46–7)

The Magistrate was ignorant of how the girl was punished by the Third Bureau, indicating that the true language of torture spoken by the Empire was a privatized entity, kept within only those inner circles who

needed to understand it, and that even those who believed they were in a position of authority could be rendered obsolete when they learned the newly defined truth of torture.

Another parallel can be drawn here with the accounts of torture suffered by Guantánamo Bay detainees. The Center for Constitutional Rights published the testimony of one such detainee, Ahmed al-Darbi, who was born in Saudi Arabia. His testimony reveals the use of torture techniques by Guantánamo guards that are similar to ones depicted by Coetzee, in that they targeted the prisoner's senses. The prisoner recounts that "he was prohibited from praying, that his cell was very hot and brightly lit, and that loud music was regularly pumped into his cell" ("Faces of Guantánamo" 9). Just like the barbarian girl's senses were brutalized by agents of the Empire, Ahmed al-Darbi experienced an accosting of his senses from the intense heat, lighting, and music that he endured while imprisoned.

It is unknown whether prison guards in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo resisted their orders to torture and punish the prisoners, but if they had, itis likely they would face a similar punishment to what the Magistrate endured upon his betrayal of the Empire. When the Magistrate is accused of sympathizing with the barbarian girl, he finds himself on the receiving end of the Third Bureau's punishment, as he has destabilized his identity as part of the Empire through his connection to the girl, therefore inserting himself into the definition of the enemy. The Magistrate reflects on the punishment strategies of the Third Bureau: "They will use the law against me as far as it serves them, then they will turn to other methods. That is the Bureau's way. To people who do not operate under statute, legal process is simply one instrument among many" (Coetzee 97).

Even though the Bureau is functioning as an extension of the Empire's will, it holds its own beliefs about how to deal with traitors and does not hesitate to implement these beliefs no matter how appalling in the eyes of the law.

In the post-9/11 period, the United States is found to be just as guilty as Coetzee's Empire of violating human rights laws. According to an article published by the Center for Constitutional Rights, "Torture is outlawed under the U.N. Convention Against Torture, to which the United States is a signatory" ("Faces of Guantánamo" 1). However, the United States did not stop from implementing obscene strategies of

torture as the Bush Administration argued, "against the weight of all legal authority, that members of the Taliban's Armed Forces could not receive the protections of the Geneva Conventions" (1). In the same way that the torture of 9/11 prisoners rewrote the legal definitions of who can be tortured and how, the language of punishment within the Empire is warped through the actions of the Third Bureau, which positions itself outside the laws of the Empire.

The language of punishment and torture is further unsettled within the novel by the unprecedented strategies of torture preferred by Mandel, a new officer brought into the outpost to deal with the Magistrate. At one point, the Magistrate states, "Thinking of him, I have said the words torture . . . torturer to myself, but they are strange words, and the more I repeat them the more strange they grow, till they lie like stones on my tongue" (Coetzee 135). To the Magistrate, leaving the prisoners in the yard, exposed to the elements and the taunts and jeers of the guards, defines torture. But the ruthless tactics of Mandel have upended the Magistrate's understanding of how one body can make another body feel pain. He is learning a new language of torture, the language of the Third Bureau, which brought Mandel to the outpost. In the article "Torture and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," scholar Susan Van Zanten Gallagher writes, "Again, words fail the Magistrate and are inadequate to depict the reality" (Gallagher and Coetzee 273). The term torturer, when reliant on the Magistrate's previous definition of torture, failed completely at encapsulating how Mandel was punishing the Magistrate for his relationship with the barbarian girl. Mandel's tactics at one moment in the novel went so far as to dangle the Magistrate a foot in the air by his arms from a tree, letting him swing and suffer the mockery of those in town who came to witness the Magistrate's punishment (Coetzee 139). Even within the Empire itself, the language of torture and punishment can be easily rewritten with no consideration for the destabilization that the Empire's subjects will suffer when their definitions are countered.

McClintock reveals a truly frightening parallel when discussing the punishment of prisoners in Guantánamo Bay and the way Mandel tortures the Magistrate. McClintock explains that "A widespread form of torture . . . involved shackling people's hands behind their backs and suspending them with the full weight of their bodies hanging from dislocated shoulders, often for hours or entire nights in extreme pain"

(71). This is eerily similar to what the Magistrate suffered at the hands of Mandel, illustrating how both Coetzee's Empire and the empire of the United States completely disregarded the proper legal treatment of prisoners in favor of inhumane torture tactics. 9/11 triggered a complete rewrite of the conceptualization of torture and punishment, which is revealed not only in fiction but also in real-life facts.

Reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* and contextualizing it in a post-9/11 period opens a complex and intricate understanding of the existence of language, specifically on torture and surveillance, within the Empire and the fragility of the Empire's existence itself. Throughout this novel, the meanings of torture and punishment are defined and redefined constantly as the threat of the barbarians is ever-changing. Just like we have seen after 9/11 with the racialized treatment of those who were deemed "suspects" and imprisoned in Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, the creation of the barbarians as an enemy of the Empire speaks to how the Empire must rely on its opposite—the suspects, enemies, detainees, and barbarians—to have any kind of meaning. Nothing with power has any definition or agency without subjects upon whom power can be exerted.

Works Cited

Boletsi, Maria. "Waiting for the Barbarians after 9/11: Functions of a Topos in Liminal Times." *Barbarism Revisited: New Perspectives on an Old Concept*, 27 Oct. 2015, pp. 355–75. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004309272.

Coetzee, J. M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Introduction by Sisonke Msimang, Text Publishing, 2019.

"Faces of Guantánamo: Torture." Center for Constitutional Rights, ccrjustice.org/files/FOG_torture.pdf. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1977.

Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten, and J. M. Coetzee. "Torture and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1988, pp. 277–85. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1208441.

McClintock, Anne. "Paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib." *Small Axe*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2009, pp. 50–74. *Project MUSE*, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/261519.

Moses, Michael Valdez. "The Mark of Empire: Writing, History, and Torture in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1993, pp. 115–27. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4336813.

Worthington, Andy. *The Guantanamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in* America's Illegal Prison. Pluto Press, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/linfield/detail.action?docID=5390953.

Sins of the Mother? Violence, Empowerment, and Reclamation of Bodily Autonomy in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

BY SHARON CABANA

> "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow. Better even to die free than to live slaves."
>
> —Frederick Douglas, "Men of Color, to Arms! Now or Never!"

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* racism, sexism, and capitalist systems of oppression intersect through the lives of a free family in post-slavery Ohio. In this paper, I explore this intersectionality, integrating the preexisting framework of Marxist and feminist theories to create an original literary analysis. I argue that Sethe's act of murder is representative of both the violent revolution necessitated in the Marxist vision of a post-capitalist society and a reclamation of bodily autonomy that subverts patriarchal gender norms of motherhood. Rather than an act of madness, I instead argue that Sethe's act was a revolutionary imperative brought about by the need to survive that undermined both the economic system of slavery and the oppressive structures of gendered heteronormativity. Using both germinal and contemporary feminist and Marxist texts regarding historical context, gender, and the body, I provide an integrative analysis to support this thesis, which draws from and seeks to challenge existing literature and privileges to marginalized voices that re-author analyses of bodies, power, and the family system. Finally, I contend that Beloved's presence in the novel is not just a manifestation of grief but a reassertion of the mother/child bond as integral to a family system that further challenges heteronormative standards of gender and family.

The intersectionality of these areas of marginalization is elucidated through the juxtaposition of Marxist and feminist theories. Gayle Rubin argues that "[i]f sexism is a by-product of capitalism's relentless appetite for profit, then sexism would wither away in the advent of a successful socialist revolution" (901). She is inextricably linking the areas of cultural oppression of class, race, and gender as well as stating the

need for anti-oppressive liberation, which, to date, remains unachieved. Whereas Marxist theory focuses on the external oppressive nature of capitalist systems, feminist theory integrates psychodynamic, Marxist, and deconstructionist theories to root out the oppressive structures inherent in gender as a cultural construct. This integration exemplifies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that "every issue of racial meaning must be embodied through the specificity of a particular class position—and every issue of class, for instance, through the specificity of a particular gender position" (1017). To reframe Sethe's actions in the text, any analysis must include an awareness of the intersectionality of social location. Slavery is fundamentally built on the exploitation of oppressed African American bodies; it is within this historical context that both the text and its writer were living, with literature playing a role as an agent of cultural change, both in its content and its creation.

To better understand the myriad of ways Morrison's text subverts patriarchal cultural norms, the historical context in which *Beloved* was created should be considered. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 mandated the return of escaped slaves to their owners and allowed for their retrieval across state lines, even if those states were considered free ("Fugitive Slave Act"). In 1856, while in jail, Margaret Garner was interviewed by the *American Baptist* after she hit her children with a shovel and sliced one of their throats (Singh "The Story of Margaret Garner"). The interviewer attempted to understand Garner's motivations and state of mind, which she attested was "as cool as I now am" (par. 10). Garner stated that she "would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piece-meal" (par. 10) Though *Beloved* is categorically fictional, this real-life inspiration raises critical questions regarding Sethe's state of mind during the murder. The interpretation of the act, in this context, suggests that the mother's deed was less out of madness and more out of a sane cognizance of her children's sufferings upon returning to their slaveowners; she chose bodily autonomy to free them from suffering, even at the expense of her cultural expectation as a mother. More importantly, Morrison's direct relationship to her creative work and the article that served as her inspiration further challenged these cultural prescriptions of motherhood. Morrison wrote about a mother who was not only devoted enough to do the unthinkable but capable of doing it.

In addition, both feminist and Marxist literary analyses force the reader to consider the social context of the work's creation. Toni Morrison's family migrated from Alabama to Kentucky to Ohio, mirroring the trajectory of many characters in her book (Singh, "Biographical Notes"). Her mother was primarily employed in the home and was an avid member of the local church, which may have also inspired some of her writings of Baby Suggs. When Toni Morrison was two years old, her parents could not afford the four-dollar rent on their home, so the landlord set the house on fire with the family inside (Singh, "Biographical Notes"). Morrison directly experienced the physical violence associated with systemic racism (Singh, "Biographical Notes"), and she gives voice to the violent and oppressive ways that capitalist systems (e.g., rent) and racism intersect to oppress people of color, an intersection that manifests throughout the text, particularly in scenes involving Schoolteacher.

Historically, many slave narratives were told from the perspective of white abolitionists (Becker). Morrison's writing of a text that centers around a black woman's story echoes Helene Cixous's call that "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (940). Morrison's story further "legitimizes the discredited past and presence of marginalized African Americans" (Mehmood et al. 23), challenging the historical dominance of white, male, heteronormative writers speaking about history and human experience. This exemplifies Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan's call that "[n]o matter how much it spuriously resolves contradictions in society between the rich and the poor or between an ideal of 'freedom' and a reality of economic enslavement, literature must also show them forth for all to see" (712). In this way, the rereading of Sethe's murder of Beloved necessitates awareness of the act as both a feminist and Marxist revolution. This revolution is not only embedded in the text itself but also in the creation of the text that centered on a narrative born from the direct experience of cultural oppression and marginalization.

A core theme of the role of motherhood provides insight into the intersections between race and gender. Judith Butler identifies the compulsory nature of performative gender identity, arguing "[i]t is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence" (957–58). After the murders of her children, Sethe is ostracized from

the community, an isolation that is only rectified when Denver seeks support outside of the home with Beloved's ghost. Sethe's ostracism implies she stepped away from ascribed gender expectations of motherhood. By taking the life of her child, she violated a core characteristic ostensibly inherent to motherhood—to protect one's children. This is supported by Mabel Deane Khawaja, who asserts that Morrison subverts the archetypal imagery of the mother through the act of violence (282). She *was* protecting her children, arguably in the only way available to her: "'I stopped him,' she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. 'I took and put my babies where they'd be safe'" (Morrison 193). This is reified when Beloved's ghost in her last manifestation becomes a pregnant woman (308). In Jungian interpretation, the land is gendered as female. Beloved's last return to the land as a pregnant woman is suggestive of a reclamation of womanhood outside culturally constructed norms. Beloved expands until her final return to the water and Sethe diminishes into rest like Baby Suggs. Her ultimate sacrifice to the ghost completes the cycle of power over life and death. Beloved becomes, in shadow form, all that she could have been, freeing Sethe to rest after the suffering she endured to save her child from slavery. In this way, Beloved's presence is not terrifying and haunting but a tragic and symbiotic forgiveness between mother and child.

Furthermore, the violence engendered by the murder effectively robbed the slave traders of economic resources and undermined the capitalist system of slavery, which depended on cycles of new bodies to perpetuate its existence. Elena Kitanovska-Ristoska contends that "[t]he products of a slave's labour were claimed by someone else, who had also the right to control the slave's reproduction" (39). Here again, Sethe's act reestablishes the power in her role as a mother, including the life and death decision for her children within the system of slavery. Kitanovska-Ristoska further asserts that Sethe can be seen as "a victim of the violence of the institution of motherhood, whose love for her children was filled with despair" (44). Forced to reproduce within the context of slavery, Sethe's doomed role of mother challenges archetypes because of the context of capitalist and racist oppression. Within the context of slavery, further awareness of the fragmentation of self exists, in both becoming a mother and suffering slavery. As Bolanle Koledade asserts, "Slavery splits a person into a fragmented figure. The identity, consisting of painful memories and unspeakable past, denied and kept

at bay, becomes a 'self that is no self'" (78). By reasserting her power as a mother by both choosing life and death for her children, Sethe undermines gendered stereotypes of motherhood, subverts systems of economic oppression, and reclaims power in a system that depends on that oppression. This demonstrates that her murder of Beloved is both a feminist reclamation of identity and a Marxist revolution in a single act.

Even the intersection of these theories is not without limitations. Rivkin and Ryan point out where feminism is weakest: "[t]he psychology or identity that feminist essentialists think is different from men's is merely the product of condition under patriarchy, a condition to be caring, relational, and maternal" (896). This requires an analysis to move away from early essentialist feminist writings and explore the ways intersectionality informs text and its creation. As Becker notes, many narratives about slavery were written by white abolitionist authors, particularly women (8). The preponderance of white abolitionist voices, I contend, creates a vacuum through which black, formerly enslaved voices speak truth to their experiences. In this case, Morrison's direct experience with racialized violence lends credence and profundity to the narrative. Though these theories intersect well, Marxist theory, due to its emphasis on systems of power and economy, best helps in understanding the tragic byproduct of the system motherhood during slavery is. Marxist theory, however, simultaneously fails to recognize the impact racism has on these systems, and it therefore risks undermining the oppressive nature of racism through erasure.

A reinterpretation of Beloved's murder is not complete without a consideration of the role of the body in the text. The portrayal of food and nutrition speaks to both the control of slavery over the body as well as autonomy over the body throughout the text. Richard Steckel notes that food was a form of control over slave populations (721, 740). Basic nutrition was determined by utility to the slave owners. Throughout Morrison's text, food plays an integral role in the characters' relationships to each other. For example, Denver's emotional eating to bury her pain and isolation at the start of the text transforms into her freedom at the end of the text. Furthermore, Sethe's plaintive "They took my milk!" as she was denied the right to feed her children and was violently raped (Morrison 20) demonstrates the integral role food plays in motherhood and reveals how oppression includes denying one's natural imperative to feed one's children. Also, Beloved's need to consume food to the point

of depriving Sethe and Denver (e.g., 281, 285) centers food as a power source. When Denver seeks support from neighbors and friends, they begin delivering food to her house (289–293), restoring community and recentering the narrative.

The portrayal of the body and flesh further supports the importance of food and the power related to it. Baby Suggs's sermon speaks to the lived experience of racial oppression: "Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it speaks to the lived experience of racial oppression" (Morrison 103). In a capitalist system, the flesh is a subject to be exploited for economic gain. As Louis Althusser asserts, "the individual is interpreted as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjugation" (776). True rebellion is not just from the overt systems of oppression but also from the covert oppression of cultural, economic, and racial hegemonies. In Morrison's text, freedom and autonomy over flesh speak to the subversion of these power structures. When Paul D enters the narrative, Sethe engages in sexual intimacy with him. Sethe contemplates while she is "naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breast, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread" (Morrison 21). In this act of accepting sexual autonomy, she reasserts control over her body and takes it back from the systems of oppression. Gale Rubin states, "women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin" (911). However, these acts suggest a means of reconstructing these essentialist gendered binaries. A further reading can also find a feminist subversion through the house's rebellion against the sexual act, undermining compulsory heteronormativity and recentering the narrative to a family outside the heteronormative social structure such as—Sethe, Beloved, and Denver as the core family unit. The act of loving and loving flesh is therefore another form of both feminist and Marxist revolution.

As with an analysis of motherhood, both Marxist and feminist readings of the story have relative limitations. Marxist interpretations are strong because of the ways in which the systems of economic oppression play out in the landscape of the flesh. Feminist theories require a deconstructionist and psycho-dynamically influenced interpretation to veer away from relying on heteronormative gender norms and to celebrate alternate interpretations of motherhood. In doing so, an understanding

of autonomy's role over the body is created, granting Sethe grace in her act of murder, as she reclaims her child's future and becomes an autonomous being who supports her family, including the ghost of her child. Only when Sethe's autonomy is threatened can she and Beloved return to their psychospiritual roots. In this way, the text exemplifies Karl Marx's description of a revolution that "aims at a more decided and radical negation of the previous conditions of society" ("The German Ideology" 735), including race and gender cultural constructs. After all, there can be no construction of new cultural norms without the deconstruction of the previous ones.

This paper presents a close reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, drawing from the author's biographical history and the historical context of the novel's creation. Using both Marxist and feminist lenses, I argue that Sethe's murder of Beloved was not an act of madness or grief but an act of violent solitary revolution that defied both gendered norms and the brutal socioeconomic systems of capitalist slavery. Through this analysis of the role of motherhood, gender, and bodily autonomy, Sethe's act can be met with tragic grace, as it exemplifies a subversion of the oppressive environment in which she and her writer lived and it reclaims autonomy and authorship of both the story itself and the context in which it was created.

Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Appartuses." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 768–77.

Becker, Peter. "Genealogies of Sympathy: Reclaiming the Maternal in Frederick Douglas's Narrative and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature*, vol. 75, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1–28.

Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination I." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. 1st ed., edited by Diana Fuss, Routledge, 1991. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699553.

Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of Medusa." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 940–954.

Douglas, Frederick. "Men of Color, to Arms! Now or Never!" 2 Mar. 1863. *Library of Congress*, https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm000556. Accessed 2 Sept. 2024.

"Fugitive Slave Act: September 18, 1850." *American Battlefield Trust*, https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/fugitive-slave-act. Accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

Khawaja, Mabel Deane. "New Feminist Voices in American Literature: Telling Tales of Mothers and Daughters." *International Journal of the Humanities Annual Review*, vol. 8, no. 11, 2011, pp. 281–88. https://doi.org10.18848/1447-9508/cgp/v08i11/43052.

Kitanovska-Ristoska, Elena. "Motherhood as an (Im)Possible Mission for Slave Mothers as Presented in Beloved by Toni Morrison." *Vizione*, vol. 37, 2021, pp. 39–49.

Koledade, Bolanle. "Slavery and Freedom in Toni Morrison Paradise and Beloved: A Marxist Approach." *Al-Hikmah Journal of Education*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 74–79.

Kosofsky Sedgwick, E. "The Epistemology of the Closet." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 1014–123.

Marx, Karl. "The Philosophic and Economic Manuscripts of 1844." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 717–29.

———. "The German Ideology." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 730–35.

Mehmood, Irfan, et al. "Toni Morrison as an African American Voice: A Marxist Analysis." *Journal of African American Studies,* vol. 25, no. 1, Mar. 2021, pp. 22–28. https://doi.org10.1007/s12111-020-09509-z.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books. 2004.

Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. "Introduction: Feminist Paradigms/Gender Effects." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 893–900.

Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan, editors. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Wiley Blackwell, 2017.

Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 901–24.

Singh, Amardeep. "Biographical Notes." *Toni Morrison: A Teaching and Learning Resource Collection*, Section 1. Lehigh University, 1987. https://scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/beloved-1987. Accessed 5 Sept. 2024.

Singh, Amardeep. "The Story of Margaret Garner: Inspiration for *Beloved*." *Toni Morrison: A Teaching and Learning Resource Collection* Apr. 2021, https://scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/the-story-of-margaret-garner-inspiration-for-beloved. Accessed 2 Sept. 2024.

Steckel, Richard H. "A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1986, pp. 721–41. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2121481.

Prince Charming, Prince Patriarchy: Sibyl Vane's Life Dictated in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

BY ABIGAIL EATON

The traditional romance narrative is not the storyline for Sibyl Vane in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Sibyl is merely a grain of sand in Dorian Gray's beach of self-fulfillment and narcissism. Wilde starts *Dorian Gray* with artist Basil Hallward painting a charming picture of Dorian and praising his youthful innocence. With a god-like complex, Dorian indulges in aesthetic and sensual pleasures, including falling in love with Sibyl's artistry as an actress. However, their relationship is short-lived as he quickly loses interest; she is merely a pawn in Wildes's patriarchal society, in which characters with wealth and power are men, and women are othered and objectified as vessels of pleasure. Suffering beneath the weight of Dorian's shallow-rooted passions, Lord Henry's disapproval, and her brother's hyper-masculine defensiveness, Sibyl's life is dictated by sexist men, which eventually leads to her suicide.

Dorian is enchanted by Sibyl because, through his tainted lens, he sees her as her craft. A seventeen-year-old actress, Sibyl plays multiple Shakespearean heroines and catches Dorian's attention. In describing her to his friends, Dorian tells them to imagine "a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little, flowerlike face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark brown hair, eyes that [are] violet wells of passion, lips that [are] like the petals of a rose" (Wilde 51). He sees her as a delicate flower, an untapped source of passion, the epitome of fertility and virginity, and one whose petals will delicately fall into his hands at the slightest mention of interest. Dorian's view of her represents the harmful ideologies of a patriarchal system.

In late nineteenth-century London, gender roles were pertinent: men held most of the power, considering themselves naturally strong and decisive. At the same time, they justified viewing women as weak and in proximity to their own uses. According to feminist theorist Lois Tyson, Sibyl is seen as a "true woman who fulfill[s] her gender role" (142), as a woman who is "fragile, submissive, and sexually pure" (143). Subjected to and characterized by her rose-like appearance, she amounts to a fragile young woman. Author Virginia Woolf discusses

that men's little knowledge of a woman's life is evident in how they portray women in literature, as they "observe through the black or rosy spectacles which [they] put upon [their] nose" (899), highlighting "the astonishing extremes of [woman's] beauty and horror, her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity" (899). Wilde's portrayal of Sibyl confines readers to this rose-colored viewpoint. Dorian sees Sibyl's youthful innocence and goodness as her talent; however, the existence of her soul and true worth as a human and woman is absent from the text.

Sibyl is eternally subjected to Dorian's viewpoint. Falling in love with her artistry, he cannot help "going to see Sibyl play . . . even if it is only for a single act"; he is "hungry for her presence; and when [he] think[s] of the wonderful soul that is hidden away in that little ivory body, [he is] filled with awe" (Wilde 55). Though romantic sounding, Dorian's perception is rooted in his shallow nature to subject a woman's worth to her appearances and skill. Enchanted with her, he asserts that her innocence belongs solely to him. Dorian desires to "place her on a pedestal of gold" (77) and to see the world "worship the woman [who] belong [s] to him" (77). Dorian enforces his power over her, seeking to present her as a prized possession to be desired. Scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss how women are represented in literature only as lovers, revealing that the great women of fiction are "seen only in relation to the other sex" (899). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, perspective of Sibyl aligns with Gilbert and Gubar's theory, as Sibyl is seen only in her relationships with men, her characterization is limited to their observations, and her short bouts of passion are only directed to Dorian. A majority of her dialogue is solely focused on either her profession of love toward Dorian or men's perception of her, illustrating Wilde's patriarchal portrayal of women.

The patriarchal relationships around her dictate Sibyl's life; yet, even in love, she becomes enslaved to Dorian. The "joy of a caged bird [is] in her voice" when she declares to her family her love for Dorian as he frequently attends her performances (Wilde 62). Like a metaphorical bird, Sibyl is young and has a bright future ahead, but she is paradoxically and unknowingly caged by the patriarchy. The system dictates her belonging to the men and systems of her time, moving her from her brother's to her stage manager's and then to Dorian's rule. The theme of freedom resonates, as Sibyl claims that she is "free in her prison of

passion" (66) because her "prince charming [is] with her" (66). In this paradox, Sibyl feels emancipated to indulge in the passion of her new lover, even if it means enslaving her heart to his care, but she does not see that their relationship is transactional. She functions under this patriarchal structure because this system is all that she knows and she is limited in what she thinks she can amount to as a woman in the nineteenth century.

Competing with her brother's hyper-masculine protection, Sibyl feels like her family does not understand her feelings. James Vane, the man of the family, upholds the patriarchy through his vows to hurt anyone who threatens her safety. Gilbert and Gubar describe how "female characters [are only] depicted according to patriarchal stereotypes of women" (1620). In these stereotypes, women are seen as inferior to men, and individuals like James consider themselves the rightful head of the family and they desire and demand respect and submission from the women in their family**.** James's mistrust of Dorian reveals this patriarchal pressure, as he holds the power to tell Sibyl with whom she can have a relationship, thus rendering her incapable of making a wise decision as a woman. He considers the "young dandy who was making love to her . . . no good" (Wilde 67), and he hates Dorian for being a gentleman: "he [sees] infinite peril for Sibyl and Sibyl's happiness" (67). James even swears that, if Dorian wrongs Sibyl, he will "kill him" (69) and, in his instinctual disapproval, he upholds the patriarchal belief that he is responsible for Sibyl's life and choices (69). James, though not intentionally hurting her, controls Sibyl's love life, which stems from his jealousy and his fear of losing his relationship with her.

Beyond her relationship with her family, Sibyl suffers from the opinions and perceptions of Dorian's friends, who objectify her as a worthless figure of pleasure. They console Dorian, encouraging him to love whomever he wants and enforcing the patriarchal idea that men can do what they please with the inferior sex. Lord Henry vows that "faithfulness is to the emotional life what consistency is to the life of the intellect—simply a confession of failure" (Wilde 74). This viewpoint enforces the idea that relationships are shallow and that men can love whomever they want and thus can move from woman to woman. Concerning Georg W. F. Hegel's theory of the master-slave dialectic, the men within this patriarchy operate by requiring the otherness of women. They do not see the other (women) as developed or equal beings and are

unwilling "to acknowledge that the "other" is also a self, who has a need and a right for a being-for-self" (547). With this perception, women become inessential, and men require the "othering" of women to define their manliness. As the "other" in Lord Henry's eyes, Sibyl is reduced to her sensual role of actress, in which he delights, but he pushes back on Dorian's intent to marry her. Lord Henry hopes that "Dorian Gray will make this girl his wife, passionately adore her for six months, and then suddenly become fascinated by someone else" (Wilde 75). In "othering" Sibyl, her objectification and aesthetic delight are far more pleasurable than her status as a partner in marriage.

Even in the portrayal of her death, Dorian considers Sibyl's passing as a sacrifice to him, considering that she has served her life's purpose to please him. Jilted and distraught, Sibyl dies by suicide in her dressing room. Dorian resolves that "she had died for love of him, and love would always be a sacrament to him now" (Wilde 104), considering Sibyl a "wonderfully, tragic figure" showing the "supreme realities of love" (104). He paints her in a Christ-like manner, considering her tragic death as an ode to their love. In this sexist mindset, she has served her role, and he delights in her death as a romantically heightened experience. He thinks that she "lived her finest tragedy" (109) and died a martyr-like death (109). Ultimately, Dorian takes her last words by defining the purpose of her death, forever tainting her reputation in relation to his own. Although Dorian feels momentary remorse for the love and life he has lost, he twists the narrative, rendering her as a martyr to his own pleasures with her dying an aesthetic death.

Unfortunately for Sibyl, her Prince Charming is instead Prince Patriarchy who dictates the ending of her life. Even from a limited perspective, before she dies, she aspires to find true love and become a successful actress, but these fantasies are short-lived—experiences bound to the stage or fantasy and impossible in real life. As a woman, Sibyl is a pawn, tossed from the rule of her brother to her stage manager to the mockery of Lord Henry and finally to the false love of Dorian. To pursue her own desires, she declares love, giving herself to and for someone who cannot see as herself. She is objectified for her beauty and talent, but when she can no longer perform, she is no longer of use to the men in her life. Even in her death, her pain and suffering are twisted by Dorian into a narrative of martyrdom and the ultimate fulfillment of his desires and of only the characters she acted on stage.

Works Cited

Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. "The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination." Leitch, pp. 1619–621.

Hegel, Georg. "Phenomenology of Spirit." Leitch, pp. 549–55.

Leitch, Vincent B., editor. *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*. 2nd ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Tyson, Lois. "Using Concepts of Feminist Theory to Understand Literature." *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write about Literature*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 142–44.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Sterling Publishing Co., 1890.

Woolf, Virginia. "Chloe Liked Olivia." Leitch, pp. 898–900.

Becoming Offred: Deconstruction and Feminism in the Names in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

BY ERIKA B. GIRARD

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* utilizes characters' names as identity-forming within a dystopian world in equally explicit and implicit ways. The novel depicts a patriarchal societal ideal for such an examination because it exhibits names as tools for identity construction through paradox, power, and self-expression. Gilles Deleuze's concept of Becoming and Adrienne Rich's seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality" both encourage analysis in this context. The following research expresses deconstructionist relevance, feminist significance, and meaningful connections between these theories while focusing primarily on names. Explored through Deleuze's Becoming and Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality," character names contribute significantly to identity formation in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In "What Is Becoming?" Deleuze employs the concept of paradox to observe something in two "senses or directions at the same time," demonstrating that a character who is in the process of growing larger—Alice in Wonderland is his example—is, during that action, both larger than she has been and smaller than she will be (471). Becoming accounts for identity formation, and names specifically pose an opportunity for individuals to "become." Rossella Di Rosa elucidates Deleuze's "process of becoming" by studying how "material and fluid identities . . . undermine the traditional understandings of stability, fixity, and identity" (Di Rosa 144). In this pattern of reasoning, the identity someone possesses is not necessarily an indicator of who they have been or will be. Identity is in flux, and one controls their own identity in any given season. A single identity does not define an individual, making it easier for one to maintain hope and create new versions of oneself despite their circumstances.

However, Becoming can be tricky to apply because names, rather than solidifying identity, only signify a single identity that is in a continual state of change (although additional identities emerge with nicknames and other variations). Identity is fluid and infinite, concurrently "both . . . future and past," indicating the inability of identity to remain

constant (Deleuze 472). One is always becoming, alternating between past, present, and future selves. Deleuze warns that "pure becoming" can divest an individual of their personal identity and proper name entirely, which may explain why Becoming is not typically applied to names in literary research (472). Names are merely words, words merely letters, and letters merely signs, together in a system of signified and signifier asserted by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Barbara Johnson 529–30). Thus, names simultaneously hold infinite meaning and no meaning, especially character names.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the most prominent display of Becoming is the narrator's process of becoming her learned name, Offred, while retaining her former name in remembrance of her former identity. Individuals without power are defined by their names, such as Handmaids, who are forced to adopt a name that references the name of the Commander to whom they are subject. Renaming the Handmaids not only devalues each woman's given name but also devalues each woman by removing her identity and replacing her freedom with a moniker dependent—and illustrating her dependence—on the name of the man who owns her. Even Marthas, little more than servants, are known by their names because they are permanently part of the household. Individuals with power, though, define themselves by their names. Serena Joy creates her name: "Serena Joy was never her real name, not even then. Her real name was Pam" (Atwood 45). She is both named and nameless, her name a created identity that she fails to fully embody; in this way, she has multiple identities and no true identity. The Aunts also retain their own names and therefore their identities as an expression of power over the Handmaids they instruct. Names are weapons for mental warfare wielded by those who can define themselves over those who cannot.

Adrienne Rich's influential essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality" investigates several "methods by which male power is manifested and maintained" and thereby influences identity formation (931). Rich's list of characteristics, originally introduced by anthropologist Kathleen Gough and broken down categorically by Rich, offers a foundation for observing strategies of oppression. This approach elucidates connections between society as a whole and individual men's abuses of power over women. Patriarchal societies have encouraged "the socialization of women to feel that male sexual 'drive' amounts to a right" (Rich 930). For example, Rich specifies the command of men in "the institutions

of marriage and motherhood as unpaid production . . . [and in] male control of abortion, contraception, sterilization, and child-birth" (930). Another of Rich's draws from Gough includes "the power of men . . . to control or rob [women] of their children" (930). Alas, Rich's argument does not encapsulate the full spectrum of male power. Her expository list is by no means exhaustive and her examples are just that—examples—as Rich expressly notes sexual promotions of power. Her analysis is tied to Gough's list from her essay "The Origin of the Family," in which "Gough does not perceive these power characteristics as specifically enforcing heterosexuality, only as producing sexual inequality" (Rich 929–30). Concepts that go beyond sex and sexuality as dominating forces men employ to wield control over women are not raised in this essay.

Applying Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality" to *The Handmaid's Tale* illuminates not only the patriarchy but also more nuanced manners of implementing names as identifying markers. The structure of the naming system for the Handmaids is intensely misogynistic. Forcing each Handmaid to abandon her former name is an institution by men, especially the Commanders, to designate ownership and promote obedience of women. Such a method of control illustrates the men's power over the Handmaids to eliminate individuality and retain authority. The name Offred, a possessive moniker that in fact means "of Fred," points to Commander Fred's possession of her as his Handmaid and communicates her obligatory subservience (Atwood xv). Researcher Tom Henthorne makes a viable claim that "names and naming are a very important function within *The Handmaid's Tale*: they represent a means of preserving identities [that] the State [i.e., Gilead] hopes to obliterate and a way for people to connect and even conspire" (108). Names are consequently utilized for intentional purposes like manipulation, expression, and control.

For the tactic of manipulation, Handmaids are forbidden to keep their former names. Deprived of her own name, a Handmaid is deprived of hope. This becomes evident when the narrator reveals, "I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live" (Atwood 143). Former names seemingly portray Handmaids as equal to Wives, Commanders, and Marthas; therefore, suppression and ignorance limit some of the dangerously bitter dynamic between said individuals. "Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous," the narrator notes (40).

Names, used also as a force for expression, are paramount for maintaining individuality. Critic Fiona Tolan claims that renaming someone, like the Handmaids are renamed, "diminish[es] the individuals by reducing them to the group" (22). Individuality thus vanishes when Handmaids are renamed. The narrator despairs when she realizes that her friend "Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names" (Atwood 283).

Because utilizing names for control is perhaps the foremost patriarchal method, Alexandra-Maria Vrînceanu's analysis provides feminist insight into oppression in Gilead within *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vrînceanu's approach explores the obedience of women in the novel, noting that "women are the sad result of a totalitarian, patriarchal society" (149). The patriarchal dynamic of this society demands women be dutiful, with rights depending on status. Gough's list of the marks of power includes "men's ability . . . to use [women] as objects in male transactions" (768). The Commander's power to use Offred for reproduction is evidenced by his name replacing hers. A Handmaid's autonomy is quite literally stripped as she performs the transaction necessary of her position for the man whose name she bears.

Convergence between Deleuze's deconstructionist Becoming and Rich's feminist "Compulsory Heterosexuality" yields compelling discoveries, primarily the use of names as expression. Observed individually, these theories analyze the latter before arriving at an intersection. Critic Brian Johnson links Deconstruction to language, specifically gossip, albeit through Derrida rather than Deleuze. He states that although "it might be taken to suggest Derrida's multiplication of contexts and the ways in which meaning is never determinable . . . the Handmaids' gossip itself tells a very different story" (Brian Johnson 51). Therefore, gossip constitutes an art form and language functions as expression, both "active and passive" as in the continuous process of Becoming (Deleuze 472). Replacing gossip with names creates a new perspective of language as art. Alternately, Tolan analyzes feminism in Atwood's fiction through individuality. The uniformity of Handmaid names removes their uniqueness; yet, if renaming Handmaids removes individuality, the opposite must also be true. This is clear when the narrator reflects, "I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (Atwood 97). She retains her previous identity by remembering her name.

Combining the deconstructionist notion of identity and the feminist conception of expression, one notices that names express identity; a Handmaid's former name grants her power over herself. Offred is extremely selective with whom she shares her former name; her name is a secret belonging to her alone. She shares this name with Nick as a bond of care: "I tell him my real name, [*sic*] and feel that therefore I am known" (Atwood 270). Likewise, a Handmaid's former name grants others a way of gaining her trust. The narrator's trust in Nick, conveyed by sharing her name, is returned when he seeks her trust. When Nick arrives with the men from the black van, he tries to comfort her, saying, "'It's all right. It's Mayday. Go with them.' He calls me by my real name" (293). A Handmaid's former name also contains her identity without binding her to the role of Handmaid. The name Offred fetters the narrator to her position, in a life parallel to the one she once lived. She reveals,

> My name isn't Offred, [*sic*] I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. . . . I think of this name as buried." (Atwood 84)

A Handmaid's former name is synonymous with her past identity—now held as a precious memory—and freedom.

Utilizing Deleuze's Becoming and Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality" for exploring character names as critical for identity formation in *The Handmaid's Tale* therefore proves insightful. Together, these methodologies create interesting arguments for identity as a construct and names as power, as well as identity as power and names as constructs. Although Deleuze's Becoming is rarely applied to names, and Rich's essay is seldom applied to this novel, intersections of these theories in Atwood's text are intriguing. Such study punctuates the necessity of reflection; names promote character building and expose characters as well as readers. Insight gained on identity formation suggests contemporary relevance in the way writers name characters, individuals invent themselves, and everyone wields the power of words. Delving further into identity construction in *The Handmaid's Tale* through Deleuze's Becoming and Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality" may lead to other

discoveries. Names can be researched in tandem with colors or clothes as examples of identity creation within Atwood's novel. Perceiving these through the same theories offers a multifaceted approach. Ultimately, the theories of Deleuze and Rich separately and cooperatively provide fresh perspectives of characters' names. Identity formation in the contemporary world is limited only by the imagination, yet for characters within the dystopian world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, identity formation is deliberately limited by the names they possess.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985. Anchor Books, 1998.

Deleuze, Gilles. "What Is Becoming?" 1989. Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 471–73.

Di Rosa, Rossella. "Material and Trans-Corporeal Identities in Ferrante's and Atwood's Narratives." *MLN*, vol. 136, no. 1, 2021, pp. 143–63. *Project MUSE*, https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2021.0008.

Gough, Kathleen. "The Origin of the Family." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1971, pp. 760–71. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.2307/349449.

Henthorne, Tom. "Naming Names: Identity and Identification in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Onoma: Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences*, vol. 40, 2005, pp. 105–13. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.2143/ONO.40.0.2033073.

Johnson, Barbara. "Writing." 1995. Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 528–35.

Johnson, Brian. "Language, Power, and Responsibility in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Toward a Discourse of Literary Gossip." *Canadian Literature*, no. 148, 1996, pp. 39–55. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.14288/cl.v0i148.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience." 1986. Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 925–39.

Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan, editors. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 3rd ed., Wiley Blackwell, 2017.

Tolan, Fiona. "Feminist Utopias and Questions of Liberty: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as Critique of Second Wave Feminism." *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 18–32. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040500045763.

Vrînceanu, Alexandra-Maria. "The 'Handmaid' and the 'Chambermaid': A Comparative Analysis of Atwood's Seminal Novel from a Feminist Perspective." *Linguaculture*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2021, pp. 145–61. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.47743/lincu-2021-2-0210.

Deconstructing the *Brave New World* of Feminism

BY KAISHA A. GIRARD

Set nearly six hundred years in the future, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* explores the dystopian society of the World State, in which humans no longer procreate physically but reproduce through a standardized scientific process. Through this system, citizens are allocated to predetermined castes in a seemingly harmonious environment. In the crossover between feminist and deconstructionist analyses of the text exists a gap in scholarship and a lack of illumination on the way the World State operates. Gayle Rubin's sex/gender system, "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (902), specifically examines the exchange of women as a transaction that benefits men. Jacques Derrida's *différance* claims, because various meanings of any particular detail differ and one single interpretation cannot be assumed, meaning is deferred (Derrida 475). The sex/gender system offers a look into the male/female binary present, and *différance* then breaks down the binary to explore how the patriarchal society is supported and how it is subverted. Although the society ultimately remains more patriarchal than not, exploring the overlap between theories yields a more complete picture. Together, Rubin's sex/gender system and Derrida's *différance* illustrate how the World State motto's tenets of community, identity, and stability reinforce the patriarchy in *Brave New World*.

These three components form the foundation of the society and, perhaps foremost, construct the keystone of community. Each caste wears a color to differentiate it from the others (Huxley 27), so each one forms its own community. Likewise, all the twins in each Bokanovsky Group share hair and skin color: e.g., "two Bokanovsky Groups of eighty-four red-headed female and seventy-eight dark dolychocephalic male twins" (208). The workers in a particular area are perceived as having the same appearance as well because of the colored lighting that shines on them (11). In this way, color signifies community. Although protagonist Lenina's caste is never explicitly stated, her green clothes conflict with her distaste toward the green-clad Gamma caste (63). Researcher David Leon Higdon points out that, although "green clearly places Lenina outside

the color codes of the caste system" (80), her choice is not considered rebellious by others. This omission therefore takes her, a female, out of the narrative by undermining her place in her own community.

Applying Rubin's and Derrida's concepts to these communities unveils feminine subordination as the bedrock of the society. Rubin's sex/gender system identifies the greater issue of gender inequality in Lenina's excluded caste by recognizing how women are unnoticed in their community. However, this interpretation fails to account for the fact that everyone in the World State is "physico-chemically equal" (Huxley 74). Derrida's *différance* comparably provides a deeper look into the principle of community and its shortcomings but in the end, falls short of determining a solution. Exemplifying this multidimensionality is the mantra of World State citizens that "every one belongs to every one else" (Huxley 40). The castes are distinctly separate, with a divide between each subcommunity, yet all are vital to keeping the society operating. This dispersal of meaning displays researcher Andrea Hurst's finding that *différance* "resists the limitations imposed by the either/or logic that still binds and blinds" other theoretical concepts (74). Consequently, its multifaceted insight must be weighed against its ambiguity. One of these facets is Lenina's ignorance of the fact that citizens are conditioned to appreciate their own caste above others. When she remarks that she is happy not to be a lower-class Epsilon, her fellow upper-class member Henry responds, "And if you were an Epsilon [. . .] your conditioning would have made you no less thankful that you weren't a Beta or an Alpha" (Huxley 74). In other words, the disparate factions may coexist, but the female community is less enlightened than the male community. Equality, then, is illusory at best.

Identity is a similarly arbitrary tenet of the World State motto. Although World State citizens are individuals with free will, they lose their true individuality through the non-viviparous reproduction process combined with hypnopædic sleep-conditioning (Huxley 27). The procedure designates gender identity on a personal basis, with embryos labeled female or male or made freemartin, but each is predetermined, and no transgender individuals are mentioned in the text (13). Because of this fixed method of gender assignment, the alphabetism of the World State's motto of "Community, Identity, Stability" (1) —CIS—may be a subtle acknowledgment that the society is fundamentally cisgender. The

term *cis*, short for the word *cisgender*, describes "a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth," as "[c]ontrasted with *transgender*" ("Cisgender"). The viability of this suggestion becomes clearer when read through the lens of analyst Paula López-Rúa's focus on initialisms, like "DHC" being substituted for the "Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning" (130). She argues that these abbreviations "hide unpleasant truths and actually narrow thought; the speakers don't reflect upon the whole meaning or the connotations of the original items (which may be disagreeable, uncomfortable, improper or even forbidden) because the parts form a new solid block" (131). This concealment matches the World State's conditioning techniques for obscuring individuality. Furthermore, these techniques impose conformity upon women, as evidenced by Fanny's insistence that Lenina follow custom and seek out intimacy with more than one man despite her disinterest in doing so (Huxley 40–43).

A fuller understanding of identity is uncovered when feminism and deconstruction come into play. Rubin's male/female binary indicates that World State women are subordinate to men through its anti-reproductive measures. Even though all persons are free to be intimate whenever and with whomever they wish, the burden is on women to use contraceptives (Huxley 50). Rubin's feminist lens is strong in viewing women as inferior to men in the case of contraceptive use. However, Rubin's perspective ignores that this practice gives women the chance to *control* their reproductivity. *Différance*, on the other hand, examines varying angles and lack of identity among World State citizens. These inhabitants are created through a standard scientific format that limits truly unique identity because members of each Bokanovsky Group are identical to each other (Huxley 6–7). Nevertheless, the individuals of *one* particular group are entirely distinct from the individuals of *another* group, so they do retain some semblance of individuality. The weakness of Derrida's concept is that it comes to no definitive conclusion toward either end: identity and nonidentity remain in question. Inconclusiveness is a staple of *différance*, though; analyst Richard Begam maintains that "the danger is in the neatness of the *différance*" (881), which, when too clear-cut, no longer resembles its inherent deferral of meaning. However, when weighing the likelihood of Rubin and Derrida's theories playing out in the World State, this analysis favors the likelihood of implied superiority of men rather than bodily autonomy for women.

The same is true for the third element of the World State's motto: stability. The institution of marriage, historically a source of stability and one that is continued in the Savage Reservation, is looked upon with contempt in the World State. Lenina is disgusted by the idea, even after she finds she is attracted to John and wants only him (Huxley 191). The *lack* of marriage is therefore the society's foundation for stability. Researcher Victoria Lamont discusses Rubin's claim that "marriage enslaves, objectifies, and commodifies women" (Lamont 102), which mirrors the views of World State citizens. Theory crossover between the sex/gender system and *différance* shows that, although lack of marriage takes away the option from women, it also frees them from the patriarchal commitment of marriage as a transaction at the expense of women (Rubin 909–10). This contradiction leaves no set verdict on whether the abolished sacrament is a loss or a boon. Even so, the women's lack of say in the matter hints that the patriarchy has the upper hand.

Pregnancy is viewed in a comparable light, whereby its absence is the basis of stability in the World State. Analyst Alyson Miller contends that feminist dystopian novels "specifically seek to reimagine pregnancy in order to free women from its physical burdens and responsibilities" (418). This idea means that even though the World State strips women of motherhood, it relieves them of motherhood's responsibilities; the benefit or disadvantage then lies in the personal views of each woman. However, it still removes women's freedom of choice. When employed alone, a theoretical approach only tells part of the story: Rubin's sex/gender system sees in marriage and pregnancy only the exchange of women instead of the potential advantages in the World State, and *différance* defers any singular judgment on these matters (Derrida 475). Together, the concepts are strongest. They reveal that even with the diverse pros and cons, the society's keys to stability point back to the patriarchy.

In essence, utilizing feminist and deconstructionist theories exposes what is already buried in the text as a whole. Rubin's sex/gender system recognizes inequality in the "socially imposed division of the sexes" and studies the resulting binary apparent in the male-dominated society (912). Derrida's *différance* likewise investigates disparities, except it puts forth numerous possibilities—supporting, refuting, and rendering insignificant the idea of patriarchal rule—without settling on one. There

is no sole analysis but rather "a fabric of differences" (Derrida 482). Whereas Rubin's sex/gender system produces a dichotomy, Derrida's *différance* supplies a mass of potential explanations. Even considering these varied angles, the World State's patriarchy nevertheless stands firm in the way women are treated in their community, pre-established identity, and anti-reproductive stability. Both theoretical concepts together demonstrate favorable and unfavorable traits of feminine inferiority in these elements.

Thus, the World State motto's tenets of community, identity, and stability may reinforce the patriarchy in Huxley's *Brave New World*, as illuminated by Rubin's sex/gender system and Derrida's *différance*. After exploring the text's problematic patriarchy, it would seem logical to conclude that the remedy is to flip the male/female binary. But the sex/gender system warns against merely rearranging this binary because such an attempt has failed before, and *différance* suggests that no one indisputable solution exists. World Controller Mustapha Mond declares "even the primitive matriarchies weren't steadier than we are" (Huxley 227), and he is correct. His thinking aligns with Rubin finding "a vision of an Amazon matriarchate, in which men are reduced to servitude or oblivion (depending on the possibilities for parthenogenetic reproduction), distasteful and inadequate" (917) because it "maintains gender and the division of the sexes" (917). As a result, the issue cannot be solved by simply reversing the structure. The true answer could be to abolish the binary, eliminating gender norms and biases and perhaps gender altogether. Only then may all members of a society thrive. But for the moment, this concept is only speculation, and the door is opened for further research to deconstruct the feminist implications of this proposal. Perhaps the future, six hundred years from now, will hold such a balance.

Works Cited

Begam, Richard. "Splitting the *Différance*: Beckett, Derrida and the Unnamable." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1992, pp. 873–92. *ProQuest*, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1379.

"Cisgender, *Adj*." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1941991411.

Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 474–95.

Higdon, David Leon. "The Provocations of Lenina in Huxley's *Brave New World*." *International Fiction Review*, vol. 29, no. 1–2, 2002, pp. 78–83. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A91036603/GLS?u=nhc_main&sid=bookmark-GLS&xid=453aac56.

Hurst, Andrea. *Derrida Vis-À-Vis Lacan: Interweaving Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis*. E-book ed., Fordham UP, 2008.

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. 1932. HarperCollins, 2006.

Lamont, Victoria. *Westerns: A Women's History*. E-book ed., University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

López-Rúa, Paula. "*VPS*, *Goodthink*, *Unwomen*, and *Demoxie*: Morphological Neologisms in Four Dystopian Novels." *Miscelánea*, vol. 59, 2019, pp. 117–36. *ProQuest*, https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20196342.

Miller, Alyson. "'Day of the Girls': Reading Gender, Power, and Violence in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*." *College Literature*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2020, pp. 398–433. *ProQuest*, https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2020.0016.

Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 3rd ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 2017.

Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women." Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 901–24.

Nature's Transcorporeality via Bigendered Identities as a Critique of Anthropocentric Environmental Control in *Frankenstein*

BY MEGAN LOLLEY

Modern scholars, such as Bette London and Marjean D. Purinton, analyze Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for its gendered language and feminist implications. These readings parallel gendered language surrounding different characters with feminist principles and/or Shelley's experience as a woman, wife, and mother. Gender is often binary in these interpretations and depicted as a spectacle or a performance put on by the characters. However, when the concepts of gender and environment are considered alongside each other, it is evident how nuanced and nonbinary gender becomes to support the materialization of nature. A focus on gender as the end goal and primary significance in the text impairs understanding of gender as a porous representation of the environment and the materialization of these concepts through the characters and setting to critique a modern, anthropocentric relationship to nature as harmfully utilitarian. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* uses transcorporeality to materialize nurturing and disordered concepts of the environment by constructing bigendered identities evident in Victor, which critiques the masculine desire for power over the natural world.

First, knowledge of the concepts of transcorporeality and the notions of nurturing and disordered environments is essential to understanding their connection to *Frankenstein*. In her book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo describes transcorporeality as a modality for connections and exchanges between human bodies and nonhuman natures; she writes, "'The environment' is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves" (4). This intimate connection makes the substance of the human ultimately inseparable from the environment, which in turn characterizes the environment as its own active being. The primary effect of transcorporeality is "mediating [the] membranes" of humans and nature to integrate sociopolitical critiques in tangency with the science of the natural realm, serving as "a powerful model for understanding material interactions in scientific/ethical/political terms" (15).

By materializing biological, social, and political critiques of nature via human personages, the association is strengthened between the human and the natural and therefore emphasizes the responsibilities humans have to the environment.

Alaimo also focuses on the effects of "[t]oxic bodies [that] may provoke material, transcorporeal ethics that turn from the disembodied values and ideals of bounded individuals toward an attention to situated, evolving practices that have far-reaching and often unforeseen consequences for multiple people, species, and ecologies" (22). The so-called "toxic body" within Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the creation of Victor Frankenstein, and this creating interferes with and infringes on the laws of nature. This infringement is manifested as a material, living being whose existence is a reminder to Victor of his transgressions upon nature; Victor's creation is earth corporealized and represents an image of chaotic nature, bringing about the consequences to multiple parties within the novel.

Gender intersects with transcorporeality in nature when nature takes on a nurturing or disordered persona. Women, particularly in literature, have been extensively connected to the earth and its natural faculties and considered lower on the social ladder, whereas men have been elevated beyond the physical realm to a higher rung of cultural significance and power. Alaimo argues, "Human corporeality, especially female corporeality, has been so strongly associated with nature in Western thought that it is not surprising that feminism has been haunted not only by the specter of nature" but also by biology and science (5). The "specter of nature" that follows feminism is associated with descriptions of aesthetic beauty linking women to nature. Although this specter alone creates a stagnant role for women and the environment, the intersection of biological investigation or science creates more agency for both parties; women and nature are given grounds to stand on and act toward a goal or purpose.

Two specific images have risen concerning the characterization of nature. One of these is the nurturing environment, which involves "[t]he identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe" (Merchant 2). In *Frankenstein*, the nurturing earth is represented by the solace Victor finds in the earth. Even when he is "broken in spirit, . . . no one can feel more deeply than he does the

beauties of nature" (Shelley 30). This nurturing earth is corporealized in different feminine characters interacting with Victor, who also serve to nurture him and give him comfort. This caring representation of nature in Elizabeth gives Victor happiness through the "sunshine of her smiles" (45). Victor shapes our first impression of Elizabeth with a description that is very earthly, deeming her "a creature who seemed to shed radiance from her looks and whose form and motions were lighter than the chamois of the hills" (37). Elizabeth's label as "creature" immediately associates her with the earth and especially demotes her socially as confined to the physical realm. The action she is afforded from this description is limited and unselfish, "shed[ding] radiance" (37) for the benefit of others, which brings her to stand on the same scale as nature.

In contrast to the image of the nurturing environment, another feminine depiction of the earth has remained prevalent; Frankenstein's environment is portrayed as a "wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos" (Merchant 2). Different from the nurturing and maternal earth, this disordered nature is manifested through Frankenstein's creation in retaliation for his transgressions against natural laws. His creation's existence is abhorrent to him and serves to punish him by interfering with every part of his life; this corporealization serves to bring violence and chaos to his natural neglect and renders him completely responsible for his careless actions toward the earth. Indeed, Victor "[feels] the never-dying worm alive in [his] bosom, which allowed of no hope or consolation" (Shelley 89). Nature—again crossing porous boundaries of being to represent a worm eating away at Victor's bosom—does not exist to comfort or nurture him like the serenity of the lake or the sunshine radiating from Elizabeth's face. Victor observes how this same "worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain" (53), as he digs the dead up from the earth to carry out his desecrate deed. Although this destructive worm haunts Victor in his endeavors, Frankenstein's creation also experiences the harshness of the earth. As a character, he is the product of transgressions against nature and sees himself as "a blot upon the earth" (123). As he realizes this through consistent rejection, the earth reveals her chaos, and he cries out desperately, "Oh! Stars and clouds and winds, ye are all about to mock me" (151). The creature bears the brunt of his creator's mistakes and discovers himself as the manifestation of the chaotic environment.

Both the nurturing environment and disordered environment identify the importance the modern era places on having power over nature because of their feminine depictions (Pon 37). Functions of womanhood, such as birth and caring for children, are tied directly to the physical realm of nature, and these functions that sequester women to a lower social rank are also imposed on the earth. Carolyn Merchant explains that "[n]ature and women are both perceived to be on a lower level than culture, which has been associated symbolically and historically with men" (144). The nurturing, maternal image of nature as man's caretaker is sought to be conquered—a masculine desire imposed on the femininity of the earth. The view of nature as disordered and chaotic strays from the model of nature performing womanlike duties. However, "[d]isorderly women, like chaotic nature, need to be controlled" (127). The desire for power stems from the recognition of deviance from the status quo and expectations for feminine conduct and the need to restore normalcy to the disordered situation. Women, seen as lower on the social rank, are therefore able to be conquered and subverted; nature, manifested as feminine and crossing porous boundaries to become corporeal, is subjected to the same submissive state.

Bigendered identities are constructed in Victor through materialization and connection to nurturing and disordered environments. Nature's expression through the novel's narrative lays the groundwork for gender identity and expression for Victor and his creation. Fred V. Randel examines the landscape of mountains in Shelley's novel as deeper than the traditional Ruskinian interpretation of mountains as a signpost of transcendence and deviant from the Alpine Club's reading of literary mountains as an arena domineered by male adventure. Instead, Randel presents the mountains of *Frankenstein* in tangent with Jane Harrison's conceptual framework of the place of struggle between rival male and female perspectives. To do this, Randel asserts two views of mountains: the "diabolical mountain" and the "divine mountain" (524). Randel's argument primarily focuses on the differentiation and intersection of maleness and femaleness within the mountains and nature encapsulated within the novel; however, the association and terming of mountains with being either diabolical or divine resonates with the other binary of feminine nature, as previously discussed.

The image of the divine mountain correlates to the persona of nurturing earth, and the diabolical mountain is likewise associated with

chaotic nature. Mountains loom over Victor constantly, whether they harbor the chaos of his creation or provide him an escape from his despair. For instance, he turns regularly to nature to comfort him. As comforting and caretaking are denoted as a womanly task, the mountains that he turns to for care are rendered divine, emblematic of the nurturing earth. This sphere welcomes him into a wholly dependent state, stripping him of his masculine focus on possessing nature. To attain comfort, Victor ascends into a valley which "assume[s] a . . . magnificent and as astonishing character" (Shelley 97). In these environments, Victor is stunned into submission, taking the form of admiration. The mountains are uniquely feminine, filled with "piny mountains" and "[r]uined castles hanging on the precipices" (97). The mountains are fertile and filled with green trees—a color emblematic of fertility and earth in tangency with feminine expression. The castles represent spaces of inhabitation, emulating the power of the mountain to harbor and care for life, perhaps even possessing these spaces as pseudo-wombs. When the time comes for him to nurture his creation, though he neglects to do so, Frankenstein turns toward a toxic and masculine drive for power and possession over nature.

The scope of Victor's gender identity and expression are widened as he turns against the divine mountains to capture and invade them. He thus unleashes the diabolical mountains, manifest of chaotic nature, that house the literal consequence of his actions—his creation. William's murder (Shelley 75) is emblematic of nature's retaliation against Victor's actions against her; nature takes sacred life from him as he has created unsacred life in her. Upon finding his body, Victor recalls the steep precipices of the mountains around the lake illuminated by flashes of lightning. Looking closer, Victor discovers that "another flash discovered [the creature] to [him] hanging among the rocks of the nearly perpendicular ascent of Mount Saleve" (78). The diabolical mountains house the chaos of nature that has been released against Frankenstein; instead of the divine mountain that comforts him, this mountain harbors resentment and hangs the weight of responsibility on Victor's shoulders for acting against nature's laws.

