

The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University



2015

Volume 42



EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

The Mockingbird 2015

The cover image is a detail from *Rise and Fall* by Susan Voorhees.

The Mockingbird design is by Jeanette Henry,
East Tennessee State University, Printing and Publications.

Photography by Katie Sheffield, Visual Resource Curator, East Tennessee State
University, Department of Art & Design

The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University

Published annually
as a joint project of the
Department of Literature and Language
and the Department of Art and Design



2015

Volume 42 edited by Jacob Vines

A project like *The Mockingbird* requires the support and cooperation of so many people that one hopes the production of the magazine itself serves as an expression of gratitude, but we would like to offer our thanks to Dr. Bert C. Bach, ETSU's Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, who has authorized the magazine's production fund as part of the regular budget of the Department of Literature and Language. We also thank Dr. Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, Dr. Katherine Weiss, Chair of the Department of Literature and Language, and Professor Mira Gerard, Chair of the Department of Art and Design, for their continued support and commitment to this project. We cannot overemphasize the creativity and patience of the ETSU Printing and Publications Office and, particularly, Ms. Jeanette Henry, our designer. Thank you all for sustaining this project.

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Editor's Note

Jacob Vines

There was a definite moment in the compilation of this issue at which the mishmash of pieces began to breathe together, at which they coalesced into a collaborative vision. I have gathered from my discussions with previous editors of *The Mockingbird* that this is a common—though strange—phenomenon. All at once, themes, motifs, and symbols arise out of a fragmented collection of texts, and the many voices and narratives unite in the kinetic energy of intersection and interaction.

If there is a collaborative voice in this issue, it can be found in these writers' attempts to express experiences that seem inexpressible, unearthing a dialogue between language and experience. This is apparent in our interview with Kevin Brown as he speaks of definitions and the divine, in the narrative intersections of "Autumn Road," in the silent music of "Chopin Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2," and in the affectionate burden in the last line of "My first cup of coffee." It echoes throughout the simultaneous absence and presence in "My Father" and "Counting Thunder on Edgewood Drive," the confrontation with a civilized savagery in "Excerpts from 'Driving Like an Idiot'" and "The Cut," and the menacing energy in "The Sunflower Room" and "Thunder and Nursery Rhymes." These pieces attempt to reach into those, as Kevin Brown puts it, "contradictions inherent in language and in life" that both define and restrain.

I owe many thanks to the student readers who participated in the assembly of this issue. They are Jonathan Ball, Alex Blumenstock, Dusty Brice, Lauren Fowler, Jessica Hall (who will return as the 2016 editor of *The Mockingbird*), Alexandria McQueen, Erik Peterson, and Marijana Stokovic. I would especially like to thank Beth Miller for her superb interview with Kevin Brown. We were also fortunate to have such wonderful literary judges: Charlotte Pence in poetry, Jon Sealy in fiction, and Jennifer McGaha in nonfiction. Lastly, *The Mockingbird* would not exist without Drs. Jesse Graves and Thomas Alan Holmes, whose passion for and dedication to this annual magazine has encouraged and inspired a thriving community of creative writers at East Tennessee State University.

Hospital Meadows

Cory Howell

She skips through the halls
Like an ancient druid,
Dancing an imagined step
To the tempo of heart
Monitors across the hall.

Her hair, a blonde waterfall,
Splashing off playful shoulders.
Her blue eyes, wedding bells,
Shining and singing
Songs of youth.

The room transforms into
A pasture of wildflowers.
She runs her hands along the petals.
At her expression of childhood,
This swollen emergency room fills with life.

God, to have the grace of a child,
To turn a hospital into a meadow.



Counting Thunder on Edgewater Drive

Matthew L. Gilbert

Remember
three shades of cracked yellow paint,
three generations under one roof
where raindrops do jumping jacks
and unchanneled water fills pools in the yard.

Army men lie in trenches on the porch,
toppled by wind and soaked,
counting thunder for cannon fire,

My grandmother, Mum, ties down tarp.
sweeping away beech twigs and maple leaves
blown onto the deck, unevening the walkway.

Papaw lifts me out of her way
and sets me on his lap,
booting my toys under the chair.

“They’re out there, I tell you” he whispers.
fingers clenched around his arm rests.

Lightning strikes, splitting an oak across the river;
It limps into the water, partially sealing the flow.
Water rises and rises, and gushes upon the bank.
Papaw tracks the trees,
eyes darting from shadow to shadow.

He tells me about his little brother,
the one Vietnam had stolen from him,
about the little girls who asked for candy,
the ones with bombs strapped to their chests
who had taken out his platoon.
Things I can't really comprehend.

My grandmother comes to rest beside him
and lays her soft hands upon his.
We sit there for twenty-some minutes,
until the rain stops,
ritual we are accustomed to.



About a Cheerleader I Used to Know

Danielle Byington

After your funeral, all that the cheerleaders could talk about was how fat and bloated you looked, busting with embalming fluid that was barely contained by your one hundred and ten pound frame. The dress your mom picked out did not flatter this funeral home booboo. Its crude collar and granny-pastels looked more like attire for a country club's Easter egg hunt than eternity spent wherever you deserved to go when you died. At least I guess that's how it went, since this was the description I picked up from various conversations occurring in the canyons of orange lockers. I wanted to go, but I didn't really fit in with the people who *would* go, and I'm sure you understand that, Becca. Less conflict that way. Though, I'd almost testify that you didn't know the meaning of conflict. Until the end, of course, when your mom bought a plane ticket to send you away after catching your boyfriend between your legs.

With the most respectful, morbid curiosity, I often wish I had gone to your funeral since it's quite the feat that it was open casket after you shot yourself in the head. I don't care for crime investigation shows, so I'm rather ignorant of the damage caused by certain firearms. The bullet must have made a graceful stretch through your brain, politely exiting without slamming the door so that it might shatter the glass. But, there must have been blood in your long, blonde hair, as though a colt was just birthed on the golden hues of fresh hay, like barnyard-fruit punch.

The mortician removed the stains from your hair, restoring it to a glossy halo of impure teenaged doom. Then he cleaned my black polish from your nails. I'm certain your mom wouldn't have allowed you to be buried with such liberal ink on your fingertips. Two days before, I watched you chip it away in study hall like a fresh fixation as you panicked with worry of what your mom would say when she saw it. In front of me, your blonde ponytail slept on

your back as you meticulously chiseled at the dried polish you had just asked me to paint on your nails. I felt irresponsible for agreeing with your charm.

Now, a headstone is chiseled with the dates of your birth and death, crowned by a jungle of polyester petals that have been bleached by the sun. When the caretaker drives his lawnmower by the collection of homely trinkets that have been napping by your burial plot all these years, maybe he makes an effort not to blow the grass cuttings on what's left of yours in this world. When he leaves, he probably walks by your grave, stopping to swivel the bronze flap open that hides a photograph of your smiling face. He's a lawn guy with a GED, but he has put the dates on your grave together with its community of ceramic winged-animals, rusting wind chimes, and a shallow-filled snow globe to create a formula of explanation—you were special. He says, "Until next time, Rebecca Jane Bartlett," and swivels the flap back over your face. Of course, this is all my speculation.

Sometimes I wonder what your mom did with your pom-poms, if she packed them away like you, never to be thought of again. Or if she washed the sweat of your teenaged-palms from their grips, the same hands that wondered down the quarter-back's pants with my chipped black nail polish.

Just so you know, I never thought you looked fat.



The Makeup Box

Matthew L. Gilbert

Golden clasps draw together like soldiers, stiff
and ready to fall, if need be,
like leaves of Yoshino that fell
to keep great secrets of a forgotten past.

Inside, each slot holds a word,
his work, his sweat, their time,
time she'd hang about his neck
like the Dowager emeralds gifted to her,
sent by air after that first great battle.

An unworn platinum band sets in twos
with an engraving that can no longer be read,
one she scratched out when message came
for the promise would be unfilled.

Momentum sets in the bottom,
twin to the band on her finger,
buried beneath the cloth she'd set,

that when unfurled like waves
on the shores of Peleliu
gives off a slight hint of Seaforth cologne,
a scent she'd given him at departure,
but one lost in the treasures of time.



My first cup of coffee

Kelsey A. Solomon

was in a plastic yellow cup with a withered handle while I sat in Mamaw's kitchen, a gathering place for every Easter, every Thanksgiving, and every Christmas, but a getaway for me on Saturday nights before church in the morning. After a certain age she stopped talking to me about Jesus, because she thought I knew him, whatever that meant. I still don't know. She told me stories about the neighbors, the churchfolk, the coyotes, the normal gossip, and when she paused to sip her coffee, I asked her why she drank it. She slid her cup to me and said, "Try it for yourself," and when I did, I burnt my lips. Brimstone, I thought, with a hint of dirt, but after a moment, the taste set in. I asked for more with a little sugar, and she said, "You'll learn to drink it black."



Autumn Road

Beth Miller

I see the mark rise, inked on my wrist, “till kingdom come,” and I nod and step outside, each footstep echoing goodbye down wooden stairs, across a short sidewalk, and into my car. Freedom. I wish the mist would roll across this little valley, washing the future with mystery.

• • •

Autumn shut the door of her apartment softly behind her. She would be back in a few days to get her dogs. He would probably be ready to say sweet things and reconcile by then. But that wasn't what she wanted. She stepped down the wooden stairs, across a short sidewalk, and got into her car. Mist rolled out of the small valley towards her red Jeep, fingers limping, breaking, crawling, across small tufts and mounds of grass, wanting to pull her back in by her hair. Luckily Jeeps are impenetrable to fog fingers outside of horror movies, and so she backed up and drove away. The labs would be all right for a couple days till she could come back and get them.

Hills rolled underneath the car, and Autumn felt the breath catch in her chest. This was her favorite time in the morning. Out here, away, fog no longer reached with clinging hands, and it didn't caress or hold, it simply wove in and out of the space of the sky, like fingers through soft, long hair, and occasionally included her in this lover's dance, imbibing life like the first notes of a symphony.

Whispers cascaded, jarring, echoing off of one another. Be quiet, she thought to the voices. Please, please, just give me this one morning. And then, the first eyelashes of sunlight open, rising up from the mountains, and they pant, and the earth whispers and sings.

Every day, she has fallen more deeply in love with the sun, and the serene beauty of this experience on her morning drive. It doesn't warm her anymore, these beams, as winter's chill begins to descend on the mountains, the rays' hesitant lovers. Its rising brilliance sits next to

her, close, close, and speaks, to her alone, in a low voice, just behind her ear, lips brushing her neck, and she takes a shaking breath, and exhales. They continue on in this way, breaths mingling with their recently past moments, steaming, exciting, enticing.

The breath carries outside of the car, Autumn's heart expands with the lightening of this landscape, hers, blue distant mountains in the season of her namesake. Here, these sunrise moments, when new light turns hair to fire, and eyes glow with a depth for her own perception alone, beauty is entwined, given and received, lapped up and poured out, but without consumption. One calls out to the other, and they embrace, twist, dance, and join — the kiss of the morning.

Her tattoo glows dully on her wrist, "till kingdom come," in pen and knife scratches. So you won't forget me, he growled. So I'll always be yours, her spirit screamed, while strong fingers clenched and wrapped, trapped, the back of her hair. You. Are. Mine.

Finally, that moment on the bridge, which she waits for every day, of clarity and beauty, the full body of the sun emerges from behind the mountains, revealing itself, naked to her, and washing over her body. Autumn's breath shuddered, quickened, peace.

The miles rolled under the car as she drove towards North Carolina. Be still my daughter, my sister, my lover, be still, the earth cooed to her. Listen.

Once upon a time, the world was not so very different than it was today, but it was warmer, so people had no need for clothes. But with this revelation of intimacy, they lost the ability to speak. Scholars have believed and hoped that we could eventually transcend language. French modernists had spread the hope of music to the world for art which could transcend cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries, but this was not that change either. Instead, stories, life stories, were worn on the body, and this was how people communicated with one another.

Do you understand?

There was a man in this world, whose name has no bearing in the story, as it was never spoken, and his written story became his name. This man wore his life in bulleted lists, accomplishment and fact following one another down his arms, across his neck, and blazed across his chest. The man's brother wove his emotions into one another, each experience, each moment of love, of hate, and he alternated the styles of writing to further attempt to communicate. The second brother turned his feet black to demonstrate that he felt his path was filled with experience, and this experience was written in ink, and so he would continue to leave his own place in the world through dark footprints.

There were two women. The first was a rainbow of color and beauty. People would gasp when they saw her in the street; necks would nearly break openly staring at the beauty before them. She rebelled against the rigid norms of culture, and chose to paint feelings rather than write words. Then she would always connect in some small way, could identify through touch, embrace, her experience and feelings. She had a beautiful smile. The second woman looked blank when you encountered her, naked of life, indecent, profane. But those who got close enough would weep to look upon her, because her body, in its entirety, was a broken, misshapen scar. She'd had a world of experience, so many things felt important, not only expressible, but necessary, and so she covered herself from a young age with stories and pictures. But then new things would arise, and she would long, again, to tell her story, find some sort of voice, but eventually she ran out of body, and could not contain her life within her medium, and so she had everything removed, lazed off, and started again. And this she did again, and again, and again. She has no words anymore, or she has all of the words. Her bright green eyes will occasionally answer yours. But this fire glowing in them doesn't translate to simple symbols inked onto skin.

Now do you understand?

• • •

Autumn had known the moment they met that they would marry. She had a special sense about these things. Her life was a series of dreams, lived in the reality of sleep, awaited, and lived again in the life outside her being — a story told to her. This fact too she accepted, and waited, seven years from the dream moment, five from their first meeting, and a beautiful white dress met a sharp suit at the end of an aisle covered in purple flower petals, and bonds were formed. But whereas before separate spaces had allowed for a yearning for togetherness, a search for it, this shared space led to apathy and thirst. An indiscernible feeling, deep within, told her the dreams had foretold this as well. And so she dreamt on.

Her car pulled off the exit of the interstate, tires following a well-known path to a special half-bridge leading out to a small lake. She exits the vehicle, the door swinging chivalrously open for her, and her feet crunch on the small white stones leading to the wooden bridge. She sits and swings her legs over the side, toes just shy of the cool water, and looks through the mist for the small boat which washes, ever empty, from one side of the lake to the other, searching for lovers who aren't coming back. Autumn imagines them, walking hand in hand across the water, or rolled one into the other, pressing the canoe, their third piece, into their romantic water-union. Her head rolls slightly to the side, imagining, when a shape does emerge out of the morning mists, and she holds

her breath. The majesty of the creature's stance and carriage causes her to look upwards, expecting to count at least eight points of honor for the vegan king of the forest. But this is no buck, but rather the largest, most elegant female deer she has ever seen. And without fear, the two women lock eyes, one holding strength, and the other wonder.

There was once, in a time not quite now, but not so very different, a young girl, who lived for the forest. Her ventures of imagination would carry her from tree to tress, tingling fingertips grazing rough, gritty bark as she danced along trails only she could see. This little girl also found a special pond, a pond just perfectly sized to hold her visions and dreams but to reassure her, as there didn't seem to be anyone else, that she was significant. Because this isn't one of those stories with talking animals. The girl built a home amidst the pond, tucked into a tree trunk that expanded with her own age which curved around her supple body in her sleep and shielded her from winds and night shadows. Every morning the girl would wash in this beautiful pond, drop by drop a cleansing, and the drops would glow as they dried on her skin, reflecting sunlight and leaves.

One special day, a particularly sunny one in a time of brilliance for the sun, she had tossed water droplets through the air in a cascade of hair when she heard a groan from over her shoulder. She turned to face dark, tousled hair and broad shoulder cloaked in leather. The trees shielded their eyes from this exchange, bark prickling even more, desiring but unable to protect their own flesh. But she did not need their protection, so bathed in sunlight as to cloak beams around her own fair shoulders. Words were unnecessary, unbidden, impotent, in the end, as the two exchanged flesh for flesh, gnashing after knowledge, consumption. Years later a separate fire would ravage the woods, obliterating innocence, but this fire would consume and evaporate, drying up lakes rather than engaging with them, long raping claws of development, scarring. The man would look at the forest girl, renamed woman, and smile at the field he had made to provide for her. Her own heart, cradled within her arms at the base of her lover-tree, would burn, trapped, cultivated. Imprisoned with a different story than her childhood mind could have told, and one which she would tell to her own daughter, night after night, cradled in wooden rocking chairs, embraced by familiar bark.

The circles speak wordlessly, but they tell her story as well, circles in the wood. Brown eyes locked on green.

• • •

The deer walked forward, gathered her day's water from the stream and continued on, throwing one glance backwards at Autumn as she rounded the top of

the hill. The morning breezes died down and gently blew leaves across the surface of the pond. The stillness grew; it was time to move on. Her car crunched backwards over the white stones, over windy roads and back onto the interstate. She cracked the windows to let the cool air run its fingers through her hair, strands kissing freedom on the back of her neck.

