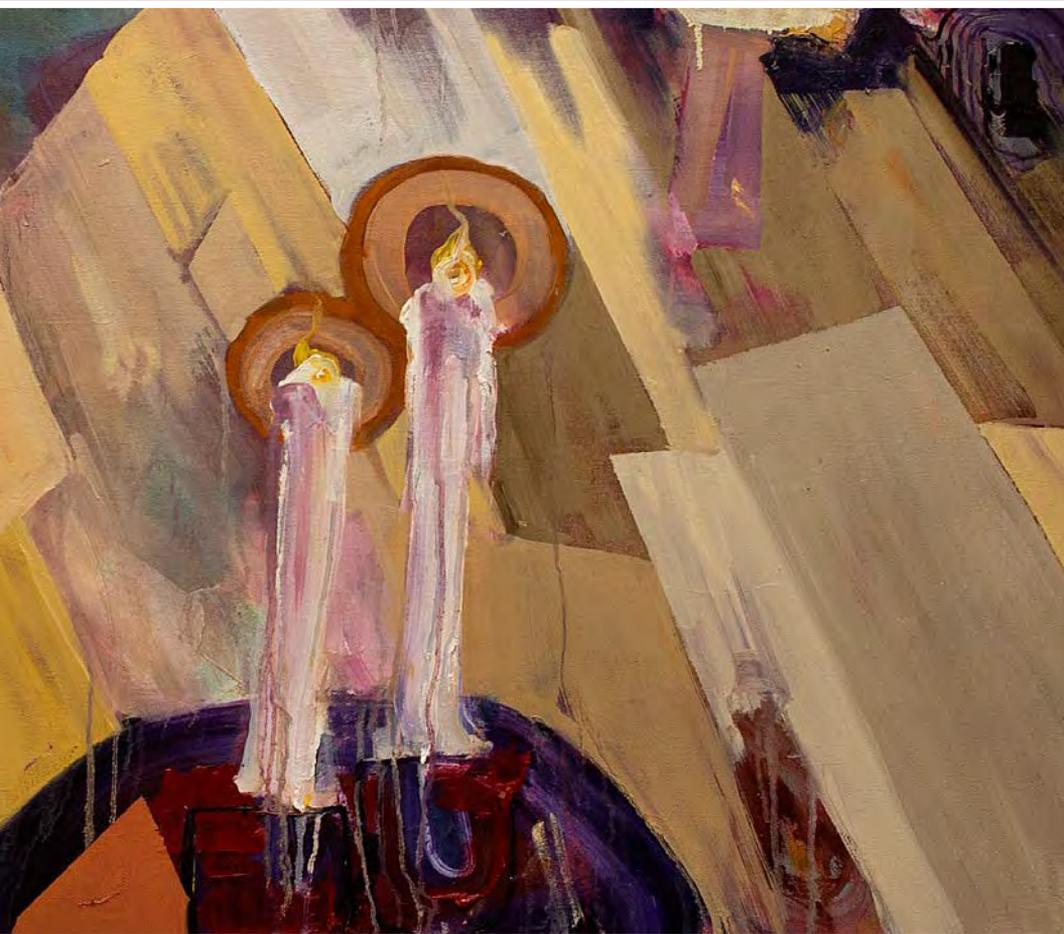


The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University





EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

The Mockingbird 2019

The cover image is a detail from *I'll Have the Steak* by Hannah Oakes.

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The Mockingbird

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of East Tennessee State University

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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 Office of University Relations and, particularly, Ms. Jeanette Henry, our designer. Thank you all for sustaining this project.

Table of Contents

9	Editor's Note
11	The Rebuff of Discovery – Kayla Ireson
12	The Grey Hawk – Micah McCrotty
13	Cartography – Micah McCrotty
14	She Goes, By and By – Emma Owens
15	Ella Va, Poco a Poco – Emma Owens (Traducido por Hannah Burgess, Kayla Parker, Katlyn Rivera, and Debon Waldroff)
16	A Goddess's Hysteria – Amber Rookstool
17	Shaking Ground – Amber Rookstool
18	Tierra Temblorosa – Amber Rookstool (Traducido por Hannah Burgess, Kayla Parker, Katlyn Rivera, and Debon Waldroff)
19	Cat Scratches – Amber Rookstool
20	An Conversation With Tamara Baxter
33	Waffle House – Sam Campbell Winner of the Fiction Prize
40	Three Seconds – Dayton Sheffield Winner of Non-Fiction Prize
46	Wearing Hajib in London: The Tale of a Bond Formed Abroad – Megan Cruicy
50	Communication – Elizabeth Chapman
51	<i>Untitled (Blue quilt)</i> – Raina Nief
52	<i>Eve'N Adam</i> – Amber Howard Drawing Juror's Choice
53	<i>Untitled (bag with rifle)</i> – Lizzy Rees

- 54 *Jungle Fever* – Olivia Ellis
- 55 *Juliana* – Zoey Thomas
- 56 *I'll Have the Steak* – Hannah Oakes
- 57 *Better to be Pissed Off, Than to be Pissed On* –
Brynne Carlisle
Graphic Design Juror's Choice
- 58 *.06 Inches* - Abby Lewis
- 60 *Sentries of the Cemetery* – Abby Lewis
- 62 *Paralysis Under Popcorn Ceilings* – Dillon McCroskey
- 63 *The Sound of Color* – Jessica Dunker
- 71 *Heart Pine* – Lacy Snapp Winner of Poetry Prize
- 73 *Red Oak* – Lacy Snapp
- 75 *Roble Rojo* – Lacy Snapp
(Seccion 1: Traducido por Kristen Bennett, Ashley
Arthur, Garrett Barker, Kayla Hodan, Rebekah Fine)
(Seccion 2: Traducido por Colin Yarid, Maegan Lewis,
Lexie Stout, Kristofer Cochra)
- 77 *Measures of Necessity* – Nancy Jane Earnest
- 79 *Conjuring* – Nancy Jane Earnest
- 80 *Lines Held in Husk* – Rieppe Moore
- 82 *Kindle Gathering* – Rieppe Moore
- 84 *Earthworm Exodus* – Emily Price
- 85 *Greenville, TN* – Emily Price
- 86 *Styrofoam* – Emily Price
- 87 *A Bookish Love* – Lia Hall
- 88 *Nightwatchers* – Sam Campbell
- 99 *Over the Shoulder of the Moon* – Abby Lewis
- 107 *Judges Biographies*

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2019



Editor's Note

Matthew LA Gilbert

Artists often attempt to define themselves through specialized titles – poet, novelist, painter, photographer – seeking to assert their voices or visions into a world where often art and the individual have fallen out of favor. What readers, and often writers themselves, forget is that artists are, first and foremost, observers of the world, creators who capture the experiences around them, internalize them, then produce beauty through their awareness. These creations form from universal experience interpreted by individuals longing the have their stories heard. Between the covers of this volume, artists construct works of the individual and the collective, leaving fingerprints along the way. Their voices carry from one work to the next, transcending language, genre, and medium with an energy meant to tear down walls.

From humility found through international exploration in Megan Cruey's "Wearing a Hajib in London" to the disintegration of language barriers in Elizabeth Chapman's "Communication" to the longing for warmth in Nancy Jane Earnest's "Measures of Necessity," this volume seeks inclusion and universal awareness through art. These selections of student work are the footprints of artists who inscribe themselves in the experience of East Tennessee State University. They represent the stories and voices of a collected artistic expression created by hands blistered with history. For the cover of this issue, Hannah Oakes's work demonstrates the price and unity of art. Artists – like the twin candles – set side by side, burning and transforming the world around them. Oakes's work invites the audience to sift through the shadows of the mind much like the other works throughout this volume. It speaks to the exploration and synthesis of forms and color, pen and brush, and the unknown that the artist works so hard to illuminate. Like the flame burning down the wick of the candle, so too will these artists' works burn through us.

I'd like to take a moment to thank my reading committee – Brooke Johnson, Abby Lewis, Amanda McNally, Sam Campbell, Harley Mercadal, Maggie Gregg, Amber Rookstool, Halley Diehl, Karissa Doughty, Jillian Bailey, and Amanda Sawyers – for taking the time to finely comb through our submissions and choose the best pieces of literature for

publication. The work of a number of these readers is also represented here (no students read for any category to which they submitted). I would like to thank my past mentor, Tamara Baxter, for agreeing to take the time to be our interviewee. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge this year's judges: Ron Rash, poetry; Lydia Davis, fiction; Dustin Parsons, non-fiction. It is an honor to have the input of these individuals and to know that each of these, experts in their respective categories, took the time to select our winners and provide commentary for our student work. And a special thanks to the chair of the Department of Literature and Language, Dr. Katherine Weiss, for your continued support and encouragement.

I would like to extend a special thanks to Dr. Gomez and the Spanish program coordinator, professor Liv Detwiler, for their time and support. Their efforts and dedication to the student body have culminated in poetry translated by our foreign language students. Thanks to Dr. Gomez and professor Detwiler, who also served as editors and worked with *The Mockingbird*, we can provide our students with a creative platform to share their work. I would also like to thank others involved with and supporting *The Mockingbird*: Mira Gerard, the chair of the department of Art and Design; Karlota Contreras-Koterby, director of Slocomb Galleries; Bert C. Bach, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs; and Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

A special gratitude is due to former Editor Danielle Byington who addressed my concerns and encouraged me to pursue a volume which truly represents Literature and Language. Lest I forget I would like to thank faculty advisors Dr. Jesse Graves and Dr. Alan Holmes who make each volume of *The Mockingbird* possible. Dr. Graves has been my poetry mentor since I came to ETSU, and my work would not be what it is without him. Dr. Holmes has been there to answer all my questions and concerns. He continues to support our student body in both creative and academic endeavors. They have both placed their trust in me as this year's editor and allowed me the freedom to shape this volume of inclusion. Finally, thank you to everyone in the Literature and Language Department who has not been listed for supporting me, shaping my experiences at ETSU and as editor, and bringing me to where I am today.

The Rebuff of Discovery

Kayla Ireson

Don't you want to be found?

Why do you lay so low in the grass? –Conor Oberst

After humid days and midnight
thunderstorms in September,
all the leaves in my mother's yard
plummet to the ground,
little anchors gripping the earth.
Some cling by threads
to the bare branches.

Most blanket the ground
beneath the drip lines—
bright carousels
surrounding every trunk.
Turning our backs on circles,

we demolish them, pile up every leaf
in the yard, and burrow our way through
the prickly mounds, pretending
we will never be called inside.
No colds will catch
us from staying out too late.

We tunnel through and through,
probing for a way out-
retreating when we see the light.



The Grey Hawk

Micah McCrotty

When the young man reached the mountain furrow
where he'd heard of water which gave
long life, he found a squatting elder
in careful patience waiting for the ageless fountain,
still hidden as a dry leaf spring, the sand around
long covered over by briars and years of autumn's fall.
Both sat with pine tar lips
in observation for the spring's sudden
gushing and agreed to cup their hands
when the water dribbled so young and old
could sip before returning to farms below
to live forever in the land of fathers.
Through the branches overhead, a silent
grey she-hawk circled the river ridges
and spied both a risen and a setting sun,
half hidden by dancing leaves,
huddled in hope between scrub pines.



Cartography

Micah Mccrotty

I.

You are in the trees, on either side of the nighttime road,
a shadow voice calling *Look up and find direction,*
read again the map upon the heavens.

But we can't see the same compass,

his belt, over dewing fields, turns in circles.

My eyes, in ignorance, gaze forgetting.

Pa! The suns are weakening! Our instruments leave no corner dark.

Bleach! Bleach!

II.

You would not know the way now; Ursa was driven out.

We put her in a zoo –

where she is safe.

The water tank vanished, and Gideon's ridge is alight anew.

I could not tell you where Orion's bow is drawn

and Uncle Ron's pasture has a constellation of its own.

Forgive me if I lose my way,

become again the startled owl,

screeching at the manlit moon:

Bleach! Bleach!



She Goes, By and By

Emma Owens

A pin pushed into silent dreams and paper gods.
Sun through sugar maple leaves
Scatters light onto the carpet.
The shapes of luster change and slip
Against the cluttered floor,
Dancing themselves into abstraction.

Naked and soft as a peach.
Wet with sweat,
Smells of cinnamon and morning sap,
She exudes culpability.
Blue resplendent patterns reflect on curves,
Phosphorous tastes on the rural tongue.

Shapeshifting windows and wooden walls,
Her bitter blood tears them down,
Slaughtering lineage.
She's still unripe,
Yet stained with green and purple bruises.
Judas pities her, her faithless bound to kith and kin.

Her bare feet drag out of overgrown moss,
Through heaps of ash.
Goodbye to stained glass windows,
the light scintillating, scalding on her skin.
To the familial hills,
With pastures of devoted cattle and sweet grass.

Exiled Mountaineer and her little boxes of poems.



Ella va, poco a poco

Emma Owens

Traducido por: Hannah Burgess, Kayla Parker, Katlyn Rivera, and Devon Waldroff

Un alfiler pulsado en sueños silenciosos y dioses de papel.
El sol a través de las hojas del arce de azúcar
Dispersa la luz sobre la alfombra.
Las formas del brillo cambian y resbalan
Contra el piso desordenado,
Bailándose hacia la abstracción.

Desnuda y tan suave como un melocotón.
Mojada de sudor,
Con la fragancia de canela y savia matutina,
Emana culpabilidad.
Patrones resplandecientes azules reflejan en las curvas,
Sabores de fósforo en la lengua rural.

Ventanas que cambian de forma y paredes de madera,
Su sangre amarga las derriba,
Masacrando a linaje.
Todavía está inmadura,
Sin embargo, manchada con moretones verdes y moradas.
Judas se compadece de ella, su infiel atado a parientes y amigos.

Sus pies descalzos se arrastran fuera del musgo crecido,
A través de montones de ceniza.
Adiós a los vitrales,
La luz centellante, escaldado en su piel.
A las colinas familiares,
Con pastos de ganado devoto y hierba dulce.