Victor expresses the masculine desire to possess womanhood and femininity while ultimately severing himself from the productive embodiment of feminine expression by transgressing upon nature. Throughout his project to create life, Frankenstein often speaks of

nature as an object that he can possess. He wants to venture into nature's hidden parts, recalling that "[i]t was the secrets of heaven and earth that [he] desired to learn" (Shelley 39); so great is this desire that he is "[i]mbued with a fervent longing to penetrate" (41) nature to acquire these same secrets. To do so, he "pursue[s] nature to her hiding-places" (55). The words Victor uses in these phrases suggest a particularly male perspective of empowerment over womanly entities; the "hiding-places" (55) of nature that undoubtedly hide her "secrets" (39) suggests imagery of the female sex, and his use of the word "penetrate" (41) suggests a violent taking of these secrets—a rape against the ideals of pure feminine nature.

Furthermore, the act of reproduction is a uniquely female action that Victor hopes to emulate himself. In doing this, he attempts to embody femininity but ultimately fails to do so because of the toxicity of his masculine pursuit and the isolation of his trial. Some scholars, such as Ellen Moers, have read the novel as a birth narrative, in which Victor embodies the fully feminine mother who creates life. However, this is not sensitive to the judgment that the novel places on "Frankenstein's parental indifference, revulsion, and responsibility" (Randel 530), which is placed in contrast to the maternal practice of generation. Frankenstein's endeavor may be seen as a complicated retelling of birth under feuding gender expressions. Victor is removed from communion with any other human, especially women; he never has any contact with women during his attempts to recreate life, even if the secluded and enclosed nature of his workshop correlates to that of the womb. His isolated and dirty workshop "mimics features of femininity in a spot reserved for untouchable maleness" (530). Masculine language is employed within his workspace, and within this space Victor is separated from the maternal, nurturing earth that he has historically been so dependent on. While he works on his creation, he "[does] not watch the blossom or the expanding leaves—sights which before always yielded [him] supreme delight" (Shelley 57). In this time, Victor is disconnected from the divine mountain, the landscape that has nurtured and cared for him. Victor's torment in both body and mind is symbolic of the chaotic nature that will be unleashed because of his actions.

The corporealization of nature intersecting with bigendered expressions manifested in Victor's character within the novel critiques

the masculine desire for power over the natural world. The novel "concerns the inextricability of the human and the nonhuman" and founds "the understanding that the natural can be manipulated, manufactured by humans, and that humans can be simulated, supplemented by nonhumans" (Mayer 229). Humans and the nonhuman, which are nature in this scenario, are essential to each other. Nature simulates and supplements Victor by nurturing him and calming his mind, while Victor, in turn, manipulates nature to manufacture life, something that spurs the idea of chaotic nature. Mary Shelley's novel emphasizes nature's cry for help and allows us to hear it in the quiet of Victor's laboratory. Kim Hammond argues, "Both Victor Frankenstein's characterization and the narrative are not focused on the unintended consequences of well-intentioned science, but rather on the entangling of science with ego, power, and status" (190). These elements are typically associated with masculine prowess. In conducting science that serves to exalt himself under the guise of "well-intentioned science" (190), Victor disrupts the natural balance and laws of the earth. Hence, nature strikes back against him, personified as the creature. It is this masculine desire for domination and self-glorification that often stands opposed to the preservation and mutual respect of nature and her feminine ways.

Throughout the corporealization of nurturing and chaotic natures within *Frankenstein*'s bigendered characters, Shelley's novel "resuscitates the dead voice or body of the traditional narrative of woman, and in its place creates a feminine voice or body that speaks in many different voices, thereby upsetting the notion of a single feminine identity" (Salotto 191). Transcorporealization serves as a modality for the feminine voice of nature, and the disruption of a singular, feminine persona standing alone to represent the natural world empowers nature and places responsibility for damage on traditionally masculine attitudes of conquest. The stance that Shelley introduces to readers in the novel *Frankenstein* is aligned with the "neo-Romantic edge of ecocentrism," which posits that "'[n]ature' is to be treated with awe, and 'natural laws' and our unity with nature respected in a nonutilitarian way" and that this is the expectation for human behavior unto the environment (Hammond 185). The utilitarian view of nature is denoted as the masculine, consumerist, and conquest-driven ideal, which seeks self-glorification above all else. This novel brings to light the consequences of this point of view and examines the stakes at hand for both the inhuman and human.

Victor Frankenstein's bigendered identity and expression serve as a vessel for the representation of nurturing and disordered environments throughout the novel to criticize the masculine desire for power over the natural world. Centralizing the porous nature of the earth's corporealization and feminine expression in *Frankenstein* allows the audience to engage in self-reflection about the human responsibility toward both women and the earth, especially considering masculine thought patterns that have dominated sociocultural expectations and redlined gender politics. It is significant that a novel written during this time could speak so consciously to issues that are contemporarily prioritized now. Extending upon this topic, the author is curious about the gendered expression of Frankenstein's creature and how he can be observed operating either within or outside of constructed gender binaries as he educates himself after his initial neglect. This research raises further questions about the manifestation of nature and ecocritical ideals concerning women within other works of literature produced within a similar timeframe. Interpreting texts concerning the intersectionality of evidence across characters, environments, and political settings may yield important anthropological subtexts below the explicitly written plot. If this novel is understood as a nature-centered, feminist approach to power and masculinity, scholars can begin to connect eighteenth-century thought processes and advocacy to issues that have remained pressing for centuries.

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010. *ProQuest*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uidaho/detail.action?docID=613606.

Hammond, Kim. "Monsters of Modernity: Frankenstein and Modern Environmentalism." *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2004, pp. 181–98. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44250971.

Harrison, Jane Ellen. *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Princeton University Press, 1991. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddczjt.

———. "Mountain Mother," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Ed. James Hastings. 1908-1926. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961.

Hobbs, Colleen. "Reading the Symptoms: An Exploration of Repression and Hysteria in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1993, pp. 152–69. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29532932.

London, Bette. "Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, and the Spectacle of Masculinity." *PMLA*, vol. 108, no. 2, 1993, pp. 253–67. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/462596.

Mayer, Jed. "The Weird Ecologies of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2018, pp. 229–43. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.45.2.0229.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. HarperCollins, 1990.

Moers, Ellen. "The Female Gothic." *The Endurance of* Frankenstein, 1974, pp. 77–87.

Pon, Cynthia. "'Passages' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Toward a Feminist Figure of Humanity?" *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2000, pp. 33–50. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3195378.

Purinton, Marjean D. "Ideological Revision: Cross-Gender Characterization in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *CEA Critic*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1993, pp. 53–64. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26393693.

Randel, Fred V. "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and the Intertextuality of Mountains." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1984, pp. 515–32. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/25600514.

Salotto, Eleanor. "*Frankenstein* and Dis(Re)Membered Identity." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1994, pp. 190–211. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225415.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Penguin Classics, 1992.

"Now, Take Her Hand in Yours": Greek Influence in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*

BY ABBEY ORWIG

The question of Shakespeare's inspirations and influences for his plays has long been debated. Through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, scholars believed that Shakespeare was heavily influenced by classical Greek dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (Showerman 201). However, the conversation went the opposite direction for the remainder of the twentieth century, with scholars asserting that it was improbable, maybe even impossible, that Shakespeare was familiar with Greek drama due to his Latin-based education (Showerman 202). If Shakespeare did not know any Greek, he would not have been familiar with the stories of Greek dramatists and would have instead been influenced by the Romans. For example, scholars say that the final scene in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* is influenced by Ovid's "Pygmalion" story in his *Metamorphoses* (Showerman 210); both works contain the essential similarity of a female statue coming to life to be united with her husband. However, this century-long theory has been challenged again by a renewed interest of scholars who have reinvestigated the possibility of Shakespeare taking inspiration from the Greeks.

Scholars like Sarah Dewar-Watson have researched and catalogued where Shakespeare's plays allude to or incorporate Greek plot, characters, language, themes, and motifs. For instance, in her article "*The Alcestis* and the Statue Scene in *The Winter's Tale*," Sarah Dewar-Watson takes a different approach to Shakespeare's inspiration for the final scene, claiming that the statue scene was inspired by the final scene of Euripides's *Alcestis*. This paper follows Dewar-Watson's example, noting similarities between the final scenes of *The Winter's Tale* and *Alcestis* to argue that Shakespeare had access to, was familiar with, and was influenced by Euripides's play.

Alcestis is one of Euripides's notable tragedies, though some scholars like Hazel E. Barnes opt to put the play into the tragicomedy category, especially because it is a departure from the Greek dramatists' usual style of tragedy (128–29). The play revolves around King Admetus, who is given the gift of freedom from death by Apollo if someone

takes his place. Admetus tries to find someone willing to make that sacrifice, until his wife Alcestis volunteers. Alcestis dies and Admetus mourns, but Hercules retrieves Alcestis from the Underworld, so husband and wife reunite in the land of the living (Euripides). Likewise, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* centers around a resurrected wife. It was one of the final plays to be written in his career, with the tragicomedy telling the story of Leontes who falsely accused his wife, Hermione, of infidelity, resulting in her death. However, sixteen years pass, and the repentant husband is reunited with his wife in a miraculous resurrection in the final scene.

The final scene in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* is rich with similarities and allusions to Euripides's *Alcestis*; one prominent similarity is the language used in describing Alcestis and Hermione as statues. When Alcestis returns from the dead, Admetus initially does not recognize her, though he comments on the likeness of his late wife (Euripides 47). Leontes too has a moment of unrecognition when the statue of Hermione is revealed (728). Although Alcestis is not really a statue, details in the narrative point to her being described as "statuesque" due to her being veiled and silent (47, 52). Mary Stieber elaborates on this theme in her article "Statuary in Euripides's *Alcestis*," giving two examples of language that ancient authors used when wanting to convey astonishment at the close representation of the human by statues: the first "the image is lifelike" (84) and the second "it is a good likeness of its subject" (84). This language is invoked in the final scene of *Alcestis*.

Hercules tells Admetus several times to look upon the woman he is presenting him, to gaze upon the body and face of this silent person as if she were a statue being admired. Admetus, skeptical, asks, "May I touch her, and speak to her, as my living wife?" (Euripides lines 1131), unable to discern if she is truly a living person or a statue or spirit from the Underworld. Admetus also uses the astonished language of noting the similarity or likeness of his wife:

> You, lady,
> whoever you are, I tell you that you have the form
> of my Alcestis; all your body is like hers.
> Too much. (Euripides lines 1061–64)

He is so overcome by the likeness of the figure to his dead wife that he asks Hercules to take her away; however, only when Hercules presses Admetus to escort the woman by the hand into his house does his doubt turn into belief, stating,

> Oh, eyes
> and body of my dearest wife, I have you now
> beyond all hope. (Euripides lines 1132–34)

Only when he can touch her and feel the warmth of a living body does he begin to believe that this is truly his wife, resurrected from the dead.

This statue motif is also present in *The Winter's Tale* with a physical statue of Hermione being presented before Leontes and his court. News of the lifelikeness of the statue reaches the public as some gentlemen comment on the famous sculptor, Giulio Romano, who

> . . . could put breath into his work,
> would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is
> her ape. He so near to Hermione hath done Hermione
> that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope
> of answer. (Shakespeare 5.2.96–100)

When her veil is lifted, Hermione's silence is shared with her onlookers as they are stunned by the statue's lifelike appearance and likeness to their dead queen. Paulina understands their astonishment, "I like your silence; it the more shows off / Your wonder" (Shakespeare 5.3.21–22). The onlookers are moved by the life emitted from the statue, and they comment on its faculties. Perdita, overcome by seeing the first beauteous image of her mother, wishes to kiss the statue's hand (Shakespeare 5.3.43–46). Polixenes thinks the statue to be so full of life that the marbled body seems warm and the lip moist with breath (Shakespeare 5.3.66). Leontes believes he sees the statue breathe and pump blood through its carved veins and wonders if the eyes have moved (Shakespeare 5.3.64, 67).

The lifelike appearance of the Hermione statue blurs Leontes's conception of the difference between art and nature and conjures the thought of the inanimate statue to be a living, breathing Hermione. Indeed, Leontes is struck by the likeness to Hermione and addresses the statue:

> Her natural posture!
> Chide me, dear stone, that I may say indeed
> Thou art Hermione. (Shakespeare 5.3.24–26)

The statue's likeness to Hermione causes fresh grief and guilt to arise within Leontes as he feels that he is truly in the presence of his wife. Scholar Douglas B. Wilson comments on this scene in his article "Euripides's *Alcestis* and the Ending of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*," stating,

> In gazing upon the statue of Hermione, Leontes, in a situation analogous to that of Admetus, feels grief and remorse, conjured by her majestic form, for the former slandering of his queen. This magical presence has bereft the newly discovered daughter Perdita of her spirits, so that she seems turned to stone like her mother. . . . (Wilson 349–50)

Everyone is frozen, in awe of the statue, especially Perdita, who mimics the statue of her mother by having her mother's likeness and standing in silence as if she were a statue herself. Dewar-Watson notes this statuesque connection Perdita has with her mother, saying it "suggests a peculiar bond with her mother—warm in its intimacy, yet cold and static in its lack of animation" (76). This response makes the mother-daughter relationship even more real with this moment of imitation that precedes the coming moment of reunion. The statue again blurs the line between art and nature, as nature (Perdita) is imitating art (the Hermione statue).

Another similarity between these two plays is the motif of "the silent female" in the resurrection scenes. Both Alcestis and Hermione are silent in this climactic miracle scene. For Alcestis, when Admetus asks Hercules why his wife has been silent during their reunion, Hercules replies:

> You are not allowed to hear her speak to you until
> her obligations to the gods who live below
> are washed away. Until the third morning comes. (Euripides lines 1144–46)

Hercules suggests that this silence is a kind of purification ritual that Alcestis must undergo to satisfy the gods of the Underworld—a kind of debt that must be paid to return to the land of the living. Dewar-Watson adds, "Her silence is a manifestation of virtue and piety, which is consistent with the way she is characterized throughout the play" (76). Indeed, Alcestis is renowned for her virtue and her exceptional character is praised by her people:

> Noblest? Of course the noblest, who will argue that?
> What shall the wife be who surpasses her? And how
> could any woman show that she loves her husband more
> than herself better than by consent to die for him? (Euripides lines 152–55)

Alcestis is also virtuous in her piety. Even when the appointed time for her death arrives, she continues her duties to the gods, praying to Vesta and performing last rites. Regarding her duties, Euripides states,

> Afterward she approached the altars, all that stand
> in the house of Admetus, made her prayers, and decked them all
> with fresh sprays torn from living myrtle. (lines 170–72)

The virtuous wife dies but is brought back to life—a fitting reward for her virtue. Though she has returned, the reader is left unsatisfied with her silence at the end of the play when no words are exchanged between husband and wife.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione, too, is silent at her resurrection; she does not speak to her husband at their reunion. Unlike Alcestis who had virtue unchallenged, Hermione, also known for her virtue, has hers questioned and attacked by her paranoid husband. When Leontes expresses to Camillo his suspicions of Hermione's infidelity, Camillo refuses to believe such claims because he is familiar with Hermione's character and virtue, and he tells Leontes,

> You never spoke what did become you less
> Than this, which to reiterate were sin
> As deep as that, though true. (Shakespeare 1.2.281–83)

Camillo boldly tells his king that his claims are irrational and that making such accusations against the virtuous Hermione would be as great as Hermione's sin if the claims were true. In the resurrection scene (in Act 5, Scene 3), Hermione's silence serves a higher purpose than in *Alcestis*. Hermione may not speak directly to Leontes, but she embraces him as a physical sign of her forgiveness. Instead, Hermione speaks to her daughter, Perdita, to finally give her a mother's blessing, asking the gods to

> . . . look down,
> And from your sacred vials pour your graces
> Upon my daughter's head! (Shakespeare 5.3.121–23)

This moment serves as a symbol of redemption and the restoration of familial, marital, and political bonds.

Another intriguing similarity between the two plays is that the husbands, Admetus and Leontes, both swear to never remarry after their wives die. In Admetus's case, it is Alcestis who asks him not to remarry as her last wish, stating,

> Children, you now have heard your father promise me
> that he will never remarry again and not inflict
> a new wife on you, but will keep my memory. (Euripides lines 371–73)

Alcestis makes Admetus promise for the sake of their children, so that they may not end up with a cruel and jealous stepmother. Wracked by grief and guilt, Admetus emotionally responds to his wife: "I shall go into mourning for you, not for just / a year, but all my life while it still lasts, my dear" (lines 338–39). This vow is additionally spurred on by Admetus's fear of what people would think of him if he did take another wife and by the fear of his wife's spirit: "I fear blame from two quarters, from my countrymen . . . and from the dead herself. Her honor has its claim / on me. I must be very careful" (lines 1057–61). Admetus has a

duty to honor his wife's memory, and he does not want to risk the wrath of his people and of his wife's spirit.

These details are replicated by Leontes after Hermione dies indirectly because of his actions. After being violently reprimanded by Paulina, Leontes is overcome by his guilt and grief, and he speaks of how he will conduct his future penance:

> Once a day I'll visit
> The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there
> Shall be my recreation. So long as nature
> Will bear up with this exercise, so long
> I daily vow to use it. (Shakespeare 3.2.236–40)

Like Admetus, Leontes vows to mourn his wife's death for the remainder of his life. Sixteen years later, Leontes has not taken a new wife (in Act 5, Scene 1). He even promises Paulina (5.1.69–71) that he will never remarry after they discuss the prospect of Hermione's ghost appearing at the insult of her memory being dishonored if he were to do so:

> No more such wives; therefore, no wife! One worse
> And better used, would make her sainted spirit
> Again possess her corpse, and on this stage
> . . . appear soul-vexed,
> And begin, "Why to me?" (Shakespeare 5.1.56–60)

Like Admetus, Leontes fears the repercussions of dishonoring his wife's memory through remarriage. Both husbands vow to uphold and honor their wives' memory by swearing celibacy and by erecting physical memorials where they spend their time in mourning and penance.

Another shared detail in the two plays that indicates possible influence of Euripides's *Alcestis* on Shakespeare is the roles of Hercules and Paulina as marital mediators in the resurrection scenes. Both orchestrate the reunion of husband and wife by bringing Alcestis and Hermione back from the dead. In *Alcestis*, Hercules recounts how he fought Death and returned with Alcestis, and he insists on placing her into Admetus's hand (lines 1028–35, 11a3). In her book *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, Helene P. Foley describes Greek marital rites and how they are displayed in the resurrection scene in *Alcestis*. Hercules takes the initiative and

brings Alcestis to Admetus, making him "grasp the hand of the unknown young woman with the possessive marriage gesture of *cheir epi karpo(i)*, right hand on the wrist . . . ; then Heracles initiates the *anakalupteria* by unveiling Alcestis to the gaze of her husband . . . " (Foley 310). Per Foley, Hercules is viewed as a marital mediator. Similarly, Robert C. Ketterer supports this special role of Hercules, in his article "Machines for the Suppression of Time: Statues in *Suor Angelica, The Winter's Tale*, and *Alcestis*." Ketterer writes, "Here Herakles as *paranymphos* [the best man] presents the veiled 'bride' and unveils her; then Admetus leads her by the hand into the house" (16). In this moment of reunion after death, Hercules acts as a mediator, joining the two together as husband and wife again in a symbolic remarriage through the acts of unveiling and the taking of the right hand.