The hills were climbing now, approaching her favorite place in the world, a gorgeous view of nothing but the Blue Ridge Mountains, stretching as far as eye can see. This view had breathed life back into her soul four years before, when her heart had been in a similar situation, and the stars above called out, tiny voices screaming brightly, calling for the displaced soul wandering around the mountains. It came back to her that night, and had remained beneath her skin since, with a few exceptional moments, when she felt it almost breaking free again. Here, now, she wondered that if the sky were to darken, if great emotions of clouds were to cascade and bring ocean to mountains, eternal unrequited lovers, would she see, sitting in the seat next to her, some bruised and battered version of soul? Because the same thirst for freedom which had led her parched flesh out and out and out to the freedom of the hay field, pale stalks begging, caressing, pleading her to join in their dance, and she had swayed and spun and fallen, caught by the light of the sun, had also sliced scales into the skin of her back, briars and reptilian spikes, so that she could not be seduced into captivity in the same way at home. And this cage from which her wings had burst in a flash of red, had been a heart too, left bleeding. The shattered pieces of its glass had embedded themselves into her hands and knees as she crawled out; they had both been in too much pain to allow the other to leave whole.

Autumn pulled off the road again, this time onto the lookout's path. She drove up to the edge, got out, and walked over to the stone wall the CCC had made so long ago. She sat on the very edge, feet dangling over the side, and let her mountains surround the entirety of her eyes. There was a story that Autumn wanted to share as well. She feared the blue ridges in the distance had already murmured this tale that it liked in this free space, where green was blue, even in the dusky colors of their most breathtaking season. But feeling herself this embodiment held, the sky leaned her back, wind tight around the curve of her waist, and she stretched her arms over her head to begin Charlotte's story.

• • •

Trees spun over his head as they traded spaces with the sky; he felt a flash of pain that burned and melted across his forearm as it fell beneath his back, playground equipment flying in bright colors in front of his eyes. His lungs sharply expelled air, as breath abandons a popped balloon, and the sky brightly

returned to its proper place with trees only just touching the edges of the frame. One scream pierced the peals of laughter that surrounded the space above his head as strawberry red curls interrupted his view of the clouds. Panicked eyes burrowed into his own, and words of concern and fear poured out. He would have sighed if he'd had any breath left in his lungs. Charlotte was speaking again. He knew everything was going to be fine.

She's different now, he told himself. Everything was different now. He had to remember that. As Kevin stepped to the window of her cottage, he saw long, curly hair bent over hiking boots, a large hunting jacket lying in a half-fold beside her. A round, squished-faced dog sat contemplating the problems of the world at her side. He raised his fist and knocked on the door. Three thumps later it swung open; a long arm in red flannel holding on to the edge of its frame. Suspicion invited him inside.

• • •

An un-stringed violin rested in the corner, robbed of its voice as the house had been of smiles twelve years before. Keep it, baby girl, your mom would have wanted that. The only time Charlotte could bear to make herself play was when her dad was just passing beyond buzzed, the tears dangling their toes over the edges of his lower lids, unsure if they had gathered for happiness or sorrow; they swayed slowly in the middle of their dance, collecting light from the moon. She would delay until the ice had slightly melted in his whiskey and then he would nod slowly, ready now to face memories and loss.

Charlotte removed the ruse of complacency with the velvet cloth over rosin, slowly running it up and down the bow. As she raised the instrument to her shoulder, happy embraces from childhood flashed in the stones of the fireplace.

Daughter danced giggling circles in a baggy sapphire dress while Father smiled, sunshine absorbed by his dark hair. Mother emanated joy as she took it in from these two sacred pillars of her life; she made the song they breathed.

Her right arm moved, swan's neck extending from her in long, fluid notes, mourning. The swan drifted past and a hummingbird landed on her wrist as the frenzy of panic in the face of grief stretched in the shadows in front of her. The fingers of her left hand scuttled and slid around the neck of the violin, at once desperate to be close to one another but also to escape. She tried to mimic the swaying of hips and shoulders to capture the vision of beauty her mother had been, but the despair of empty arms and unnoticed tears held her frozen. Self-preservation called from the kitchen and reminded her not to run too far away. The path is secret and dark, it said, scattered with sharp rocks and thorns.

But one last time she ignored its caution. The voice was so familiar now, so easily blended with so many others that were disregarded she didn't hear its increase to pleading as her song stared at the quickly vanishing pavement approaching crescendo. Her breath caught on the screeching high notes, on the anguish that has no words.

Mother's head ripped back, a demon grinned from the floorboards, singed tips of blonde in his claws. The arch of her back was the shape of the bridge over the dam outside of town near the valley. Screams were reaped from the thin body, nearly snapping jaw from the rest of skull in their rush, pulling from toes, hips, and chest, hooks cruelly searching for soul. White hands gripped the sides of a handmade cot, the unfinished wood still rough from sanding impeded by tears and shattered dreams for future time.

The first bits of blood began to leak out of the stretched lips, small rips in the pink half-moons adding drips to the stream of a much deeper affliction. Silent horror was replaced with Mother's screams as Daughter saw the body fall back onto the fresh straw mattress, coughing a mouthful of blood onto the pillow. Cornered eyes wailed the sorrow and fear that lips could no longer express. They met those of Daughter, for the first time void of warm comfort and quiet strength. Father's heart was dueling love and horror but neither was watching as hollowness crept up from behind and slit their throats. The Two were so locked together that as one's light died, the other plunged across the chasm to fall as closely as possible to slaughtered spouse.

The violin scraped violently to the lowest strings, deep sobs from the spirit that has lost everything.

Father bent over in the moonlight, palms gripping the planks, splinters entering the already weakened flesh of hands not strong enough to ward off the greedy phantom of sickness. Father's back was the bridge's reversed twin, wracked by groans rather than screams but tormented by the same devouring of soul.

Charlotte was so wrapped in her reverie of song she didn't see the rage of brokenness grow flaming in her father's empty eyes. It wasn't until the shattered glass and whiskey splashed onto her from the wall that she realized what she had done, where she had gone. That was the night the violin had lost its strings.

The screams of Daughter leapt into the hollow between lovers at the moment the light between them was severed. Forgotten in that moment, the One that had come from Two wished so desperately to be a part of them in some way, any way she could. And so her voice fell into the darkness, chasing the intertwining lights, ever ahead of her, ever together, leaving her alone.

• • •

Charlotte?

Eyes blinked back yes, feigning boredom.

I don't know if you remember me. I'm Kevin. We were best friends when we were eight.

I remember.

The chief told me to come here and check on how you're doing and ask you a few questions about your dad.

Charlotte responded with more absent blinking.

Char, please? This is my job now. Can I at least sit down?

Nope. That's Howard's seat. Kevin glanced at the small, squat dog. You can sit on the floor or get a chair from the kitchen.

The white wicker chair was split like a foot or fist had gone through it, but it looked more promising than the other two that had duct tape attached at their hip sockets. He carried the chair back into the room, ducking beneath the low doorjamb as he remembered her father doing when they had been small and set the chair down on the hardwood floor. It only wobbled slightly.

So how long have you had Howard?

He really doesn't like to be discussed when he's in the room, and he doesn't like it when strangers say his name.

If she hadn't looked so serious, Kevin would have laughed. But he knew better than to agitate or tease Charlotte, she was the toughest, most aggressively fragile person he knew. He looked down at his toes for a moment, black and shiny shoes poorly attempting to mirror the small room, made less shiny by the dust of the woods. Charlotte, I need you to listen to me.

She owed so much to Kevin and his parents, although she hoped she'd never have to admit it. And he reminded her so much of Howard except that one was short and stocky and a pug and the other was tall and lanky with stubble.

I care about you.

Charlotte expelled a sigh and rose jerkily to her feet. Kevin's hand on her arm stopped her exit.

How many days has it been since you saw your father? I'm trying to help him. And you.

The two minds wandered back, remembering a shivering eight-year-old girl,

badly bruised and hungry, knocking feebly on the blue front door of a brick house. Charlotte remembered looking, uncomprehendingly, into two sets of adult eyes, staring at her with pity, when a familiar hand emerged between them, followed by an arm, small shoulders, and a sling. He had wrapped his free arm around her, at night sometimes Kevin still remembered how cold she had been, and bony, and held her tightly against him; temporarily the man of the house.

I was thinking about that day at the playground on my way up here today. I was preparing to be the guy you attacked this time, though, instead of the one you saved.

An ugly, freckled face leered at her from the playground as she stumbled down the cobblestone street. Weary feet fell down the hill, one in front of the other. The dreaded trek back down the mountain signifying that for yet another weekend she had failed to make her father smile, to convince him that he loved her too. Bits of dirt were speckled across her grimy shirt, the dirt of a few days and a long trip down the road. She didn't want to turn her head to acknowledge the cruel yelling; she just wanted to be back home.

A rock whizzed by and struck her forearm, drawing blood. Blood drew deep from the reservoirs of memory, of that day a year before when Mother had made the same shade from her mouth and left the house in Father's arms. The same color was all over him as he begged to leave as well, to follow his wife, but he only lost the light from his warm brown eyes.

Orphan! The ugly faces had called. Daughter paused, turned, stunned. Her voice paused in its pursuit of the parents' lights, intertwining. It began its way back to her, running, smelling danger.

Kevin's voice interrupted for Charlotte. Hers was still bounding back to her throat. He had been finishing her thoughts for her for a year and the habit came easily to him. She stayed at his house on weekdays and walked up the mountain every weekend. The women of the small town worried for her welfare but not enough to do much about it and certainly not enough to refrain from gossiping, calling father a murderer and a drunk. All except his mother, and that made him proud. She had taken Charlotte into their home for school during the week, watched her leave with a hug and a kiss every Friday and return every Sunday, thin and sad.

Kevin took a step towards the boy, looking as tall and menacing as possible. It was at this moment that he found himself pushed off the top of the scaffolding leading to the slide.

Seeing Kevin's arms flailing from the highest point on the playground, Charlotte's voice found her again; they reunited in a scream that was nothing like her mother's last had been. It was not pulled out of her but pushed, as Kevin had been. But this larger, stronger force was from herself, knowledge of all she had lost negated by the anger and betrayal of abandonment.

Kind, grey eyes indicated that they were shocked and in slight pain, but their light was still present and it was not running away from her. Shaking palms bent down, feeling the gravel rocks intended for play serving as the arena for a much more serious game. She found a rock the width of her fingers, flat and with jagged edges and threw it at the evil boy. He fell from the plastic castle, clutching his forehead as it spilled blood. Charlotte leapt upon her victim screaming feelings deeper than words, wounding and bruising whatever way she could.

Motherly screams echoed again and pulled her from under her arms off of the round boy. Looking down at them, she saw the blood in a new way, as it had been on Father's hands as they tried to pull the fleeing soul back, back to him. All they mined was blood.

Howard, it's time to go.

Kevin looked up at Charlotte, her head thrown slightly back in the doorway, eyes sparkling with that cool fire he saw when he closed his own.

You're either coming or you're not. Decide now.

Howard's eyes looked up into Kevin's as though this were the most normal, rational thing he'd ever heard.

Charlotte grabbed the leather coat from its patient spot on the sofa and slid it onto her shoulders. She'd like to look good in her dad's hunting jacket, but it still swallowed her much smaller frame.

All right, I'm coming.

The trio made their way to the back door.

Charlotte grabbed an axe from the back porch, swinging it across his line of vision and onto tree branches that had grown lovingly along the sides of the rusty, sky blue pickup truck. Charlotte swung open her door, waited for Howard to throne himself in the middle and then climbed in herself. The engine groaned to life, and Kevin tripped over the newly dead sticks to get to his dented door, afraid that he would wrench the handle off before it allowed his presence in the cab. It sprung suddenly and attacked his shin, the knot swelling immediately as he reached around his shoulder for a safety belt.

You're not going to find what you're looking for, Kevin.

Most people don't see the beauty of the mountains after dark as they should, Charlotte thought as she threw the truck into gear. The headlight beams through the forest reminded her of the way she had seen the light of life leave her parents' eyes. Sitting beside Kevin reminded her of silence, her voice having left with the violin strings, trying to find light for them to live again. This adventure would bring a different sense of loss, and abandonment.

• • •

A low rumble and crunch of tires pulled Autumn and her surroundings slightly out of the story. The breeze from the blue pickup truck blazing by blew her hair back slightly, nothing compared to the torrent of curls undulating against one another, grappling near the heads of a stout pug and a shy police officer.



On *The Lady and the Unicorn*

Danielle Byington

She touches the horn just so—
Enough to glimpse
Into the maiden hood she loses.
Frozen by the taste she's aspired to deny,
She's unable to jerk her hand
Away in complaint.

Now every note she hears
Is the climax of God,
Dripping on fair skin that
Shivers in a velvet dress
Among staring animals
That embroider her environment.

She no longer hunts for nature—
It spreads her open like a trough,
Leaving its heredity
To collect in her lips,
Screaming in her ears
With the birth
Of its hungry larvae.

She inhales the odor
Of nature's perversion
Through her elfish nose,
Then checks herself in the mirror
To eliminate mistakes.

The bounty of senses consumes her,
Jumping in her lap
To tell her lies about
The purpose of breathing,
The purpose of breeding,
The purpose of bleeding—
Now she understands.



Time Capsules

Sponsored by Jerry's Artarama of Knoxville



Tyler Ridgeway

With & Without



Tyler Ridgeway

⌋ *Photography Merit Award* ⌋

Brantner: Annalee 16, Taylor 24, Mariah 18

Sponsored by Nelson Fine Art Center



Trish Gibson

Contraction

Sponsored by Johnson City Area Arts Council

Sponsored by Faculty of Art & Design



Freddie Lyle

Three Wise Men

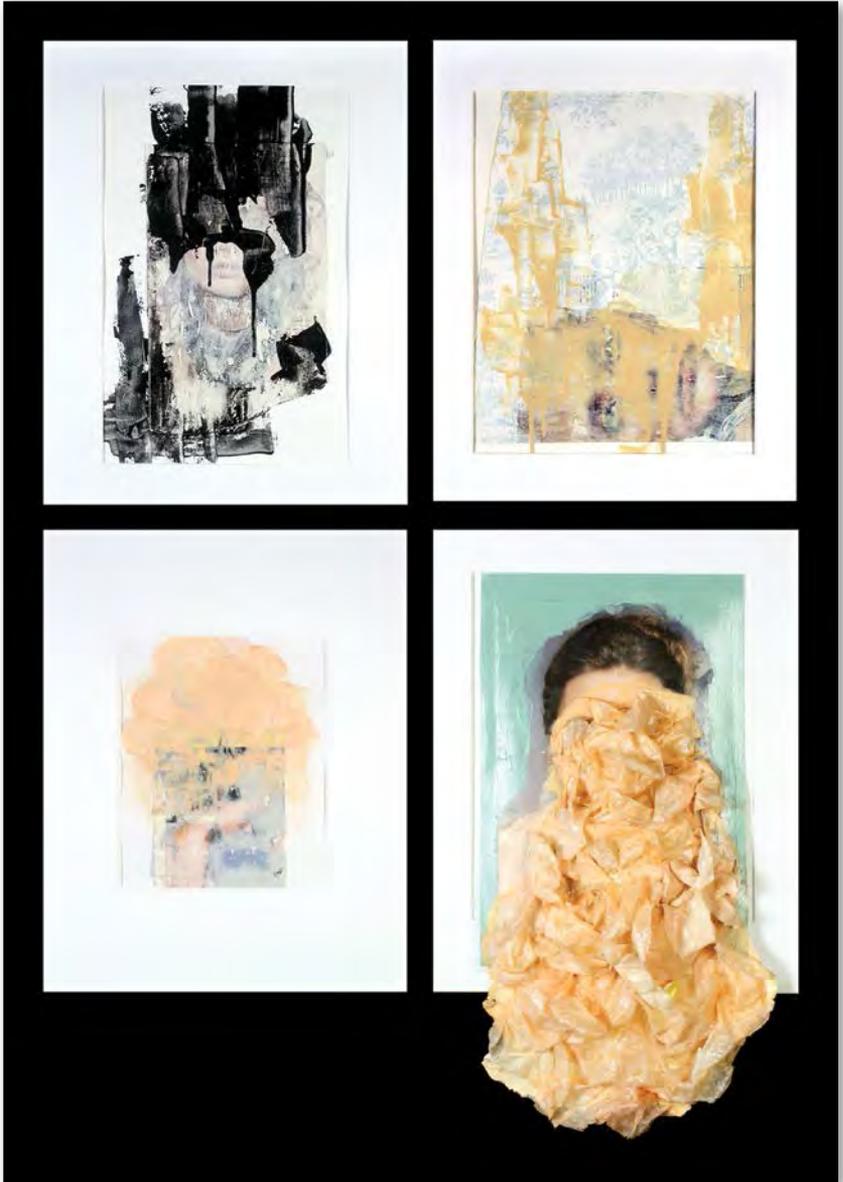
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Michael Hale