Montañera exiliada y sus cajitas de poemas.



A Goddess's Hysteria

Amber Rookstool

You could smell it on her breath as she talked,
tempered and slurred, intoxicated,
inebriated, roofied and raped by death.
Creation in her words sparked a fire.
A torrential blast of roaring tornados;
charring clouds, commanding a storm of fiery blaze
as soul scorching as God's Lake of Fire.

Blackening the earth, the sound of her voice,
seething in suffering, desire and anger,
calling in despite all life to wither,
wilt, curl up and shrivel. Everything perished
cease all existence fire flames waned to white ashes.
She exhaled one penultimate sigh
scattering embers—icicles darting in mayhem
when the Sky burst into shards



Shaking Ground

Amber Rookstool

“They should be startled and dazed by the light emanating from the veil.” Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad

My world ended when a sky with no sun
broke open. When an intense white light glowed
with the essence of a hand and reached through
the cerulean-azure horizons,
forcing itself into the atmosphere
as if the earth spins on its axis inside
a worn-out marble or scraped-up snow-globe,
dropped and now splitting at every crack;
the entity who lives outside the thick
glass now breaks into this reality.



Tierra Temblorosa

Amber Rookstool

Traducido por Hannah Burgess, Kayla Parker, Katlyn Rivera, and Debon Waldroff

“Deben ser sorprendidos y aturcidos por la luz que emana del velo.” Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad

Mi mundo terminó cuando un cielo sin sol
se abrió. Cuando una intensa luz blanca brillaba
con la esencia de una mano y alcanzó a través de
los horizontes cerúleos-azules,
forzándose en la atmósfera
como si la tierra girara sobre su eje adentro de
una canica desgastada o un globo de nieve raspado,
dejado caer y ahora dividiendo en cada grieta;
la entidad que vive afuera del
Vidrio grueso ahora irrumpe en esta realidad



Cat Scratches

Amber Rookstool

The canvas is not cotton, linen, hemp,
or burlap, but a hide, from years ago:
human skin, date unknown.
We marvel. For what tool, what medium
toyed on a corpse: surely pencil, pen, nor
paint, nor any ink could endure;
but what would make those thick-thin, red faded white,
lump-shaped lines look
so real, so painful, so strict, so fresh--

Is the paint still wet?



A Conversation with Tamara Baxter

Tamara Baxter was born and raised in the Great Smokey Mountains much like the characters of the stories she shares. While her works are often set in the Appalachian region, her works transcend the settings of her tales to provide complex and universal characters that anyone can relate to. Her short-story collection *Rock Big and Sing Loud* has received several awards including the Morehead State and Jesse Stuart Foundation's First Author's Award for Fiction. Other awards include Harriette Arnow Award, a Leslie Garrett Award, the Sherwood Anderson Award, and the National Rose Post Award for creative non-fiction. She has served as the editor of the literary journal *Echoes and Images*, and her work has appeared in dozens of journals.

MLG: Thank you for agreeing to share with our readers your writing career and craft. Thinking about the aspiring writers here at East Tennessee State University, I think about how every writer finds an individual way into writing. What led you into writing and how did you know you wanted to be a writer?

TMB: First, Matthew, thank you for inviting me to answer these interview questions for the Mockingbird. So cool. My former student gives me an assignment.

My parents often told me that I was born talking. Evidently, I never shut up. I spoke in complete sentences by the time I was eighteen months old and commented on everything I saw or heard. My father nicknamed me "Cicero" after the Roman orator who my father told me had talked so much he got himself into deep trouble. Perhaps my liking to write began with my love of speaking and hearing oral narrative. Growing up, I was inspired by the Weekly Reader, our reading textbook, Bible stories, listening to all the upper grade lessons at Walker's

Elementary (there were five grades in five rows in this two-room school), neighbors talking at the Susong Store, singing and sermons at the New Ebenezer Presbyterian Church (I never missed a Sunday in seventeen years), talk at the supper table, talk with neighbors. Understand, my early years were pre-television. I began writing poems in the third grade, all rhyming, of course. During high school I attempted to write fiction, unsuccessfully. I could easily finish a poem, but the story trapped me midway. During my college years, I discovered that one must write about what one knows. I had been trying to write stories that had no roots in my life experience. When I began writing the real-life narratives I saw unfolding before me in everyday life, only then could I finish the story. I am convinced that writing fiction or poetry is a gift. I'm not sure that you can just tell yourself you will be a writer, and make it happen, particularly if you just retired and want to take up writing as a hobby. I knew by third grade that I yearned to write. I learned early on that writing is hard work. Writing demands a lifetime of persistence. Writing is the thing that makes me most joyful.

MLG: Did you have a teacher or mentor who inspired you?

TMB: Ketron Wells, my eighth-grade teacher, and my school principal since first grade, encouraged me to read "thick books" like David Copperfield, and other classics. I mention Mr. Wells because he was one of the few men of my youth who told me that I was smart, and that I was "going places." (I also mention Mr. Wells, because writing must first begin with reading.) I wrote hilarious poems for Mr. Wells that he would then read to the class. I hated math. I hated dissecting worms and frogs. I protested in poetry. I wrote poems for all my teachers throughout the years. Dozens of them. Thankfully, they found my little "roasters" humorous. Since I lived at the end of nowhere, and the library miles away in town, summer reading could have been difficult. However, my Uncle Garrett, a high school principal in northern Virginia, brought me boxes of books each summer that had been culled from his school library. Magically, books came to me. The Wahoo Bobcat, Lorna Doone, Little Women, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Robinson Crusoe, My Antonia. Writing begins with lots of reading. Yes, the principal is my pal.

A writer will always find a mentor. In college, you will attend public readings of poetry and fiction. You find the nerve to speak to the author, ask questions, read their work. Perhaps you write a letter to them. You receive a response. Little by little, you are in the world of the writer. You have some small successes. A poem or a short story is published. You feel a sense of accomplishment. You find yourself giving a public reading, perhaps as part of a group of published students such as you find in the Mockingbird. Later, you attend writing workshops and conferences. This scenario is also my story. This is how I found my greatest

mentors at Hindman Settlement's Appalachian Writers' Workshop, Hindman, KY. I met Robert Morgan, my first fiction writing instructor, at Hindman Writers' Workshop in 1988. During the twenty years I attended Hindman, I studied with Gurney Norman, Lee Smith, Sharon McCrumb, Lisa Koger, Meredith Sue Willis, and Denise Giardina. Often, James Still sat in his rocker, available for a chat. Albert Stewart, poet, teacher, and founding editor of *The Appalachian Heritage*, came often. I met Harriett Arnow the year before she died. Other teachers were George Ella Lyon, Jim Wayne Miller, and many others who came to Hindman multiple times. Hindman Writers' Workshop was the best kept secret in the Mountain South. I cherish that spot of earth where many of my stories began.

MLG: Community and feedback are very important for many writers. Is there anyone close to you that you trust to read your work through each draft of a new story?

TMB: I belong to a small group of fiction writers, and we do critique manuscripts. Michael Cody, Bob Kottage, Cate Strain, Tess Lloyd, all writers extraordinaire, and other writers come in and out of our group. As a personal rule, I do not share early drafts of my work. I spend 5% of my time drafting the story to the end, and 95% of my time editing. I encourage beginning writers to spend serious time editing before sharing work. Learn to line edit. Check out Meredith Sue Willis' *Deep Revision*. Learn to remove the "scaffolding" in your writing. Like Eudora Welty, post your scenes separately on the wall, and move them around. You will learn organizational skills as well as find those pillars and posts your brain wrote into the manuscript as transitions and remove them. Find a reader you trust to tell you the truth. The wrong reader can kill your idea before your story has a chance to live. Never "talk out" your story idea to anyone before you have written your draft and edited. Your story may be gone as soon as you speak. Keep the lid on the pot, the horse in the stable. Keep all drafts of your story. You will revisit them. Learn to give and receive criticism in a constructive manner. If several readers point out the same issue, you'd better listen. Read books on writing craft by well-known writers. Ultimately, you must learn to edit your own work, but really good readers are absolutely necessary. I also belong to the Poetry Society of Tennessee, North East Chapter (PST-NE), and The Lost State Writers. I regularly attend conferences and workshops such as Jump Start, Tennessee Mountain Writers' Workshop, Mountain Heritage at Lincoln Memorial University, Creative Writing Day during Abingdon's Festival, and The Fall Gathering at Highlander.

MLG: A major struggle for many writers is finding a writing process that works. How do you start a story and what is your process?

TMB: I do not arise at 4:00 a.m. and write as I used to do some years ago. I find that I really get wound up in the evening and would stay awake all night... if I don't watch myself. I also find that as I get older, I can work on several writing projects simultaneously. I may pull out an old story, poem, or previously written essay, and see what potential still exists. I often begin a new story from a workshop prompt. My stories are sometimes based on autobiographical experience, or observations. Some of my stories are inspired by something I read in a novel, or even a newspaper. I keep a list of names and story ideas I read in the daily newspaper obituaries. Also, I listen to people talk, particularly in the public. You'd be surprised at the story lines, or spoken lines, you hear from people around you. For example, I once heard a woman proclaim of another woman: She's got teeth like Indian corn. Nine different colors. I used to tell my students that poems and stories are hanging in the air all around them in the voices of other people. Learn to recognize a possible narrative or spoken poetry in the voices of others. Write it down and use it. Remember that your brain is like a computer, like a hopper, in matters of writing. All the memories, observations, stories, novels, poems, kitchen table talk, and public conversations you have heard or read are stored like fodder in a silo. You will unconsciously remember the conflicted facial expressions, secrets, guilt, confusions, pains, and conflicts in those narratives. My hopper is filled with a great deal of Thomas Hardy. I can now tell you as an adult writer that I liked Hardy because he was an agrarian writer, and because I grew up on a river bottom farm I felt a kindred spirit in his work, especially, *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

How do I start a story? My fiction is character-based. The character comes to me. My brain whirs something up, perhaps because I have been reading the latest Ron Rash collection, or re-reading Lee Smith, or Robert Gipe's *Trampoline*. Now, there is an authentic voice. Some conundrum whirs up. My character comes fully loaded and ready to go. The character always writes my stories. I never know where he or she will take me. The saying that writing is a mystery is correct. I trust the character. I never judge my character unworthy to say their piece. Faulkner once said that he had to write fast to keep up with the character. That is a true feeling when I am in the swift movement of the process. (I draft with ink pen on a white tablet. I type later.) Sometimes I am astounded by what my characters say or do. They always know things that I myself can't possibly know. I feel surprised by their insights. As I read and edit the drafts of my stories, I realize those ideas came from another place. Really, from beyond. As I feel this experience, I know I am on the right track. I also recognize that the narrator/character is stuck working within my framework of my brain, with those observations, thoughts, experiences, all the fodder I have previously fed into my brain and my emotional being. I must be sure I have fed it well. For

every story I write, I have probably read dozens of recent pieces. Stack that onto a lifetime of reading. Nourishment for the character to do their work.

I begin my story in medias res: in the middle of the action. As James Still always said, “The bear is at the door.” I write fast and hard. I want to get to the end. I never stop and edit. I let the draft sit for a week or two. Well, honestly, sometimes years. Now, I find I have scaffolding in my story. My character(s) who so graciously gave me a story also put in bridges, explanations, extraneous materials, and signposts necessary to get me from here to Tipperary. I take out the scaffolding. I rearrange. I may have to lose a character. I once discovered that three different characters were actually one character. Editing, the necessary crafting process, I love equally well to writing the draft. The editing or crafting process comes from a different part of the brain. I believe that many beginning writers don’t like to edit because that newly written draft feels like a perfect piece. The editing process involves tampering with the “message from beyond.” As an early writer, I felt as if editing a story was like cutting the pound of flesh from my newborn. Note to new writers: Tear the story down. Build it up. Tear it down. Build it up. Very much like decorating a room. If you paint the walls, the sofa looks old. Change it out. Varnish the end tables. As you edit, one change points to another change. You make opportunities for your manuscript when you take out a cliché, when you find a better verb. Keep every draft. Never throw anything away. The writing process requires some lazy time. Some alone time. But, you have figured that out already.

MLG: Reflecting on your process, can you tell me how the Appalachian and mountain regions influence your work? Do you consider yourself an Appalachian writer? If so, what does being Appalachian mean to you?

TMB: I consider myself an Appalachian writer, a Mountain South writer, a Southern writer, and an Appalachian Gothic writer. I grew up in Greene County, TN, on a river-bottom farm at the end of a dirt road. Actually, the mountains were a long line of blue bumps far off in the distance. I am probably a flat-lander, a rural writer. My country, small-community upbringing is similar to other Mountain South writers’ experiences. While I do not have firsthand experience of mountain life, of coal mining, of the dark-shadows-living in hollows or high places, I am from a biscuit and gravy upbringing. I am told by my husband that I have an 18th century upbringing. I attended a two-room school, with pot-bellied stove (yes, the big boys cut and carried the wood inside), outhouse, etc. Our wood floors were oiled, our odd-old desks from another century, probably. At home, we had an icebox. My mother cooked on a wood stove, we used kerosene lamps. We raised tobacco and milked cows, killed hogs, raised and preserved our food; ham meat in the smokehouse, jars of preserves, cans of corn, green

beans, chow-chow, and vegetable soup. My mother grew everything from carrots to corn, and canned hundreds of jars each year. My experiences may have been slightly different than some other writers as we lived on a farm in a line of farms that formed a corridor down the Allen's Bridge Road, an area of big river farms with big houses, still haunted by the times of slavery. The African American descendants still lived and worked on the lands of their slave ancestors. In a sense, I lived in an interracial community. Two stories in my collection, "Some Living Room," and "Where the Fishes Swim" both feature the African American character Silas Mosely and are heavily autobiographical. Appalachia is often defined as a region of mountains, its inhabitants, and their culture. A successful Appalachian writer is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

MLG: Throughout the stories in your collection, *Rock Big and Sing Loud*, you create a vivid sense of regional community. Is this a natural process for you or do you spend a lot of time creating setting?