In the resurrection scene in *The Winter's Tale*, the reunion of Leontes and Hermione evokes vivid echoes of the Greek marital tradition portrayed in *Alcestis*. Both resurrection scenes are powerful and alike; it is impossible to dismiss that Shakespeare may have taken inspiration from the symbolic remarriage after death. In Shakespeare's version, Paulina plays the role of Hercules. She orchestrates the theatrical unveiling of the Hermione statue, imitating the unveiling (*anakalupteria*) of Alcestis according to Greek marital tradition (Shakespeare 5.3.18–23). Paulina also imitates Hercules as a mediator by invoking the Greek marital rite of taking the right hand (*cheir epi karpo[i]*). The hand motif is referenced by her and other characters in the scene. Scholar Myron Stagman notes this pattern in his book *Shakespeare's Greek Drama Secret*:

> Paulina's line 107, "Nay present your hand," specifically corresponds to Hercules opening of the Hand-motif: "No, I will give her only into your hands." He continues, "Your own *right hand*! Nothing else will satisfy me. . . . Come, *your hand*! Now *take her hand in yours*." (388)

These similarities in the final scene support an argument of Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek tradition and how the resurrection scene of *Alcestis* was constructed. Both *Alcestis* and *The Winter's Tale* end in a powerful and beautiful way due to their shared theatrical components.

More similarities between the two works point to *Alcestis* as a primary source for *The Winter's Tale*. The list includes the presence of

Apollo in both plays (Euripides lines 1–70; Shakespeare 3.2.123–53), the similar language, and the final scenes concluding with music (Euripides lines 1159–63; Shakespeare 5.3.98). The orchestra plays at Paulina's signal when the statue is unveiled (Shakespeare 5.3.98), and the chorus sings its final words as Alcestis and Admetus enter the house together (Euripides lines 1159–63). The many similarities between the two plays are too numerous to ignore and support the possibility of Euripides's influence on Shakespeare. The final scene of *The Winter's Tale* is one example of how beautifully Shakespeare takes Greek plots and themes and incorporates them into his own stories while amplifying them with his own creative spin. This argument shows how the timelessness of Greek literature can continue to influence and how artists like Shakespeare can value and imitate its greatness. Much like how the death and resurrection of Alcestis is imitated by Hermione, so also the statue of the great Greek breathes and comes to life in the works of those who imitate it.

Works Cited

Barnes, Hazel E. "Greek Tragicomedy." *The Classical Journal*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1964, pp. 125–31. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3295060.

Dewar-Watson, Sarah. "The Alcestis and the Statue Scene in *The Winter's Tale*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2009, pp. 73–80. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40210320.

Euripides. *Alcestis*. Translated by Richmond Lattimore. *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides I*, edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, 1955, pp. 7–53

Foley, Helene P. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton UP, 2001.

Ketterer, Robert C. "Machines for the Suppression of Time: Statues in *Suor Angelica*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Alcestis*." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1990, pp. 3–23. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41153438.

Martindale, Charles, and A. B. Taylor. *Shakespeare and the Classics*. Cambridge UP, 2004.

Shakespeare, William. *The Winter's Tale*. *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller, Penguin Books Inc., 2002, pp. 695–729.

Showerman, Earl. "A Century of Scholarly Neglect: Shakespeare and Greek Drama." *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, vol. 37, no. 2, June 2023, pp. 201–17. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.31275/20233109.

Stagman, Myron. *Shakespeare's Greek Drama Secret*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

Stieber, Mary. "Statuary in Euripides' *Alcestis*." *Arion*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1998, pp. 69–97. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163690.

Wilson, Douglas B. "Euripides' *Alcestis* and the Ending of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*." *Iowa State Journal of Research*, vol. 58, no. 3, Feb. 1984, pp. 345–55. *EBSCOhost*, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=1984025196&site=eds-live.

"Decaying and Flowering Ever": The Cycle of Knowledge in Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage*

BY ERIN QUINN

At the end of Arthur Hugh Clough's verse novel *Amours de Voyage*, protagonist Claude boldly states, "Not as the Scripture says, is, I think, the fact. Ere our death-day / Faith, I think, does pass, and Love; but Knowledge abideth. / Let us seek Knowledge; —the rest may come and go as it happens" (5.160–62). The prominent concept of knowledge at the text's end, as well as the profound tone of Claude's words, demands considering how the theme of knowledge functions throughout the remainder of the narrative. Notably, this statement contradicts earlier observations that Claude makes about knowledge, showing a transformation in his perspective on knowledge, which reveals his intellectual outlook. Specifically, his changing attitude about knowledge portrays how he pursues knowledge as a cycle of loss and renewal that is simultaneously limiting and necessary to his existence. By refusing to break out of this cycle, either through knowledge or by other means, Claude proves the limitations of his own intellectualism.

Scholars address the topic of knowledge, focusing on how Claude's view of knowledge limits him or on the importance of this theme to Clough and to Victorians in general. Scholars focus on Claude's challenges that results from his opinion about knowledge. Scholar Walter E. Houghton reveals that intellectualism causes turmoil over events and hinders Claude's "growth" (154). Scholar Stefanie Markovits connects imperfect knowledge to inaction, writing that Clough's work addresses "the question of whether it is really feasible to do anything meaningful at all, given how obscured the ground of action is" (459). Another scholar, Fergus McGhee, determines that Claude "seek[s] to confine the future within . . . bounds of the knowable," limiting opportunities that stem from motivations like "instinct" (428) and dismissing, as Benjamin D. O'Dell points out, non-knowledge-based paths to understanding (427–28). W. David Shaw similarly argues that Claude seeks to control his life but that personal limitations (111) and ignorance (168–75) hinder Claude. As both McGhee and Shaw note, Claude

is unable to make choices or accept outcomes that may influence the future, including what might have been a joyous relationship with his friend Mary Trevellyn, because he is obsessed with knowing fully (Shaw 167; McGhee 428–29). These scholars establish serious limitations that Claude's strong adherence to knowledge engenders.

Scholars also point out that the theme of knowledge in Clough's work relates to the contexts of his personal life and major literary and philosophical concerns of the Victorian period. In contextualizing her claim that Clough's writing presents imperfect knowledge as a motivator for inaction, Markovits notes that Clough's personal reflections display a Claudian preoccupation with knowledge and its relationship to action (448). For example, Clough once wrote, "until I know, I will wait: and if I am not born with the power to discover, I will do what I can, with what knowledge I have" (Markovits 448). Meanwhile, critic Daniel Tyler reveals Clough's personal uncertainties over which source of knowledge he should use to revise his writing—"impulse" or "reflection" (130). Tyler relates this consternation to Claude's consideration of whether "instinct" or reason is a proper motivator for action (126–27).

According to scholar Micheal Timko, Clough shows the importance that he attaches to knowledge by prioritizing communication of "truth," "understanding," and "moral[s]" in his writing over style and emotion (56–57). These themes of knowledge reflect the "epistemological debate" of the Victorian period (Scott 35). As a result, prior criticism of Clough's verse novel paints a picture of biographical and cultural contexts that potentially motivated his inclusion of the theme of knowledge.

Little scholarship explains any overarching theory that Claude possesses regarding the nature of knowledge, especially considering his contradictions on the topic. To provide such a theory, I explore the idea that Claude's pursuit of knowledge is a repetitive and inconclusive process that he refuses to alter. A lack of finality is acknowledged by Paul Dean and Jacqueline Moore in Claude's search for knowledge: "[the] value [of knowledge] may lie more in our willingness to undertake the search than in any expectation of success . . . ; [E]ach man must accept bewilderment and disappointment as part of the process of personal growth" (62). Although this statement accurately describes part of Claude's intellectual journey, his experience of knowledge is far more nuanced, as it includes recurring confidence in the value of knowledge as well.

My attention to cycles in Claude's thought also builds on McGhee's claim that "Claude's nightmarish vision of the future"—which he creates by attempting to prevent surprises through inaction, by predicting his own "failure" in action, and by finding warped security in the certainty of death (428–30)—"culminates in 'renewals' that keep this cycle stuck in its grooves" (430). However, although McGhee's analysis focuses on how inadequate knowledge or an unhealthy application of knowledge keeps Claude in a "cycle" of aborted possibilities (429–30), I focus on the circularity of Claude's experience of that knowledge. This paper builds on Shaw's point that "the expansive, circling hexameters of *Amours de Voyage*, often rolling over and over like huge ocean waves without actually advancing, suggest that there is something comically precarious about the balance of Claude's psyche," thus showing that "a half-dreaded, half-desired knowledge keeps thrusting itself upon his conscious mind" (175). Yet, these claims only describe Claude's wavering between wishing and fearing to choose a particular action, due to how it might limit future opportunities (173–75). Instead, I apply McGhee's and Shaw's ideas of "cycles" and circularities to progress the theme of knowledge itself in Clough's verse novel, while explaining and justifying contradictions within this progression. I offer a deeper understanding of Claude's thought processes, its implications, and the role of knowledge in *Amours de Voyage*.

Over the course of the verse novel, Claude displays a circular intellectual progression. In the beginning, he expresses arrogant security in knowledge. Of fellow travelers in awe of their surroundings, he patronizingly states, "Shall not devotion atone for the absence of knowledge? and fervor / Palliate, cover, the fault of a superstitious observance? . . . I can be nothing at all, if it is not critical wholly" (Clough 1.137–140). McGhee describes Claude's general attitude as reflecting Emerson's philosophy of "'knowingness': the supercilious confidence in what one already knows . . . [and] the over-attachment to knowing as a means of orienting oneself towards the world" (414). However, by line 235, Claude is "lost and know[s] nothing" (Clough 1.235). His crisis—involving loss of security, pleasure, and benefit in knowledge—continues throughout the text. In Canto Three, Claude concludes that God alone possesses true knowledge and that knowledge "perish[es]" in humans (Clough 3.134). At the same time, Claude complains that the knowledge he possesses overwhelms him and he would rather God

"[t]ake from me this regal knowledge" and allow him to "[t]ranquilly, happily lie, —and eat grass, like Nebuchadnezzar!" (Clough 3.211–13). Despite decreasing confidence in and eventual rejection of knowledge, Claude ultimately renews his faith in the durability of knowledge and commits to pursue it as an object that will make him "happy" (Clough 5.161–64).

Claude's cyclical experience of knowledge is in keeping with multiple claims he makes about the process of pursuing knowledge. Toward the end of Canto One, Claude connects his resignation to enjoying a relationship with Mary Trevellyn—rather than simply remaining in a passive state of observance, contemplation, and criticism (Clough 1.140)—with a state of "know[ing] nothing" (Clough 1.235). He characterizes his decision as a "descen[t] through the fissure . . . to shore, or to shelf, or / Floor of cavern untrodden, . . . sway[ing] . . . from crag unto crag re- / Bounding" (Clough 1.237–244). However, even in this confusion, he proclaims that he "Yet shall plant firm foot on the broad lofty spaces I quit, shall / Feel underneath me again the great massy strengths of abstraction, / Look yet abroad from the height o'er the sea whose salt wave I have tasted" (Clough 1.245–247). The "sea of natural existence with all its flux of emotion" (Houghton 140) does not simply refer to the confusion Claude feels under the circumstances of falling in love with Mary while simultaneously being afraid of committing himself (140); the "sea" also refers to the uncertainty he feels because of his perceived loss of knowledge, given the fact that he later connects contemplation of the transience and vanity of knowledge to the idea that humans remain in "Aqueous Ages" (Clough 3.51–59, 3.79–97). As Houghton states, "'abstraction' of course stands for the life of the mind" (139). Therefore, when Claude says he shall "[l]ook yet abroad from the height o'er the sea whose salt wave I have tasted" (Clough 1.247), he not only predicts that he will leave his long-term relationship with Mary but also foretells a return to confidence in knowledge, which he fulfills by recommitting to knowledge at the end of the verse novel.

Claude also portrays knowledge itself as simultaneously ephemeral and lasting. In Canto Three, he muses about "the transient blossom of Knowledge, — / . . . the needless unfruitful blossom" hanging "on the apex most high of the Tree of Life in the Garden, / Budding, unfolding, and falling, decaying and flowering ever" (Clough 3.81–82). Claude displays paradoxical opinions regarding knowledge. He glorifies it as a

preeminent part of "Life" (the "apex") and potentially a sort of deity ("most high"). Yet, he also describes it as "needless." He states that it both "decay[s]" and "flower[s] ever." For this to be true, his possession of knowledge must involve a process of existence that equally involves the exciting and enriching discovery of knowledge; loss and growing inadequacy of that knowledge; and discovery of further beneficial knowledge only for that knowledge to become inadequate and lost in turn. According to his own theory, Claude cannot remain in hopelessness; he must return to his confidence in the "flowering . . . of Knowledge."

In many ways, the broader context of Claude's worldview necessitates his perspective on knowledge as a cycle of confidence, loss, and renewed confidence, particularly regarding his final renewal of commitment to a search for knowledge. Claude experiences unexpected disruption to his intellectual state because of his unexpected relationship with Mary, causing him to doubt matters about which he had previously been confident (Clough 5.120). Yet, the consternation he experiences demands that he return to knowledge as a foundation for his life amid change. He sees knowledge as a means to maintain a low-stakes engagement with the world and control over his life, which, according to Shaw and McGhee, are key drivers of his behavior (Shaw 173; McGhee 428–29). As Markovits notes, Claude possesses a strong desire for inaction but ultimately realizes that such a commitment is not entirely tenable: "All my old strengths are gone. And yet I shall have to do something" (Clough 5.126). At the same time, Claude displays an unwillingness to experience inconvenience or pain (Clough 2.63–74, 2.100–103), and the one action he tries to perform—finding Mary Trevellyn after becoming separated from her—fails miserably (Clough 5.62). The pursuit of knowledge is a perfect solution for his quandary. Although an action, it does not put his body or practical future at risk, as long as he remains in the "life of the mind" (Houghton 139).

The pursuit of knowledge is something that Claude can somewhat control, as opposed to concepts like "Faith" and "Love" (Clough 5.161). Within the narrative, he ties "Love" to external influences such as "inspiration" and "Fate" (Clough 2.270, 5.139), which have clearly failed him because of his failed relationship with Mary. Faith involves trust in something outside of one's control. "Faith" involves trust in something outside one's control, and Claude thinks it has also failed him, whether in a religious sense, because of the contradictions he sees

in religion (1.148–63, 1.182–97), or in a secular sense, because of the disappointment of his faith that he might find Mary. By contrast, the pursuit of knowledge does not depend on his relationship with another; he largely determines his progress himself. And although faith and love involve intangible feelings about complex issues, such as the unpredictability of a romantic relationship with Mary, knowledge for him is an attainable goal in which he is confident: "when we know, we are happy" (Clough 5.164).

Paradoxically, until late in the text, Claude seems to have reached an opinion that a complete knowledge of truth is unreachable, stating that "limited beings / Scarcely can hope to attain upon earth to an Actual Abstract" and that they should "[l]eav[e] to God contemplation" (Clough 3.131–33). However, his brief foray into the realm of accepting the "inspiration" of "Love" (Tyler 126) fails because his relationship with Mary fails. He is left, therefore, with nothing to fall back on beside his original commitment to knowledge. However the search for knowledge may fail Claude, he forces himself to return to knowledge as a foundation for life in lieu of accepting a foundation entailing risk.

Some elements of Claude's intellectual recommitment may seem to indicate that the verse novel's conclusion demonstrates his intellectual growth rather than a final instantiation of an already established cycle. His admission that "[k]nowledge is hard to seek . . . [and] painful" (Clough 5.163–64) does not stop him from embracing the search, even though accepting "hard[ship]" and "painful[ness]" (Clough 5.163–64) contradicts previously expressed desires for convenience. However, the "hard[ship]" and "painful[ness]" that he references are likely mental and emotional rather than physical or practical challenges, which appear to be his primary concerns. Claude also appears to grow intellectually in terms of the contents of his thoughts. Rather than completely dismissing art, as he does at the beginning of the verse novel (Clough 1.44), Claude reflects, "I may haply resume some day my studies in this kind" (Clough 5.159). He defers this plan beyond the length of the text, leaving readers to wonder whether he ever fulfills it.

Perhaps the most sympathetic aspect of the conclusion is the fact that Claude discusses seeking knowledge rather than simply exhibiting the knowledge he already thinks he has (Clough 1.137). Yet, this seemingly humbled tone does not prove that he has developed intellectually, as the reader does not know his feelings.

More importantly, Claude shows a degree of intellectual instability similar to that which he displays earlier in the text. After dismissing faith and love as unimportant, he briefly mentions hope. Then, he immediately breaks off this train of thought and shifts abruptly to a more trivial subject: "As for Hope, —to-morrow I hope to be starting for Naples" (Clough 5.166). His refusal to determine his beliefs about hope recalls previous moments in which he displays a similar thought pattern. For instance, when wondering how one knows whether one's "belief" is "the true one," Claude quickly concludes that "it doesn't much matter" (Clough 5.20–21). When his mind leads him to the issue of determining what is "*wrong*" (Clough 5.25), he backs down from attempting to answer his own question with the statement "but I do not know that it matters" (Clough 5.25). He does not even try to answer his queries about life after death (Clough 5.101, 5.148). He experiences these admittedly difficult issues, but Claude does not consider them beyond simply asking questions. His musings about hope follow a similar trajectory of abrupt curtailment, indicating that he is not truly committing to a deeper process of intellectual effort or honesty. Finally, his unwillingness to incorporate faith and love into his life—"leave mere Faith and Love to come with the chances" (Clough 5.165)—after suffering the cost of initially ignoring those factors in his relationship with Mary shows that he has not progressed intellectually because he has not learned from his mistakes. Because he experiences little intellectual growth, the reader can view his recommitment to knowledge as part of a self-determined cycle of gaining, losing, and regaining knowledge rather than as a new intellectual development.

Amours de Voyage, as Scott points out, is a text about knowledge (75). However, instead of portraying a true intellectual voyage of discovery, Clough portrays the confusion and contradictions of a man (Claude) caught in the perception that the experience of life is a cycle of gaining, losing, and regaining knowledge. With this realization, the readers recognize such a dramatic shift in Claude's view toward knowledge at the end of the verse novel. Moreover, understanding reasons behind this shift affords a clearer perspective on the transformation.

Critics have lauded Claude's intellectual recommitment as a brave "resist[ance] of the easy way" ("Arthur Hugh Clough" 65) or "refusal to purchase comfort at the cost of intellectual honesty" (Houghton 153). Even Clough himself believed that the final words of his protagonist revealed a "final Strength of Mind" ("Arthur Hugh Clough" 59);

however, Claude's intellectual recommitment is simply the repetition of a pattern that he predicted and planned himself as well as a decision from sheer necessity due to his flawed rejection of potentially better paths in life. Indeed, his embrace of a search for knowledge, without other values such as faith and love, is actually "the easy way" out after his failure to succeed in other pursuits. Ultimately, in examining Claude's experiences with and views toward knowledge in *Amours de Voyage*, the reader can see just how static he is as a character.

Works Cited

Clough, Arthur Hugh. *Amours de Voyage*. 1858. Edited by Fellugo, et al., https://editions.covecollective.org/edition/amours-de-voyage/amours-de-voyage. Accessed 8 Sep. 2024.

Dean, Paul, and Jacqueline Moore. "'To Own the Positive and Present': Clough's Historical Dilemma." *Durham University Journal*, vol. 76, no. 1, Dec. 1983, pp. 59–62.

Houghton, Walter E. "*Amours de Voyage*." *The Poetry of Clough: An Essay in Revaluation*. Yale UP, 1963, pp. 119–55.

Markovits, Stefanie. "Arthur Hugh Clough, *Amours de Voyage*, and the Victorian Crisis of Action." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2001, pp. 445–78. https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2001.55.4.445.

McGhee, Fergus. "Clough, Emerson, and Knowingness." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 71, no. 300, June 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgz145.