Doomed Beauty

Sponsored by Soleus Massage



V. Kelsey Ellis

🏆 1st Prize Craft Award 🏆

Untitled (Ring)

Sponsored by Tennessee Craft



Kathryn Haaland

Speak with Me (The Seeds)

Sponsored by Soleus Massage



Chantel Wehr

Untitled

Sponsored by Jerry's Artarama of Knoxville



Rima Day

Rise and Fall

Sponsored by Wyatt Moody Memorial Fund



Susan Voorhees

↳ *Graphic Design Merit Award* ↳

Tenfold's Light Hide

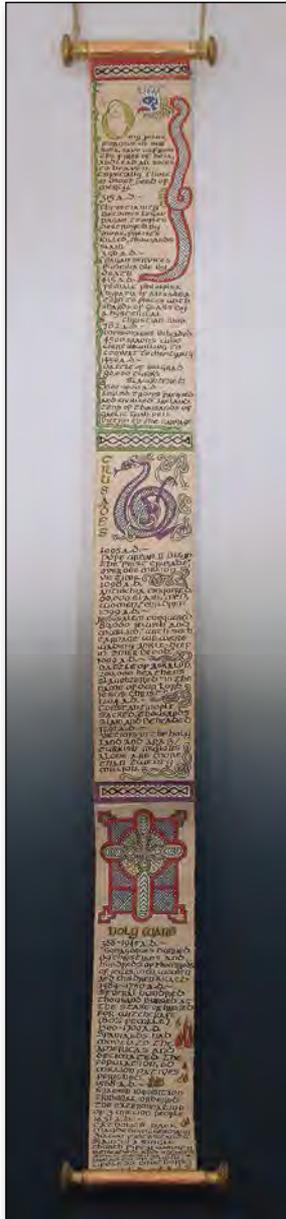
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Priyanka Modi

Atrocities

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Michael Hale

Katrina

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Megan King

Meditations on a Storm

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Lyn Govette

3^d Prize Craft Award

Black and Blue

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Dayna Bruell

Jill

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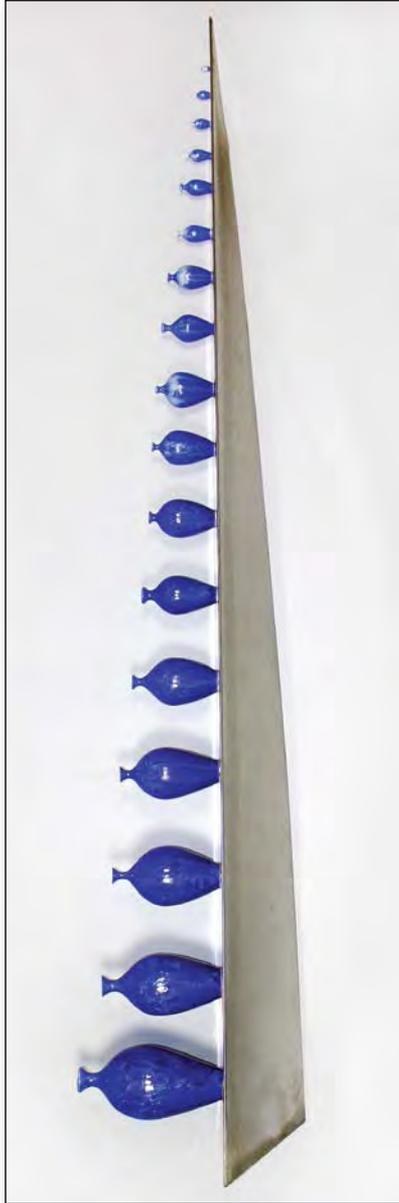


Hannah Harper

Tapered

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Becca Irvin

Balance

Sponsored by Mark Russell Foundation Arts Fund



Emily Matney

Photography Award II

Catlett: Anna 16, Jackson 12

Sponsored by Art & Design Photography Fund



Trish Gibson

The Sunflower Room

Dana T. Speight

It was not the first night that Mrs. Harrison claimed to have been visited by the ethereal young girl that she affectionately called “Anna Marie.” These peculiar visitations had been happening on and off for six months prior to this occurrence, steadily fueling the apprehension of her husband, Charlie Harrison. Mr. Harrison knew his wife was an idealist and a dreamer; he himself was fond of a creative mind, thankful of his mother’s emphasis on becoming an idealistic man, one who believed and supported the fantastical realities entertained by children, yet remained in tune with the monotony and harshness of reality.

“It is wiser to have an open mind than to be blind and deaf,” his mother would preach, keeping her voice low and careful in hopes of avoiding another lecture from Charlie’s tyrannical father. “We spend too much time focusin’ on what’s in our hands, rather than listenin’ to what’s in our hearts. Don’t you ever forget that, my boy?”

She smoothed out the wrinkles of the young boy’s clothing.

“Don’t you ever forget to *listen*.”

It was because of his mother’s words that Charlie found himself baffled by his current predicament as he stood partially obscured behind the half-opened doorway that lead to the balcony of his and his wife’s two-story house. Mrs. Harrison stood as if transfixed by an unseen being, beautifully illuminated by the iridescent moon as she leaned against the white pillars of the railing while gaily chatting with the vacant space next to her—God only knows what about, Charlie thought to himself. Her eyes burned with a joy that was only displayed in these rare, yet frequent moments when talking to her invisible companion, a demeanor vastly different from the depressive attitude she bore for the last six months. For now, her ruddy hair was loose, a change from her usual reserved style, in waves that cascaded past her shoulders and met with the swell of her hips. For a woman of twenty-five, it was clear

that despite her sudden lackluster attitude and apparent “illness”—he couldn’t think of any other word accurate enough to describe it—she was still strikingly beautiful and charming; the perfect housewife in physic, one that instantly dazzled all who might have the chance to gaze into her glassy, greying stare.

Charlie knew he was a lucky man—so *damn* lucky, in fact. He could still recall the day – August 13th of 1953, to be exact—when his wife’s father approached him in near the old soda fountain outside of the Kress Emporium¹ with the request of marrying his eldest daughter who was seventeen at the time. He could still remember the excitement he felt when he awkwardly accepted the proposal, rubbing his dirt covered hands on the sides of his faded overalls as her father squeezed the soft mound of her shoulder, ushering his soon-to-be wife forward to take his hand. He was overcome with such veneration that he almost missed the frightful expression clouding her porcelain face—poor thing must’ve wanted to stay with her daddy a bit longer—as the weight of her father’s calloused hand pressed into soft curve of her shoulder and dipped dangerously low.

“She’s a feisty one, but I reckon she’ll make a lovely wife. I’m sure go’na miss her m’self.” He squeezed her shoulder once more and smiled, exposing the yellow of his teeth—he was so sincere, thought Charlie—while her silver orbs paled submissively. He smelled of cigarettes and alcohol; a fine, virile man that Charlie knew he could trust with one greasy, powerful shake of his hand. His hardened eyes never left the poor girl’s form even as she stepped forward to lay a trembling hand into Charlie’s, who eagerly pressed in return, sealing their fate despite the automatic wince that graced her features.

Such fragility! He was indeed lucky, Charlie concluded.

In the late year of 1956, however, his luck became twofold. It was the same day that Charlie received a promotion to management in the factory job he had been working at since their spontaneous matrimony. He would now be able to build his wife their dream home, a fine two-story house with a beautiful balcony that overlooked their small country courtyard; however, it was that very same day in which he also received a call from Martha Evian, his wife’s younger sister, stating that her father had finally succumbed to his illness and passed away in his sleep. She had been reclining in an armchair in their shabby living room when he gently broke the news to her. Her doll-like face seemed impassive; not once did her expression falter from its previous neutrality, but Charlie could see a flicker of *some* emotion come to life in her grey eyes. She took a long drag from the cigarette held loosely in her left hand, the folds of her dress mov-

¹ Originally constructed as a department store located in downtown Asheville, North Carolina.

ing with her as she stood and walked over to the window. She placed her palm gently against the glass; the cool surface fogging from the proof of her mortality.

“Poor, poor daddy,” she would say, drawing out each syllable as if it were toxic to her. She exhaled the smoke, fanning the fumes and memories away from her face before she glanced over her shoulder, a coy smile playing upon her thin lips. Charlie never knew what sort of relationship his wife had with her father. She must have been taking the news dreadfully. He could remember the way she smiled—she always smiles when she’s tryin’ to hide somethin’, he mused—before turning on her heel and retreating into their master bedroom.

“That poor bastard,” Charlie agreed.

In four short months, her father’s belongings, stored in a scarlet chest, were transferred to their newly renovated home despite her request for Martha to take them instead. Charlie had taken the belongings and put them in their third bedroom, a room in which had no other purpose than for storage for the time being—although, if he recalled correctly, it would soon be used for *other* means—despite its vacancy and location in the house. It was a beautiful room situated in the perfect place; the sunrise would bathe the room in gold, warming it with a breathtaking hue of yellow and orange as if the walls were painted with the pigments used in the petals of sunflowers. It was the perfect room for a little girl to share her memories, to learn and live and grow as beautiful as her mother. Thus, in the year of 1957 they gave birth to a radiant little girl his wife christened as Lilybeth Harrison, who could equally dazzle her way into anyone’s heart with the sparkle of her silver gaze, just as her mother could. Charlie had never seen his wife so exultant, glowing with joy as she raised the little girl in that beautiful sunflower room. She was a wonderful mother; if her daughter needed her during the late hours of the night, she would dutifully attend to the child, putting her wants before even Charlie himself. His love for his wife only intensified; he adored her girlish whims and the frilly rose colored dresses—never scarlet, she would say reproachfully—she wore that were adorned with yellow ribbons. “They remind me of when I was a girl,” that coy smile stretching her cherry mouth. He loved that smile, the way that it widened as she hugged the little girl to her breast, her grey eyes sparkling more than Charlie had ever seen in their brief marriage. He recalled that if he could somehow freeze this moment for eternity, he would find a way to do so.

However, it was only the calm before a tragic storm. By 1961 on a cold, autumn day that Charlie chanced to be home earlier than usual, their darling Lilybeth had carelessly slipped between the railings of their silver balcony. Charlie had found her first; her flaxen hair—as soft as her mother’s, he recalled—sticking

to her forehead as he carried the fragile flower upstairs into the golden room where he called for his wife to find help. Her hair was still as soft when Dr. Guiles, a sagacious man, slender and crow-like with a presence of morose comprehension, announced her death in the very same room that was now a wilted mud color, stained from the loss of innocence. Charlie gently squeezed his wife's shoulder, unaware of the involuntary flinch he received as she shook from internal sobs. Her starlit eyes darkened with sorrow as she wept for their child in a colorless room, resentment sweltering in the silver irises that happened to glance upon the scarlet chest—it was worn from age, but he took good care of it for her sake, Charlie recalled—that sat opposite of the child's broken form in the middle of the floor by the wall, like an eternal stain of blood that disturbed the tranquility of the room.

Charlie crossed his arms, his eyes refocusing on the scene before him. His wife whispered with hushed secrecy as if explaining a hidden secret to the unheard voice. He watched the way her breasts swelled with each excited gasp; the skin around her precious neck flushed with heat from a reaction he hadn't seen in six months.

His wife began to have "visits" from an ethereal girl only she could see following their daughter's death. The first visitation had left Charlie in a daze; he arrived home from a tedious day of managing the factory to the sound of his wife's chime-like laughter spilling forth from upstairs. He would close the door and call out to her as he usually did, only this time he made his way upstairs where he stood with his arms braced on the doorframe, mindful of his mud covered hands as he took in the scene before him. His wife, the beautiful creature he chanced to call his own, was laid out in the middle of the floor in a fit of girlish laughter, her eyes fixated on the spot next to her as if in mid-conversation. It was a rare sight; since the death of their dear Lilybeth, his wife had taken to sitting in a depressive state in the sunflower room, her gaze fixed out the tiny window that overlooked the courtyard with her slender back to golden wall. She would never leave the room until the moon coerced her to retreat, forcing her to recline into the master bedroom. It was during that time when her dreary face would wilt and become a shade gloomier; her sullen expression souring as she departed from her preferred spot. In the morning, she performed her daily chores as any wife should, but never would her mood improve – her eyes refused to glow with the radiance that Charlie had fancied upon their first meeting, while her demeanor never changed from the listless attitude she bore around the clock.

It was the first time; however, that Charlie found his wife on the floor in that cursed room, smiling at an unseen force that transparently lay at her side while

the sun kissed at their bodies. She turned her gaze—oh, how he missed those silver orbs—carefully regarding his intruding frame in the doorway. He dared not to question her intentions, but chose to instead play along with her delusion, hoping to savor the moment of his beautiful wife reopening up to him once again.

The visitations began to become more frequent, however. His wife became obsessed with the young Anna Marie, sneaking away from their master bedroom in the early hours of the morning to step out on their balcony and have a meaningful “tête-à-tête,” she would say, touching one of her pale, slender hands against his cheek while flashing that captivatingly coy smile of hers, one of which was laced with the answers for the secret rendezvous and mysteries that solely belonged to her and dear Anna. It became worrisome; his wife became so adamantly involved in her unexplainable trysts that Charlie could no longer entertain a delusion responsible for the thinness behind her loose gowns, the dark circles under her starlit eyes, nor the sudden shifts in her irregular behavior. He had no sooner than made a distressed call for a doctor—the good man who tried to save their daughter, in fact—when he found his wife outside their greying home under the balcony with her face flushed, her starry eyes reflecting the flames that licked at her legs and breasts as they consumed the splintered scarlet pile at her feet. Charles had quickly pulled his wife away from the burning heap, hastily trying his hardest to stop the angry flames from spreading any further than the blackened mound. Discarding his suit—it was his wife’s birthday, wasn’t it?—Charlie finally managed to subdue the fire when finding a hose to combat the flames; his flaxen hair clung to his scalp as the sweat of apprehension and incredulousness traced his horrified features. He then found his wife in that *damned* room; her father’s belongings were scattered across the sterile bed, his clothing ripped and tattered in every corner while various items, most of which Charlie would rather keep in case he could salvage some kind of use from them, were littered and trashed. She sat by the window in that little brown chair, her small hands clutching at a brown rope frayed from the years of usage with a distant look in her eyes. Upon seeing her husband’s reflection in the window, she turned her gaze, heavy with unmistakable tears, and smiled that signature coy smirk before pointing to the distinct indentation on the blanched sheets that donned the bed; and if, perhaps, Charlie had stopped to listen, he would hear a child-like whisper caress his ears as his wife merrily stated how “Anna” made her do it.

Charlie was at a loss of what he should do. It had been weeks since his wife’s last episode—that was what the good doctor called it, if he was correct in recalling their conversation—and yet, he now found her once again merrily engaging

with the unseen force that he positively knew was just a figment of her imagination. He wanted to gently call his wife to him and end the charade for tonight, but he also wanted to listen to the one-sided conversation in hopes of hearing the cause of these midnight exchanges. Instead of the latter, however, he decided to gently approach her, quietly slipping behind her form and taking hold of her arm.

“Darlin’, do you know what time it is right now?” he asked, softly. Charlie felt his wife stiffen with their contact, her skin flushing with guilty heat. Her glassy eyes turned to meet his muddy brown, a coy smile playing upon her lips as she spoke.

“I am aware of the hour, dear. I didn’t want my little Anna to be lonely, so I came to keep her company.” Her smile widened as she motioned for her husband to focus on the space next to her. “Although,” he felt her shake with girlish laughter, “she seems to prefer my company rather than yours.”

“So it would seem.” Charlie couldn’t help but feel a bit of animosity for the ethereal creature. He wanted to blame the girl’s presence—should it even be called a girl, he pondered venomously—for the turmoil in their lives; the sudden changes in his wife’s behavior, the distant gazes, the absent touches and boring conversations—all of it was a consequence from the arrival of that *thing* that only his wife adamantly swore existed. All of the negativity in their lives culminated into one fixated point that didn’t even exist to the naked eye; and, quite frankly, Charlie was tired of entertaining his wife’s hallucinatory games.

“I’m go’na call Dr. Guiles and have him visit tomorr’a. He can help *us*, darlin’. He can help us just like when little Lily—” His wife detached herself from the man, shrinking into the balcony railing that was adjacent to his form. Charlie had never seen his wife as angry as she was currently—probably part of her symptoms, just as Dr. Guiles has suggested.