TMB: That is a neat question because I have given little thought to setting. Since I write character-driven stories, the settings appear in mere flashes, and in concrete objects associated with the characters, and in the voices of the characters themselves. For example, in "Doomsday Monday at Pee Wee's Hamburger Emporium," I mention the new plastic swivel seats, a hamburger grinder, the crowds, the heat and smoke in the kitchen, the French fries in a basket of grease, etc. I expect the reader to fully picture a small-town drive-through restaurant. Since most people from small towns already have that scene in their own minds, that setting can be fully accomplished by mere suggestion of narrative voice and concrete sensory imagery. If my settings are developed at all, they are accomplished by my characters' narratives delivered in strong concrete imagery. I always start with a character in the middle of the action in a place and time. The setting magically weaves itself into the story as the character directs our full attention. While I like first person narratives, I do also write third-person and omniscient narratives. Beginning a story with a setting may not get the novice writer very far. Do, however, learn to write in the concrete.

MLG: Robert Morgan has described your characters as the "most enduring people we are ever likely to meet." As I read through stories like "Black Dark," "Jack Mooneyham is Going to Hell," and "Dustbusters," I get the sense of regional and individuality. You describe relationships and people with wit, humor, and darkness. How does your own connection to people inform the way you create these highly developed characters?

TMB: The three stories you mentioned, interestingly, are heavily autobiographical, as is much of the collection. Heavily fictionalized autobiography, I

might add. “Jack Mooneyham is Going to Hell” was ripped straight off the lips of older female relatives who discussed this true scenario. I believe I was in my early teens when I overheard their conversations. Their perturbations were serious. Hell hung in the balance. Hand wringing and whispered prayers in close circles filled that summer. I wrote the story after grad school. I was sitting in the bathtub one evening, recollected the event, and strangely thought the whole thing was hilarious. Jack Mooneyham is going to hell, I thought. I know because my Mama says so, I thought. I drafted the story in one sitting. I left the prayers out of the story, and went for gossips instead. The old fornicators in the story are long dead, and in heaven, no doubt. This may be the first story I wrote that didn’t occur when I lived on our farm. We sold our farm and moved to the suburbs when I was seventeen.

I grew up at the end of nowhere. The closest neighbors were tenant farmers “serving” one of our neighbors. Fortunately for me, all these tenant families lived at the edge of our property, but on the other side of a long dark hollow with a ribbon of dirt road running through. I saw a great deal of the many tenant farm families who came and went from the brown tarpaper house above us. We called them “renters.” I say fortunately because the first story I wrote, “The Curin” (Appalachian Heritage, Winter 1979), came from Judy Renner and her Granny who had the gift of curing thrush. I called her Judy Renfro in the story. I digress to say that Judy Renner, my first character, died in recent years. My mother sent me a clipping of the obit. I felt abject sadness at her passing.

“Black Dark” is also autobiographical, and is based on another tenant family, the Hinkles, who lived less than a year in the brown house that sat like Humpty Dumpty on the dirt bank: a drunk brutal man, quiet religious mother, nine-year-old son. The boy showed up at our door late one summer evening. He’d come through the dark hollow, no flashlight, to beg for help. I never forgot his frightened face, his hands prayer-fisted, begging us, “Come help my mama. Please come. My daddy killed her on the floor.” He stood outside the screen door on our dark front porch. My own father and brother were gone fishing. No telephone in those days. My mother asked me to walk with the boy to a neighbor’s house where we could find help. The boy’s mother, Eileen (I say her name in reverence), gave birth in the back seat of the neighbor’s new 1957 Chevrolet, a little girl who lived (the baby dies in my story). The family disappeared soon after that, but I heard about them from time to time. Nothing good. I weep as I remember the boy’s sweet face. Oddly, I can’t remember his name. “Black Dark” is an imagination of his situation. I had such a fierce emotional reaction to this child that I wrote a novel “The Promise of the Father” on his behalf. He endures, bless him. Every one of these poor, itinerant farm people

who came and went, frequently, in an old pickup truck loaded with bedstead and trunk, all gave me great insight into the human condition. I thank them for the blessings of my stories.

“Dustbusters” is a collage of every stingy, hard man, of every fatalistic wife who puts up with her stingy husband, and every old maid extraordinaire that I experienced growing up. (I just realized there are old maids in “Jack Mooneyham.” My fifth-grade teacher, Miss Mary Ruth Russell, was also an old maid. Now, there is another story.)

Flannery O'Connor said that every story you will write happened to you before you were fifteen years old. I grew up in isolated, hard, brutal rural life. Animal death and human death were common. Dead people were laid out in the family parlor, and Jesus was hanged on the cross at Easter. There were no metaphorical butterflies on the Easter cross at our church. Hell and damnation were as close as breath. If the devil didn't get you, God surely would. Perhaps I came from a place of no escaping. Robert Morgan knows these people as well as I did. He knows we have all endured.

MLG: Often, closeness to subject matter can hinder a writer. As a poet I find it much easier to siphon the poetry from the moment once I have distanced myself from that subject. Do you find yourself using experiences or ideas from your past to write? How distanced from your subject matter do you have to be to write about it?

TMB: I would say that I draw close to the situation of the story emotionally; however, in some instances I may allow time to pass before I can get the right point of view for the story. My fiction comes to me as a whole draft, usually. Even when I know the draft doesn't work. The fiction I have stored in my files are stories that still haunt me. After time passes, I am able to take something I have previously written and rewrite. And, yes, I am still distilling memories, especially for poems.

MLG: As a Southern writer, would you say that writers like William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor have influenced your work?

TMB: I made my pilgrimage to Roanoke in Oxford, MS, last summer. I have waited years to see the place where Faulkner created some of the greatest fictional characters ever imagined. I have made my pilgrimage to Milledgeville, GA, as well. I really don't suppose anyone wants to drive down Pumpkin' Bloom road and see the farm where I grew up. I think the barn is still there. I would say that Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty were particularly influential. I seemed to know their characters personally, as being similar to people I grew

up knowing. Faulkner, on the other hand, wrote from the past. O'Connor and Welty seemed to write stories in the here and now. I would never compare myself to these writers, but anyone who aspires to write fiction should read great writers. Notice their style. Faulkner writes lines that wind around like kudzu. O'Connor is crisp and matter of fact. You can learn a great deal by paying attention to a style you might want to emulate. Once or twice, I have been told that my characters are "unsympathetic." I take it that means my characters are not likable. I reply that if Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner, and other Southern writers for that matter, wrote only "sympathetic" characters our great body of Southern literature wouldn't exist. Although most of my characters come whole cloth from my early life experience and observation, readers often believe I made them up from some dark interior self; therefore, I should be judged as being a dark person because my fictional characters are sometimes dark, or violent. Many of my characters, I believe, are humorous. I internalized a great deal of what I saw in my world, and then I cast it out into the light.

MLG: Some of our readers may not know this, but your work has appeared in the *Mockingbird* in past issues. Your short story "Doomsday Monday at Pee Wee's Hamburger Emporium" also won the *Mockingbird's* first place prize in fiction. How did these publications help inspire you to go on to publish your collection later?

TMB: I am proud that two of my stories won first place in fiction. I give credit to the great faculty at ETSU, and particularly the English faculty. My stories and essays have also appeared in college publications such as *Now and Then* over the years. Dr. Fred Waage should be given credit for an early journal, *Second Growth*, which predated, and probably launched, *Now and Then*. One of my early stories appeared there. Also, Ron Giles edited an anthology, "In Place: A Collection of Appalachian Writers" where one of my stories appeared. I studied writing poetry with the legendary Dr. Dave McClellan who brought great poets such as Alan Ginsberg and James Dickey to campus. My poems were terrible then. I think he would be happy to see the progress I have made. I studied fiction writing with Dr. Thomas Lane who recently passed away. Good journey, Dr. Lane. Several of the stories in my collection were written for that graduate class, including "Killing Oranges." Dr. Ambrose Manning, Dr. Thomas Burton, and Dr. Jack Higgs were instrumental in promoting the study of Appalachian literature and culture. Many regional authors such as James Still, Jesse Stuart, Jim Wayne Miller, Wilma Dykeman, and others came to our campus. I attended numerous public readings and learned from hearing authors read and discuss their works. Dr. Don Johnson, author of several collections of poetry, taught poetry writing over the years. John Morefield taught fiction writing. The English

faculty created a great atmosphere for the creative writer during my years on campus. I did have other works published during my college years. “The Curin” had been published in 1979 in the *Appalachian Heritage*, and an essay “Getting Back to the Simple Life” appeared in the *Tennessee Conservationist*. I received a check for that essay. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Styron Harris who read my story (I had written as an assignment) and told me he thought “This piece could be published.” I considered these words from Dr. Harris as great praise for he always set the bar high. Soon after our conversation I watched an episode of “The Waltons,” and John Boy had sent his story to the *Appalachian Journal*. On TV, his work had been accepted. He was gleeful. Therefore, in my wisdom (not!) I sent “The Curin” to the *Appalachian Journal*. I received a letter from Cratis Williams, editor of the journal, telling me that only poetry and academic articles were published. (John Boy lied? Head scratch.) However, Cratis Williams liked my story. He directed me to send my work to Albert Stewart, editor of *Appalachian Heritage* at Alice Lloyd College, Pippa Passes, KY. I was to tell Al Stewart that he recommended my story. My first short story was published! Take that, John Boy Walton! By the way, *Appalachian Heritage* is still going strong. My college experiences launched me with a strong wind in my sails. I am thankful for all that I learned from these teachers, and for the opportunity to be published in the *Mockingbird*.

MLG: As a creative writing teacher and a writer, what do you think a creative writing class has to offer?

TMB: The creative writing class is a safe place for you to learn much more than creative writing. A place where you get individual attention, where you develop your own powers of expression, empathy, critical thinking and reading skills. You learn to analyze, you develop creative problem-solving skills, and crafting experience. In the right environment, you may find your unique voice and style. In a good class, you learn to play (because so much of writing is playing), you learn about life, you learn the professional approach to writing. Creative writing classes benefit your emotional wellbeing. You cast out your demons onto the paper. Literature is born. You learn to give and take constructive criticism; develop the rhino skin for the time you enter the publishing world. As Flannery O’Connor said, “I write to discover what I know.” You will be surprised by what you know. You will build a library of reading materials. Paperbacks do count. You read authors you’ve never heard about. The writing process itself requires effort and discipline. You reap the benefits of having finished a poem or prose piece. To create something on a blank page out of the mind, something that moves other readers, and that lives on is an astounding accomplishment. Shared expertise with a teacher and other students helps you learn from each

other, helps you learn to read people, places and things (I believe Jesus once spoke of people who could read the face of the sky, but couldn't read the situation before them). In creative writing classes, you learn to read a building, a winding road. O'Connor read "tree lines." One appears in each of her works. You will learn best to read people. Overall, learning to communicate what your heart wants to tell is a rare and precious thing. I highly recommend creative writing classes for students who want to take up the habit of writing, and for those who simply want to expand their personal communication skills. You may never make a living with creative writing, but you will develop skills that transfer beyond the classroom experience.

MLG: When you are reading the work of students or reading the works of writers you haven't read, what makes a work successful to you? What draws you in and what keeps you reading?

TMB: What keeps me reading? Write something that I will find hard to forget. Grab me in the first few lines, particularly if I am reading short fiction. If I must read several pages before I can guess what is going on with the character, I am likely to stop reading. Don't write pages and pages of dialogue. Avoid talk-back writing. I like a speedy, crisp narrative, well developed scenes, concrete sensory imagery, strong verbs, spare surprising adjectives here and there. Find the best point of view. Surprise me with a second person piece, present tense. I want to learn something I didn't know, whether it be an emotional truth, or something commonplace, but interesting. I have heard it said that the purpose of writing is to entertain and inform. Over the long term, I probably want more than that. Another question might be: What keeps me re-reading? As a child, I read Lorna Doone dozens of times. I felt so desperate when the novel ended, I simply read it again, and again. I was invested in the characters' lives, hopes, and personal outcomes. The writing never faltered. The true test of a story, poem, or novel is this: Do you want to read it again? If you read a story or novel once, if you are well satisfied, that's jolly good. But if you felt a death has occurred, a loss that grieves you because the work has ended, you have found a grail, never empty. I read Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies once a year. I also re-read Ron Rash, Robert Morgan, and James Still on a regular basis. The greatest praise I get is from someone who tells me years later that they heard me read a story, or they have read one of my stories, and they have never forgotten it. The story made them laugh, or it made them cry. Write something that I cannot forget. That will keep me reading.

MLG: There's something to be said of the way narrative transcends the barriers of art genres. Do you write in or have you experimented in other genres? If so, how does your craft with fiction inform those works?

TMB: During childhood, I wrote dozens of rhyming poems. Silly things. After I successfully began writing fiction, I found my poems inside the stories. Several of them have been published in journals. Now, I write lots of narrative poems. I also write creative non-fiction and craft it much in the way of writing fiction. I write novels, but I don't think I am a natural novel writer. I do believe the short story is my best genre. I haven't written a play thus far, but I am open to experimenting with that. Playwrights are teaching more often at writing conferences these days. I will say that writing in other genres increases inspiration and strengthens techniques. Writing a poem, for example, strengthens imagery, word choice, and poetic sounds. Writing essays helps develop narrative and descriptive technique. I highly recommend journal writing, writing morning pages, writing letters. When I am stuck in the middle of a chapter, or story, I often have my characters write their own journal entries.

MLG: In a country which has become increasingly reliant on and enamored by social media and technology, what role do you see for the writer?