O'Dell, Benjamin D. "Lyric Moments and the Historicity of the Verse Novel: *Amours de Voyage*." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 59, no. 4, Winter 2021, pp. 411–31. *Project MUSE*, https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.2021.0028.

Scott, Patrick Greig. "The Victorianism of Clough." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 16, no. 1–2, 1978, pp. 32–42. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002583.

Shaw, W. David. *Victorians and Mystery: Crises of Representation*, Cornell UP, 1990.

Timko, Michael. "*Amours de Voyage:* Substance or Smoke?" *English*, vol. 13, no. 75, 1960, pp. 95–98.

———"Arthur Hugh Clough: Palpable Things and Celestial Fact." *The Victorian Experience: The Poets*, edited by Richard A. Levine, Ohio UP, 1982, pp. 47–66.

Tyler, Daniel. "Instinct and Hesitation in the Work of Arthur Hugh Clough." *Poetry in the Making: Creativity and Composition in Victorian Poetic Drafts*. Oxford UP, 2021, pp. 122–46.

The Commodification of Beauty

BY LUKE STRINE

In her essay "In the Name of Beauty," Tressie McMillan Cottom discusses that her appearance—being black and disabled—does not fit the capitalist standard of beauty and therefore she is not beautiful. People were angered by her claim, insisting that she was wrong and that she was beautiful, despite the capitalist standard of appearance that defines beauty for society. Similarly, in the essay, "There's a Mathematical Equation that Proves I'm Ugly," Ariel Henley narrates her many interactions with people at school that addressed how she was "ugly" or "wrong." Henley discusses the golden ratio, a mathematical equation used by artists to create symmetry and studied by scientists who quantified beauty (41). Both Cottom and Henley's essays relate to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in which Garland-Thomson examines how standards of beauty are used to oppress and "normalize subjugated bodies" (339). Garland-Thomson contends that discrimination against both women and people with disabilities are similar, as they are both pressured to fit into the capitalist standard of beauty. Both Cottom's and Henley's embodied experiences and Garland-Thomson's narrative related to discrimination help to articulate how disabled bodies highlight the commodification of standard beauty.

Cottom explains how she does not fit the beauty standard due to her ethnicity, disability, and gender and how individuals have tried to enforce a harmful beauty standard upon her. For example, she discusses an interaction with her teacher: "The first time a white woman teacher told me that my breasts were distracting was in the sixth grade. Over the years, white women with authority over me have told me how wrong or dangerous or deviant my body is" (41). This discourse shows how society favors a specific type of body, as her teacher views her as "deviant" because her gender and ethnicity do not fit the ideal body standard. Additionally, Cottom's use of diction with this experience illustrates how the beauty standard degrades and places women at a disadvantage, as the teacher uses the words "distracting" and "dangerous." These words suggest that her body is a problem and she is at fault if people are looking at her.

Henley discusses an interaction she had with a classmate: "*You have the weirdest set of eyes I've ever seen,* he told me. When my teacher overheard this, he sent the boy to the principal's office, where I would later go and give my story, only to be told that I needed to not be so sensitive" (39). Like Cottom, Henley's body is not accepted by society; her classmate called her eyes weird, and, like Cottom's teacher, the principal reinforces the boy's view of Henley being a problem, further demonstrating how the beauty standard dehumanizes individuals by reducing them to their physical attributes.

Henley's experience with the school principal also disadvantages women, who are individually blamed for not meeting an impossible and ideal standard of beauty. This ideology is rooted in history; as Garland-Thomson states, "Aristotle . . . defined women as 'mutilated males.' Women, for Aristotle, have 'improper form'" (337). Although Aristotle's philosophy is old, he is still a prevalent figure today, and his view of women is present in the capitalist beauty standards: that is, many people view women's bodies as lesser than men's. Women are seen as missing the features that a man has, rather than being their own powerful selves. As a result, Cottom and Henley received this treatment, and classmates' and teachers' responses supported society's view that their bodies were "improper form[s]" and thus deserved to be treated differently.

Garland-Thomson's feminist disability theory "denaturalizes disability by unseating the dominant assumption that disability is something that is wrong with someone" (336). Garland-Thomson argues that people who do not fit the idealized standard, specifically individuals with disabilities, are not valued by society. These individuals are considered a problem that must be fixed so that they fit the standard or norm. Garland-Thomson's feminist disability theory is clear when Henley learns about the golden ratio. Henley states, "I had never understood mathematical equations or ratios, so the only thing I learned from her lesson was that these were the beauty standards a woman must meet if she wanted to be deemed worthy" (41). Both Garland-Thomson and Henley show how disability does not fit the ideal, as Henley's condition does not meet the standard expected by women in Western society. Additionally, Henley's use of diction when she states "worthy" suggests that she must get rid of her disability to prove that she is beautiful, further illustrates Garland-Thomson's point that society makes the "assumption that disability is something that is wrong with someone" (336).

Similar to how society views Henley's disability as not meeting the ideal, Cottom addresses how being black does not fit the same standard. She writes, "When beauty is white and I am dark, it means that I am more likely to be punished in school, to receive higher sentences for crimes, less likely to marry, and less likely to marry someone with equal or higher economic status" (71–72). Cottom illustrates how the beauty standard automatically places her at a disadvantage because being white is considered more beautiful and thus more valuable than someone who is black. The standard also assumes that being black is something that is individually wrong rather than a social construct created from the idea of the norm. The standard allows for a societal hierarchy in which groups of people based on multi-faceted identities—such as gender, race, and body—are oppressed to advance others. Garland-Thomson further shows how disability, race, and gender are connected. She contends,

> considering disability shifts the conceptual framework to strengthen our understanding of how these multiple systems intertwine, redefine, and mutually constitute one another. Integrating disability clarifies how this aggregate of systems operate together, yet distinctly, to support an imaginary norm and structure the relations that grant power, privilege, and status to that norm. (Garland-Thomson 335)

Both Cottom's and Henley's embodied experiences, through the lens of Garland-Thomson's feminist disability theory, are examples of how the standard of beauty classifies certain individuals as less and thus commodifies beauty.

Cottom, Henley, and Garland-Thomson critique how individuals unintentionally forward a capitalist beauty standard by buying into the idea of beauty that society promotes. Cottom writes, "White women need me to believe I can earn beauty, because when I want what I cannot have, what they have becomes all the more valuable" (65–66). Cottom explains why people still believe in the standard, despite the fact it is based on a for-profit system. Beauty is highly valued by society, and individuals (consumers) need to think beauty is obtainable. Cottom's critique aligns with Garland-Thomson's, who writes, "Images of disabled models are both complicit and critical of the beauty system that oppresses all women" (350). Per Garland-Thomson, even when a

model with a disability challenges the beauty standard, her modeling perpetuates complicity through commodified beauty.

Both Cottom and Garland-Thomson explain how people who believe that they can obtain beauty would feel powerless if no societal beauty standards exist to achieve. In addition to illustrating how promoting the idea of obtaining beauty is harmful, Cottom also addresses how people look at individuals who are further from the norm of beautiful to feel better about themselves. As Cottom discusses, if white women believe that a black woman can meet the Western beauty standard, then white women will feel more confident in their ability to achieve beauty (65–66).

Similarly, Henley's experiences show how other people considered her disability to feel better about themselves. Henley illustrates this when she talks about an interview that she and her sister provided for a magazine; Henley writes, "The women took pictures of us and asked us questions about our lives. . . . I felt confused when they kept implying that I was different" (43–44). The magazine made a spectacle out of her disability by presenting her as different; they also increased viewers and gained profit, further highlighting how beauty is commodified. This story also demonstrates how people often consider a difference—a disability, or perhaps gender, race, and physical differences—to feel more secure; people compare themselves with individuals who are further from the beauty standard to feel more beautiful. Ultimately, Cottom, Henley, and Garland-Thompson show how "denying these empirical realities is its own kind of violence, even when our intentions are good" (72).

Cottom, Henley, and Garland-Thomson also critique the capitalist beauty standard by showing how it commodifies beauty for economic profit. Garland-Thomson writes, "The point of aesthetic surgery, as well as the costuming of power, is not to appear unique—or to 'be yourself,' as the ads endlessly promise—but rather not to be conspicuous, not to look different" (340). She explains how people profit from the beauty standard; advertising the standard as something unique makes individuals more likely to spend money trying to fit that standard. Garland-Thomson also shows how this capital is harmful because the profit of aesthetic surgery comes at the expense of people giving up what makes them unique.

Henley illustrates the danger of making profit from this beauty standard when she writes about her experience with doctors: "I would sit in a room while doctors took pictures of my face from every angle. They

would pinch and poke, circling my flaws. I would sit and let them pick apart my every flaw. . . . Fix me, I would beg" (42). Henley describes how the commodification of beauty affected her, as she went through multiple surgeries to look more like the norm. Henley's experience shows how individuals who do not meet the beauty standard, specifically individuals with disabilities, feel like they need to be "fixed."

Cottom shares a similar response to the commodification of the beauty standard. She writes, "When I say that I am unattractive or ugly, I am not internalizing the dominant culture's assessment of me. I am naming what has been done to me. And signaling who did it" (60). She explains how others perceive her and perceive the norm by showing how society portrays individuals who do not meet the unattainable standard as intrinsically wrong rather than being assigned an identity. Cottom clearly demonstrates that giving in to the standard is harmful because it is attempting to become society's "assessment of you" rather than the unique person you are (71–72).

Like Cottom's critique on how the standard removes what makes individuals unique is similar to Garland-Thomson's argument that a surgically untouched female body is advertised as abnormal and as needing reconstruction. Garland-Thomson writes,

> Beauty, then, dictates corporeal standards that create not distinction but utter conformity to a bland look that is at the same time unachievable so as to leash us to consumer practices that promise to deliver such sameness . . . the unreconstructed female body is persistently cast as having abnormalities that can be corrected by surgical procedures which supposedly improve one's appearance by producing ostensibly natural looking noses, thighs, breasts, chins, and so on. (340)

Garland-Thomson contends that trying to look like the capitalist standard comes at the expense of what makes individuals unique and encourages them to spend money to look like everyone else. This idea of wanting to become "normal" is also prevalent when Henley talks about the golden ratio, stating, "Never had an individual been ranked a perfect ten, but still we lived in a society that found the need to measure and rate and rank and score" (41). Both Garland-Thomson and Henley show how capitalism is able to profit from consumers: people spend

large amounts of money to look like something they will never become. Moreover, because no one has scored perfectly on the beauty standard, consumers will endlessly purchase beauty products. As Henley shares, "They took bone from my hips and put it in my face. I had to learn how to walk again" (44). Henley critiques the beauty standard by using irony because what was supposed to "fix" her disabled her even more (42).

Cottom explains how the standard of beauty has a negative impact on individuals: "Beauty is not *good* capital. It compounds the oppression of gender. It constrains those who identify as women against their will. It costs money and demands money. It colonizes. It hurts . . . It can never be fully satisfied" (56). She criticizes capitalism by documenting the cost to attempt to become beautiful, which can lead people to treat others cruelly and also risking that they may never be "fully satisfied with themselves" (56). Cottom also writes, "Ugly is everything done to you in the name of beauty" (72), contending that the idea of ugliness is rooted in the capitalist ideology of beauty. Ugliness is therefore defined outside the idealized norm; that is, ugliness may be that which makes a person unique and they are only ugly because they do not meet the commodified standard of beauty.

The idea of beauty is an artificial one that harms society. As Cottom and Henley describe with their own experiences and as Garland-Thomson connects disability to feminism, beauty is being commodified to create beauty but, because these standards are pervasive, individuals struggle not to absorb them. Individuals who pursue being beautiful per the ideal, they ultimately lose themselves and their unique identity in the process. Perhaps the answer to this problem is to teach people self-acceptance and pride in who they are so they can disconnect from cultural and economic manipulation.

Works Cited

Cottom, Tressie McMillan "In the Name of Beauty." *Thick: And Other Essays*, The New Press, 2019, pp. 33–72.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *Journal of Feminist Disability Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2023, pp. 333–53.

Henley, Ariel. "There's a Mathematical Equation That Proves I'm Ugly." *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage Books, 2020, pp. 39–52.

"Unclean! Unclean!": *Dracula* and the Return of the Bubonic Plague

BY LAURA UNDERWOOD

Dracula clearly shows the theme of contamination and purity when Mina cries "Unclean! Unclean!" (Stoker 263) while the Count forces her to drink his blood. Critics have read Bram Stoker's novel as a metaphor for racial contamination through reverse colonization and orientalism (Arata), sexually transmitted diseases or rape (Senf), contemporary and political medical practices (Willis), or fears of malaria (Forman). These theorists interpret vampirism as a metaphor for disease and contamination and argue that it reflects the fears and facets of Victorian society. In this paper, I argue that the resurrected feudal warlord in *Dracula* represents Victorian fears of the third wave of the bubonic plague, a medieval disease that threatened to wreak havoc on London. Using Foucault's concept of the "leper" from *Discipline and Punish*, I show how *Dracula* reveals the conceptions of purity and contamination on which Victorian society was built.

After the first two waves of the bubonic plague in 541–549 CE and 1347–1351 CE, a smaller third wave (1894–1897 CE) hit in the late-nineteenth century, which originated in India and spread west toward England, the center of the British Empire (Benedict 107). The third wave hardly reached English ports before scientists developed a vaccine. Much like Dracula, the Bubonic plague was a disease of Eastern origin from a past era that seemingly was resurrected and spread westward into the modern world (107). Dracula—both a medieval warlord and a bringer of disease—resurrects himself and invades London. In much the same way that modern science prevented the Bubonic plague from spreading, Van Helsing and the vampire hunters—symbols of science—prevent vampirism from spreading to England.

Most people know that the Bubonic Plague devasted Europe during the medieval era (Benedict 107), but the modern outbreak in the Victorian era frequently is unknown. The "Third Plague" or the "Bombay Plague," named for its place of origin, was "[o]nly the third in recorded history" and it "had been endemic in Yunnan province since at least the late eighteenth century" (108). However, by 1894, it spread from China

and "carried the plague bacilli to all the major seaports of the world" (108). In many areas, it died out shortly after making landfall, but it caused "10 million deaths in India alone" (Stenseth 1). The Bombay plague did not claim as many English victims as its predecessors because the British isolated the plague in Plymouth. According to a clipping from *The New York Times* during the infection, "both patients have been isolated and the [ship] *Golconda* has been disinfected. The rats on board the steamer have been utterly exterminated by burning as the rodents are credited with spreading the plague in India" (7). Though the plague contaminated few Victorian bodies, it alarmed many Victorian minds. *The Deseret News* in January 1897 noted, "In England the feeling is one of rather insecurity" because "Great Britain is not entirely safe for a new invasion of the plague" ("The Black Death" 4). Because India was the jewel of the British Empire, Victorians feared that this plague in East Asia would arrive quickly in their borders. Similarly, in *Dracula*, the reader sees the disease of vampirism originate in the East and bleed toward the West, causing panic among the Londoners about what, or who, might enter their ports to infect the nation.

Michel Foucault theorizes that medieval strategies for dealing with leprosy established the foundation for modern social relationships. Specifically, Foucault argues that modern society depends on identifying and excluding certain individuals it considers threatening or contaminating. Medieval people with leprosy lived outside the village and marked themselves as unclean to benefit the group. Foucault argues that this excuses oppression, saying, "On the one hand, the lepers are treated as plague victims; the tactics of individualizing disciplines are imposed on the excluded; and, on the other hand, the universality of disciplinary controls makes it possible to brand the 'leper' and to bring into play against him the dualistic mechanisms of exclusion" (199). Although a person with leprosy would be isolated to protect others, figuratively, this concept creates an "us versus them" mentality to push certain people out of society. Although literal leprosy does not concern modern people, the idea of categorizing people into either "normal" or "abnormal" remains. The power structures—such as religion, science, medicine, or surveillance systems—are used to maintain binaries and eliminate threats.

Foucault's panopticon is an example of these power struggles: prisoners are misled to think a guard surveys all prisoners at once—"to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that

assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). The panopticon deters people from doing wrong because they are afraid of being caught. This model is used to eliminate threats and prune society so that only the most well-behaved succeed. Although the novel is aware of the threat of the vampire, it is also aware of the need for self-policing so that they do not become a threat themselves. This is seen in Mina's cries of "Unclean!" when she fears for her purity (Stoker 263). Foucault's society is organized around a scapegoat, where a person is named a threat and everyone else gives roles to eliminate that threat. The same occurs with a real-life plague: some are tasked to stay indoors; some are tasked to care for the sick; and some to cook, to clean, to protect, or to search for a cure. Dracula clearly fulfills the role of the medieval person with leprosy in Stoker's novel, and the main cast of men and Mina act as the village that labels him as an outcast.

Dracula represents the medieval era threatening to return and take over the modern era, with barbarism battling sophistication through the conflict between Dracula and the men. In the same way, Dracula—both a medieval warlord and a disease—battles the modern Van Helsing, who represents religion and modern medicine. The most prominent example is when the Count talks to Harker about his bloodline, saying, "We Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many Brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship. . . . What devil or what witch was ever so great as Attila, whose blood is in these veins?" (Stoker 37–38). Dracula's heritage is rooted in destruction, and his connection to Atilla the Hun and the Vikings links him to the past, a time of feudalism. Dracula also compares himself to a feudal warlord who must rule over his peasants: "What good are peasants without a leader? Where is the war without a brain and heart to conduct it?" (Stoker 39). Dracula's love of feudal warlords marks him as an outdated political figure in a modern society, one the Victorians would not have wanted to see return. This relates to another group, the Goths, whose perceived role in history was, as Nick Groom points out, "primarily one of destruction: they were responsible for the fall of the Roman Empire" (x), yet at the same time, "they were also being slowly rehabilitated by scholars as an intriguing example of a primitive society" (xi). In the same way that the English are fascinated with the fall of Rome to the barbaric Goths, the English are simultaneously afraid of and fascinated with the

idea of England being taken over by medieval or barbaric forces. But, as Arata has demonstrated, Dracula represents an anti-science, anti-reason, and anti-civilization mindset. This threat must be destroyed to preserve civilization.

Dracula's monstrous description, aligning him with vermin and rats, reinforces his role as a plague-bringer. Readers see this particularly in his initial description from Harker: "Strange to say, there were hairs in the centre of the palm [of his hand]. The nails were long and fine, and cut to a sharp point" (Stoker 27). This monstrous physical description counters the way the women are described based on their virtue, such as when Harker says, "I am alone in the castle with those awful women. Faugh! Mina is a woman, and there is nought in common" (Stoker 60). Much like the rats responsible for spreading the Bubonic plague, Dracula has clear animalistic and monstrous physical qualities, in stark contrast to the novel's other characters. The Count controls vermin too, as explained when Seward said he "could see that there were thousands of rats with their eyes blazing red, like [Dracula's,] only smaller. He held up his hand, and they all stopped" (Stoker 258). Dracula's control over the vermin that spread the plague clearly demonstrates his role as a vector of disease. This in turn contaminates Lucy and Mina.

The analogy of the leper village is not a Foucauldian thought experiment but rather an actual solution depicted in the Bible to isolate the ill and keep the pure from being tainted. In Leviticus, the exact protocol for someone infected with leprosy is explained: "The leprous person . . . shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp" (*The ESV Study Bible*, Lev. 13.45–46). This verse parallels Mina's cry when the Count infects her (Stoker 263). Just as explained in the biblical reference, if an infected person cannot be cured of leprosy, they must be removed. In the gospels, however, there is the possibility of healing or cleansing of impurity. This creates a conflict between the urge to purge things that are unclean versus the desire to heal them. The novel shows this juxtaposition when the men are drawn to cleanse the tainted Mina (Stoker 263), whereas they immediately want to purge Lucy (Stoker 200). With the advancements of modern medicine, leprosy is no longer treated only by isolation and can instead be eliminated through vaccination. In much the same way, vaccination and treatment healed the Victorian Bombay

Plague patients rather than them being quarantined in preparation to die. In the novel, with Van Helsing's modern science, Dracula's disease is no longer allowed to sit isolated in Castle Dracula and must instead be purged.