“You think I’m crazy don’t you, Charlie?” Her eyes burned with an unseen fury, hurt by her husband’s tenacity of refusing to believe in what she saw. “You’re going to let that man take me away for some experimental *help* – he will kill her, Charlie. He will kill me and her both. He will hurt me, just like...” His wife withdrew herself, cradling her body with her pale arms as the nighttime chill caressed their skins. She was visibly shaken; her ruddy hair clinging to her form like glue trying to mend the broken pieces of a fragile frame. Her silver eyes closed, the stone in her chest hardening with each shake.

“She don’t exist; Anne—my darlin’—there’s no such thing as spirits, or little girls that run around durin’ the night like some kin’ of horror story.” Charlie sighed.

He wanted to believe his wife, for the sake of their marriage and for the sake of her wellbeing; however, it was just too fantastical. He thought back to his mother's words, but he couldn't accept this bizarre occurrence. He didn't want to, really. He didn't want to *listen*. "Come to bed. The good doctor will be 'ere when I get home from the factory tomorr'a and he'll help us."

Charlie gently pulled his wife's arms away from the heat of her form, tugging her into the chilled air of the hallway and away from the invisible, damned *thing* that followed her around. He was too focused on pulling her into the bed, trailing kisses down the swell of her exposed shoulder, to notice the involuntary flinch that forced her eyes shut. Nor did he notice the final sliver of starlight slip away from her starry gaze into the vast pools of darkness that surrounded them in the cool of the night.

Dr. Guiles arrived as promptly as he promised the week before. He met Charlie outside the Harrison's family gate, waiting in his mud colored Bentley S1 with a distant look in his beady eyes. He turned his gaze on Charlie as he approached the doctor, promptly shaking the man's hands. "She had another *episode* last night, doc," Charlie started with a low voice, afraid that she might somehow hear from outside the graying home, or perhaps even he retched Anna Marie might hear and chance to tell his wife before he could approach her himself. "She got up aroun' two in the mornin' and was talking to that girl again. I tried to coax her out of it, but she denies that she's makin' it up." They two men heard the click of the car door next to them as the nurse sitting in the Bentley made a move to join to them. "I keep wonderin' if maybe she's seein' our dear Lilybeth, but she's swearin' up n' down that the *thing's* name is Anna Marie."

Dr. Guiles motioned for the nurse to stay in the car. Charlie let his eyes roam over the poor girl; she kept her eyes downcast, a sullen expression blossoming across her pale face. The white of her uniform clashed with the snowy pigment of her skin, giving an almost ghostly appearance to the young nurse—but he was tired of ghosts, Charlie decided.

The doctor regarded Charlie with a cool expression, his hand gently tracing the long lines of his stout jaw. "Do you believe in this...Anna Marie?" he asked quietly. Charlie fixed his gaze on the greying house, a white blemish amongst the yellow-orange skyline. "No sir, I don't."

"I have a treatment that I would like to use on your wife," the doctor said as the two men approached the wooden doors. The wood on the doors had grown grey with the years of exposure to the harsh sunlight. Charlie pressed his hand against the wood, pushing the door aside and allowing the two men to enter the

abode. “I think it would be beneficial to use a method known as ECT² on her. As we discussed earlier, I believe your wife is suffering from depression over the loss of your child—hallucinations can occur with this form of illness.” The good doctor pulled out some papers—Charlie hadn’t given them much thought—regarding the treatment, as well as information pertaining to the institution. “I assure you,” Dr. Guiles said with a lithe smile, “that Appalachian Hall³ is a marvelous institution where I will personally see to it that your wife receives the best treatment and will return full recuperated.” He grinned, flashing the yellow of his teeth.

Charlie gently called for his wife to come downstairs before tentatively taking the worn papers from the doctor. His coffee eyes searched the stairs for any sign of his wife, or perhaps, as some sort of proof to deter this decided moment, a sign from their spiritual companion. At that time, the nurse silently approached the two gentlemen with an extended clipboard in her glove covered hand while her somber eyes indifferently sought Charlie’s own.

“Her name, Mr. Harrison?” Her voice was light with uncertainty, like wind on a brisk autumn day. Charlie impulsively ascended stairs, anxiety and guilt lacing his hoarse voice as he answered the bleak form behind him.

“Her name is *Anne*.”

He felt his feet give out upon reaching the entry to the room that contained the balcony. His legs were numb with exhaustion, yet his eyes burned with remorse and comprehension, edging the man to push forward into the scene before him. The balcony doors were violently held open from the strong breeze that lavishly whipped at the now three occupants of the room. Charlie carefully picked up the broken picture frame that lay at his feet, his eyes softening at the image of a young girl and her father—bless his heart, Charlie quickly prayed – her silver orbs downcast, solemnly directing his gaze to the cursed name that was smudged near the bottom of the frame.

May 5th, 1943 – Mr. Evian with his daughter An-

He didn’t finish reading it.

2 *Electroconvulsive Therapy is a medical practice in which patients received neurological shocks through the temples and brain. This treatment was commonly used to treat depression, as well as hallucinations and suicidal tendencies.*

3 *An active Asylum located in Asheville, North Carolina during the 1950s.*

Dr. Guiles whispered something to the nurse, but Charlie didn't listen. The frame slipped from his hands as he stopped short upon seeing the balcony; the white was disturbed by a timeworn rope, brown and silent as it clung to one of the erect pillars, heavily swaying with the burden of compunction. A warm hue began to illuminate the scenery. The sunflower room blazed somewhere behind Charlie's yellowing face, its warming hues transcending into scarlet before wilting away and becoming a dingy brown, leaden with the loss of sanity.



After a Summer Rain

Matthew L. Gilbert

Verdant blades peak between bare toes,
Wet, slippery, half drunk from the spring of youth,
Cold and rejuvenating,
Like years forgotten — I remember.
Droplets ripple in tiny mirrors on the ground.

Nightshade Wing, Artillery Shells. Midsummer blossoms.
My chest rattles, the sky silhouettes an unsteady form:
Rushed, lithe legs on flopping dog-eared sandals.
I tilt my head away, shadows conceal a soft smile,
For twenty seconds my knees are weak.

Colors open the night in streams
Of crackling blue and razzled violent lines,
Stretched-out incandescent dreams marked by fire.
Spirals in paired, Calesita steps
Rise high, draw close, then explode.

Tears reflect their falling meters,
Burning cardboard petals, tailed by dimming stars.
I close my eyes, grasp one in my hand,
Feel light ash tingle tiny hairs on my arm,
And cast it into nothingness.

When lights white out, we gather debris,
I feel cool air blow down my neck.
I watch you light another, then hurry away.
Your hand brushes against mine.
Three seconds pass. The night lights up again.



Drive after Rain

Cory Howell

I pleaded with him, “Just one drive
Dad?” He would give his signature silent
Stare off into the distance. It always meant no.

On the first day of spring, after rain,
My chin buried in my palms, on the porch
Where I'd watch him work, He asked,

“Wanna take the Vette out?” We would
Do this every Sunday; him, me, windows
Down and The Stones on the radio.

He tossed me the key, and from my surprise
I dropped it, never expecting to drive
His Volunteer orange '79 Corvette.

I drove through our three red light town,
Five over the speed limit. No music, no top.
Just the vibrations from the gas pedal.

For a half hour I was my dad. Sixteen,
Wandering the country, looking for anything
That didn't remind me of the house I grew up in.



Excerpts from “Driving Like an Idiot”

Tucker Foster

As a pizza delivery driver, I have travelled over the same roads countless times. Center Street westbound, through the roundabout to Netherland Inn, the long, straight two-way which runs alongside the Holston River. Netherland Inn will either take you to Ridgefields, Rotherwood, Canongate, or it can be used as a shortcut to bypass the red lights on Stone Drive (westbound). Heading east on Center will take you to Memorial, and Orebank (just before Deadman’s Curve). North is usually the Lynn Garden area, approaching the TN/VA state line while south will either be the hotels just off exit three from Interstate 26 or the condos located in the foothills of Bays Mountain. We deliver within a five-mile radius of the store. Names and addresses are plugged in, the brain waves relaying to the synapses which allow for automatic muscle memory reflexes once I am seated behind the wheel of the car. This is when it feels as if the human element has become removed. I still haven’t been able to figure out my self-worth, spending most of my time as not necessarily a person, but as a transient means of conveyance. People are reduced to points on a map. Referred to by the name of the street they live on or the contents of their usual order.

Throughout the course of my employment, I have crawled, fallen, sweated, frozen, ran, whispered, hugged, been cursed out, pulled over five times, been called an idiot at least four times. I’ve kept a straight face, shaken with anger, felt awe, felt at peace. Felt pity, lust, resentment, excitement, freedom, zen, and utter chaos. Every time you drive to a stranger’s house and knock on their door, it is a strange and surreal experience. Voyeurs would be excellent delivery drivers. Delivering pizzas can be a lot like standing still in the middle of a revolving carousel and watching the world spin by around you. Like floating motionless in a void and watching time and events fall around you in a slow-motion whirlwind of freeze-framed memories. You see the life you could have, and the life you could fall into.

You are required to take the role of passive observer. Much like Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now*. Captain Willard sets in for the long voyage down the deadly Nung River, his objective lies at the end of the trip, and he is not required to become involved in any of the events that occur along the way, as long as he completes his mission at the end of the day. I work nights. Usually 4 pm until 10 or 11. The time on the clock is the deadly river, with each delivery being an encounter on the way down.

Like the troop of soldiers making their way down the river in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, there is always an underlying sense of urgency and tension thick in the air when on delivery. The human mind is a fragile thing, and since people do not stop and tidy up their lives for a pizza, I have unwittingly stumbled across social landmines while standing on people's doorsteps. There is a regular, an older man who lives in a condo on Scotland Road, off of Canongate, just behind the Rotherwood Mansion and Subdivision. I have delivered to him just as much or maybe even more than most regulars. It's an easy three and a half mile drive down Netherland Inn, but I am never very excited to get his order. He is a nice man. Nice in an uneasy, slightly askew way. I get the sense he is a veteran, perhaps Vietnam. I have trouble feeling the sincerity in his niceness. Every trip felt like a skate out on thin ice, and I knew the inevitable outburst would hit sooner or later.

The man's tiny red SUV is an older model, a product of the mid-90s which has been kept in good enough shape to where it has a constant shine. The sport red paint always looks slick and polished when I pull in next to it. The feature that catches my eye every time, however, is the white window decal that blares out against the heavily tinted back window on the passenger side. The decal depicts Jesus Christ, from the chest up, hanging from the cross with the crown of thorns sending strings of blood trickling down his face. This sticker only adds to my sense of unease each time I enter into the condominium's parking lot. One night had been rough, and each delivery felt like it had maximum potential to go wrong. It was a chilly winter evening, and the sun had long been down by the time I pulled in beside the tacky red SUV with the crucified Jesus projecting from the dark window. The man had ordered his usual large hand-tossed cheese pizza and turkey sub. I step up to his door and prepare for the usual barrage of high pitched, relentless barking from his pint-sized dogs. He gleefully ignores the barking every time and instead proudly displays the fact that he owns two dogs of which would be heard at the gates of my own personal hell. This is all going as usual until I produce his order from the hot bag. His pasted-on smile fades as I hand him the food, as if it had been waiting for an excuse to disappear from his face. "Did I not get a thirteen inch sub?" He

asks. I look at the ticket. Whenever an abnormality arises, I immediately resort to the ticket. The ticket is my only shield from blame and all the misdirected anger and repressed unhappiness that is about to be hurled my way. I tell him the ticket says that he ordered a six inch sub. He throws his head back as if he had just taken a bullet to the chest. "JESUS CHRIST!" He exclaims. I couldn't help but look back at his glistening red SUV, still shining like a blood-soaked pearl underneath the pale streetlights.

I haven't been able to figure out whether regulars are depressing or simply reliable. On average, my shift runs two delivery drivers. Myself, and one other. Regulars are those who order at least twice a week. I never know whether to act like we know each other or if I should just keep feigning like it's a new experience each time. I wonder if the regulars would still call in every other day if they didn't think I could make it to their front door within 20 minutes of them hanging up the phone. Sometimes, things can get tense with regulars. Regulars are sometimes slightly off their rockers.

To work with the public binds you into an unspoken agreement which states that you will undoubtedly encounter people at their worst. There was one man with whom I had the pleasure of working, a man that had presumably experienced more life than I will probably ever get the chance to experience. I knew more about him from rumors than I did from what I actually heard him say. He had supposedly lived in the clouds at one point. Owned his own business, made millions, lost millions, lived on the street, been a saint, been a sinner, and it all led to him being one of the best dishwashers my little hole-in-the-wall pizzeria had ever seen. This ended one day when he failed to show up for work and neglected to call in with a reason. From then on out I would only see him when he came in to visit, to tell us about his latest endeavors which never ended up going anywhere.

After a while he was banned from visiting the store, for some reason or another. Then I would only see him when he ordered deliveries to his little rundown apartment on Watauga Street, which sat less than a mile away from the pizzeria. Which meant it should never be more than a ten-minute run, on the long side. One night turned into much more than a ten-minute run. The address on the ticket was for another apartment on Charlemont Avenue, just around the corner from Watauga, and a part of the same complex. Given the nomadic nature of this individual, I assumed he had moved into a different apartment just down the street from his old one. The order was placed, and I was told to call my old coworker when I was outside of his apartment so he could come out and meet me. I was having a decent night at work, so I wasn't all that disappointed when I got stuck with the short delivery to the rundown apartment to

the ex-millionaire who was now banned from coming into my workplace. If I could whistle, then I would have been whistling on my way out the door that night, and as I got into my car. I drove down the street to the address listed on my ticket and told him I was on my way. He sounded cheery on the other end of the line and said he would be watching for me. I arrive at the address and feel confident enough in myself to go and lean against the apartment building, beside the doorway, and wait. If I could whistle, I would still be whistling at this point. Until I realize that this isn't right. The address on my ticket was *wrong*. The apartment I needed to be at was *around the corner* from where I was standing. The man had not moved, instead, the wrong address was entered into the system when his order was taken. Wrong addresses, the bane of every delivery driver's existence. Shit. I get back in the car and drift around the corner. I can't remember if I called him back or if he called me first. Either way, he was *furious*. I had lied to the customer. I told him I was outside his apartment. He went outside, and, "no joke" I was not there. I made this poor man walk outside for nothing. He says some more words as I make the less than five-second drive over to the correct address. He tells me he sees me, and I imagined he probably slammed his old flip phone shut at that point and began to march his way over to my vehicle. He meets me head on as I step out of the car. In no way does this gentleman have a threatening presence. He stands about two heads shorter than me and weighs in around 1/3 of my weight, judging strictly from appearances. These facts do not stop him from giving me a profanity laced, drunkenly enraged piece of his mind. I call him by his name. Try to explain the situation, attempt to reason with him. We are former co-workers, for Chrissake, does that not count for anything? I even show him the address that I was given on the ticket. He does not care. He has never lived there in his entire. Life, he tells me before crumpling up the slick, thin piece of paper and tossing into my delivery bag. He takes his food and gives me some money somewhere during all the commotion. He makes his way across the street, back towards his apartment room. (If there was ever a time for a careless bus driver to come careening down the street...). He shouts back at me over his shoulder. "I'm never ordering from you guys again in my life!" I tell him ok and apologize again. Later that evening I was still so distraught from the ordeal that I had to view an album of photos on the internet that were assured to 'restore my faith in humanity.' Obviously my thick skin had not yet arrived.



My Father

Blaine Boles

I wake up.
He is a ghost,
A shock of cold.
Like a dopamine rush
Or a night's Winter breeze.
I am thinking of blue.

And I walk into the bar,
Where the shit is soft going down
And fractal tufts blown from men's mouths
Make me know I am all alone
Dealing with Damoclean debt.

The bar has a bottle, hung
Over the best seat in the house.
The thing is jagged and broken,
And I know I was born from it.
But I always saunter in,

And I always take my seat.
Sometimes that bottle drips down:
A slow, syncopated tap on
The sloped edge of my skull that scares me
Because I see what he sees.

Sometimes I have angst-dreams
Where I have such strange skin;
So, I run in that chair.
All the other
Places I go,
He kills Me.

Interview with Kevin Brown

Beth Miller

Kevin Brown is a professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry: Liturgical Calendar: Poems (forthcoming from Wipf and Stock); A Lexicon of Lost Words (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and Exit Lines (Plain View Press, 2009). He also has a memoir, Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again, and a book of scholarship, They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels. He received his Master's in English from East Tennessee State University and his MFA from Murray State University.

Editor's Note: The following interview was conducted via e-mail spanning the first week of February in 2015.

Beth Miller: First, I was thinking of a lot of our student readers and their interest in writing, and so, generally, do you have any advice for blossoming or aspiring poets or writers? Are there any writing strategies or practices that you've found beneficial to your creation? What is your writing and revising process like?