TMB: That's an interesting question because I recently read an article online discussing that subject. Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan, in his article "Will Social Media Kill the Novel?" opines that we are at the "end of private life" in a world "in which our interior lives are played out online." He has retreated from the world, he tells us, and he has "decided to greet the future by making it harder to find" him. His theory is that "...a writer's "reality" as created by constant contact via social media outpaces the "vision" of the novelist." O'Hagan warns us via *The Guardian* posted---you guessed---on the Internet! O'Hagan concludes in an outrageous about-face that, "The abolition of privacy will not kill the novel, but more likely...will make it new...as the age of the internet provides...a fan-fair of existential provocations." Ironically, social media and the Internet helps get the word out. We learn of writers and books we may never have heard about. Authors spread the word about their own work, and that of other writers. Writers support each other online. Online, we find writers' blogs, writers' groups, writers' conference information, contest information. Creative classes are taught online. There are dozens of writing prompts online. There are dozens of online literary journals. And, yes, we may buy all of those books online, or listen to them on our electronic devices.

MLG: What can we look forward to reading from you? Are you currently working on anything new?

TMB: Presently, I am going through my computer files and paper files, sorting dozens of poems, stories, and two or three novels. I have several short stories in draft or completed and ready for submission. I am writing new poetry and

editing old poems. Recently, I have begun to write memoir. I have had some short fiction and poetry published in recent years. I am working toward a new collection of stories, and editing a finished novel, *The Promise of the Father*, based upon the characters from the story, “Black Dark.” I have drafted a few new stories this past year that I am excited about. In my study are stacks of notebooks, and legal-sized tablets filled with writings. It looks like an excavation dig in here. Wish me luck.

MLG: We’ve discussed what you look for in creating and reading new works. Many of our readers are aspiring writers. Is there any last advice you could give them?

TMB: Develop the habit of writing. Keep your notebook and pen handy at all times. Even a tiny pad and pencil will do. Or record and text to your phone all the great ideas that come to you daily. Write down interesting names of people and places. Write down external observations about others, and internal investigation of self. Try to write every day, if only a few lines. If you are working on a project, touch it every day. Read it over, add to or edit a little. If you are a serious writer, you will want an audience. Remember that when you send your work into the world as a submission to a journal, you have entered the business phase of writing. As soon as your work is in the envelope, sealed and addressed, or submitted electronically, you have entered business mode. Writers are often personally upset by rejection letters. Learn to welcome them as evidence of the effort you made. Rejections are business. All the best journals receive hundreds of submissions. Often, a slew of graduate helpers are reading through what is called “the slush pile” and answering your submission or query. The editor may never see your submission. Do not take rejection personally. If you are lucky, someone wrote a note telling you why you were rejected. Do please read submission guidelines carefully and follow them to the letter. Read several of the journals or publications where you wish to submit and understand their style and voice. Make sure that what you are submitting to them stylistically fits their publication mission. Most journals tell you what they are looking to publish. Clean up any rejected submission accordingly and resubmit elsewhere. Mathematically, twenty submissions may be necessary before you get a piece accepted for publication. Count on that. Learning to accept the difference between your personal writing mode and the business mode of publishing is the best psychological advice I can give you. Writing can be personal and emotional. Publishing is business.



The Waffle House

Sam Campbell

Last night at 10:01 p.m. my mother and I had an argument. That is the reason she is not speaking to me this morning. She sat, stiff lipped, staring at me while I made her breakfast. I resolved that if she wasn't going to talk to me, I wasn't going to talk to her either.

The eggs in the frying pan popped and sizzled as they fried. I enjoyed cooking, even if my mother criticized anything I made for her to eat. Even now, in her silence, I could hear her in my head saying *you might want to salt them, Rhonda, unless you're trying to make them bland on purpose*. With a sigh, I reached for the salt and sprinkled some granules over the eggs.

I dished out the eggs onto a plate and sat them in front of my mother. I pulled two slices of light bread from the refrigerator, then dropped them into the toaster. My mother was very picky about her toast. You must put it in the toaster at exactly the right time in the cooking process. Too soon, she says, and the toast gets cold and soggy while the rest of the meal is being prepared. Too late, and the rest of the food gets cold while she waits for her toast. I never seemed to get it right.

"Gordie! Get ready, you're going to be late for school!" I called as I removed my apron. The toast popped up and I caught it midair. I tossed it onto my mother's plate, then darted down the narrow hallway to my bedroom. I threw on my blue button up and black slacks—the standard uniform for a Waffle House cook. I tied my black apron around my waist.

On my way back to the kitchen I stepped into Gordie's room. The lights were off, and he was still in bed.

"Gordon Gray, what do you think you're doing? You're going to be late!" I stepped over and flipped on the lamp near his bed. He stared up at me with tired eyes, pallid and weak.

"Gordie?" I sat down on the edge of his bed and placed my hand on his head. He was cool to the touch.

“Oh, sweetheart, you’re cold.” I tucked his blankets around him. “You must be coming down with something. I think you should stay home from school today.” I paused, thinking that would get some glee out of him, but it didn’t. I fretted.

I flipped off the lamp and kissed his forehead. “It’s okay. Go back to sleep. Nana will be here all day if you need anything.”

Back in the hall, I slipped on my shoes and jacket, then tucked my keys into the left pocket. I stuck my head into the kitchen and broke the silence with my mother. “Gordie is sick, so I’m keeping him out of school today. Please look after him while I’m at work.” I waited for her to say something, but she didn’t even acknowledge my presence. The breakfast I had made for her sat untouched on the table. Irritation festered in my chest, and I was going to say more to her, but I was going to be late for work. I turned on my heels and hurried to my car.

I had been working at the Morristown Waffle House for almost fifteen years now. When I first started there, I was sixteen and had just made the decision to drop out of high school. I was failing all my classes except home economics, and one of the boys on the basketball team wanted to marry me. With a husband, a home, and a job, what more could high school offer me?

My mother did not agree with my decisions.

We used to have lots of arguments back then. Our fighting slowed down when I had Gordie though. Mother always said he was the only thing I did right in my life. He was the only thing that wasn’t a mistake.

I pulled into an empty parking spot behind the Waffle House and shut the car off. I had managed to make it to work on time. I double checked my hair and makeup in the rearview mirror one last time.

I entered the restaurant ready to work. In many ways the people here were like my second family. There was Thelma, the older woman who had worked here for as long as I could remember. She was like the wallpaper, an ever-present part of the Waffle House. Then there was the little old man who sat in the corner and read the newspaper all day. His name was Jerry. He would sit there from sun up to sun down just reading the paper. He only ever ordered coffee, and that was fine. My favorite patrons, however, were never there when I first began my shift. They came later.

I began clockwatching as the day carried on. It had become a routine. It was almost 12:30. At 12:30 my favorite customer stopped in for his daily lunch of three fried eggs, bacon, hash browns, and toast. He always ordered breakfast for lunch. That’s one reason I liked him.

At 12:30 on the dot the front doors swung open and two of Hamblen County's finest walked up to the counter in full uniform. I handed a menu to one, but to Officer Gregory Carey I sat a plate of steaming breakfast in front of him. He beamed down at the plate.

"You know me too well, Rhonda," he said with a laugh.

I liked the way he said my name – as a friend and not just a waitress. I also enjoyed the idea of knowing him too well. It made me want to know him more.

"Oh, I'm just trying to show my appreciation for an officer of the law." I smiled.

He smiled back and tilted his head. "Now, don't go thinking flattery will get you out of any speeding tickets." He winked at me and I felt my face turning red. His eyes met, then held mine. I could not help admiring the way they sparkled, full of life. It made me sad, made me feel like something substantial was missing in my life.

"I need a patty melt extra cheese." My co-worker called from the other side of the restaurant. I blinked a few times, shaking off the feeling that something personal had just been interrupted. Our eyes met for a moment more, before I turned to the kitchen to slice onions and peppers and melt cheese over shredded beef. I had the sandwich ready in less than five minutes.

"Order up!" I called. I set the plate on the counter and hit the little bell that I got to ring anytime I finished meal preparation. I turned my attention back to Officer Carey. We had been doing this same song and dance for a few months now, and he had finally asked me out on a real date last week. Tonight would be the night. It had been a long time since I had dated anyone, so I was happy and nervous at the same time. I had married straight out of high school. When my husband made me a widow last year, dating was the last thing on my mind.

"Delicious as always, Rhonda." Officer Carey stood up and threw a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. "Keep the change."

"Thank you, Officer Carey." I took his money, smiling at him.

"Please, call me Greg." He said. The look in his eyes told me that there was no mistaking it. He liked me as more than a waitress or a friend.

"Greg," I said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He started to leave but turned around. "I'll see you later."

My insides exploded. "Can't wait."

He smirked. "Great, I'll pick you up at eight?"

I nodded. "I'll see you then."

The rest of my shift passed slowly. In truth, it was agonizing. I spent the entire day thinking about what that night would bring. I fantasized about delicious food, slow dancing to Elton John songs, and a shy first kiss at the end of the night. I daydreamed about introducing him to my son, and one day moving him in with us. We could get married, maybe honeymoon in Gatlinburg. I'd always wanted to go to the aquarium, but between work and raising Gordie, I'd never gotten a chance to.

When my shift ended, I didn't dawdle and chat with my customers the way I usually do. Clock-out time was go-home time for once. I rushed from the restaurant and drove five miles over the speed limit all the way home, part of me hoping that Officer Greg would pull me over to give me a ticket.

"I'm home!" I called out as I kicked my shoes off in the hallway and then headed into the kitchen. My mother was sitting in her favorite seat at the kitchen table, and she didn't greet me. I figured she must have still been upset at me for the night before. I began clearing the dishes away from her meal.

"Listen, mother, I know we had a disagreement last night, but I thought that we could put it behind us and start fresh, okay?" I scrubbed hardened egg yolk from the glass with a sponge. "Greg is coming over tonight and I'm excited for you to meet him. So please be considerate, okay?"

I turned and looked at her. She said nothing but hung her head forward. I rushed over to her and wrapped my arms around her shoulders.

"Oh, mother, it's okay. I know we fight, but I'll always love you." I lifted her head up and looked into her eyes, a dull hazel color. "And you're going to love Greg. He's a police officer."

An unpleasant smell wafted to my nose. I inhaled, then leaned toward my mother taking another sniff. I pulled back my head away from her odor.

"Mother, I think you forgot to put on deodorant again. You need to take a shower before Greg gets here, and don't even think about arguing with me about this. You're showering, end of subject."

I helped my mother to her feet and struggled to get her down the hall. She was old and was not able to get around as well as she used to. She leaned on me. I supported most of her weight. Once in the bathroom, she sat down on the toilet while I drew her a bath. I poured in lavender scented bath salts and made sure the water was hot, but not so hot that it would burn her skin. The older she got the more delicate her skin became. It would tear under the slightest pressure, and bruise at the gentlest touch.

“Okay, I’m going to be right across the hall in my room getting ready for my date. If you need anything, just holler.” I happy that we were at least taking steps towards getting along again. Before going to my room, I peeked in to see Gordie. He was sleeping in his bed, peaceful and quiet as always. I hoped that he was sleeping off whatever bug he’d caught. Schools were the worst for illness. They were like the breeding ground of disease and infection. If I had my high school diploma I would’ve homeschooled Gordie and he’d never had stepped foot in a public school.

I closed his door quietly and went into my own room. I scoured my drawers and closets looking for the perfect ensemble to wear for my date with Officer Greg. I tried on jeans and blouses, button ups and shorts, skirts and tanks. I decided on a black maxi dress with tiny white polka dots all over it. The dress was ribbed and hugged my slim figure but flared out around my hips to hide those areas on my body that had never completely recovered from childbirth. I slid on black flats because high heels make my back hurt now. Then I freshened up my hair and makeup.

I knocked on the bathroom door and said, “Mother, are you decent?” I waited for her to respond. When I didn’t hear anything, I opened the door and peeked in. My mother was ready and waiting for me, sitting fully dressed on the toilet. I stepped over and helped her down the stairs and back to her favorite seat at the kitchen table.

About that time the doorbell rang. I gasped in surprise, not realizing that it was already eight o’clock.

“That’s him!” I whispered to my mother. I could feel her disapproval already. I wished that she would just give him a chance. She hadn’t liked my husband, and she frowned upon the thought of me dating anyone after he passed away. But I’m not dead and I wanted to move on with my life. I was tired of mourning.

“Please just give him a chance,” I told her. I walked out of the kitchen before she could respond. The last thing I needed was an altercation with her and Greg here. We’d both be arrested for a domestic dispute! I laughed at the thought.

I opened the door to find Officer Greg waiting. He was out of his uniform and in civilian attire, though he had warned he’d be on call. He looked very nice in his dress shirt, tie, and jeans. His hair was combed back, and he was holding a bouquet of lilies.

“These are for you, Rhonda.” He said, handing me the flowers.

“Oh, thank you so much, Greg. Here, come in while I put these in water.” I stepped aside. I shut the door behind him and led the way to the kitchen. I put the flowers in a vase and began filling it with water.

“Greg, I’d like you to meet my mother. Mother, this is Greg, the police officer I was telling you about.” I smiled at the two of them. My mother still sat in her favorite seat at the kitchen table, silent and brooding. I turned the water off and sat the vase of flowers on the counter.

Greg stepped forward, around the table to face my mother. “It’s nice to meet—” he stopped mid-sentence and stared at my mother. I stared at her too, waiting for her to respond. When she didn’t, I stepped close to her and whispered, “Please, mother, be nice. I really like him.”

I straightened myself up and turned to Greg. With a nervous laugh I said, “She doesn’t like meeting new people, but she’s really nice once she warms up to you.”

“Rhonda, what happened to your mother?” Greg asked. I could see beads of sweat forming on his forehead. His entire countenance had changed, and I didn’t understand why. Gone was his sunny, flirty disposition I’d grown accustomed to from the diner. Now, he stood rigid. One hand hovered near his hip where his gun rested in its holster. The other hand was half-reaching out to me. His shoulders were hunched, his legs apart, knees slightly bent as though ready to run or attack if necessary.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “There’s nothing wrong with my mother.”

Greg hesitated, glancing from me to my mother and then back again. He scanned the room, his eyes pausing as he took in the dirty laundry strewn on the floor, the flies buzzing through the house, the empty pill bottles on the counter. He seemed like he didn’t know what to say. He took a cautious step towards me. “Rhonda, your mother is dead. What happened to her? Where’s your son?”