If Dracula represents the Foucauldian person with leprosy, Van Helsing and the band of men represent the village, utilizing religion and modern medicine to contain the disease of vampirism. In the Foucauldian metaphor of the person with leprosy and the village, the hatred of the person with leprosy creates community and assigns distinct roles amongst all the leper hunters. As Foucault explains, "Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, and organization in-depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power" (198). Foucault promotes spreading out power amongst smaller divisions of people to make for a stronger society rather than a harsh power imbalance between two groups. Readers see this when the men and Mina divide into clear roles in preparation to attack the Count in Castle Dracula. Van Helsing assigns these roles when he says, "Now, men, to our Council of War; for here and now, we must plan what each and all shall do" (Stoker 323). Their hatred of Dracula and desire to keep his disease contained causes men from various social classes and backgrounds to join forces and divide up roles to achieve this goal. Van Helsing and the rest of the men would not have had a social bond without Dracula. Without the threat to Lucy, Seward and Quincey would have returned to their previous lives and Dr. Van Helsing would have never been summoned. The threat of the person with leprosy gives a common identity to a group of people that would not usually associate. Unlike the medieval societies that Foucault describes, which try to prevent the spread of leprosy, the vampire hunters attempt to cure the disease. The vampire hunters represent the vaccine to combat the plague by utilizing science as their base weapon combined with religion.

Stoker, however, continually returns to the idea that beneath the supernatural aspect of the vampire is a deeper reliance on scientific reasoning. He attributes Dracula's powers to "[t]he very place, where he ha[s] been alive, undead for all these centuries . . . full of strangeness of the geologic and chemical world. . . . There is something magnetic or electric in some of these combinations of occult forces which work for physical life in a strange way" (Stoker 293). Van Helsing believes

that deeper than a supernatural anomaly, Dracula and his home country of Transylvania must be otherwise affected by the wonders of science. Continuing with that same idea, vampirism in the novel likens itself more to a disease of the body rather than a disease of the soul. As Rosemary Jann explains, "Stoker's characters may profess faith in a higher religious truth, but their actions reaffirm the truths of a normative rationality" (284). In the same way that Vadn Helsing, the vampire hunters, and Mina eliminate Dracula with science, the vaccine eliminated the third wave of the Bubonic Plague. Foucault's society is created around marking people with leprosy and keeping them away from society. However, I am interested in a revival of this idea, where instead social issues are not kept at arms distance but cured. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the vampire hunters, acting as a vaccine and representing new science, have the power to *cure* rather than only *prevent* or *isolate* the disease.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* portrays vampirism as a revival of the Bubonic plague, showing social anxieties, Foucauldian binaries, and methods for controlling and neutralizing threats such as plague. Comparing the novel to the third wave of the Bubonic plague demonstrates a broader historical and theoretical significance, specifically regarding the Victorian anxieties about the oncoming plague at the end of the nineteenth century. The Foucauldian analogy of the person with leprosy in the village helps to illustrate not only the Count's contamination and exclusion but also the roles taken by the men to mediate this infection. This disease originates in the East and spreads westward much like the Bombay plague, as it infects Mina and Lucy and intends to spread through England. This is until Van Helsing, representing modern medicine, intervenes and stops the threat just as a vaccine stopped the Bombay Plague. The significance of this analysis lies in the modern connotation of disease and binaries. The stigmatization of vampirism aligns with the stigmatization of the ill and healthy within more modern examples of plague. These intersections of theory, historical context, and literature invite readers to critically engage with issues of power, exclusion, disease, barbarism, and purity both in literature and in the modern day.

Works Cited

Arata, Stephen D. "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1990, pp. 621–45. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3827794.

Benedict, Carol. "Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China." *Modern China*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1988, pp. 107–55. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/189268.

"Bubonic Plague in England: Mild Case of the Plague Landed and Isolated at Plymouth." *The New York Times*, 1899, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*, https://pascal-csu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01PASCAL_CSU/9viptf/BM_eNrjYuBNLC3JSM0ryUxOLElNYWHgNDA2M9I1MTY25GSQdAp18vfzdFYI8HF0D3VV8PRTcPVz93H0c-FhYE1LzClO5YXS3Awybq4hzh66BUX5haWpxSXxGXkF8Zam5oaWlhYGBgSkAUaIJKA. Accessed 14 February 2024.

Forman, Ross G. "A Parasite for Sore Eyes: Rereading Infection Metaphors in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2016, pp. 925–47. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26347269.

Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism" from *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*." *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, vol. 2 no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–12. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/252435.

Groom, Nick. "Introduction." *Castle of Otranto,* by Horace Walpole, Oxford World's Classics, 2014, pp. x–xvi.

Jann, Rosemary. "Saved by Science? The Mixed Messages of Stoker's *Dracula*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1989, pp. 273–87. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754893.

Murray, Alexander E., and Percy Clare Eliott-Lockhart. *A Frontier Campaign: A Narrative of the Operations of the Malakand and Buner Field Forces, 1897–1898*. London, Methuen, 1898.

Senf, Carol A. "*Dracula*: Stoker's Response to the New Woman." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1982, pp. 33–49. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3827492.

Stenseth, Nils Chr. "Plague Through History." *Science*, vol. 321, 2008, pp. 773–74. doi:10.1126/science.1161496.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Norton Second Critical Edition, 1897.

"The Black Death." *The Deseret News*. Jan. 1897. *Google Books*, https://books.google.com/books?id=k69LAAAAIBAJ&pg=PA4&dq=bubonic+plague+%2B+England&article_id=6615,4993621&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjOifWs47iEAxVZ5MkDHYp9CuUQ6AF6BAgGEAI#v=onepage&q=bubonic%20plague%20%2B%20England&f=false.

The Bible. English Standard Version. Crossway, 2012.

The Bubonic Plague in Bombay. s.n., 1897. *JSTOR*, https://jstor.org/stable/60231370.

Willis, Martin. "'The Invisible Giant,' Dracula, and Disease." Studies in the Novel, vol. 39, no. 3, 2007, pp. 301–25. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533817.

BACKMATTER

Contributors' Biographies

Editorial Team

Raisa Harris
Summer 2024 Intern
The University of Southern Mississippi
Alpha Nu Gamma, chartered in 2005

Raisa Harris recently graduated (BA in English) and is an aspiring fiction writer and copyeditor. She has edited issues of literary journals *Mississippi Review* and *Product Magazine*, copyedited for *The Student Printz* university newspaper, and served as social media assistant for USM's Center for STEM Education. She has won awards for her fiction (e.g., Shannon O'Hara and Henry Mackaman English Endowment Scholarship for fiction), and her short story "True Crime" was selected for USM's Undergraduate Symposium. Harris was President of her alma mater's Sigma Tau Delta chapter, Vice President of the Creative Writing Club, and Social Media Committee member for LSMAMP.

Baylie Jett Mills
Summer 2024 Intern
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX
Psi Delta, chartered in 1943

Baylie Jett Mills graduated *summa cum laude* in May 2024, earning a BA in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and minors in Communication Studies and Legal Studies. She is pursuing an MA in English with an American Literature concentration. Baylie has worked as Copyediting Intern at Texas Tech University Press, igniting her love of the publishing industry. She currently serves as President of her university's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. Baylie is the author and illustrator of *The*

Adventures of Max children's series, and she has published in *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books.

Miranda Miller
Summer 2024 Intern
University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA
Alpha Tau Iota, chartered in 2012

Miranda Miller recently graduated from the University of Iowa with her bachelor's degree in English and Creative Writing, with a minor in Ancient Civilizations. During her time at Iowa, she was Editor-in-Chief of *Wilder Things*, a speculative literature student literary magazine. Her past student publications include *snapshots*, *Boundless*, and *The Foundationalist*. She also published a fiction piece in *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* (vol. 99). Miranda is currently pursuing her MA in English at Florida Atlantic University, where she plans to pursue a concentration in Science Fiction and Fantasy. She hopes you enjoy this Centennial edition of the Sigma Tau Delta journals!

Sarah G. Pouliot
2024 Centennial Editorial Intern
Palm Beach Atlantic University,
West Palm Beach, FL
Alpha Zeta Mu, chartered in 1997

Sarah Pouliot graduated *summa cum laude* with a BA in English from Palm Beach Atlantic University's (PBA) Supper Honors Program. As the recipient of PBA's Outstanding Graduate for English Award, Sarah served as President of her university's Sigma Tau Delta chapter, completed grant research on disability studies and children's literature, and worked as a Senior Editor of *Living Waters Review*. Winning prestigious awards for her creative and critical writing, she has fourteen publications in national and international journals. When she is not writing, Sarah enjoys singing along to Taylor Swift in the car with her border collie Theo.

Carie S. Tucker King, PhD
Managing Editor of Publications
The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX
Alpha Psi Nu, chartered in 2017

Dr. King earned her BA in English (Baylor University), her MA in Technical Writing (University of North Texas), and her PhD in Technical Communication/Rhetoric (Texas Tech University), with postdoctoral study in ethics (Texas Tech Health Science Center). A medical

editor for 14 years, she is Clinical Professor and Director of Rhetoric at UT Dallas. Her books include co-edited *Amplifying Voices in UX* (SUNY Press) and *The Rhetoric of Breast Cancer* (Lexington Studies) with articles in *Health Communication*, *Technical Communication*, and *Journal of Surgery*. When not with her students, you can find King consulting writers around the world (www.bkscommunication.com).

Faculty Reviewers

Lisa Bell
Fort Hays State University, Hays, KS

Lisa Bell is the Writing Center Director and Instructor of English at Fort Hays State University where she serves as the Co-Advisor for the Sigma Tau Delta chapter. Her teaching and research focus on developmental writing and first-year composition programs. She believes that writing education is the foundation for solid communication skills and encourages her students to explore their worlds through words.

Sonia Mae Brown, PhD
Philander Smith University, Little Rock, AR

Dr. Brown is an Associate Professor in the Department of Language and Letters and the Chair of the Division of Arts and Humanities at Philander Smith University. She received her doctoral degree in English from Howard University, and she possesses a master's in English with a focus in Creative and Professional Writing from Long Island University. Her areas of research include eroticism, black female subjectivity, and sex as a discursive act or practice.

Christine Davis
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ

Christine Davis is an Associate Teaching Professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, AZ, where she lives with her husband and two children. She teaches first-year writing and was recently named Teacher of the Year for the College of Arts and Letters at NAU. She writes and publishes poetry. Christine can be reached at Christine.Davis@nau.edu.

Michael Frizell
Missouri State University, Springfield, MO

Michael Frizell, Director of Student Learning Services at Missouri State University, is Editor of The Learning Assistance Review, the peer-reviewed journal of the International College Learning Center Association. In addition, he is a newly appointed CLADEA Fellow. He is a prolific speaker, presenting hundreds of workshops and informative speeches, guest-starring in podcasts, radio and television shows, and more. As a writer for TidalWave Comics, he has written more than 100 comic books based on famous people.

Kriss Larkin, PhD
Southwest Oklahoma State University,
Weatherford, OK

Dr. Larkin is an Instructor of English at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She holds BAs in Sociology and English from Middle Tennessee State University, an MA in Literature from Belmont University, and a PhD in Literature from The University of Texas at Dallas. Exploring the interplay between sociology and English is her central passion, as she seeks to integrate the popular with the academic.

Shannin Schroeder, PhD
Southern Arkansas University, Magnolia, AR

Dr. Schroeder, a scholar of magical realism, has presented and published numerous essays and chapters, as well as the book *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*; she has authored or co-authored three novel manuscripts. At Southern Arkansas University, she directs the Writing Center, teaches World Literature and Creative Writing, and is Interim Chair of her department. Dr. Schroeder has served on the Sigma Tau Delta Board for 18 years, has chaired or co-chaired five conventions, and is Immediate Past President.

Nicole Sheets
Whitworth University, Spokane, WA

Nicole Sheets is an Associate Professor of English at Whitworth University, where she teaches courses like Environmental and Nature Writing, Writing in the Community, and Applied Editing. Her work has appeared in *Image, Mid-American Review, Bellingham Review, Hotel Amerika*, and other journals. Nicole is hoping to find a home for a memoir-in-essays about purity culture. She is Managing Editor for *Rock & Sling*, a journal of witness.

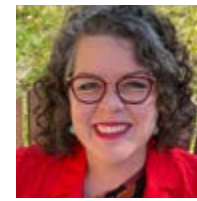
Yu-Li Alice Shen, MFA
University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN

Yu-Li Alice Shen is a playwright, audiobook narrator, and English professor. Her plays have won awards from ATHE-KCACTF and SETC, and her voicework has received an AudioFile Earphones Award. Shen earned her BA in English literature from James Madison University and her MFA in playwriting from Virginia Tech, and she currently teaches at the University of Southern Indiana. In her spare time, she hosts a humor/improv podcast called *Going Terribly*.

Deena Varner, PhD
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX

Dr. Varner is an Assistant Professor of Practice in the Department of English at Texas Tech University and serves as the Faculty Advisor for TTU's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. Dr. Varner is an interdisciplinary Americanist specializing in carceral studies, cultural studies of the law, and law and literature. Her research has appeared in journals such as *Cultural Politics*, *Ethnic Studies Review*, and the *Journal of Historical Geography*. Currently, she is an advisory board member and book review editor for the Carceral Geography Working Group of the Royal Geographical Society in the United Kingdom.

Amy E. Weldon, PhD
Luther College, Decorah, IA



Dr. Weldon, professor of English at Luther College, is the author of *The Hands-On Life: How to Wake Yourself Up and Save The World* (2018), *The Writer's Eye: Observation and Inspiration for Creative Writers* (2018), *Eldorado, Iowa: A Novel* (2019), and *Advanced Fiction: A Writer's Guide and Anthology* (2023). Her website is amyeweldon.com.

Student Authors

Booker Atkins
Cedarville University, Cedarville, OH
Alpha Kappa Delta, chartered in 2001

Booker Atkins is a senior English Education major, and he hopes to teach high-school English in Southwestern Ohio after he graduates. Booker greatly enjoys studying spatial theory, and his favorite literary theorist is bell hooks. When he is not studying, Booker enjoys raising and tagging monarch butterflies and promoting awareness about the declining species.

Carolina Jane Atkins
Palm Beach Atlantic University, West Palm Beach, FL
Alpha Zeta Mu, chartered in 1997

Carolina Jane Atkins is a writer based in West Tennessee. She is a lover of folklore and French literature. Her previous work in fiction and poetry has been accepted by *Living Waters Review*, *Tenth Muse Literary Magazine*, and *Clackamas Literary Review*. She has worked as a writing coach, copy editor, translator, and private tutor. Her favorite accomplishment to date is her English translation of Eugène Ionesco's play *Le Roi se meurt*, which was completed as part of a volunteer academic project. Her professional goal is to continue writing and trying as many new things as possible.

Cayleigh Baillargeon
University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA
Alpha Theta Rho, chartered in 1999

Cayleigh Baillargeon is a nonfiction writer, poet, and abolitionist from Lowell, MA. Cayleigh writes about her road trips across the United States with her dog Walter and other current events and connects them to American history. She is majoring in Creative Writing and History and minoring in American Studies. Cayleigh is the Vice President of UML's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and the Managing Editor of UML's literary magazine *The Offering*. Her work has been published in the *Guagua Poet Anthology*, *The Offering*, *The Dead River Review*, and elsewhere.

Emma Bare
Linfield University, McMinnville, OR
Alpha Tau Nu, chartered in 2012

Emma Bare is a senior pursuing her undergraduate degree in English Literature with minors in Economics and Critical Ethnic Studies. Emma works in Linfield's library and the writing center and has also worked on Linfield's literary magazine, *Camas*. She is President of Linfield's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. Most recently, she has further pursued her passion for books and publishing by attending New York University's Summer Publishing Institute, spending the month exploring New York City and learning about the world of publishing.

Hanna M. Beshai
Augustana University, Sioux Falls, SD
Alpha Xi Mu, chartered in 2006

Hanna Beshai is a senior pursuing a degree in English, religion, and education. Her work has appeared in publications such as the *Graphe* magazine, *The Bearings* online, *The Summit Avenue Review*, and the *Augustana Venture*. Hanna had a short play selected for the Claire Donaldson New Play Festival in 2023, and in 2024, the Augustana Theatre Company performed a full-length play, *This is My Body*, that Hanna collaboratively authored with Dr. Richard Swanson, Grace Ahles, and Dr. Jayna Fitzsimmons. Hanna's connection to the land and ancestral storytelling are the primary focus of her writing.

Juliann Bianco
Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY
Alpha Mu Kappa, chartered in 2004

Juliann Bianco is a senior, majoring in English Writing with a minor in Games and Emerging Media. Juliann has always been passionate about reading and writing and has great love for the English courses taken. She works as a Peer Tutor in Marist's Writing Center, helping students of all majors and levels to improve their writing. She often submits to Marist's *Mosaic*, and she has published in two Young Writers' USA competitions.

Alyssa Borelli
Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY
Alpha Mu Kappa, chartered in 2004

Alyssa Borelli is a recent graduate with a BA in Communication, a concentration in Public Relations, and minors in Creative Writing and Theatre. As an undergraduate student, she won the John P. Anderson Playwright's Festival three times and had pieces published every year in Marist's literary magazine, *Mosaic*. She plans to continue her path as an aspiring writer by focusing on women's rights and on the storie that society is afraid to tell. Alyssa grew up in New Hartford, CT, and in her free time, she can be found reading beside her two cats.

Zachary Brady
Utah State University, Logan, UT
Rho Tau, chartered in 1985

Zachary Brady (he/him) is a senior pursuing a BS in English with a minor in Chemistry. Zach loves writing and presenting his work. He has published written pieces through Sink Hollow's 2023 Contest Issue and *Cherish: The Love of Our Mother in Heaven* (vol. 2). In addition to written works, he writes and produces music, much of which has gone on to merit awards through *Scribendi Magazine* and the Zappers Film Festival. Zach loves playing the guitar and traveling abroad with his wife Cassidy. After graduation, Zach plans to apply to medical school, with hopes to further understand humanity through medicine.

Sharon M. Cabana
Southern New Hampshire University—Online, Portland, OR
Alpha Phi Beta, chartered in 2016

Sharon Cabana is a mental health therapist from outside Portland, OR. They have three master's degrees in Anthropology, Marriage and Family Therapy, and English and Creative Writing. As a queer, neurodivergent writer and clinician, Sharon seeks to explore issues of gender and neurodivergence in both literature and everyday life. An avid writer and reader, Sharon primarily focuses on the genres of speculative memoir and epic fantasy. In their spare time, Sharon enjoys the Pacific Northwest with their rescue dog Auggie and their Arabian gelding Ki.

Crystal Lea Dilling
Arkansas Tech University, Russellville, AR
Omicron Tau, chartered in 1985

Crystal Dilling is a graduate student in the Master of English program. She holds a bachelor's in Creative Writing, a minor in English, and an associate's in General Education. She has served as Editor for *NEBO*, Arkansas Tech's literary journal, and is the Southwest Region Student Representative (2024–2025). Crystal specializes in creative nonfiction and speculative fiction; her creative nonfiction has been published in *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* and her speculative fiction can be found on Amazon.