Kevin Brown: I didn't take writing very seriously for much of my adult life. I never had a creative writing class, and I didn't read very much poetry. I would just write whenever the spirit moved, and I probably wrote about fifteen to twenty poems a year. If I was lucky, I would publish three to five of those. Then, I had a poem accepted in a journal I never thought would publish me, so I thought that perhaps I was better at writing poetry than I had thought until that point. That's when I decided to go get an MFA, actually.

Once I started taking things seriously, I developed a regular writing routine, and it really made all the difference. I think most young writers don't take discipline very seriously, writing much like I did, whenever they feel like it. The ones who really improve, though, are the ones who make the time to read and write regularly. Mason Currey has a book, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, that came out a year

or two ago. He lays out more than 150 routines for a variety of artists. What's interesting is how different their routines were, but they all have some sort of discipline. It doesn't matter what approach one takes, as long as one develops some sort of consistency. Donald Hall has a quote in his book *Life Work* that I share with all of my writing classes: "Anyone who loves accomplishment lives by the clock and the list." If you want to be a writer, you have to live by the clock and the list.

It took me a bit of time to find one that worked for me, and I was worried that mine was the wrong one because I didn't know anyone else who did it. I would go walking every morning, and I would just put an idea in my head. I would use a title or an image or something and just mull it over, working it and working it until I ended up with a poem. When I got to the office or back home, I would write that down. Everyone else talked about sitting at a desk and revising on paper, but I did most of my revision work in my head, as I could hear it better that way. It was only when I read about Wallace Stevens that I felt somewhat normal. He used to walk two miles to work (and home again) every day. He would compose in his head, then dictate to his secretary when he arrived (I can only imagine what she thought of some of his poems). Hearing that someone else worked the same way made me feel more confident, but, overall, we all need to find our own way.

I'm getting ready to start another series of poems, and I'm going to try a different approach this time around, just to see if a different technique leads to a different type of poem. It might not work at all, but it's always worthwhile to try new approaches.

I will say one other thing about my process. I tend to have some sort of series in mind, some sort of prompt. Thus, I've used the words from the Oxford English Dictionary and the liturgical calendar, among others. What keeps many writers from writing is the blank page. If I already have a title or one small idea, that helps me break through that fear, and I can at least begin getting something down on the page (or in my head, in my case).

BM: Secondly, working as a scholar as well, do you feel any anxiety about the interpretation of your poetry? So often students interpret "I" narrators as the author; do you think about that during the poetic process?

KB: I've never really had a fear of interpretation because of my scholarship. If anyone ever does take a scholarly look at my work, I'll be as interested as anyone to see what they would come up with. I can give them my interpretation, but theirs would also interest me.

However, the “I” narrator is extremely problematic. That might be why I took a break and wrote a series of poems all about Jack, a persona I created to avoid that issue. Some of those poems were largely autobiographical, and he and I are similar in many ways, but almost no one would have any way of knowing that.

Where I ran into problem, though, was with my family. My parents aren’t really poetry people, so they would read my first-person poems as being absolutely autobiographical. I once wrote a poem that used a father, and it did use a scene that was similar to something that happened to my father. However, I was drawing from what had happened to a friend’s father, and I wasn’t even thinking about mine. They saw it online, and they raised questions about it. Another time, my mother asked my wife why she said something about her, and my wife was completely caught off-guard. I had to jump in and explain that the comment was in a poem I wrote and had nothing to do with my actual mother. For most poets, dealing with family is much more worrisome than dealing with scholars.

BM: Your use of enjambment and alliteration is so interesting to me, and I really enjoyed that in your poetry. How do you know when to break the rules of “standard” poetry or diction and when to work within them?

KB: I love playing with line breaks and using alliteration, so much so that I have to watch how often I do both. My approach is typically to use whatever I need to use to get the poem down on paper. I know I can play with form at that point, but, when I’m working it out in my head, I’m concerned about word choice and rhythm. I had a professor once tell me he thought I fell back on alliteration whenever I would get stuck, which might be true, but it’s also just a sound I like a good deal. Given that I do tend to overuse it, though, I’ll use it to get the poem down on paper, then I’ll purposefully go back through and prune my use of it back. Those decisions are based on nothing more than feel and sound.

On line breaks, I became so enamored with them that, when our chapter of Sigma Tau Delta was ordering t-shirts with clever literary nicknames on the back, mine was line/break. I spent my first seven or eight years writing without any knowledge of how line and stanza breaks worked, but we had a visiting writer (Scott Cairns) one year, and he talked to a class about line breaks. He knew the formal terminology, which I have long since forgotten, but, essentially, he talked about how to use line breaks to get more meaning from a line.

Here’s an example from one of the poems in my new collection. “Let He Who Is Without” is clearly a poem about a relationship that is falling apart, so that runs throughout, but I tried to convey it in more subtle ways, at times. Here’s a short passage:

“misshapen representations
of occasions where I neglected
to call when late or events
we did not share / with her cousins
or nieces or nephews...”

I tried with the line break after “share” to get extra meaning there. When the reader reads it the first time, it sounds like the speaker is talking about events he and she did not share, meaning they didn’t share those events with each other. Once the reader gets to the next line, though, he or she sees that those events weren’t shared with other family members. The reader, consciously or not, gets both meanings from that one line.

Of course, it is easy to do that too often and make the reader constantly stop and reevaluate every line, so I’ve found I have to be rather judicious in my use of such line breaks. When done well, they can add a lot of meaning to a poem, though.

I also find I tend not to end lines or stanzas with hard-stopped lines. I know that my poems are more narrative to begin with, so I want to break up the prose-like nature of the story by propelling the reader from one line to the next and one stanza to another. If I can break up the sentences (I also use lots of subordinate clauses), then the rhythm becomes more poetic and less prosaic (a complaint I get about my poems).

BM: Your work seems concerned with the idea of losing words and what that means for our society. Do you feel that the words are going somewhere, or that we’re losing a specific type of word? Are they being replaced, and how do we make value judgments about their replacements? Is this a process we can react against?

KB: I think we’re in a society that is superficially obsessed with communication, but has given up on deep conversations. Almost everyone is on social media at a level that is unhealthy, and my students don’t talk to each other nearly as much as they text with one another. I hear of relationships that start and end almost exclusively via text. We update our Facebook statuses (now our Instagrams or Twitters more than Facebook), as if we are actually communicating with people. We scroll through those feeds, favoriting or liking all of this, and then we immediately forget it. It’s all disposable, just like so much else in our culture.

In doing so, then, we do lose words, and our words lose meaning. I don’t mean the way they change meaning--”tweet” moving to an electronic update from the noise a bird makes--but the way they empty of meaning. “Friend” is no

longer someone we're actually friends with, though it could be. "Like" doesn't really mean to have any true affection for. "Favorite" doesn't signify something that truly stands out. I'm truly not trying to complain about the simple shift in words that happens in every generation; I'm much more concerned about what some of these changes do to our relationships.

I'm also greatly concerned about the lack of conversations. My wife and I go out to dinner, and we'll look around at tables and watch people stay on their phones the entire time they are at dinner. I know that she and I are not having terribly deep conversations during many of those meals, but we are at least present with one another. I watch people walk around with others, but never look at them or speak to them. Whenever I see people walking on the sidewalk looking at their phones, I purposefully walk toward them to make them look up and acknowledge me by at least moving out of the way.

There's a great book, *Alone Together*, by Sherry Turkle where she talks a good deal about the effects technology is having on our relationships. Moving a bit more to poetry, I worry more about the fact that technology is taking away our solitude. More than anything, I see people who are afraid to be alone with their thoughts, a condition that must be present for us to create art. People sit at street lights or waiting for people in restaurants, and they immediately pull out their phones to try to avoid being alone. As a writer, I've worked hard to provide solitude in my life so that I can find those places that are too easily covered over in our society. I limit my use of Facebook every day, and I still don't own a cell phone.

I realize I've drifted away from words here, but all of this is related to me. If we don't take the time to sit with ourselves, we're never going to find the feelings or demons or whatever we have deep within us that drive us to create art. If we don't find them, it doesn't matter what words we have or don't have because we won't have the emotional truth we need to create.

BM: I think that the role of God and belief in your poetry is very interesting. Do you find a lot of cultural response to this or is it more personal expression? Do you feel that poetry creates more answers or more questions? What are you hoping for your readers in this theme in your poetry?

KB: I live in an interesting place regarding my faith. I'm clearly a Christian, and I'm quite active in my church, but I'm on the very progressive end of the Christian spectrum. I teach, though, at a Christian university where many of my colleagues and most of my students are on the more conservative end. In some ways, then, I feel I don't fit well at either place. I have too much of my fundamentalist roots within me to be completely comfortable as a far left progressive, and I view the world and God very differently from the far right conservative

branch. As a poet, though, this is a very good place to be. It's too easy to surround ourselves with people who agree with us and reaffirm what we think. Being around people on both sides of the spectrum keep me constantly off guard.

Also, as I've gotten older, I've embraced mystery in ways I never could have done in my twenties. In fact, I've always wanted to give a talk on God as a metaphor. God is so large that whenever we begin to talk about God, we immediately limit God because we're essentially using a comparison. Even if we say something simple, like "God is love," we've already limited God because we have a very human definition of love. Even "God is God" is limiting because we've limited God by language, as we immediately have some sort of definition of God. I'm much more comfortable living with the contradictions I see in my (and others') perception of God because I'm comfortable with the contradictions inherent in language and in life.

When I write poetry that comes from my faith in any way (which, I don't ever really intend to do, and I'm always as surprised as anyone else when it makes a significant appearance), it's always to deal with some sort of question. I've heard several people say, "When you want to make an argument, write an essay. When you want to ask a question, write a poem." If one were to trace my poetic development, I hope they would see my poems becoming much more about questions, as I used to be rather didactic in my earlier writing. I'm not sure if that's true, but it's what I want to be true.



Heterophemize

(from *A Lexicon of Lost Words*)

Kevin Brown

v.—to say something different from what you mean to say

I set out to say
that you were my
noun, but I verbed
you instead, so I
stammered out that
you were an adjective,
but I spoke so adverbly
that you exclaimed. I
thought that we were
gerunding well, but you
saw nothing but a split
infinitive, as my misplaced
modifies left us with
nothing but a
fragment.

Syntax and semantics led to my
downfall, as I failed to notice
the lack of a coordinating
conjunction between us. I was
always more of a math
person, it seems, where one
plus one
always equals two.



Latibulate

(from *A Lexicon of Lost Words*)

Kevin Brown

v.—to hide oneself in a corner

I remember our time in college, with our illicit electronics: the black and white television with rabbit ears that we extended with coat hangers and aluminum foil just to get that one extra channel; the Betamax that was already ten years out of date, but that you insisted upon because of the better quality; the hot plate, toaster oven, and microwave, all to provide you with pop-tarts and grilled

cheese sandwiches, which you used to fuel the late nights you spent with writers professors merely referenced: Nietzsche and Neruda, Vonnegut and Voltaire, de Man and Derrida. The lamp light reflected in your eyes like a fire, as the ideas burned into your brain, igniting the discussion of the following day, when you would seek us out to question us about free will, the structure of language, and what

might be possible, if only we could imagine it. I remember evenings when I returned to the dorm to be greeted by foreign smells and languages, mingled with your laugh, as you tried vindaloo and discussed Hinduism with the student from Bombay or when you argued race and religion over fried okra with the theology major from Mississippi. I remember all of this as we meet for our monthly meal, a lunch where

conversation always lags until I reference a book you once would have loved. Now, though, you meet it with the righteous rhetoric that you repeat from the soulless books you now read, and I see the violence in your eyes, as you vilify ideas you refuse to understand. I hear the fear in your voice, as it drives you deeper into the darkness of your ignorance, but the candle on the table reminds me of why I will be back here in thirty days.



On Jack and the Dead, Old Lady in the Bathtub from *The Shining*

Danielle Byington

The fishbowl of requiem in her lungs
Stews with the loss
Of some dumb young man,
Yet she laughs without breath
At the Porter's eagerness
To unzip the door,
Despite all he has been told.

She parts her shower curtain,
And in gossamer nude stride
Never slips on the tiles that unite
The bathroom mirror
With her demise.
It is too much work
For Jack to pull his hands
From her corset
Of watery ulcers,

And he searches for Knowledge
In the back of her mouth.
His brows furrow at the taste
Of such a bitter apple,
And he can't stop chewing the pulp—
He has become a very dull man.



The Cut

Lauren Fowler

You could probably jam a quarter into the hole Miles knocked in my lip. The thing just split right open like it had a zipper. This isn't my first busted lip. In fact, lately they've been wearing out their welcome. Miles is getting more impatient, and I can only work so fast. It's the same with all the guys, so we spend a lot of time getting up close and personal with car doors and parking lots. At least one night a week he introduces my face to the asphalt outside of Club Angel. I'm sure I've lost a few fillings out here in the last couple months. I've spent the last half hour on the ground, drinking Jack from a paper bag while my blood collects on the collar of my shirt. My face throbs every time the bottle touches it.

I know how I must look to the owner of this place. A part of me wishes he'd call the police, so I could get slugged by somebody else for a change. But he doesn't, of course. Never said I was a lucky guy. Like he always does, Tito the bouncer notices me and comes over to ask how I am. Tito is a 6 foot 5 inch brick wall with a chip on his shoulder the size of Texas, but for some reason he's taken a liking to me. Maybe he's impressed I'm still alive after seeing me get my ass kicked five times this month.

He squats down in front of me. "Hey little guy," he says. "I think you need to find some new friends."

"You're tellin' me." I start to get up and he offers his hand—a catcher's mitt, really.

He wrestles a crumpled pack of Marlboro Reds out of his pocket and sticks one to his lip. "Want one?" I light it and try to ignore the outline of bloody lips forming on the filter. For several minutes, we lean against my truck in silence. I see his eyes dissect me through puffs of smoke. I expect him to ask me about my "friends" or why I spend so much time horizontal in the parking lot of a strip club, but he doesn't. Instead he says, "I guess I can't keep calling you 'little guy.' What's your name, man?"

“Leo,” I say, back to nursing the bottle of whiskey.

When his cigarette is spent, he turns to head back to work. “You should come inside. I’ll buy you a dance from one of the girls. You look like you could use it.”

I shake my head before he even finishes the sentence. “Maybe some other time. I’m on a deadline.” He flashes me a familiar look, one of pity. I see it on nearly every face I meet. They all think they have it figured out, have my life summed up in a few neat sentences. They can tell me what drug I’m on, what disease I have, what support group I should be in. What a joke. I let him walk back to his post before I head to my assignment. For his sake, I hope he forgets all about me.

It’s almost one. I’ve stalled for too long, and, unless I want to mess up the rest of my face, I better do my job. It was a short drive to the bus station where my cut works. He’s been working there the last three nights anyway. If he happens to call in sick tonight I might as well start building my own pine box. To my relief, he’s sitting behind the ticket desk, squinting under the sterile glare of the fluorescent lights. He looks skinny, weak. His veins practically float in his milky forearms. Maybe I’m doing him a favor. The station is empty except for us. That helps. His nose is buried in an issue of *Men’s Health*; there’s something unfortunately ironic about that. As if it’s second nature, I walk up to the counter and ring the bell. The interruption startles him and he doesn’t look happy to see a customer. He tries to avoid eye contact, but his eyes keep darting to my bloody face. I half expect him to call security; he doesn’t. I guess he sees a lot of weirdos on night shift. I know the feeling. “The bell is for when no one is at the desk,” he says, bothered.

Oh good, he’s a dick. This will almost be easy. “I was just going to ask where your bathroom was.” I play dumb.

The cut sighs and stabs his stubby finger towards the back of the building. “Read the sign, sir.”

I nod in gratitude and head to the back. The bathroom tile is bright yellow. How is a man supposed to compose himself in a bathroom with fucking yellow tile? I catch a glimpse of myself in the clouded mirror. I look like hell. My lip vaguely resembles a busted plum—pulp, juice, skin, blood, it’s all the same. Miles sure knows how to motivate someone. My mind drifts to the ticket clerk. I wonder how much he weighs, how fast he is; I’m not in the mood for a chase. I put my hands on either side of the sink and scrutinize my reflection. I don’t recognize myself. I’m buried somewhere under regret and dark circles. But I can’t stall on this job any longer; this is my last opportunity to meet my deadline.

Washing the blood from my face, I get ready to play my part. I make sure to bust the door open with too much force so that the sound catches him off guard.

When I make it back to the lobby, he is no longer behind the counter. Perfect. “There’s a guy,” I start. “He’s unconscious. I-I can’t help him. We have to call somebody.” I should have been an actor; I have already perfected the role of panicked citizen. He buys it, of course, and sprints to the bathroom. I wait. One second. Two seconds. Then I follow him.