My mouth fell open and I gaped at him. “What are you talking about? My mother is fine. My family is fine! Gordie is in bed and my mother is sitting right there!” I gestured wildly around the room. I couldn’t fathom what he was trying to say. Anyone with eyes could see my mother sitting at the kitchen table. I walked over to my mother and put my hands on her shoulders.

I shook her a little bit and said, “See, Greg, see? My mother is right here! There’s nothing wrong with her!”

“Rhonda...” Greg relaxed his stance a bit, looking more concerned than anything else. He took a step towards me. I could see the look in his eyes. He thought I was crazy. I began shaking my head, backing away from him.

“No, no, they’re right here! Why can’t you see that?” I turned and began walking to Gordie’s room. “Come here, I’ll introduce you to Gordie. Gordie! We have

a visitor.” I ran down the hall and waited for Greg to follow me. He did, taking each step as though he were walking through a minefield.

I opened the door to Gordie’s room and flipped on the light. I stood aside and motioned for Greg to come in. I pointed to the bed.

“Greg, this is my son Gordon. He likes to be called Gordie.” I said. Greg walked by me and went to stand next to Gordie’s bed. He reached down his hand and took the edge of the blanket. He pulled it off Gordie and flinched back. His hand flew to his gun and he drew it, swirled around and pointed it at me.

I jumped back, my hands flying up automatically. “Greg, what are you doing?”

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.” He was reading me my Miranda rights. I didn’t understand why he had his gun out and was reading me my Miranda rights.

“Greg, Greg, what’s going on? Mother! Gordie! Someone help me!” I didn’t know what to do. Gordie was asleep; the boy could sleep through an earthquake. Greg grasped my arm and twisted me around, claspings the handcuffs around my wrist and detaining me.

I couldn’t figure out how this wonderful night could have turned so upside down? As we walked through the kitchen I screamed for my mother. “Mother! Mother, help me! Please, tell him you’re alive! Tell him there’s been some kind of mistake.”

But my mother and I had an argument last night at 10:01 p.m., and she still was not talking to me.



Three Seconds

Dayton Sheffield

One. Two. Three. I counted so carefully. Fifteen compressions, then bag. Again, do fifteen more. One. Two. Three. My mother once told me that good things come in threes. I hoped and pleaded that she was right, for this man's life was hanging in the balance. One. Two. Three. I recited. One. Two. Thr- "I need faster compressions," the nurse next to the cardiac monitor barked at me. I heeded his words at once, though I was in slight disbelief. One. I was taught to relay compressions at 120 bpm. Two. I was taught to think of the popular song "Staying alive," though when you are in the heat of the moment, it's the last thing you want steering your train of thought. Three. I watched the heart monitor and slowly sped up until the it read 180 bpm. That's when the nurse gave me the okay to hold the beat at this speed.

At this moment, I forced myself to look at the man whose ribs I had just cracked to keep his blood pumping. I was expecting to see some semblance of the man I held conversation with hours earlier. He was nowhere to be found. No matter how hard I tried I could not relate the body that lay lifeless with the man I had known before. One. Two. Three. The counting became lines of music. They were stanzas without sound. I wrenched my thoughts back to the room. My mind surely wanted to be anywhere but its current residence. My arms were starting to feel like they did after a day of chopping wood. I think they were throbbing, but I pushed any inkling of exhaustion as far away as I could, perhaps somewhere on the icy plains of Pluto.

Pluto is by far one of the coldest planets in the- "Time to defibrillate," the nurse announced in her nurse voice. Pulling myself back to Earth for a final time, I stopped the beating of the man's heart abruptly and drew my hands away from him. "Back up!" the nurse next to me yelled. My legs had been touching the bed. Normally, I would have been startled and rather offended by this command. Though, had she not reacted to this potential disaster, 3000 volts would have made its

way through the bed, into me, and down through the ground, effectively knocking me to the wall, possibly arresting my own heart.

I chastised myself a thousand times in a millisecond. The man on the bed lurched with surprising, albeit unnatural contortion. I knew this to be the electricity flexing every muscle group in his body. "Resume compressions," the robot voice of the nurse iterated. I immediately responded and took great care to emulate the depth and speed of the previous beats. I looked around at the apathetic, jaded faces of the veterans in the room. This was a regular day for these nurses. I couldn't imagine facing such an intense situation so nonchalantly. Judging by all sense of time, I had been giving compressions for about thirty minutes. Time was a luxury I could not afford to wait on. I knew that the chances for survival were the optimal 30% if given in the first two to four minutes of cardiac arrest.

"That's two minutes. Are you ready to switch out?" said the nurse at the head of the bed, who had been breathing for the man lying unconscious. I stared in disbelief; even though my arms felt like they were melting, I declined his offer and pushed on. I pushed on for about six more years which equated to about another minute in real time before finally handing the torch to a coworker who took over the beat seamlessly.

I stepped back and tried to assess the entire situation. This proved to be a near impossible feat. The tiny ten by ten room was filled with more people and machines than I ever thought possible. People and words were racing all over the room; it was difficult to ascertain any of them. I made my eyes look, yet again, at the man that once was. I took time to really notice and follow the lines of his face. None of them resembled him anymore, the frown lines around his eyes no longer frowned; they lay motionless in a moment of complacent placidness.



Before I left the house that morning, I took a second to look in the mirror. I studied my face for a moment. Yep, that's my face. Same as usual except for the tinge of fear hidden ever so delicately among my features. "It's going to be okay," I told myself. Today was my first day at the hospital. I was doing my best to quell the butterflies in my stomach. The affirmation of my face was contrasting to the turmoil that was lying not so far underneath it. I forced myself to make for the door, turning away from all that I knew.

When I arrived, I was immediately greeted by the most offensive parade I have ever encountered. Her name was lost in the excitement she experienced when explaining that she would be my preceptor. As my preceptor, she would be in-

structing me on the day-to-day requirements of my job. She began to explain the process and began receiving the report, or the information, on the patients she and I would be taking care of today. She explained that we were ever-so-typically short-staffed today. Much to my chagrin, I listened carefully to the night shift person giving us report.

My uneasiness had compounded in the minutes it had taken us to round on each of the patients. We would be responsible for twice as many people as was typical for us. Once we were finished, we started to take vital signs immediately. Upon entering the room of each patient, I introduced myself politely and asked their permission to enter. In each room I was greeted with kind, yet sleepy invitations. Though, when I reached the last room, I was greeted with shocking inhospitality. His surliness was grounding. "Well, fine, come on in anyway," he begrudgingly barked. "It's not like I have much choice in the matter," he spat. I rationalized that not everyone in this world is going to be friendly. Nevertheless, I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

I pushed on rather optimistically. I told him my name and my purpose. He didn't reply. Instead, he threw an arm into the air and awaited the procedure. I tightened the cuff around his arm and started the machine. The machine in question is a hissing blood pressure apparatus on wheels that looks rather top heavy. After waiting a minute or so, the blood pressure alarm started sounding. It was unable to take it.

"Wow, you'd think they'd have higher quality equipment in this place, given how much it costs to be here," he said.

Doing my best to remain professional, I explained that while our equipment could use some updating, the machines can sometimes prove insufficient. Therefore, I grabbed my stethoscope and took it manually. The pulse was incredibly hard to discern it was so faint. The blood pressure read low, much too low for a man of his age, or of any age. I alerted the nurse immediately. She rushed in and took the pressure herself. I was not opposed to this as it's always good to get a second opinion on these things. She confirmed my observation and left the room to contact the doctor.

The man was looking up at me, and I could see some appearance of fear in his eyes. Was it the same fear I had seen in my own eyes earlier? No, this was a different kind.

"Is, um, is everything alright?" he edged through the tension.

I replied as comfortingly as I knew how, I told him his blood pressure was rather low, and what that could mean. I asked him if he was experiencing any

symptoms of hypotension, or low blood pressure. He refuted each of them but explained that he felt rather exhausted. I reassured him of everything.

“Well, it’s no doubt you people stressing me out. I’d like to be left alone,” he scoffed. I abided by his wishes and immediately tracked down his nurse. I explained everything he had told me. The nurse thanked me, and I took my leave. But before the next thought was formed in my brain, the charge nurse flagged me down from the end of the hall. I walked over to meet her. She explained to me that since today was my first day, they were going to move me to another hall that was adequately staffed so that I could have a chance to learn the floor more realistically. I hesitated before agreeing. The man in the last room was still on my mind.

The day went on rather well. My new preceptor was notably calmer and conducted herself and her point well. I had many questions about procedure and rules. I learned many things about the unit and the nurses as well. It was a very enjoyable first day, but I still couldn’t push the hateful man from my mind. It is my philosophy that it is never too difficult to be nice to somebody. Rude people always left a bad taste in my mouth. Yet, I was equal parts resentment and concern when I thought of my patient.

The day progressed as did my relationship with my preceptor, the nurses, and the other patients. When it became time for me to take my lunch I paraded to the cafeteria with unparalleled enthusiasm.

It had been an enjoyable day so far but a tiring one. I had worked up quite the appetite. I paid for my food and returned to the breakroom on our unit. I sat down and took my first bite, relishing the satisfaction it brought me. Before the first bite had reached my stomach, however, the intercom burst forward with the energy of a thousand trumpets: “Code Blue, Medical-Surgical.” My stomach lurched; daringly, the food that had nearly made it to my stomach threatened to force its way back up. In a half second, but also in an eternity, I was out the door and racing towards what I feared to be true.

Like bees in a hive, people swarmed into the room of the man I had taken care of earlier. The anarchy present was astounding. But upon a closer look I saw some form of order. The rapid response team had moved in and surrounded the man like a pack of wolves would their prey. They had already begun compressions. Words and thoughts turned to colors and sounds as they raced through the air and around me. Minutes or years passed; I couldn’t have told the difference. I was desperately trying to observe the compressions. I had been certified in CPR (Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation), but the training was next to nothing compared to the real thing, I knew. I stood on the sidelines and watched as

people ran to and from the room with urgency. People were still arriving to the scene: ECG (Electrocardiogram), Respiratory Therapy, and Phlebotomy. After a bit longer, a nurse came out to me and said, “They’re getting pretty tired in there, would you like to step in?” I stammered nervously and embarrassingly. I was mortified. I had not expected to be pulled into the heat of battle so soon, and on my first day. I wanted so badly to run and never come back, to forget all about this day and everything that had happened during it. Nonetheless, I found my resolve and stiffened my expression. I rushed in and waited for them to give me the okay.



“Twenty- three minutes,” a faceless voice said from somewhere behind me. I knew this wasn’t going well so far. It was nearing time for me to take over again. I was still counting the beats. This was the only thing my brain was effectively capable of. The crying outside the room seemed to be a memory. The source was obscured. Every one of my senses was trained to focus on the situation at hand. I thought perhaps someone had contacted the family since no one was there previously. We had reached 32 minutes.

“Alright, get ready to take over,” a nurse to my right told me.

I was lined up across from the person giving compressions and ready to take over as seamlessly as possible when a nurse practitioner ran into the room and yelled stop repeatedly. It seemed that she was the source of the crying I had heard. As it turns out, she was the niece of the man who was once laying on the bed in front of us. She wiped a tear and held the man’s hand. She turned to one of the Rapid Response Nurses that I’m guessing she knew pretty well.

“He burned all of his bridges with the rest of us. I only knew he was in the hospital because my cousin told me. I just wish things had ended differently.” She turned to her uncle, squeezed his hand and said, “I love you, Unc.” She said her goodbye and left the room.

The energy left in the room was unlike anything I have ever felt before. It was a sort of absent pressure that threatened to suck all emotion from your body. I knew how hard it must have been for her to make that decision. But, in her education, she knew how the odds were looking, and she knew how slim the chances of survival were after 30 minutes. I turned to my previous preceptor and asked if she would like my assistance with the post-mortem care. She assured me that she didn’t and ushered me away.

I returned to the breakroom alone and broken. I tried to force myself to eat, but to no avail. Every bite was tasteless and made purely out of motivation for

sustenance. I recounted every detail about the day, though they were scarcely chronological. I realized that the events weren't very preventable. Though, a very real and terrifying reality of my job is that there is a nationwide shortage of nurses. Often, nurses are overworked and underpaid. They often have high patient-to-nurse ratios. In my hospital, nurses are sometimes forced to care for up to seven patients, which is almost double the nationwide average. Now, it would be unfair to say that nursing staff shortages cost this man his life, but perhaps, it could have been caught sooner if the nurse in question had a safer number of patients. She had indeed had seven patients relying on her that day.

I thought once more about the man I had briefly known. I thought about how differently today could have gone. I wish I had gotten to know him a bit better. Suddenly, guilt flooded my mind and threatened to engulf me when I realized I had never asked the man his name.



Wearing a Hijab in London: The Tale of a Bond Formed Abroad

Megan Cruey

The train was red and blue; the seats were made of some kind of orange faux leather, and it was sticky to the touch. After discovering the sticky bit, I chose to stand. It was Wednesday mid-afternoon, and a rare English heatwave had struck up, so the train smelled heavily of foreign spices, cumin and turmeric, and of body odor. This train was different than all the trains I had been on in London so far. Long gone was the sleek look of the underground, the air-conditioned cars, the intercom that had worked. This was one of the above ground trains to the outskirts of the city. This was the train to Little Bangladesh.

We had flown to London just a short few days before. I was on a college trip to Europe that was to last the entire summer. I had worked two jobs for a whole year to pay for this trip, all while going to school. One was waiting and bussing tables at a restaurant on the weekends. I learned to smoke cigarettes during this period, because that's how a girl got a break from the endless barrage of work that was 12-hour shifts and poor tipping days. The other job was during the week, and I was a caregiver to intellectually-disabled individuals. Delivering medicine and cleaning all afternoon, all while exchanging conversation was a much more easy-going vocation. This was one of the most difficult periods of my life; however, the seemingly tangible anticipation I felt at the beginning of May had been worth every hour of work I had put in.