Abigail Eaton
Olivet Nazarene University, Bourbonnais, IL
Tau Theta, chartered in 1962

Abigail Eaton is a senior pursuing a BA in English Education. As a second-year President of her school's chapter, she was awarded an honorable mention at the Colorful Colorado 2023 Convention for her essay "The World Beyond the Web" and the 2024 Regents' Equity Scholarship. She is researching secondary English educators' implementations of the Illinois State Board of Education's 2021 Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards. She plans to graduate with a 3-year university published research project. Abigail enjoys studying and writing about feminist and multicultural literature, and she plans to teach high school English and eventually college literature.

Brody Eldridge
Palm Beach Atlantic University, West Palm Beach, FL
Alpha Zeta Mu, chartered in 1997

Brody Eldridge graduated from Palm Beach Atlantic University with a BA in English. During his time as an undergraduate, he worked as a Senior Editor for his university's literary journal, *Living Waters Review*. He spent a term studying at the University of Oxford, and he is a 2024–2025 Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Award winner for the country of Georgia.

Lauren Farrell
The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ
Alpha Epsilon Alpha, chartered in 1995

Lauren Farrell is an Education graduate student pursuing her MAT at The College of New Jersey. She received her BS in Special Education and English in May 2024. She presented papers at the 2023 and 2024 Sigma Tau Delta conventions; at the former, she received first prize for Critical Essays in British Literature. She is also an executive board member for *The Lion's Eye*, TCNJ's literary and art magazine. Aside from writing, Lauren loves teaching, playing musical instruments, and journaling. Her life goal is to inspire a love of reading in the next generation.

Takier George
Howard University, Washington, DC
Theta Theta, chartered in 1959

Takier George—a recent graduate from Howard University, where she received an Honors BA in English—was an avid supporter of literary spaces, serving as Editor-in-Chief of the literary journal *Sterling Notes* and Editor of *The Amistad*. During her senior year, Takier was a journalism intern, writing stories about her HBCU for ESPN's media platform *Andscape*. Takier hopes her summer publishing internship with National Council of Teachers of English, her previous stint with Smith Publicity, and her time at the Columbia Publishing Course will provide her a foundation from which to launch a career in publishing.

Erika B. Girard
Southern New Hampshire University—Online, Manchester, NH
Alpha Phi Beta, chartered in 2015

Erika Girard is currently pursuing her MA in English and Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry through SNHU. Her poems, short stories, essays, and photographs appear or are forthcoming in *Black Fox*, *Iris Literary Journal*, *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, *Viewless Wings*, and more. Her work has earned multiple awards from Sigma Tau Delta and Delta Epsilon Sigma (National Catholic Honor Society). Originally from Rhode Island, she derives creative inspiration from her family, friends, faith, and fascination with the human experience. She also proofreads for the bimonthly online literary journal *Wild Roof Journal*.

Kaisha A. Girard
Southern New Hampshire University—Online, Manchester, NH
Alpha Phi Beta, chartered in 2015

Kaisha Girard is a graduate of Saint Leo University, now pursuing her MA in English and Creative Writing with a concentration in Fiction through SNHU. Her publication credits include *Sandhill Review*, *Burningword*, and *Ember Chasm Review*, for which her work was nominated for 2021 Best of the Net. A native Rhode Islander and proofreader for *Wild Roof Journal*, Kaisha hopes her passion for editing the world will someday blossom into a proofreading career.

Veronica Gomez
The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ
Alpha Epsilon Alpha, chartered in 1995

Veronica Gomez is a senior English liberal arts major, and they have worked for TCNJ as a peer tutor. They are a writer of both poetry and prose. When doing neither, they are also an amateur fiber artist and seamstress, among other things.

Will Grasso
Chatham University, Pittsburgh, PA
Alpha Delta Lambda, chartered in 1994

Will Grasso has a love for creative writing that grew from unlikely roots. They are a senior double majoring in Visual Arts and Women & Gender Studies (minor in Jewish Studies). Seeped in Judaic iconography and queer theory, their undergraduate studies encouraged reimagining and creating worlds. Their work often interplays nostalgia, identity, and most recently horror. Their collection of three poems published in *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* interprets *centennial* in the context of cycles, where the cyclical nature of mental illness is inherited through generations along with behaviors and objects. Aside from studying, they enjoy petting cats and watching romantic comedies.

Josh Hammingh
George Fox University, Newberg, OR
Alpha Rho Omicron, chartered in 2010

Josh Hammingh, hailing from Washington state, is in his final undergraduate year. He has been involved in the literary landscape of GFU. He has been published in the university's creative writing magazine and presented a paper at the GFU-hosted

"Undiscovered Lewis Conference." His past jobs have involved technical writing and editing, and he currently serves as a research intern in the GFU archives.

Emma Harding
Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI
Sigma Delta, chartered in 1940

Emma Harding hails from Armada, MI, as a neurodivergent and demisexual woman with an MA in Creative Writing from Central Michigan University. Her poetry, flash fiction, and visual art can be found in several journals including *Sketches*, *Artifex*, *Central Review*, *streetcake Magazine*, and *Spectrum Magazine*. Later down the road, she wants to work for one of the big five publishers from an editorial or design aspect. Until then, Emma stays alert on the road by listening to goofy dad jokes from a Dungeons and Dragons podcast called "Dungeons and Daddies." During her breaks, Emma befriends local, stray cats.

Allison Grace Harmon
Lamar University, Beaumont, TX
Gamma Nu, chartered in 1974

Allison Harmon is a graduate student pursuing an MA in English, and she is employed as a Graduate Assistant. As a creative writer, she is developing a series of short stories inspired and set in the region where she grew up—Southeast Texas. Her work surrounds the social and economic climate in the Southeast, centering around the resilient and unique characters that arise from the area. Allison spent last year engaged in archival research. In Summer 2023, she traveled to the University of Sussex's "The Keep" to transcribe Leonard Woolf's journals (1911–1915).

Loria Harris
Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO
Kappa Beta, chartered in 1928

Loria Harris is a student in the MFA in Writing Program. Published in *Reverie Literary Magazine*, *Winged Penny Review*, *The Freak*, and others, she is a recipient of the Jim Haba Poetry Award and the Alyson Dickerman Poetry Prize. A lifelong multi-creative, Loria holds a BA in Music Performance and works as a professional portrait photographer. She is the current Vice President of Sigma Tau Delta at Lindenwood.

Carmen Lok
Southern Arkansas University, Magnolia, AR
Epsilon Theta, chartered in 1959

Carmen Lok is an international student from Malaysia, who is pursuing her bachelor's degree in English with a minor in TESOL. She was born and raised in Malaysia and came to the United States in 2021 for higher education. She enjoys writing fiction but was introduced to nonfiction through a creative nonfiction class. Her biggest inspiration for writing in this genre is Maxine Hong Kingston, who has shown her the privilege and power of sharing stories. Further motivated by her first creative nonfiction piece, "Honoring My Own No Name Woman," Lok seeks to share her culture and history through her work.

Megan Lolley
University of Idaho, Moscow, ID
Eta Chi Chapter, chartered in 1987

Megan Lolley is a second-year MA student pursuing a degree in Literature. She is president of the English Graduate Association and the Writer-in-Residence for the College of Natural Resources. Her areas of study include environmental humanities and ecofeminism with emerging interests in affective ecocriticism and poetic analysis.

Grace Mackey
Palm Beach Atlantic University, West Palm Beach, FL
Alpha Zeta Mu, chartered in 1997

Grace Mackey is entering her senior year as an English and Journalism student. She has experience writing poetry, short fiction, news reporting, and academic research papers. Last semester, she published a poem in *Living Waters Review*, Palm Beach Atlantic University's creative journal. She also had the privilege of attending Sigma Tau Delta's Centennial Convention to read a critical paper. She wrote for *The Beacon Today*, Palm Beach Atlantic's news publication, for two years; she reported local news and hosted a podcast with a fellow journalism student. This past year, she worked as an editor.

Nicole Mautone
Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ
Alpha Chi Mu, chartered in 2017

Nicole Mautone graduated in January 2024 from Monmouth University with her BA in English and minors in Public Relations and Professional Writing. She is now pursuing her MA in English Literature. Mautone is interested in pursuing multiple paths in the future, including the publishing industry, law, and higher education, but for now, she is excited to continue studying English. Mautone served as Secretary on Monmouth's Delta Sigma Chapter, and she hopes to bring the same enthusiasm to Montclair State's chapter.

Evelyn Milburn
Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY
Alpha Mu Kappa, chartered in 2004

Evelyn Milburn is an English Literature Presidential Scholar, with minors in Political Science and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies and a pathway in French Language Studies. She has served as the President of Marist FEMME, *Mosaic* Poetry Editor, and a member of the Marist Dean's Circle. She completed her Senior Honors Thesis, titled "Lover or Killer—Revisiting *Twilight's* Vampire Romance," in spring 2024 and presented an abridged version at the "Supernatural Studies Conference," hosted by Marist College. This is her first submitted creative work, and she is thankful to share her piece alongside her inspiring peers.

Taylor Morgan
Stephens College, Columbia, MO
Alpha Epsilon Eta, chartered in 1995

Taylor Morgan is an author hailing from both Piedmont, MO, and Cedar Rapids, IA. "My Fat Feminist Daughter" is her first piece to be published in *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*. She served as Editor-in-Chief of Stephens College's *Harbinger* in Spring 2024, and she continues to dedicate herself to understanding writing as a craft. Since she was 12 years old, Taylor has aspired to become a young adult or juvenile fiction author. Until then, you can find her enjoying the Great British Bake Show alongside her fiancé William and their two cats, Merriam and Webster, all of whom she loves greatly.

Sydney Motl
Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, AR
Omega Beta, chartered in 1931

Sydney Motl is from Arkadelphia, AR, and graduated from Ouachita Baptist University in May 2024 with a degree in English Language and Literature and a minor in International Studies. She is pursuing her master's in Gender Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK. She has been published in the *Echo Review*, Alpha Chi's *Aletheia*, and Ouachita's *Assayers*, and she enjoys writing about politics and travel.

Abbey Orwig
Union University, Jackson, TN
Theta Omicron, chartered in 1979

Abbey Orwig recently graduated with her BA in English with a concentration in Literature. A Jackson, TN, native, Abbey enjoys traveling to hike national parks, cooking new recipes, and reading new and old books alike. While working as an online writing tutor, she is also currently pursuing her MSt in Classical Christian Studies at New Saint Andrews College. She is excited to return to her roots in classical education and eagerly awaits what new discoveries Homer, Shakespeare, and St. Augustine have in store for her.

Michaela Plumb
College of the Ozarks, Lookout, MO
Alpha Nu Nu, chartered in 2005

Michaela Plumb recently graduated with a BA in English and a minor in Writing and Rhetoric. Michaela has dabbled in many genres, winning awards at her college for her poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, and essays. She believes in the necessity rather than the luxury of hope and wishes her works to reflect that belief, while acknowledging the darker realities of life. She enjoys reading classics and fantasy, painting, and drinking copious amounts of tea. She hopes to soon pursue her master's degree at Missouri State University.

Erin G. Quinn
Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS
Xi Kappa, chartered in 1967

Erin Quinn is a senior undergraduate and a Presidential Scholar majoring in English and minoring in History and Classics. She is President of Sigma Tau Delta's Xi Kappa Chapter. Erin has published an article entitled "'Beyond His Native Town: Travel and Alienation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" in the literary criticism journal *Criterion*; performed research on William Faulkner and his legacy in Oxford, MS; and presented papers at numerous conferences. She is a recipient of a 2024 Phi Kappa Phi Pioneer Scholarship. Following graduation, Erin plans to pursue a PhD in nineteenth-century British literature.

Sara Rabinowitz
Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY
Alpha Mu Kappa, chartered in 2004

Sara Rabinowitz graduated from Marist College with a BA in English and a minor in Creative Writing. Her short fiction and her poetry were featured multiple times in her school's literary and arts magazine, *Mosaic*. During her senior year, Sara wrote a one-act play that was produced as a part of the John P. Anderson Playwright's Festival. While presenting her collection of poems at the Sigma Tau Delta Centennial Convention, Sara received first place in the original poetry category. Sara currently resides in New York City, where she is pursuing her MFA in fiction writing at Columbia University.

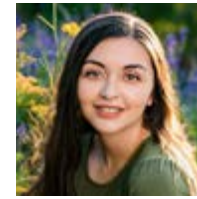
Marley Ramon
Mercyhurst University, Erie, PA
Beta Upsilon, chartered in 1986

Marley Ramon lives and writes in Albuquerque, NM. Serving as Chief Editor of the Mercyhurst University literary magazine *Lumen*, Marley is a senior, studying Political Science and Art. Her work has appeared in *JourneyWoman Magazine* and *Auroras & Blossoms* and has been recognized by Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Her collection "Between You and I" received accolades as New Mexico's "That Poet is Dope" champion chapbook. When not writing, Marley enjoys playing water polo, drawing, and reading.

Rosen Slepian
University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA
Alpha Upsilon Nu, chartered in 2014

Rosen Slepian is a senior studying fiction writing, public and professional writing, and linguistics. They work in Pitt's Writing Center, where they read, edit, and assist with students' work throughout the writing process. They also serve as a teaching assistant and research the lack of creative writing in the writing center. They are the President of Pitt's Sigma Tau Delta chapter; they hope to use the writing and interpersonal skills developed through these endeavors to pursue an MFA in fiction. "The Standstill" is their first short-story publication.

Madison Stahl
Drury University, Springfield, MO
Pi Alpha, chartered in 1925



Madison Stahl writes short fiction from the Ozarks. She is entering her senior year, majoring in English and Writing. She covers sports, music, and university events for *The Mirror*, Drury's student-run newspaper. She has worked as a writing tutor on campus and has written professionally for the Springfield Symphony Orchestra. When Madison is not writing, she watches silent films, attempts to play clarinet, and tends to a rather large collection of vinyl records. Her short fiction has been published in Drury's *Currents* and the University of the Incarnate Word's *Quirk*.

Luke Strine
Oakland University, Rochester, MI
Alpha Iota Eta, chartered in 1999

Luke Strine was born in Michigan to a loving family, and he has lived in Michigan his entire life. He is engaged to his high-school sweetheart. His experience at OU widened his horizons. Looking back, he sees himself as an extroverted, only child, which helped him make friends easily. This also influenced his curiosity about what causes people's similarities/differences and why humans are resilient or susceptible to falling into destructive traps. Unsurprisingly, Luke has chosen a Psychology major/English minor to learn about human nature through scientific research and great stories about what makes people tick.

Julianna Swarm
Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA
Pi Delta, chartered in 1939

Julianna Swarm has graduated from Duquesne's Dual-Degree Program, majoring in Secondary Education and in English. Since a young age, Julianna has been passionately captivated by literature and storytelling. Throughout her childhood, her father would tell stories and read to her before bed, and by the age of nine, she realized she could create her own. In high school, she began putting these stories on paper, and she decided that writing was what she wanted to do as a profession. Duquesne's Creative Writing Program helped her expand her skills and—with education, encouragement, experience, and inspiration—Julianna became an author.

Katherine Anne Thierfelder
Union University, Jackson, TN
Theta Omicron, chartered in 1979

Katherine Thierfelder holds a bachelor's degree in Communication and English and currently lives in Utah, where she works as a freelance editor. Katherine Anne writes in part because she knows the next generation will read no matter what, and she wants to give them stories that shape, teach, and inspire them the way her favorite stories did her. However, chiefly, she writes to tell the truth and offer hope because she is an artist made in the image of the Creator, and she wants to reflect the best story ever written—The Story.

Laura Jo Underwood
Charleston Southern University, Charleston, SC
Alpha Eta Alpha, chartered in 1997

Jo Underwood is a senior majoring in English Education. She plans to become an English professor and teach creative writing and literature. Her creative works have been published in *Trace Fossil Review*, *Ambient Heights*, *The Library of Poetry Collection*, and *Sefer*. Her research interests include Victorian literature, religious studies, and feminism.

Sean L. Wang
Rutgers University—New Brunswick,
New Brunswick, NJ
Alpha Pi Xi, chartered in 2009

Sean Wang is a 2024 alumni from Rutgers University, with a BFA in Filmmaking. For his undergraduate thesis, he completed production on a fantasy short film, "Hell is Half Empty"—a German-expressionist interpretation of the Orpheic Myth, starring Ella Sembiring and Jo Szilagyi. He is an avid fan of the horror genre, listing the works of Algernon Blackwood, Junji Ito, and the Evil Dead franchise among his favorites. Besides reading and writing, Sean enjoys exercising and playing video games during his free time.

Adam Willis
Otterbein University, Westerville, OH
Alpha Rho Upsilon, chartered in 2010

Adam Willis is a Biology and Creative Writing double major. His poetry, personal essays, and illustrations have been featured in several publications, including *Embracing Wetlands*, *Quiz & Quill*, *Atelier Realm*, and *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*. Adam uses his work as an outlet for expressing his feelings of distress, anxiety, and displeasure with the current state of the environment. In this regard, the tones and themes of his work are almost always negative; however—for his sake—his creative process is therapeutic.

Sara Reed Wilson
Brenau University, Gainesville, GA
Alpha Theta Nu, chartered in 1998

Sara Reed Wilson is a senior English major with a concentration in Creative Writing and double minors in Fashion Merchandising and Women's Leadership. She currently serves as the Editor of her university's literary arts magazine, *The Elixir*. She is a member of Delta Delta Delta and has held multiple leadership roles within her sorority. She is a member of the Brenau Honors Program, Alpha Lambda Delta, Sigma Tau Delta, Order of Omega, and Phi Kappa Phi. After graduation she hopes to work for a publishing house and devote more time to literature and writing.

About SIGMA TAU DELTA

Since its inception in 1924, Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society has modeled its mission to confer distinction for high achievement, promote interest in English language and literature, foster exemplary character and fellowship, and exhibit high standards of academic excellence.

In 1972, Sigma Tau Delta was accepted as a member of the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS). Currently the Society has grown to include nearly 800 active chapters with more than 1,000 Faculty Advisors; more than 7,500 members are inducted annually.

Sigma Tau Delta has continued to flourish and expand, branching out in 1996 to found Sigma Kappa Delta for the growing two-year college system, and in 2004, it established the National English Honor Society for secondary school students and faculty. The English Language Arts Honor Society for students in grades 6–9 was launched in 2023. Sigma Tau Delta is now the second largest honor society in the ACHS.

Through hard and dedicated work, Sigma Tau Delta has built upon the strong foundation of its founder Judson Q. Owen, whose initial foresight shaped the Society; three subsequent executive secretaries/directors—E. Nelson James, William C. Johnson, and Matt Hlinak—added their own visions to the Society, and many other individuals further shaped the vital, growing organization we are today.

Sigma Tau Delta's Journals

The Sigma Tau Delta journals publish annually the best writing and criticism of undergraduate and graduate active chapter members of the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society.

Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle was founded in 1931 as a quarterly publication highlighting the best creative writing of the Society's members. At the fall 1998 meeting of the Board of Directors, the Rectangle went to a once-a-year publication schedule, providing a more professional look and permitting the inclusion of more student writing in each issue.

Sigma Tau Delta Review was added as a societal journal in 2007 and publishes critical essays on literature, essays on rhetoric and composition, and essays devoted to pedagogical issues.

Annual Submissions

The best writing is chosen for publication from hundreds of submissions. Not only do these refereed journals go to chapters worldwide, but they also honor the best writing in each category, with five awards totaling $2,500.

As of 2016, the Sigma Tau Delta journals are catalogued with the Library of Congress. There is also an annual reading at the Sigma Tau Delta convention by any of the published writers in attendance.

All active undergraduate and graduate members of active Sigma Tau Delta chapters are invited to submit their work to the *Review* and *Rectangle*. Chapter Advisors, faculty members, alumni, and honorary members are not eligible to submit.

Submissions for the 2026 journals are due between March 10 and April 7, 2025.