When I open the door he looks confused. “I don’t see anyone,” he says. His confusion is slowly turning to anger. I pull a gun from my jacket pocket and he quiets. “Listen, take all the money. It’s not much, but it’s yours.” The cut’s voice has that low, desperate quality someone gets just before they get ready to beg. I hate when they beg. I motion for him to leave the bathroom and go out the back door at the end of the hallway. The dew is heavy tonight, like you could choke on it. I think of it as a kind of cleansing, a baptism for unwilling sinners. When you’ve been in this situation as many times as I have you have to make up things to justify it to yourself and to God.

I can’t think of anything profound to say to him, so I just start counting to end it quickly. “1...” He turns around to face me. I wish he hadn’t done that. “2...” Seeing his expression makes my hand shake under the weight of the gun. I wonder if I did enough research. He could have had family somewhere. I’m sure someone will miss him. Tears well up in his bloodshot eyes and for a moment I forget what I need him for. Heart? No. Kidney? Maybe. Eyes? Shit, now I don’t know where to shoot him. I think of letting him go. I think of Miles. I think of... The bullet chars a hole in the center of his forehead. His body folds up like a puppet that’s been cut from its strings. There’s always a moment when someone dies that the world goes silent. And you’re deaf for that instant, that vigil. If you look closely, you just might see their soul leaving their body. It’s like smoke when a fire finally goes out. Killing always makes me too damn spiritual.

The cut lay motionless on the pavement, looking heavier than he did inside. I struggle to lug his dead weight into the bed of my truck and wrap him in a ratty blue tarp. I don’t worry about the mess, that’s not in my job description. The hard part is over, now I just have to get him back to Saul, and it’s out of my hands. I pass several cops on the way back to work, but I don’t even flinch. Miles takes care of the police. Somebody goes missing, and their checks get fatter. There’s nothing like a little financial incentive to make an investigation grind to a halt. But to cut down on suspicion, he picks cuts that won’t be missed. He says he wants to make as few waves as possible.

Miles owns an old building right outside of town, just past the interstate where the traffic starts to slow and there’s nothing but shady gas stations and hookers as far as the eye can see. It used to be an antique place run by this old man

that would rather spit at you than sell any of his shit. Miles bought it after his death and started a little business of his own. Unfortunately, he kept most of the merchandise, so our warehouse looks more like a diseased carnival than an illegal market. The walls are lined with sickly music boxes and rocking chairs that probably move on their own when no one is watching. He renovated the main floor into a lounge with a bar, offices are upstairs, and the basement is where receiving unloads the cuts.

Saul is behind the bar when I get back to the warehouse. “New cut for you,” I say, sliding onto a barstool.

“Name? Stats?” He dries his thick forearms on his blood-stained apron. I don’t want to imagine where it came from.

I touch all my pockets, looking for the wallet I lifted. “License says, ‘Kent Fletcher. 34 years old.’”

Saul takes the wallet and puts it behind the counter. “That’s the kidney job, right?”

I shrug.

“You boys in delivery are real efficient, aren’t you?” I know he’s joking. When you work for Miles, you learn not to be too nosy about other departments. Saul is in receiving. Sometimes he’s called The Butcher, but that is more than I want to know about what he gets paid for. Other guys work in cleanup. By now, that crew has erased all evidence of my job at the bus station. While I have never met any of them, I imagine them like vultures, fussing over pieces of flesh and drops of blood. They get wind you’ve taken a cut; they show up within ten minutes. The whole thing is a twisted ant farm—everyone sticks to their job and none of the workers disturb the progress of the colony. Each of us as insignificant as the next. I lean over the bar and pour myself a drink to wash that image out of my head. Saul walks away to oversee the unloading of my truck. I appreciate my moment of solitude in the empty bar. Since Miles doesn’t open the place to the public, it’s easy to hide out and let your chuckling at some private joke. When I don’t play along, he continues, “I have a new assignment for you.” He punctuates his sentence with the smack of a manila folder on the bar. “A special assignment.”

I’d like to crush my glass in my hand. I’d like to tell him to go to hell. But I don’t. “New assignments don’t come out until next Sunday. I did the Fletcher job this month. One a month.” I stress the last few words, but I know my tone won’t matter. If Miles wants you to do one a week, or ten a week, you do it because you remember what it was like before. When Miles found me, I was living in a junkyard, bunking in the back of a half-crushed van, and selling my blood for

a chance at a real meal. He saw me yelling at a nurse one night. They couldn't take anymore blood, she said; I had given too much. A dark savior in a three-piece suit, Miles led me away to a nearby diner. There, he looked at my bruised arms and asked if I'd like to help him with a project. Looking back, I guess it was the gnawing in my starving stomach that answered him, the voice of a twenty-eight-year-old kid that didn't ever want to feel that weak again. I never even asked what the project was, and two years later I still can't tell you exactly what he does with the cuts we bring him. I just get a name, a location, and an organ. Until now, I've only had one assignment a month, but now those same dead eyes are telling me they want more and I can't say no.

Miles sees the uncertainty in my face. My fear has drawn him in; he feasts on it. "Leo...." His voice trails off, controlled anger lightly tinting his words. "You wanted this. I was only trying to help. I gave you a place to live, food to eat. In return, you only have to do your job. We're just two friends, Leo, helping each other out." He makes killing sound like planting roses for a fucking housewife.

I start to protest, but I know he won't hear it.

He puts his hand under my chin and lifts my face toward the light. "You should really get that lip looked at." A smirk slithers sluggishly across his face, drunk on its own power. He doesn't give me time to reply, maybe because he knows I won't. He leaves me to lick my wounds and starts walking back to his office. At the bottom of the stairs, he stops, as he always does, at Madame Ava. It's this fortune teller machine that is just one of the many creepy antiques Miles kept from the old place. The figure inside is tattered. I'm sure at some point it resembled a woman, but now the face is faded and unrecognizable. The machine no longer makes any noise; it only spits out small cards with fortunes written on them. It has been in the lounge since before I came to work here and Miles is the only one that ever touches it. In fact, he has a habit of pushing the button every time he passes by. The machine is his nervous tick, a small vice he allows himself each day. He reaches for it almost obsessively and waits for it to give him a single, yellow card. Now he completes his ritual again, shoving the card in his pocket and making his way back to his office. When I turn back to the bar, I see that Saul has also been watching Miles. The action seems to trouble him, but he lets his confusion fall away. I wonder if Miles is superstitious. Certainly not a man like that, not a devil like him.

The folder Miles left taunts me out of the corner of my eye. I hesitate to open it, as if that makes it real and puts everything in motion. It's my Pandora's box—a plague that chases me to hell. I slide the folder over to me by its corner, like it might explode in my hands. Just as I pry it open, I hear a familiar whistling

come into the room. I shut the assignment and glance over my shoulder to see James practically strutting up to the bar. It's sick how much he enjoys this damn job. He throws a pair of shoes on the counter and pulls up a stool next to me. The tattered laces lay there lifeless, as lifeless as their owner is now, I suspect. To someone like James, death is art; it is symbolic, a representation of the artist. He believes a man is nobody if he doesn't have a signature. James collects shoes from his cuts. Just tacks them right on the wall above his bed. Everybody has their way of coping, I guess. He turns his bright, cheesy smile in my direction and says, "Man, Leo, you are looking beautiful tonight. A real catch." James moves around my face, looking at my mangled lip from all angles. "I'm assuming your date with the boss didn't go so well."

"Do they ever?" I push the folder farther away. I don't want him to find out how much I don't want another assignment.

"You're just not open to the experience," James says, craning his head to light a cigarette. "We could spend years rotting behind a desk just to pretend we're doing something that matters. But to take a life, that's really something. How many people have the guts to be there when someone takes their last breath? That's poetry, that's meaning. A thousand painters couldn't recreate what I've seen tonight."

I want him to think I agree. The alternative is admitting that sometimes I hesitate. It's been two years and I still think about letting people go. I'm not cut out for the job the way James is; I'm not an artist. I just give him a weak smile and nod my head as if nothing in the world could be truer. I try to avoid rumors about my shortcomings as an employee. Luckily, James has the attention span of a toddler, so he quickly starts talking about meaningless bullshit that I can tune out. Unfortunately, this leads him to ask about my assignment folder. "Just the next cut," I assure him.

James laces the shoes with a steady hand. They have to be perfect to be one of his trophies. He answers with his eyes still glued to them. "Well, where's the job?"

I figure information like that couldn't hurt. I flip open the folder and search for the location, but instead I'm drawn to the name. Vicki York. I've never been assigned a woman. Every cut I've ever seen come through here has been a man. The thought rots in my mind. I slam the folder shut, which startles James from his project. "What's the matter?"

"Have you ever been assigned a woman?" I don't really want discuss it with him, but it had knocked me on my ass.

James wrinkles his face in surprise. “Yeah, sure. It happens sometimes. Why?”

I hear Miles’ voice coming up behind me and I don’t want him to hear me talking to James about the job. I pour the rest of my drink in my mouth to avoid speaking to him. “Leo, are you ready to scout for your assignment?” When I turn, I see that Miles isn’t alone. A young kid, maybe seventeen, fidgets awkwardly next to him. “This is Adam. I want you to train him tonight.”

My face convulses in disgust. I never train new deliverers. I can barely get my own job done. “I wasn’t planning on going out tonight,” I say.

“Well start planning. I want scouting done on this cut today, or you can find another gig.” Miles lets the words settle for a minute before he adds, “I trust you’ll show him a good time.” He leaves the three of us alone so that he can collect another fortune.

Adam shoves his hands in and out of his pockets. He acts like an addict. I’m two years deep in this business; I know I can’t duck out and not expect repercussions. I can already imagine my interrogation room—sweaty cop, two-way mirror, and a confession that includes the phrase, “I didn’t mean it.” I’m screwed if I don’t scout this case. Defeated, I grab the folder and motion for the junkie to follow me outside.

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The cut works at Rocko’s, a twenty-four-hour diner on the other side of town. It’s about four; her shift should be almost over. For any other job, I would make note of how tired she’ll be. It makes someone less of a challenge. But right now, I’m hoping she called in sick. We slide into a booth at the back and a waitress with “Vick” on her nametag bounces back to us. “What can I get you boys?” She has shiny black hair that curls around the sides of her mouth, creating the illusion of dimples on her cheeks. She stares down at me with those eyes. I couldn’t hold her gaze for long, not when I knew what her eyes would look like in a few days.

I make up an order just to send her away. The kid speaks for the first time when she is out of earshot. “Is that her?” I nod. He continues, “When do we kill her?”

“Not tonight. We’re just scouting the case. Learning her habits.” Man this kid is green. He’s too eager.

Impatiently, he squeezes sugar packets between his dirty fingers until they bust, leaving white granules in a pile in front of him. This kid rubs me the wrong way; he looks unstable, like he’s ready to explode. Not that I have much room to talk. A few minutes pass and Vicki drops our food off at the table. We eat in silence,

watching her straighten up tables in the empty diner. We are the only customers, and I assume she and the cook are the only workers. The building is a quiet tomb. After several rounds of pushing food around the edges of his plate, Adam stands up and says he's going to find the bathroom. I'm glad to be rid of him.

As I shove a piece of bacon into my mouth, I hear a struggle in the kitchen. Shit. I know he's blowing it. I rush to the noise to see the cook running out the back and Vicki scrambling backwards on the floor. Adam is stabbing a gun in her direction. Her sobs echo in the room. "Shut up. Just shut up," he says as if he doesn't know what to do next.

"What are you doing? That's not how this works." I step forward to take the gun from him. He slinks away in horror, running into a shelf. A falling bowl distracts him during the commotion and the waitress takes the opportunity to run. Her movement panics him. He shoots. Her body thuds on the floor, still alive. Shit, Miles, at least send me someone who's a good shot. The kid runs out of the room, away from what he's done. Her body is pumping out blood like it's on tap. His bad shot hit her in the neck and I know there's nothing I can do. But I kneel next to her quivering form and place my hands around her neck like I'm holding her together. The slick blood runs over my hands, making them too hot, too guilty. We're both in shock, I think. I've never seen someone suffer; taking a cut should be quick. I should finish her, but selfishly I pretend to save her like some kind of twisted hero. I hold her until the life falls from her face and the pumping in her veins slows.

Self-conscious about my position, I peer out the kitchen window to see if the place is still empty. Thank God, it is. I walk back to our table to get the assignment folder. I wouldn't want anyone else to find it. My hands are shaking too hard to hold it, which causes a few pages to escape from the sides. As I pick up the forms, I notice one line. It is the organ we were supposed to be preserving—the hands. My stomach twists into a knot. Nothing about my world makes sense. Why the hell would Miles have a market for hands? I rush to the bathroom to lose a fifth of whiskey and my breakfast. I purge her memory from my body until my stomach crawls into my throat. I try to wash her blood from my hands, but I feel like it's seeping out of my pores. The water runs red onto the porcelain, funneling the coppery smell of her down the drain. I confront myself in the mirror. "This is over," I sniffle. "I can't do this anymore."

I page cleanup to take care of the mess, but the cook had gotten away, and an eye witness is pretty damn incriminating. I hate to admit I don't know how this will pan out. Since Adam ran off, the burden will probably fall on my shoulders. If given the opportunity, Miles will put the blame on me, there's no question.

The only thing I can think to do is flip the open sign to closed and hope no one shows up for breakfast. I force myself into my truck and drive back to work. Flashes of the waitress's face scatter throughout my mind. I make up scenarios about her life, her family. We had torn her away from that like careless gods.

By the time I get to the warehouse, my regret has turned to anger. Saul and James try to intervene when I barge into the bar and fling the folder at the wall. "Easy, now," James says. I flinch away from him. "You're getting sloppy, Leo." He gestures to my shirt to make light of the situation. It looks like abstract art—splotches of red that mean nothing except to the person who painted it. I cringe at my medium.

"Adam shot the cut. Three days early. Fucking shot her and missed. She bled out." I try to curb my anger, because there's no one here to blame.

The room is silent for a minute. James stares into his drink from the bottom of the glass. "Who's Adam?" The words take a long time to form in his mouth. He's already drunk.

"That kid that Miles brought for me to train. It was less than an hour ago."

His dull eyes brighten with understanding. "Oh, yeah. I liked him." He pours himself another drink, spilling most of it on the counter.

I can see he isn't going to be any help. Saul's face looks nervous under my gaze. "Why would Miles need hands? This cut's chart said hands, not an internal organ, hands. Why?"

Saul pulls his eyebrows together. "Not my job. I just unload and slice. That's it. What he does with the parts is his business."

James throws his hands up in protest. "What does it matter? You're still getting paid, right? Who cares if he's selling them, or making lamps, or eating them, for God's sake?"

"I can't keep doing this," I say under my breath. I decide to find Miles. I have to quit this job before it kills me.

I have never been in Miles' office. He always insists on meeting us at the bar, or in a public place. I check every room upstairs, most just storage, until I get to the last door. It is barely open, with a single strip of light bursting from the cracks around the frame. I can hear him talking in a hushed, excited tone. "Almost perfect now," he says, his voice like an overjoyed child. "We'll be together like before. You'll be so beautiful again, Allison." I push the door and let it swing open slowly. It is immediately apparent why none of us have ever seen his of-

fic. Four floor freezers line the walls, mismatched body parts litter the room, and the most disturbing sight—the head and torso of a dead girl, frozen and incomplete, lay on his desk. Thousands of yellow cards are sprinkled on the furniture around her and all over the carpet. Miles is hovering over her with a stitching needle, painstakingly sewing parts on and taking them off. Currently, she has one arm and one leg. He is working furiously to attach another leg as he notices me in the doorway. “Oh, Allison, we have company.” He coos to her like they are young lovers. “Isn’t she lovely, Leo?” I don’t respond. “So lovely,” he assures himself. “It’s going to work this time, you know? Madame Ava said so. I just had to find the right combination of parts... and here they are! I have been trying for so long.”

I pick up a nearby yellow fortune. It reads: “Follow your passion.” Another says: “You are close to success.” I search his face, almost sorry that I wasn’t talking to violent, level-headed Miles that likes using my face as a punching bag. This man is no side of him I have ever seen.

“See?” He gestures toward the fortunes I had read with his needle. “It has to work.” His voice cracks at the end as if he is trying to convince himself. “Has to,” he whispers. Miles continues to work, but each stitch is followed by a quiet sob.

“Sick son of a bitch,” I say, barely audible. He doesn’t notice. I pull the door closed and put some distance between me and the things behind it. His muffled voice mingles with the sound of sirens approaching outside—cackling, and mumbling, and sobbing for his dead cut.



After Reading Hélène Cixous on a Windy October Evening, the Female Poet Writes for Herself

Kelsey A. Solomon

I have burned the church door,
ignoring the faded hymns and shouts,
these warriors I have idolized
since I was thirteen.

There was the altar I feared, prayer upon
prayer of chicanery coagulating the flat music
of the organ. There I performed on stage
of oak and red velvet, on bended knee
and stinging carpet, an ignorant lamb,
a sacrifice of autonomy and speech.