On May fifteenth, a group of seven scared college students, my professor, and I boarded a plane bound for Paris. London was a short trip for my group between France and Italy. We arrived on June twentieth and remained until only until July third. I was attempting to soak up every experience I could before we had to leave and fly over the Italian Alps to land in Venice. The morning prior to this new adventure on the red and blue train, to little Bangladesh, I had gone to see the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. I thought this museum had paled in comparison to the Musee D'orse, a French museum we had

visited a week or so before. So far, I had not chosen to leave the safety of my tour groups; a country girl, barely nineteen years old, from a small town named Honaker, population of a thousand at the most, terrified of the size of Paris and now London. However, this trip, on the red and blue train, I was making alone.

In the beginning, before the plane rides, the boarding passes, and even before I paid my dues to the EF College Tours, I had told my mother and father I was choosing to go abroad for a spell. This was in May of the previous year, of 2014. At first, they were apprehensive, until I explained the trip would end in Rome. A light seemed to turn on in my mother's eyes and she understood. The tour group I was with would spend an entire day in the Vatican. My Catholic mother had gone on and on about the pilgrimage to the Holy City- and the Pope, my god, the Pope. Distinctly, however, this day's trip on the red and blue train was not to satisfy the will of my mother or of any other person. I was on this train to satisfy a need of my own: a need to experience.

At last, after what seemed like an hour but had only been 24 minutes, the train creaked to a shaky halt and I escaped the stuffy car to the street beyond. As if experiencing the fresh air for the first time, I inhaled, and the air was sweet with a scent I did not recognize. The buildings, tall and mostly brick, had signs all written in Arabic. There was graffiti, beautiful and strange, covering whole walls, the street, or anywhere there was room for it. The effect was beautiful, this meshing to brick and art. I felt as an interloper, my mind recalling the words of a poem I had read on the plane, recalling Ozymandias; I was a traveler from a distant land.

I strolled along the sidewalk of a street that was not well kept, until I reached an intersection onto a larger road. There, I halted in amazement as my eyes landed on the largest open-air market I had ever seen. It was loud with music somewhere in the distance and voices of many people speaking all at once. My eyes flitted from stall to stall as I took in the faces of the people and everything I could from that single location. I began walking through the market, staring into the eyes of fish being butchered right there on the street and at women in beautiful gowns that flowed down to their ankles or men with long beards and friendly faces. I toured through the shops and bought a bag of samosas, a sweet naan filled with vegetables and spices fresh from a large kettle fire. I tasted what I thought must have been the most delicious tastes in the whole world.

This is where I saw it, what was to become my new dream. A huge, towering mosque, dark brown with hues in tans and light oranges with a gorgeous door gleaming gold. I knew in that moment that I wanted to see in inside the mosque more than anything; the beautiful building in front of me had been the goal all along.

As I approached the building, however, my path was blocked by two men. They wore dark outfits and surly expressions. The one to the left of me said in a heavy accent, “Ma’am, I am sorry. You cannot enter the mosque.” Politely, I asked him why I could not. His answer made sense but devastated me nonetheless. “Because Ma’am, your head doesn’t have a covering.”

With that they walked back to the front doors and I turned around to leave. Dejected, I wheeled back around to the market and began strolling through the stalls again. Suddenly, I viewed what must have been my saving grace out of the corner of my eye. There was a brilliant splash of colors: pinks and blues, deep purples, and mahoganies. And in the middle of it all, a woman with dark skin and eyes, but greying hair, stood in a stall, selling hijabs. I quietly spoke to the woman. I asked her how much the hijabs were, then offered to pay her more to correctly put the hijab on me. She was curious, and by the tone of her voice, a tad apprehensive as to why I wanted this. I explained that I wanted to see the mosque and how beautiful I thought it was. The woman’s eyes softened, and she began searching through a box filled with her beautiful cloth. Finally, she pulled out a hijab of the deepest blue I had ever seen. It seemed almost unbelievable and was made of thread.

“Sit.” She spoke to me in a heavy accent but a soft voice, and I obeyed. I sat in front of her, crisscross applesauce like a child. She began wrapping me in the cloth as if swaddling me. I felt so young, so naïve, and the woman’s touch was gentle, her face drawn in a quiet determination. She was content when the hijab was correctly pulled around my face. I stared at myself in the mirror hanging in her booth, and I felt different, as if the acts of this woman had changed me. I asked her to allow me to pay her, but she serenely told me this would be her treat. She turned quickly and put a board sign on a nail on her booth, something in Arabic I could not read. She took my hand, and again I felt small, childlike. She led me back to the golden, looming doors and whisked me through, into a massive room with a domed ceiling and columns intricately decorated with golden flowers and birds. The top of the dome was painted with a mural I did not recognize, women in hijabs like mine and men with dark beards and books. The chairs were soft, plush in the seat of them but dark wood all around and the whole big room gave off a peaceful, earthy tone, just as the outside color of the building and other accents did.

Irmani, which I learned was my newfound guide’s name, spoke to me about the mosque. She spoke softly due to the volume of people in the mosque, so many for the middle of the day, which was somewhat surprising to me. She explained that the mosque was not only used on Fridays – or Jumaa, which is the Muslim holy day – but it was used all week as sort of a community center as well. She showed me where the prayers were done, the mats tucked away safely. She explained how Jumaa services usually went. Eventually, after I had been staring at this beauty I had

not known I was living without, Irmani took me by the hand once more. This time I felt less like a child, more like an equal, and she leaned to my ear and asked if I had been anywhere around here to eat. I grinned openly at her and said I had not. With that she swept me away, the hem of her long skirt kissing the floor as she moved.

The restaurant was a hole in the wall, and Irmani seemed to know everyone in it. The room was painted in beautiful and bright colors, the whole place smelled of sweetly cooking meat and fresh bread. Irmani spoke about her life, and I spoke about mine. She told me of her own daughter, Jiniya, beautiful, ambitious, and kind. She spoke about weaving the hijabs, how her mother had taught her the skill. I was hung up on every word, eating my meal with the appreciative silence of good food and an interesting story being told. Afterward, Irmani simply said she had to return to her booth and pack up for the night. She suggested I go back to the city before it was too dark. She kissed my cheek and gracefully swept away, and I did not see her again. In this moment, the childlike feeling swept over me again and I wished for Irmani's hand to hold as I walked back to the train. It was the first time the whole day I had felt the apprehension of this part of the city. Needless worry though, as I found the platform for the red and blue train quickly. However, standing on the platform I still felt the childish bewilderment in my chest and I realized perhaps it was not fear. Instead, it was a deep feeling of loss as I knew I would not see my new friend again.

On the ride home, the air was sickly sweet with the smell of fruit and perfume. The orange seats were still slightly sticky. I sat anyway. The red light of a sunset filtered over me, and the world seemed as if everyone were holding their breath at once. The sun sank, and the world turned dark. The train's inside lights flickered on. I reflected on the day's events. Truly, I felt miles different now than the me who rode this same train earlier. I thought of Irmani and the completely different life she had lead than I had. And yet, for a moment in time, we shared ourselves with each other.

This is one of the days in which I became the person I am today. A moment no one would deem radical. I did not convert to Islam; I did not uproot my life and move to London. However, this was the day I learned that kindness and friendship are universal, defiant of language and differences. I believe I now carry that lesson in my heart and try to be an example of that love given to me freely from a woman who had nothing to gain but my love back.



Communication

Elizabeth Chapman

When I learned my first words in Nepali,
one girl at a party taught me a line
to convince my boyfriend to bring more wine.
I listen closely to her and then say:
Malai maya gara: love me, love me.
I repeat in both languages: His. Mine.
Both of our brains releasing dopamine
from foreign accents speaking the plea.
Pupils dilate, white teeth peak below
his smooth-mauve lips. Enchanted by the smell
of my coconut perfume, the cumin
on the food. He laughs, grabbing my torso.
His response has universal meaning.
our bodies know this language: it's human.



Untitled (Blue quilt)



Raina Nief

Eve 'N Adam



Amber Howard

Untitled (bag with rifle)



Lizzy Rees

Jungle Fever



Olivia Ellis

Juliana



Zoey Thomas

I'll Have the Steak



Hannah Oakes

Better to be Pissed Off, Than to be Pissed On



Brynne Carlisle

O.6 inches

Abby Lewis

I.

Our golden retriever died
on the carpet in our living room.

She lay stretched out on her side. We placed
water by her head. She did not drink.

I lay next to her, my face mirrored in her eyes.
She whimpered. I stroked her oily fur.

For days we maneuvered around her body. Surrendering—
finally—we brought her to the vet.



Years later, our feline birthed a litter
on the same carpet—four kittens.

The next yielded double. We had her fixed after
that, though the vet said she was already pregnant
again.



We raised another golden, a girl
fixed as soon as she was of age.

She watched the birth of the kittens
with the keen eye of a midwife

and licked each one clean as if it were her own.

II.

I think of how our golden retriever would
have been an excellent mother.

I think of our role as superiors,
our decisions shaping their lives.



I lay awake at night

rubbing the skin between the nail and
first crease of my finger,

a surface larger than the size of a developing kitten
in its mother's womb, unaware

how sterile—cold—life can be;
safe in its dark, watery love chamber.



Sentries of the Cemetery

Abby Lewis

I tie a loving noose around the neck
of tree number 1427, do the same
to its brother, 1428, before stringing
my hammock between the two.
Chips of bark shower the ground
as the straps clench to hold my weight.
Cicadas sing their rebellious song while I lounge
below their home.

When a woodcutter finishes his labor,
he places each hour of his day in the
arms of the survivors. How strange
it is we expect trees to carry the fallen
without question. Are they bothered
by their numerical names?
Are we bothered by ours?

When Mother and I went to Old Gray Cemetery,
there was a separate, circular graveyard
full of identical headstones
etched with numbers and letters—
pallid alligator teeth waiting to disappear
under the mallet of a child's finger.
Only a few had names;
some were lucky enough to have wives—
someone to remember them by,
if only for a while.

Dusk falls, and I release the trees
from their bonds, wipe the crusted
sap from the straps.
I pat tree 1428 before I leave.
The pine cones crunch like bones
beneath my feet.



Paralysis Under Popcorn Ceiling

Dillon McCroskey

Holy days passed by—
I look back
through faint fragrances
to catch a glimpse.
Underneath carport shadow
pink plastic teacups,
my small hands,
getting the lowdown
on the phantoms in the backyard.
So much I've forgotten
in the corners of the toolshed—
so much forgotten
lying scattered across the yard,
wrapped around grass blades.
My brother points to the black cloak
wandering the apple orchard at noon.
Red and yellow figures dance
out from the wall. Strange
leaves fall—
I float, frozen.



The Sound of Color

Jessica Dunker

The smell of breakfast pervaded the upper levels of the house, waking the children first, then the masters themselves. The kids crushed each other as they hurried down the steps, their faces eager for a taste of the smoked sausage still hot on their plates at the table. They shoved their faces full, nevermind the newly washed clothes they found neatly folded for them in the early hours of pre-dawn.

No. 41 circled the dining room with a smile, the milk pitcher full to refill any of the empty glasses on the table. Both masters shuffled in, their white suits pressed to perfection, and sat at both ends of the table. The family's platinum blonde hair reflected in the morning sun of their home, the shadows resting only in a small portion of the room, where No. 41 waited patiently with a closed lip smile.

"Very good breakfast this morning," the master said and winked at No. 41, who blushed in return. It means well when the master compliments the food.

Only the sound of chewing could be heard, along with the sound of the children scraping their polished silverware against the plates.

"Forty-One, what are your tasks for the day?"

"Actually, Mrs., today is my Free Day. With your permission, I would like to take my Free Day and go to Market."

"Is it that late in the month already?"

No. 41 knew better than to respond and paused before replying. "By going to Market, I could acquire some new linens to make another tunic for myself. This one is growing too small for me, and it would be indecent not to craft another soon."

"My, it is, Forty-One," the mistress muttered. "You are blossoming, aren't you?"

The master's eyes shifted to No. 41, to which No. 41 averted her eyes less the mistress noticed. It did not mean well for No. 41 to look at the master with the mistress in the room.

"Yes, ma'am. I also wonder if Miss Aimy might need another shirt too. I could gather some linens for her at Market."

"It seems you and Aimy both are growing rather quickly," the mistress said, placing her utensils across the plate. "Sometimes I forget you two are the same age."

No. 41 quickly stepped over and removed the plate.

"I believe Miss Aimy is a couple years older than I," No. 41 said with a smile. "I remember being small and chasing Miss Aimy around the yard so many years ago."

"Yes, I remember those days," the mistress said with a thin smile. "You've grown so much since then, Forty-One. Now look at you, growing fast and making your own clothes. No. 40 would have been proud."

A silence settled over the room.

"Of course, you can go to Market for your Free Day, Forty-One," the mistress added. "Here, I'll take the family vouchers. Have you saved up enough slips to get your own linens and a snack? I wouldn't want you to go hungry and be tempted to sneak a snack when no one's looking."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you for your concern."

The mistress handed No. 41 the family vouchers. Two vouchers had a large fifty at the top and pictured the family crest. For a moment, No. 41 noticed the stark difference in skin tone as the mistress's hand brushed against No. 41's. She wondered how one hand could be so pure and pearlesque, while the other seemed so dirty and tainted.

No. 41 held fast to the vouchers and excused herself from the room. She hurried out the kitchen's side door and across the lawn to where a one-room building stood at the end of the grounds. In the room stood two small beds, one empty and the other neatly made. No. 41 reached underneath the slim pillow on her bed and pulled out the handmade brown pouch that held her saved slips from her month's income. She had scrimped to save two slips this month, coming to a grand total of twelve overall. Twelve will be just enough to treat herself to a day at Market.

She returned to the master house only to find the family had finished their breakfasts and retreated to their respective rooms.

Once she finished cleaning up the kitchen, she made a small bundle for herself in one of the brown rags laid away for her personal use. On her way to Market, she nibbled at the half-eaten leftovers. She wore her shrinking, brown tunic with her dark, curly tassels of hair pulled tight behind her head so it lay flat and looked soft like her mistress' hair.

As No. 41 walked the streets to Market, she noticed a sea of brown eyes poking out from brown faces, their brown tunics all blending together, making it impossible to distinguish one from the other. Many of them looked determined, their vouchers clasped tight in one hand; others seemed happy to be spending their personal slips on treats for themselves, such as slices of pie or bonbons from the bakeries. Their hair all pulled back just as hers was. Only a few white spots dotted the crowd, and even then, they were granted enough room to walk with leisure and without worry. At every street corner was an officer supervising the crowds. The officers wore an all-white uniform and polished white shoes blinding to the eye.

Rows and rows of shops opened on the street. Signs read off all the different commodities and pleasures the stores offered. Some were useful, like the shop fronts reading "Grocery" and "Simple Linens." These were the most practical, and No. 41 wasted no time pushing her way to the entrance. She bumped into several men, all of whom glanced back with either resentment or a snide smirk. No. 41 chose to ignore them all and continued her tasks, despite feeling a breeze underneath a new tear one of them must have made at the base of her spine.

Those incidents happened from time to time, though No. 41 knew the futility of reporting her complaints to the officers. Only a woman in white could report these incidents and be heard. If a woman in brown asked for directions, another incident could occur. No. 40 used to say it was best to ignore the bad and focus only on the good. She used to say it didn't end well when women publicized her personal matters, especially when a man was involved; it didn't look right for the lady in question. As Free Day was a day of special importance, No. 41 pushed the bad away and instead focused on the good.

Inside the shop, she found all shades of brown linens for her to fashion her tunic. Many of the linens were recycled tunics, but No. 41 wasn't interested in hand-me-downs. She wanted a personal tunic of her own, something she could call her own.

When she asked the shopkeeper, a man wearing an off-white suit, for the best brown linens in the shop, the man did not check the back for new arrivals, nor did he seem to notice her request. He pulled out a roll of ordinary brown cloth

and asked what measures she needed. She frowned, but only inside, and answered the man with a smile she hoped appeared as white as pearls.

She left the store and made her way to the far end of the street where the sign read “Pure Linens” and asked for the newest arrivals for her mistress’ daughter, whose name she referenced for clarification. The shopkeeper insisted he must see a family voucher, which she produced immediately from her brown pouch. He took the linen in his hand and examined it under an eyepiece, thoroughly, before nodding his consent and sending the errand boy in brown to retrieve the spring arrivals from the back of the shop.

Midday approached rather quickly, signaling time for No. 41 to enjoy her Free Day lunch. She felt her insides rumble at the smell of the lined up snack stands down the street. She made her way to the first stand she saw, reading “Chicken” across the top. Chicken would do as well as any, so No. 41 took her place at the back of the line.

As she stood behind the other brown-clad people, many men and women in white stepped forward without taking notice of the line or those waiting behind them. They held up how many orders they needed, and the man behind the counter smiled without protest for his other customers. He wore a spotless, off-white shirt, a too-small hat resting atop his head and nearly hiding his crudely bleached hair. The man handed the white-wearing customers what they needed with a crooked-toothed smile as another man in a stained brown tunic worked tirelessly to prepare the orders.

When, finally, it was No. 41’s turn to retrieve her snack, she held up a one with her index finger and said “please” and “thank you” as was the custom No. 40 had instilled her so many years ago. No. 41’s order was interrupted by a woman in white, her natural blonde hair shining in the afternoon sun, her skin white as snow. She demanded an extra order, claiming hers was undercooked and held up a half-eaten order No. 41 thought was perfectly prepared.

The man in off-white smiled pleasantly and simply handed her another order then apologized profusely for the mistake.

“It’s the boy,” he said. “He’s been working all day, and sometimes they can get a bit flustered with so much work to do.”

The woman accepted the snack and pushed her way closer to the man behind the stand. “I should let an officer know about this incident,” she whispered. “But I’m willing to let mistakes go if you make the appropriate reparations.” She grimaced at the man in brown.

The man was disconcerted for a moment, but the woman's harsh gaze finalized his speech. "No. 16, stop what you're doing and face me," the man demanded.

Slowly the man in brown put down the order he was preparing and faced the man in white. Though he stood taller than the man in off-white, the man in brown kept his head down, his chin to his chest, his eyes on the ground.

"You could've harmed this woman," the man in off-white said. "There's no excuse for such a clumsy mistake on your part." The man in off-white swung his right hand over his left shoulder and smacked the man in brown across his cheek and eye. "Now apologize!"

The man in brown's face purpled, and a stream of blood leaked from his eyes. Still his nose pointed to the ground as he apologized to the woman for his recklessness in hopes she would see it to forgive him. The woman merely sneered and stalked off as the man in brown turned back to his station.

The man in off-white turned back to No. 41 with a close-lipped smile and reached underneath the stand. He handed No. 41 a cold chicken sandwich, and though the bread was stale, the tomatoes slimy, and the lettuce browning at the edges, No. 41 accepted her snack without complaint and paid the man. She mustered the kindest smile she could as she stepped away, and tears flooded her eyes.

No. 41 immediately left the park and hurried down the street, her hands holding fast to her bags and measly sandwich. Her eyes scanned the streets for an empty bench, anything to sit on and rest for a while. Three blocks later, No. 41 slowed her gate and checked behind her as a precaution. No. 40 had taught her to always look over her shoulder when she felt danger was around, but how many times a day could she look over her shoulder without breaking her neck?

She felt exhausted as her heart came to a steady pace in her chest. She spotted a park nearby, one with an open field and a garden to mingle. No. 41 noted all the benches were occupied by women in white and their white-bearing children, so she took a seat in the grass at the outskirts of the park. Her feet kicked up dirt as she made her way to the center of the park and sat down. She laid her shopping bags down beside her, her sandwich softening to mush the longer she held it.

No. 41 unwrapped the sandwich and picked off the lettuce. She stomached the rest of the sandwich to the end, her taste buds revolting against the old meat, her eyes watering, though she could not say what from. No. 41 reminded herself that she has food to eat and would eat again tonight after the family's dinner. She reminded herself that her masters were kind and would never abuse her.

They were so kind to allow No. 41 their leftovers. They were so kind to let her go to Market on her Free Day. They were so kind when No. 40 left her alone in that one-room shack at the edge of the grounds. Her masters offered their condolences and allowed No. 41 three days off from her chores and did not yell at her when she cried in the kitchen or over the laundry. Others, she knew, were not so fortunate.

No. 41 sat in that spot as the sun overhead made its way across the sky. She did nothing but sit and think, watching as others went throughout their day. She noticed children in white recklessly playing out of their parents' sight, the hems of their pants already stained from the dirt. The mothers did not scold them, only talked amongst each other, their shifting eyes whispering household secrets. She noticed many others in brown passing through the park, their heads down, their eyes avoiding the women in white. The men in white held their heads high, their strides confident, their heads craning to glance back at women in their brown tunics.

Amid No. 41's thoughts, she wondered what it would be like to wake up wearing a white nightgown, her skin as pale as her mistress', her hair smooth and shining in the morning dawn. Would she feel any different? Would she still be able to perform her tasks with knowing her inherent worth? She imagined what her life would look if she had skin white as milk, pure and clean. She saw herself clearly in white, walking through the crowds, the appreciation on everyone's faces of her external glow. She wouldn't have to smile for everyone to notice her beauty. She would not have to ask to receive the rewards she deserved.

No. 41 sat there in that park until the afternoon sun began to wane. Without much thought, No. 41 rose from her seated position and headed back into Market. She was among the shops again and entered Grocery. Often, No. 41 would purchase a few fruits or vegetables to enjoy throughout the rest of the month. These small pleasures would remind her of the Free Day to come if she had a bad day, but No. 41 had another treat in mind, a treat she would cherish much more than simply by consuming it. She understood value and worth, and she would obtain both in due time.

Once No. 41 got home, she prepared and served the family dinner as usual. When the family asked how her day went, she told them her Free Day was as refreshing as always and thanked them for asking. They nodded their approval, glad to see No. 41 happy with herself. After all, good feelings promoted good work.

When the family retired to bed, No. 41 tidied the house of discarded snacks and trash, locked the doors, and retreated to her room. She did not sleep that night.

Though she rested peacefully in her bed without any nighttime disturbance, she fashioned herself two new tunics, her eyes closing shut with needle and thread in hand.



The following month, when No. 41's Free Day came back around, the mistress approved of No. 41's request to return to Market without any notice to the anticipation in No. 41's voice. After breakfast, No. 41 returned to her room, her bed neatly made, her second tunic hanging on a nail in the wall, ready for its first wear out to Market.

From underneath her bed, No. 41 pulled out the treat she had saved from her last Free Day. She kept it wrapped in the brown paper bag the clerk had given her. A stool sat in the corner, a piece of glass stuck to the wall as a makeshift mirror. She could only see her face, but that was enough. She pulled the treat from its bag and admired the white gel inside. Slowly, and with deliberate concentration, No. 41 peeled the "Mayo" label off the can. With nothing distracting her eye from the treat, even when wrapped in a thick glass container, the color inside seemed to her an entrapped piece of divinity, something so pure that it must be sealed away from the public's greedy eye.

No. 41 twisted the top off and reached her dark hands in, the white immediately covering the brown of her hands. As No. 41 reached deeper into the can, she watched her arm lose its original form and turn to white, the mass of mayo scaling her arm in a soft caress. When the process was complete, No. 41 put on the white dress she had made, one identical to Miss Aimy's and walked to Market.

Just as she reached the corner leading to the shops, she felt everyone's eyes immediately on her, the whites of hundreds of eyes clearly visible among the many colored-faces. With careful steps forward, No. 41 stepped her way through the crowd as everyone cleared a path to let her by. They couldn't help but stare! She was so beautiful covered in white--her smiling face, her coarse hair, her long neck, her broad shoulders, her lean arms, her thick legs. Even her feet covered the brown toes squelching in her sandals, leaving a white path in her wake.

She felt angelic, her newfound worth seemingly divine. The thick mayo on her skin congealed from the heat of early afternoon and faded into a sickly yellow. No. 41 took no notice. Rather, she embraced the change, for even off-white was purer than the dark faces grimacing around her, their eyes black and hateful of her newfound beauty.

She heard footsteps pounding against the sidewalk behind her and turned, her still-smiling face greeting the end of a gun's barrel. Her teeth cracked from the

oncoming force as white exploded from the back of her eyelids. The black bullet forced its way past the whiteness of her skin, breaking the mold, and spilling all her colored insides against the pavement.

The men and women wearing white ran from the scene, screaming in agony at the sight of so much color. They pushed aside those wearing brown who could only duck their heads and pray for their lives as officers fired shots into the air. The officers called for order, their white uniforms splattered with red, a color that stained and could never be erased. For once those wearing white saw the taint of their class and fled from the scene in attempts to escape the damage the men in white had caused. The public would later deem No. 41's death *the color incident* as a reminder of someone who knew her worth and refused silence.



Heart Pine

Lacy Snapp

Juanita. Juanita.

We repeat words to ingrain them into memory.

Sometimes, the more we say a word, the stranger it feels
on the tongue. Foreign. Like we don't actually know what it means at all. Juanita.

Great-grandmother. I knew her as a child. Well, parts of her. I knew how
she would sweeten her coffee with ice-cream. I knew her jewelry stand
by heart—I'd get on tiptoes to peer into every drawer, marvel
at the broaches, the rings, try with little fingers to clip
Sarah Coventry earrings onto little earlobes. I knew
her everyday necklace, pearls even and
tight like the grain of heart pine.

Heart pine.

When the tree's seed germinates,

for ten years it will only be the height of a blade

of grass. For ten years, its energy is spent strengthening its root system—

most of its universe lies beneath the surface. When it's finally ready, its will grow an inch

wider every thirty years. After her death, I found black and white photographs

of a woman in a pencil skirt and pinned on hat, peeking out from behind

a tree, laughing, whiskey bottle in hand—I learned she slept with

a pearl handle Bauer .25 under her pillow and had five

husbands, some passed of mysterious

circumstances. She voyaged

from Shelton, NC, on a covered wagon with
her many brothers and sisters, dressed in matching
potato sacks, and looking back on the poorness of what was,
wasn't mournful, just wanted more. A pair of shoes for every blouse, tools
of her own, accessories, she'd write her name on anything in Sharpie to claim it as
it came through the door. Every pan in the kitchen. Even the back wall of her father's cedar
armoire. One Sunday, after her second stroke, Dad loaded us up in the van
to pay her a visit. Measuring tape in his hand, she stood on her tiptoes,
eager for my dad to calculate her height, her width—he told her
that was cheating, she needed to keep her feet flat.
It took us a few months to build her coffin
in the basement.
I was only ten, friends would come over
for sleepovers and be scared of what was in the works beneath
the house's surface. In the end, when her growth rings were getting closer and closer together, she'd
ask dad how it was coming along, and he'd tell her, to hang on a bit longer,
he wasn't done yet. In a plot with a view at Happy Valley Memorial Park,
she is closer to being reunited with the earth than those encased
in bronze or copper. She sleeps in a bed all her own,
made of reclaimed heart pine.
Heart pine for Juanita.



Red Oak

Lacy Snapp

I.

RIP my childhood red oak.

When you were planted by my father,
you were only the height of a toddler,
but grew to be three stories tall
and would brush your tree-tips across
my bedroom window at midnight,
relentlessly throughout summer storms.

You were the first tree I ever climbed.
It was uncomfortable—I'd hug tight
to your trunk when I needed a rest,
bark would poke through my shirt
into my soft, elementary belly. I felt
ants scurry beneath fingertips but
I was too scared of falling to ungrasp.

Fresh-faced stump, you now stare up
at me. In shock. Outraged. Wounded.
Years of shade and afternoon games
dropping sap and acorns on my car
were cut away in a few hours—
a deception that shook every house
on the street, rippled out from the eye
of your rings, confined now to seventeen.

II.

RIP backroad red barn.

You offered wanderers protection as they braced
against the elements in the middle of a cow field.
Unconcerned with the modern—electricity, fashion—
your red paint flaked proudly until your sagging roof
and old age were no longer charming, but dangerous.
You fought my father with
each rusted nail as he tore you down.