The smoke hastens in blackening swirls
toward the clouds, emptied of tears,
a rough breath of peace
like sandpaper scraping away sap.

There by the door I laugh,
divest my breast and distend my hands,
to shatter the grip of deacons.
That day across the mountain, brothers and sisters,
you will find this little white church
sunken deep in the faith's grave.



Walking the Right Way: Coming to Terms with My Pentecostal Holiness Upbringing

Daniel Isaac Ratliff

“Come up here, young man,” said Don Rich, an old, white-haired evangelist from Oklahoma, as he gestured to the back of the large church where I was sitting. It was the sixth of August, 2013, about 8 o’clock in the evening, and I was sitting in the Tuesday night service of the Richlands Tabernacle’s 74th Annual Camp Meeting.

I wanted to believe that the words coming from the elder evangelist weren’t directed at me. Even as I write and recall his words I get a nervous lump in my chest. The term “young man,” at least in my experience, rarely ever carries a positive connotation; it is almost derogatory. It has always been said to me when I was in some sort of trouble. But was I in trouble here? I certainly wasn’t aware of it at the time, but in some people’s eyes, I was in grave trouble—my soul was doomed for hell, and I didn’t even know it. Or maybe I did know it, and I just didn’t care. Or maybe I didn’t know it but I did care. Maybe I both knew it and cared—you’d have to ask the people at the church that night. The full weight of the incident doesn’t lie in the night alone, however. What happened that night is more properly called a culmination.

Earlier that week, on Sunday, the fourth of August, I was at my home at the base of Appalachia’s Clinch Mountain deliberating over attending one of the camp meeting services. I remembered that, in years prior, the first Sunday in August (the official beginning of the annual Richlands Camp Meeting) had always been an exciting one for me; it had been one of my favorite weeks of the year. During the Sundays of previous camp meeting weeks, I would sit in the same mountain home and deliberate, not over whether or not I would attend—the fact that I would attend every service that I could was a given—but over what I would wear, whom would talk to, where I would sit. But now this week was no different than any other.

I had stopped going to church at the Richlands Tabernacle about two years earlier, but I had a long history at that place and with many of

those people, much of my family included. I had a real desire to attend—to see old friends and family and to entertain my nostalgia. But I had a troubled feeling about attending as well. I dreaded entering the backwards, retrogressive atmosphere most Holiness churches have—an atmosphere that often, at least for me, elicits a curious sadness. It is an atmosphere pungent with a blissful ignorance brought about by the Pentecostal Holiness belief that their people possess a kind of monopoly on the truth, that they have a heightened understanding of the mind of God over all other religions and even other Christian denominations. Their sense of privilege, particularly among Christians, is apparent in their sermons and testimonies in which they often condescendingly reference “the churches down the road” as being flippant and insincere. This ignorance is appalling to those who realize this is not true, and to me, it is saddening. But despite my dread for this kind of atmosphere, I made the less logical, more sentimental decision to attend that Tuesday night.

Maybe the decision was made out of a subconscious longing to cling to my roots. I had been raised, as suggested above, in the Pentecostal Holiness tradition in the rural town of Richlands situated in the Appalachian Mountains along the Upper Fork of the Clinch River. The small, Southwest Virginian town’s economic development is largely a result of the grueling manual labor of coal mining. Consequently, like many towns developed under similarly humble conditions, the community has carried with it a tradition of hard work, conservatism, and simplicity, a tradition out of which Holiness Pentecostalism was born and in which it continues to thrive.

The Holiness denomination is unique among Christian denominations. It is a type of fundamentalist Christian group, although completely independent with no formal organization. They are, however, somewhat unified informally through simple church fellowship, which allows for the large camp meetings held in many parts of the Appalachian Mountain region as well as the southern United States. This type of Christianity places heavy emphasis on a very specific dress code, but the standards and convictions go far beyond mere dress standards: watching television, playing video games, listening to anything except certain kinds of Christian music, and going to theme parks are all activities looked down upon by the Holiness church. Typically, the men wear long sleeves all the time, keep their hair short (by short, I mean very short—anything slightly touching the ears is unacceptable), and don’t grow beards. The women wear skirts, never cut their hair, and wear no jewelry or makeup. I know it’s not strange to see a man who keeps his hair short or a woman who doesn’t wear makeup. However, the peculiarity is seen in the fact that this is all done out of religious conviction; furthermore, if one were to break these rules—if, for

example, a woman wore makeup or a man grew his hair long—by Holiness standards, that individual would be committing sin in rebellion before a wrathful God. This ideology frames Salvation in such a way that it is seen as a light switch. It causes one to see Salvation as something that can be turned off and on by a single action or thought. But what is really detrimental to the individual is the condescension, the assumptions about one's character, and the shameless ostracism inherent in this ideology.

The ostracism I speak of here is a peculiar kind that mostly only occurs when one completely rejects Holiness ideology. Holiness people do not necessarily shun you when you leave their church; their methods are more passive-aggressive. They make you aware that you no longer match their standard for being “saved” (going to Heaven). For example, when I left the Holiness church, despite the fact that I was regularly and openly attending services at another local, non-Holiness church, one of my old Holiness friends would often invite me to his Holiness church whenever he saw me. “Hey, Isaac, are you busy this week? We'd love to see you at church,” he would say. It was his way of saying that the church I was currently attending was not sufficient, that only those at the Holiness church had access to spiritual truths.

Because of these standards and the constant fear of turning off the light switch of Salvation, being Holiness, even while conforming, is characterized by perpetual guilt, and I understood this reality very well. My Holiness upbringing had caused me to be very familiar with guilt, even after I had left. I had seen how being subject to this ideology had given me issues with both my confidence as a person and my spirituality. Still, my whimsical desire to attend camp meeting again overrode the obvious reasons to stay away.

Before I tell you about what happened when I visited, it is important that I establish another critical foundation. That is the grand reputation of the Richlands Tabernacle Camp Meeting. It is one of the largest camp meetings in the Holiness movement. Like the others, it is a weeklong gathering with church services happening all day and food after every service. In its prime from the mid 1970's through the mid 1990's, the Richlands Tabernacle Camp Meeting would often have over 1,000 people attend the weeklong event. Holiness people attend this gathering from Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, Florida, Ohio, West Virginia, Tennessee, and many other states. Each event happens to be, for many Holiness people, one of the only times all year that they socialize with other likeminded people outside of their own church. For them, it is as much socially edifying as it is spiritually edifying. It is a time when all of the “in” people, that is the people who are “living right” and “going to Heaven,” can fellowship with each other in a circle usually untainted by “out” people. I, however, being an “out” person,

with my hair long, my music collection mostly secular, and my face sporting its best imitation of a beard, happened to be in attendance that Tuesday night. The meeting's attendance was down from its glory days, but there was still a rather large crowd of about 650 people there. My knowledge of this intense social aspect only added to my embarrassment when the confrontation occurred.

I had asked Autumn and Cody, my then-girlfriend and close friend, respectively, to come with me to attend the church service. They went to church with me at an Assembly of God church in town and were generally unfamiliar with the Pentecostal Holiness denomination. We arrived at the church on Tuesday evening about ten minutes early. Because the church parking lot was full, we had to drive down the alleyway that leads to the fellowship hall and park there. I was nervous as we walked back up the alleyway to the front of the church. It had been a long time since my last visit. I was comforted by the fact that Autumn and Cody had been supportive enough to come with me but noted to them that they actually looked much more "Holiness" than did I, which did not help disguise my longer hair and facial hair.

I think Autumn and Cody were excited to see what the camp meeting was like. These meetings have a reputation of getting wild—people jumping up and down, running on the backs of the pews, speaking in tongues. When 650 hyperemotional people gather for a time of hyperemotional worship, it is a peculiar, albeit entertaining, experience. It is not unusual to see men race out of their pews to the nearest aisle in order to run around the building in worship; it is commonplace for women, seemingly in a trance, to break into a dance with enough force to displace the pews in which they were sitting. But that was nothing out of the ordinary for me. In fact, it was all I had ever known church to be.

We were greeted very generously as we walked through the doors of the church.

"Isaac! It's good to see you, buddy," said my old Sunday school teacher, Dale. He was always kind to me, and for that I had always had a fondness of him.

"Hey, Dale, it's good to see you too," I said with a handshake-turned-hug and introduced him to my friends.

Before we settled into the church, we encountered the man whom I later identified as Don Rich. He had a medium build, a rather round figure, and an unmistakable head of slicked back, snow-white hair. He, too, greeted us very kindly.

"Hello, young man. Good to see you tonight," he said. He then very intentionally asked me, "What's your name, son?"

"Isaac," I told him, and he went on his way after another cordial exchange. This seemed at first to be a kind gesture; I then realized that this kind reception was

most likely due to his perception of me as an “out” person. And he wasn’t the only one who had this perception. Despite some kind greetings, I was not naïve to the awkward tension that my being there was causing. People, mostly out-of-towners who didn’t know me, would walk by the back of the church and cast nonchalant, curious looks at me. Others I had known fairly well were awkward in their short conversations with me. This, of course, was not entirely surprising, and I’m certain the awkwardness was mutual. But the discomfort I gleaned from certain conversations with familiar people seemed to indicate a desire for separation. “Glad you’re here with us,” one old friend said to me. I couldn’t help but notice his exclusive wording; although I knew him and a large number of the people there, I was clearly not a part of this “us.” This seemed to be his attempt to distance himself from our previous friendship, and I recognized this subtlety immediately. After a few more clumsy conversations, Autumn, Cody, and I found a seat in the back of the church on the far right side and waited for the service to begin.

The service was just as I had remembered it. They still sang the same songs. There was one particular favorite of theirs, “Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound,” that I often still think about. I find the song to be quite odd because it is not, as it may appear from the title, the famous song by John Newton, “Amazing Grace”; rather, it is a song *about* the famous song by John Newton. I had always been curious as to the point of singing a song about another song in worship. And, as I sat through the service, I realized I was curious as to the point of many of their conventions—shouting in tongues while praying for others, sprinting around the church in worship, the chaotic mosh pits that inevitably formed towards the front of the building during the “altar call” (the response after the sermon). Although these things were once my standard for the proceedings of a church service, they were now foreign to me.

After the congregational singing, the special singing, and the choir singing, it was time for the preacher to preach, and Don Rich stepped up to pulpit to do just that. I would be lying if I told you I remember exactly what the sermon was about. I do not. I’m not sure if the blame lies with me or if the blame lies with the Holiness preaching propensity for flamboyant shallowness. But because many Holiness sermons seem to be ultimately the same, I can say with relative certainty that the sermon was about one of two things—“getting the Holy Ghost” (speaking in tongues) or “getting saved” (becoming a Christian). Considering what transpired during the “response” part of the message, I’m guessing it was the latter.

“Would everyone please stand?” asked Don Rich. These words had always roused me from my sermon-induced daydreams. “And would everyone bow

their heads and close their eyes?” Don Rich continued. “Church, I feel like there is someone in here who needs to come pray.” I immediately became tense. I knew what was about to happen. This member of the “out” crowd was about to be rebuked in front of everyone. There was an intense, thick tension permeating the large building.

“Come up here, young man,” he said, finally, after a couple of minutes of referencing me indirectly. I hunkered down slightly as to escape his gaze, hoping frivolously that he was talking to another “young man.”

“You can’t hide, young man,” Don Rich cried from the pulpit. That’s when I knew for sure he was talking to me. I kept my eyes closed and head bowed. I thought about leaving but wasn’t sure if that would be a good idea. I didn’t want to cause a scene or feel guilty after the fact. However, to my surprise, I didn’t feel guilty in that moment. I felt embarrassed and angry, but not guilty.

“I don’t want to have to come back there,” Don persisted. He was probably over fifty yards away from me on the stage of the large building, but he seemed to be suggesting that he was going to come to me if I continued to ignore his prompting. By that point, all 1,300 eyes in the building had turned back to see me, the person to whom Don was so indiscreetly speaking. I knew I had only one choice. I turned to Cody and Autumn and said, “I think I’m going to leave.”

“What do you mean?” Cody asked.

“I mean that I’m walking out right now. Are you all going to come with me?”

“Of course we’ll come with you,” assured Autumn.

I began to walk out. Because I was sitting three seats from the aisle and about fifty feet from the big double doors that lead outside, my exit was not a quick one. I realize in retrospect that when I first began to exit the pew, it was unclear whether I was heeding to his call to come pray or leaving the building. There were cries of approval and support as I stepped out of the pew because several people thought I was indeed going to the front to pray. But I wasn’t. Instead, I made the almost ten-second walk towards the double doors, opening them both upon my exit with Autumn and Cody close behind. As I walked out the doors I heard Don Rich shout the words, “No! You’re going the wrong way, young man!” But I knew that by walking out of that building I was going the right way.

Before that night, despite the fact that I had left the Holiness movement years before, I was still bounded by its legalism. I was still subject to guilt when anyone would talk about why my hair being long was wrong in God’s eyes or when anyone would try to hold me to other facets of the movement’s religious stan-

dards. This instance, however, was different. I didn't feel that way. Of course, as I said, I felt embarrassed, but those feelings of humiliation never progressed into guilt. Instead, I felt a liberty that brought me to terms with God and with myself. I knew my salvation was not a light switch to be turned on and off based on what I wore or how long my hair was; it was not a condition to be determined by a man with a microphone. It was a condition to be graciously sustained by God in spite of even genuine mistakes. This newfound liberty allowed me to walk guiltless out of the building in which I had shuddered in fear many times at similar refrains by similar men. That is why what occurred that night was a culmination and triumph for me. It represented my new realization of God, my new perspective on spirituality, and the end of my perpetual guilt.



Broken Handle, Digging Trench in Unicoi, TN

Raleigh Cody

The limestone refused to give,
save for the slip and crack as rock
shot up from the hole. My shovel fell
in two pieces, my hand splintered and raw.
Chunks of rock and the halved
shovel lay strewn around the hole
like leftover straw spread sparse
in the new growth of last season's
seeding. The wood and its imperfections
still felt familiar to these calluses,
but foreign, now that its weight
and certainty are gone—
like a pen that has run its course,
its ink dried up. I gathered the debris,
and it all fell weightless like leaves
into the wheelbarrow. My hand still buzzes
from the concussive crack, each pulse
a fading reminder of what my hands have done.



Chopin Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2

Mary Emily Vatt

Her mistakes never bothered me
as she stumbled through faded sheets
of music. That night, I felt dull
vibrations from the room below so
softly with my hand while I stretched
onto my bedroom floor.

I was sixteen then, and rarely spoke
truth to her whose slender
feet pressed the pedals, causing the sound
to swell and subside. I
crept downstairs to watch her thin fingers
and wished to know her better.

Sometimes, notes of that melody
escape from me, honest and
unexpected, like the hushed kiss
I gave to her when the bright
sounds from the black piano grew faint.



Thunder and Nursery Rhymes

Danielle Byington

Mary Fleisch's name was synonymous with happiness, though she wasn't very happy. But, she wasn't sad, either. She was comfortably apathetic, in the stinging way that most sixteen year-olds are, or, at least pretend to be. She did feel things: excitement, anger, or whatever else may be suckling her pulse at any given moment. But, if you've ever been sixteen, or a girl—at any age—you know how awkward it can be if you decide you would like to breathe.

Looking at her, Mary should have been happy about how lucky she was to be Mary. She excelled with her academic smarts; however, knowing more than other people can be isolating. Being on the quiet side, most people knew Mary for how poisonously attractive she was, like a modern maiden blithely existing as the fairest one of all. The perfection of her presence turned Pi into a finite number, and no matter where the bright blue of her irises peered, she never quite looked you in the eye. You might, just barely, catch Mary gazing at you during conversation, but, now she only gazed absently at the ceiling above the coroner's table.

Her father had returned early in the morning from a standard business venture, discovering his daughter's limp body in the backyard just a few feet away from the patio. Her nightshirt was damp and reddened with blood and sticky, jelly-like slime. Hours of jetlag didn't stop him from the procedure of trying to reanimate his only child. 9-1-1. CPR. Tears and prayers that excreted the glasses of iced scotch he had downed before noticing his daughter wasn't in her bed at about 7:00 a.m. He rode in the passenger seat of the ambulance, sobbing all the way to the hospital. Mary's father, George, caught his breath only when he tried to leave his wife voicemails over and over again on the nine minute drive.

Mary's pretty body was declared dead on arrival. George slid onto the floor between his wails of hysteria like the news shocked him all

over for a second time. The nurses gathered their information for paperwork like clockwork, and the deceased's address caused some shifting eyes to act like they knew nothing. Mercury Hills was a regal neighborhood you'd expect to be gated, and the colossal house her parents chose to move into seven years ago was sandwiched beside of other home owners with appropriate conservative standards. Well, not really, but neighborhoods like this are made for people who pretend. It was movie-like territory: pristine, flawless, and of course, enchantingly deceptive. Her parents were rather protective, something Mary acted fussy about among her small circle of acquaintances, but the shroud they nailed on her seemed to be exactly what she wanted. They were frequently out of town, stereotypically successful with their individual matters of business, and Mary had bountiful opportunity for social escapism. Yet, she kept the doors locked, doing who knows what in the glory of her solitude.

To the left of the Fleisches lived Henry Dumphrey. He undoubtedly had money, an entrepreneur in the surgical tools industry, but the right type of online search easily revealed his federal title as a sex offender. Dr. Dumphrey had suffered a great fall a few years ago, and now he walked as though part leper, a physical quality that did not soothe his creepy presence. His bad knees had just enough strength to hold his lopsided beer-gut figure by his glass door so that his breath created a fog as he watched Mary ride her bicycle up the hill in front of his cobble stone house. Living that close to the backyard where a dead body is found makes it difficult to avoid conversations with investigators. Despite his reputation, Dr. Dumphrey's information actually checked-out, although he had commented on noticing Mary's silhouette laying in the grass at dawn when he had gone outside to smoke a cigarette,

"I was just admiring a pretty girl. Never crossed my mind that she was dead."

"Didn't you question why Mary Fleisch would be lying in her backyard at dawn?"

"I just figured that may be she finally had some fun."

Henry Dumphrey kept his face straight, silently disturbed by the fact that he had been aroused by the slim, pale legs exposed beneath that crimped night-shirt. And, they had been the legs of a corpse.

To the right of the Fleisches was the Hubbard family, Will and Anita, a veterinarian and a gastroenterologist, respectively. Their circumstances were peculiar, with seemingly too much income to have so little. They owned one car, and the large windows of their three-story home revealed a rather bare interior in which their ribcage-thin dog could be seen pacing around. Mary had gone to school with their son until he disappeared two years ago. They had told the police how sure they were that he ran away to New York City. Drugs. And drug

money. They almost didn't get away with it. They were out of town more and more often these days, and were of course no help to Mary's case.

Behind the Fleisches lived Ursula Wolfe. Not a single citizen of Mercury Hills knew her, but they had her pegged as a modern-day Wife of Bath with a fleet of red convertibles parked in her circular drive-way, and a much younger fellow living with her whom everyone somehow knew, or wanted to believe, was a mail-ordered groom. Ms. Wolfe's home was easily the stateliest residence in the neighborhood, undoubtedly blowing down the competition of smaller seven-bedroom houses that surrounded it. Its interior was surely lavish as well, but no one would ever know since the witchy old lady kept to herself.

Mary's father sometimes referred to Ms. Wolfe as "Nessie" after once noticing the woman's head occasionally popping above her rosebushes as she pruned them—at three in the morning—to carefully retain their labyrinth shape. The connected backyards were separated by a white brick wall which rose to Mary's chin—a well-measured height Mary knew for the times she had rested her wondering head on its ledge, watching her cat, Kali, as it jumped over the brick wall and prowled through Ms. Wolfe's garden. On a number of occasions, Mary tried to discern the pattern of the rosebush maze, intrigued at Kali's ease in navigating through the passages. It was as though she knew what she was doing.

While none of these people were desirable products from the cookie-cutter, the less exposed and seemingly average families of Mercury Hills seemed to enjoy the rude sparkle of what they felt was gross society. Probably because the guilty's edges were softened by the amount of money in their bank accounts, and, surely, everyone could be a little more cocky with dirty people living next door. The nurses and doctors knew the Mercury Hills dirt the same way they knew how to pass a drug test, doing their typical soothsaying about the verdict of death as they prepared to have Mary's corpse wheeled downstairs for the coroner.

"Twenty bucks says rich-bitch-suicide."

"Too easy. Pretty girl plus blood in Mercury Hills is way more Sherlock. That's like trying to make a wedding cake in an Easy-Bake Oven."

Over the years, Mary had heard her classmates gossiping about the neighborhood in the halls, when she usually had her head unreasonably far into her locker hunting for books she knew how to find. She never had any comments to share about the gossip, mostly because she was grateful that she and her awkwardness were not the study hall topic. But, as one might imagine, it was difficult for the short-sightedness of puberty to dismiss discussion of her. When

there was nothing outstanding to ramble about between classes, a group of prime private school boy types lightly teased Mary,

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?”

Smirking at their obnoxious boredom, she walked faster towards her destination to escape confrontation. Their hormones forced them onward, until they fulfilled their boredom and Mary was in the security of a classroom,

“Mary had a little lamb...”

Each of the three young men stood suddenly quieted, secretly wishing they had asked for her number, instead.

But now, classes were only fragments of tasks Mary’s mind was free from on summer break, as her body lay divided like a sewing project on the coroner’s table. The crown of her scalp was ruddy with an irritation reminiscent of a fresh burn. The same damage appeared to jigsaw down from the cerebellum to her spinal cord with lesions of inflammation that ceased at her pelvis. Traces of this linear trauma were also apparent across her thin shoulders, sprinkled like red poppies that grew as far down as her wrists.

The air outside was abominably hot, making even the smallest insects burrow in water spouts for relief. Mary wasn’t very good at sleeping in late, hovering about her parents’ house around six in the morning. Before the Hubbard’s son had disappeared, he eagerly told his friends fictional stories about what his imagination had seen Mary doing in her room with the blinds up. Remarking on Mary’s attempt to make unattended toast in the oven, he one day told them,

“The freak can’t cook.”

The charred bread had set off two smoke detectors, and their banshee pitches caught the attention of next-door neighbors. They had sincere worries that Mary herself would burn alive in the gigantic house, assuming she was deeply in slumber like the rest of her peers who laid cocooned in down comforters throughout the neighborhood before sunrise. Mary had answered the door when Dr. Hubbard was beating its frame with his fist during the burned toast incident, cracking it only enough to say she was fine, forcing an ‘oops’ smile, and never looking him in the eye.

The rest of her peers surely wallowed in the absence of academic responsibility now that summer had taken siege of the Mercury Hills landscape, but Mary was typically restless, and needed something worth searching for: to find things, to do things. Besides wandering about her huge house aimlessly while her parents were gone, Mary was seen riding her bike, not just often, but religiously. Her

father was an engineer with tastes for fancy mechanics, and had gifted her a high-end cruiser bicycle, equipped with a simple number of speeds to provide ease for Mary's fair calves to pedal the supple hills of the neighborhood.

When George and Anna Fleisch were signing important things miles upon miles away, Mary allowed herself to be carried away on that bike. Its bright ivory frame matched her curiosity, ready to follow white rabbits wherever they may go. Her father had purchased the bike from a co-worker whose daughter had been sixteen once, but too cool to ride it about the neighborhood. Mary was shy, but she also didn't have anyone to impress. She gripped its handle bars as both passenger and pilot, cruising the pretzel-like streets of Mercury Hills. Her long amber hair was pushed behind her shoulders by the wind she created by pedaling faster and faster, and it would fall forward again when she crimped her brakes against the spinning tires. This was the only time neighbors even knew that Mary was alive.

She typically began with circles around the spread of her driveway, teasing her cat, Kali, by grazing its head with her out-held foot as she passed by on the saddle of her pale steed. The cat wouldn't budge, knowing exactly how far Mary would roll by, as its spread of calico fur absorbed the warmth of the sun-Christened driveway. Kali was to remain indoors, as Mary's parents demanded, since she so frequently returned with dead baby animals on the doorstep. Mary saw the depression in the cat's face when it was locked-up inside and started letting it outside when she rode her bike. Girl and beast had an unspoken pact: Kali returned before bedtime, prissy-stepping into the den to bathe her face as though someone might notice how she had devoured every second of outside pleasures.

It was now mid-June, and Mary had awoken at her typical 6:00 a.m. hour. She squandered time briefly, stretching beneath the covers carefully so as not to spawn a cramp in her calves, finally getting up and out of the bed. The gentle hum of air conditioning was currently slumbering, waiting on the harshest rays of sun to turn Mercury Hills into a destination for Dante. While the weather would surely not hesitate to spew its rising heat, the sunrise was currently smothered by thick clouds, pregnant with a spectrum of grays. Mary focused on her breakfast, specifically to not burn *anything*, as it could call unwanted attention. It also tasted better this way.

After eating, Mary began tending to minor chores that would be checked early the next morning when her father was due to return from Boston. The tasks were small, conventional treatments most teenagers would be assigned to under their parents' roof. Sweep, mop, vacuum: a generic Cinderella square dance. Mary took her time, not rushed with her list, and Kali emerged from hiding

an hour after the vacuum cleaner had been used upstairs and down. The cat wallowed its fluffy body between the glass of the dining room window and its blinds. Mary got the hint, and by two o'clock, the girl and cat headed for outside.

As soon as Mary held the door open, the cat did its vanishing act, and Mary followed, walking her bike onto the driveway. She left the door unlocked, knowing she would not spend much time out and about, feeling invincible among the secrets she knew about the neighborhood. She had a routine. Around the left loop of the pretzel where her house was located, then, accelerated by the downhill ride, she shot through the right loop, and then through the street's outlet. This street intersected with another, littered with non-frugal homes that Mary breezed by, turning left down a street that led into the parts of Mercury Hills with houses that had been in their gestational period for a couple of years. Mary liked riding her bike by them, knowing that no one was looking out of the windows at her.

Mary's need to feel life hitting her face in the wind she created was met when she felt the first sparse pricks of rain clip at her skin. She felt a headache coming on, and was ready to return home, anyhow. Pedaling gently so she would not strain the subtle pounding that grew in her head, she coasted through the moist air, passing by the vacant homes one last time. She gained speed, and as she glided through the straight pass, Mary veered her bike to the right, bumping up and over the curb, driving her way through a small patch of woods that would allow her to emerge at the boundary of her backyard. It was probably five minutes faster, Mary thought, as she risked being kissed by poison ivy and ticks, listening to the first solid clap of thunder that seemed to unzip more rain.

As Mary broke through the wooded property, she could see Kali stalking through the backyard carrying something in her mouth. As Mary rode closer to the cat, she stepped from the bike and approached Kali with a gentle kindness in hopes of taking the small black rabbit from her jaw. The cat perked up its head and tail, and strutted with its dampening fur to Mary, proudly dropping its kill on the ground. Mary reached down, pinching up the dead animal with as little contact as possible, turning towards the woods to toss the evidence. But, Mary realized that she couldn't feel herself gripping the rabbit, or stepping across the ground. Her ears rang, shutting into an unnatural silence. Her skin burned, especially down her spine, as though flames reserved for the damned poured over her. The bolt of lightning that briefly thrust itself from the sky finally ended its intercourse with Mary's body.

The searing pain in her head awakened Mary, dizzying her perspective of the clouded sky and its rain drops that were beating her face as she lay on the

ground in her backyard. What felt like a few minutes was likely only seconds, as Mary's heart began to race faster when she rolled onto her side to vomit. She pressed her palm into the wet grass to raise her helpless self away from the bile, holding her face to the earth in the expectation of another heave. She brought herself to her knees, looking at the back patio door that she knew she needed to enter. The mile her body slurred across the grass to the door was only fifty feet, but she dug out the spare key from a neighboring flower pot, unlocking it to needed shelter. Weakened and wiping wet strings of hair from her face, she grabbed a water bottle from the fridge and weaved up the stairs to her room, collapsing into her bed with illness. She immediately fell asleep, dreamless and damp with the chaos that had stricken her existence.

Mary opened her eyes, her face chilled by the air conditioner-blessed pillow, and she reluctantly recalled how she had gotten there. She shifted her body to see the time on her alarm clock: 5:27 a.m. She had slept for roughly twelve hours, and her body craved fluids after the backyard trauma. Mary excused the event on terms of a stomach bug, that debilitating type that breeds havoc for a day or so. She posed on each stair step with a crippled anguish and finally made it to the kitchen for more water. She sipped lightly on the bottle's brim, still lacking trust in the uncomfortable bloat of her stomach. She had changed into an oversized nightshirt, its thinness allowing her over-heated body to breathe. Her father would be home in a couple of hours, and he could nurse her as needed. But, everything felt heavy in her body. The weight of the water bottle was despicable. She curled her hand about her usually narrow abdomen as it pudged with irritation.

Thinking fresh air might ease her queasiness, Mary stepped out of the sliding patio door she had entered the previous evening. The sound of its sliding frame wasn't quiet enough to hide from Kali, who bounded inside, still wet with rain. Mary didn't have the energy to stop the cat, and slid the door closed behind her as she examined the rain drops that glistened upon the patio furniture, hoping to find a spot dry enough so that she could sit down as soon as possible. As she meandered to a corner of the patio, a motion sensor ignited the flood lights on one side of the house, creating thick shadows behind the table and chairs. She held her bottom upon the driest edge of a green iron chair, breathing in the humid summer morning. The sun had only begun to consider rising, not even casting enough light for neighbors to disturb her solace with their eyes. Mary faced the distant white brick walls, and petted the water bottle's brim with her lips. Swallowing drops of chilled beverage, her placid discomfort was interrupted by a metallic screech at the boundary of the yard. The iron gate that allowed entrance through the white brick wall drifted open, nearly invisible at the boundaries of the exterior lighting.

Mary's unsteady heartbeat began to thud with the surprise of the petite woman walking mechanically through the open gate. Ms. Wolfe's stride seemed to avoid mashing the grass beneath her feet, but no one would know if she did beneath her long Victorian skirt. The old woman's lengthy hair lay stiffly down the front and back and of her body, uneven like clumps of ashy wool, and it did not so much as shift with her determined stride. Mary thought of darting inside, but instead of feeling threatened, she felt a need to stay with the old lady who had stopped about fifteen feet from the patio. Ms. Wolfe simply smiled with her lips at Mary, remaining on the infinite breach of speaking a word or six. Mary didn't know if she should greet the old woman with speech, curtsy, or just shake her hand. So, the young girl, swollen with pain, waddled with what energy she had to Ms. Wolfe.

When Mary was three feet away from her, she paused, certain that she was close enough, and, perhaps, too close. She noticed that the old lady gripped a circlet of red roses from her garden, their stems carefully woven to hug one another by their thorns. Mary stood before her, silent, and Ms. Wolfe lifted the round floral piece, resting it upon Mary's head like a crown. Mary couldn't move. She didn't want to move. A burning pain in Mary's belly made her expel a whimper as she sought to slouch, until her fragile frame was grasped by Ms. Wolfe who cradled the young girl's shoulders with her withered palms. The old woman spoke so quietly that Mary could not discern her words, only detect an accent that, perhaps, she had only imagined. Ms. Wolfe's language, though indecipherable, felt warm. A savage jolt reminded Mary's body it was not well.

Mary's consciousness felt surreal, perceiving, but not feeling, and what should have been pain drifted through her mind as exclamation points. Her pale knees began to bend beneath the nightshirt, and Mary felt Ms. Wolfe's fingertips dig into her shoulders not to let her go. Mary's thighs quivered with pressure, and she felt a moist bubble growing outside of her body. It pressed against her legs, its wetness saturating the hem of her nightshirt. Enveloped in a time and place she could not see, a scream nestled in Mary's throat, unable to be born. Her ears noticed the splash of fleshy moisture hitting the grass, and she felt horrifically relieved.

The result of the nativity released a nasal grunt, and scraped the earth irresponsibly with its hooves. Attempting to stand, the lamb wailed with confusion of this world. Ursula Wolfe collected the animal in its white, gooey fleece, cradling it with a nurturing pretension, and wiped the placental jellies from its seeking snout. Mary had fallen to the ground, no longer needed. First glimpsed at by the silence of the rising sun, the sixteen-year-old body grew cold on the soggy grass. Her father opened the patio door an hour later.



Judges' Biographies

Jon Sealy

Jon Sealy is a South Carolina native and author of *The Whiskey Baron*, which the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* said reads like “what you’d get if Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner co-wrote the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire* while on an especially inspired, existentially tinged bender.” His stories have been published in *The Normal School*, *PANK*, *Still*, and *The Sun*, among other places.

Jennifer McGaha

A memoirist, essayist, and humorist, Jennifer lives with her husband, five dogs, twenty-three chickens, herd of milk goats, collection of bee hives, and one high-maintenance cat on fifty-three wooded acres in western North Carolina. Her work has appeared in *PANK*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Baltimore Fishbowl*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *The Brooklynier*, *Now and Then*, *Switchback*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Lumina*, and dozens of other publications. She is also a regular contributor to *The Huffington Post*.

Charlotte Pence

Charlotte Pence is the author of the recently released *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, January 2015), *The Branches, the Axe, the Missing* (Black River chapbook prize winner, 2012) and *Weaves a Clear Night* (Flying Trout Press Chapbook winner, 2011). A professor of English and creative writing at Eastern Illinois University, Pence also edited *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012). Awards include the Discovered Voices prize, multiple Pushcart nominations, and the New Millennium Writing award. New poetry has recently been published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *North American Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

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