I spread out your seventeen-foot limbs,
stick stack sort them, make sure they stay
flat, are prepared to be cut and sanded,
formed into a table or clock, something less
mysterious than an untouched barn at a dirt
road's end. Your worth is now measured by
feet. Inches. How well you can be divided.

I flip your scarlet face away and watch as silverfish scurry
from my fingertips. Hating
the sunlight, but unafraid, when the wood's
movement disturbs them, a new home is easily found.
Soft. Grey. Fluid. Sheltered in the solid bones of a red oak
twice displaced.



Le Roble Rojo

Lacy Snapp

(Traducido por: Colin Yarid, Maegan Lewis, Lexie Stout, Kristofer Cochran)

DEP camino trasero granero rojo
Les ofreciste la protección a los vagabundos mientras
se agarran contra los elementos en el centro
del campo de las vacas. Despreocupado con lo
moderno – la electricidad, la moda – tu pintura
roja se desconchó orgullosamente hasta tu techo caído
y la edad vieja ya no eran encantadora, sino
peligrosa. Peleaste contra mi padre con
cada clavo oxidado mientras te desmontó.

*Extiendo tus diecisiete extremidades del pie,
Las apilo, me aseguro que permanecen
planos, que están preparados para ser cortados y lijados,
construidos en una mesa o reloj, a veces menos
misterioso que un granero intacto al final de
un camino de tierra. Tu valor ahora es medido por
pies. Pulgadas. Qué bien se puede dividir.*

*Volteo lejos a tu cara escarlata y veo mientras
las lepismas corretean en las puntas de mis dedos. Odiando
la luz del sol, pero sin miedo, cuando el movimiento
de la madera los molesta, una nueva casa se
encuentra fácilmente. Suave. Gris. Fluido. Albergado en
los huesos sólidos de un roble rojo desplazado dos veces.*

(Traducido por: Kristen Bennett, Ashley Arthur, Garrett Barker, Kayla Hodan, Rebekah Fine)

DEP el roble rojo de mi infancia

Cuando te plantó mi papá,
sólo tenías la estatura de un niño,
pero creciste hasta tener una altura de tres pisos
y rozabas tus puntas sobre
la ventana de mi cuarto a la medianoche,
implacablemente durante las tormentas de verano.

Fuiste el primer árbol que trepé.
Era incómodo – me abrazaba fuerte
a tu tronco cuando necesitaba un descanso,
sacaba la corteza por mi camisa
contra la barriga blandita. Sentía
que las hormigas se apuraban debajo de las puntas de los dedos pero
estaba demasiado asustado de caer para soltarme.

El tocón lozano, ahora me miras
fijamente. En shock. Enojado. Herido.
Años de la sombra y juegos de la tarde
en que se caían la savia y las bellotas en mi coche
fueron cortados en unas pocas horas –
un engaño que hizo temblar a todas las casas
en la calle, se ondeó del ojo
de tus anillos, confinado ahora a diecisiete.



Measures of Necessity

Nancy Jane Earnest

I outgrew my toddler play table.
 Soon my father claimed it as his own.
It measured three feet square.
 When he sat at the end of the couch,
 he'd pull the table tight up over his knees,
 ensuring nine square feet of space
 between him
 and me.

The table held everything he needed:

TV Guide

cigar humidor
stack of lightly used paper towels
pencils in a cup
a shot glass
monogramed Zippo lighter and fluid
pocket knife, three rubber bands
short stem pipe, Prince Albert tobacco, pipe cleaners
bowl of unshelled peanuts
pouches of Bugler brand tobacco, papers included
device for hand-rolling cigarettes that filled a worn, wooden box
and a large, full ashtray providing
fifteen hours of continuous second-hand smoke daily

After years of honing isolation to accommodate his habits,
my father burned himself out.

Grief,
the unnamed tape holding my loneliness together,
had long ago turned brittle and fallen away.
There was nothing now but
scrubbing brown scum from walls and furniture
and mourning,
not the man,
but my unmet need for his warmth.



Conjuring

Nancy Jane Earnest

I pulled the case down from the shelf
as dust began to scatter.
Its sides were beaten, scarred, and scuffed,
the handle cracked and tattered.

For years the contents laid at rest
while I pursued distractions.
But now I flipped the latches wide,
amazing by my reaction.

The coils of brass still circled up;
the bell flared round and free.
But when I held it in my hands,
this horn was part of me.

I slipped the mouthpiece in the pipe,
then raised it to my lips.
A lover's buss could not have matched
the sparking of that kiss.

With buzzing lips and flowing breath
the magic had begun.
For nothing can contain the fire
when heart and horn are one.



Lines Held in Husk

Rieppe William Moore

The Mother has colonized the cider vinegar like the rats beneath the covered duck house, burrowed in and tunneled out. When you pickle beans, the Mother lifts her milk-dew to the top and you have to scrape it off. It's a strange thing to see, to raise cheese cloth and find a fermented sidle. But I heard that was in the Bible. Its fog-dream clouds up, quick and shifty like the lightning filament that fleshed the bones of night from the hill-crest where I was looking past the Unakas, winking back re-mustered darkness quicker than the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Down the pasture Stan's boy is in his 60s, telling the cows about Trump's time machine. They low and low, then duck their heads in tall grass to chew the cud past their lips. He needs to walk more. He knows this. At least that's what the doctor said before he left the sanitarium where his mother took her life. She had the sight more than most but couldn't tell her son about it. Her vision had the gravity of a hummingbird, Stan said, *Weighs less than the weight of a dime*, and held his hand up so his finger touched his thumb, a gesture for the likeness of his son.

Now Stan can't rub two nickels together for the loss in his steps and he said, *I'm just trying to keep the place up*. His 87 years with flies around his head might be like the flies in mine. Walking with cows in the tall grass and chasing them from the gate when they approach the truck, yelling, *Git git git!* with new-seeded grass yet to come, held in husk, lifted knee high and light as the space between a finger and a thumb.



Kindle Gathering

Rieppe William Moore

Past the girthy maple still sheltering a skitter of chartreuse leaves
a few slant-dream poplars stand out, proud of blanched gray bark.

Gathering kindling in bundles after the late rain has bathed
in wind and sun, the woods resemble a rusted palate.

The beech's straggled leaves hang on from dark green to bronze
in elliptical shades of morning as the grass with burnished green

in the old fields long since raked for blunts and flint, some
sailing with a twang from a hunter's open chest, some exploding

by the ear of those prone to the quiet of corn sheaves' growth,
given to the silence of fire, not permitted here

from any letters of proclamation, a hammer away from liberty
like the leaves on the beech tree with its taught paper bark;

a blast of wind a spark or the poplar with its cupped children,
premature for calm or liberty, the spotted scorn of the property.

Singed flecks of light fall to the ground through skimpy trees
with a rhapsody of leaves. I'm stepping where the steep ground

won't tear away from slick grass, which wards off a water table
overseeped to bottom-soil, where I can find my place between

mountain bogs of still water contiguous to streams and branches
flowing with water-green or that distant blue that's not quite seen.

Lasting impressions linger from oaks lining the pasture with the hue
of butternut squash soup and gone just as quick or held for a little bit,
after the flow dries up. I remember when the last of the distant thunder
cracked against the shortened days and scared the green in leaf away.

Now branches burl in hemlock trunks and the sun will brandish
the dull blade of its Case knife across the sky. All my things are old

things stuck to memory like a willful leaf to its branch, faithful
as a hen to her roost, ready to fade from colors I can't cling to.



Earthworm Exodus

Emily Price

shredded paper bones fill hollowed tissue skin
that crumbles with the slightest breeze
or tears with saltwater floods
or seeps through sockets of empty eyes
in droplets that pool in the streets
apathetically observing an earthworm exodus—
their swollen bodies waterlogged & exhausted
relentless inching forward
towards nowhere, quietly

the aching present holds almost corpses
weighed down, unable to float away
towards the tired clouds swollen with rain
(they will swallow you whole)
drowning in their miniaturized red sea
flowing over concrete
futility overtakes each of seven segmented hearts
that tomorrow will be drained
by sun against the drying pavement



Greeneville, TN

Emily Price

the almost frigid spring air whips, haphazard,
to scatter the ashes from their impermanent
resting place where we laid them just before.

they now shift in small grey tornadoes—
like when the late august wind with its
long, sifting fingers spins whirlwinds of

grasshoppers—sending these remnants
swift across a familiar pasture in whose
rustling hay i used to run, pretending to

be free in the embers of another sunset.
light disappears with one final flourish,
giving way to night's glistening emerald

sea of humming cicadas who mutter
gossip in the space between the three
clustered homes that kept my family

close. they whisper, too, in the space
between us & our neighbors, hardly
visible in homes at the pasture's edge.

here, it feels infinite—
where the ashes
once were living cells
compiled as a body

who kept watch over the herd,
who hung tobacco from the rafters to cure,
who dug from the soil things that grew,
who told me all the secrets of this place.

now the ashes dance above the hay.



Styrofoam

Emily Price

drift through remeron fog
only slightly awake
 tightens on my arm
 eyes half-open
 “you can
 go now”
take tiny pills
 before crumbling back
 into the crinkle of stiff sheets
 & plastic mattress
once, twice, again at bedtime
 after three trays of barely food &
 literature of ghosts
 passes through
 incoherent eyes
 like the harsh gaunt bodies
pass through windows
 they walk circles or squares
 stare past all life, past
 ferns, hibiscus, aloe, past
glass reminders of the cage surrounding—
 surrounded
leaves start to fall despite
no sense of the weather
 (it’s always winter here)
wings hold bodies tired,
hollow, dope-sick,
but still breathing
 (if only a little)
drink styrofoam beads
 that surround chlorine
 the small capsules
 coax down sleep



A Bookish Love

Lia Hall

You picked me up some years ago,
The best day of my dull life.
Your soft hands carried me
To what would be my home.
My dearest days exist
Within our brief love affair.
You settled me on your lap,
Lovingly caressed my cover,
Gently turned my pages for hours.
I never wanted our time to close.
But it only took a few fleeting days,
Seeing each other off and on
For me to run out of pages.
Towards our end,
You became dissatisfied,
Putting me down for eternal minutes
Only to roughly jerk me open again
Just to finish what you started.
Until you finally slammed me shut
And jammed me onto the shelf
With all your others, collecting dust.
Now you deprive me of contact,
Acting like I don't exist,
While making me watch
As you move on to better
Adventures and longer loves.
Ones you treasure more than me.



Nightwatchers

Sam Campbell

We settled ourselves atop the catlike hill that arches its back so high that it looks as though we could reach out and touch the full moon. The grazing sheep appeared as scattered snowflakes in summertime against a backdrop of darkness. Father hummed quietly to himself, the way he always did at the beginning of watch when he was trying to decide which story to tell. I'd heard them all before, but I was always happy to hear them again. His stories were magical— about greedy humans who turned into wolves to prey upon the sheep and kind, nomadic witches who travelled the earth to bless the land.

“Have I ever told you boys the truth about the night sky?”

“Only a dozen times,” grumbled Colt. “Can’t you come up with anything better than that?”

“But I like that story!” I shouted. Colt punched me in the arm.

“Stop that fighting. In this world family is the only valuable thing you have. Best take care of it,” Father said.

Colt ignored him. “Still, you could make up something new. We’re out here every night, and we need something new. Something fresh.”

“Well I can’t just make something up,” Father said. “I don’t want to lie. That’s why I only tell true stories. Now, as I was saying...”

Colt rolled his eyes. Father always said they were special. He had a story for why Colt’s eyes were different colors, but tonight he was telling a different story, my favorite story.

“It is said that every individual has their own protector—a god or goddess that watches over them and protects their livelihood. Priests and government officials worship Axel in hope that the god will assist them in leading the people. Seafarers worship Nai’a so that they may return home safely and with a great catch. As for hunters and herders,

well, we worship the goddess Raena – praise be unto her – that she will protect both us and our flock from the prowling wolves.”

“Now hold on,” Colt interrupted, “if she’s protecting our flock, then why do we have to be out here every night?”

An exasperated look flashed across Father’s face but was replaced seconds later by patience. “You cannot expect the goddess to do what we ourselves are unwilling to do. And as anyone can guess, it would be selfish of us mortals to expect our deities to work constantly, especially when we frequently take holidays. The immortals have holidays of their own. For our dear Raena – praise be unto her – she takes holiday once a month on the night of the Full Moon. As legend goes, on the night of the Full Moon, Raena—praise be unto her—sits on the Moon and cries for all the creatures that have died during the last cycle. Her tears become the stars.”

“Why would anyone take a holiday to just cry like a baby?” Colt mumbled. Father ignored him this time.

Looking out across the meadow I could see the glow emanating from the kitchen window. The light spilled out of the house and bathed the blue pickup truck in a yellow radiance. The illumination captivated me as Father continued.

“When she creates new stars, however, there is no more room in the sky. The old stars must fall so that the new ones can take their place. No one knows exactly what happens to the fallen stars, but I do know if you see one falling, it means you will have great fortune in your life.”

When he finished his story, I turned my eyes up to the sky. I never doubted Father’s stories the way Colt did. Looking back, I knew something was going to happen that night. Standing there, head tilted back, I searched in hopeful anticipation of seeing a star descend. The sky extended endlessly in every direction. For a moment, it was as though I were alone floating among the stars and planets.

My concentration was broken by Colt.

“What a load of dung.” He spat on the ground next to him. Not only was his language disrespectful, but he spat in front of an elder. That was an offence that could land you with no breakfast for a week. But Father just turned his head to the sky acting as if he’d seen nothing. I followed his gaze and fixed my stare on one exceptionally bright star. Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw Colt lift his gaze as well. I’m not sure how long we all sat there, our necks craning for us to gaze into the magnitude of wonder.

The star appeared to become gradually larger. I blinked a few times and rubbed my eyes, sure it was just the trickster god playing me for a fool. But when I looked back at the star, I knew it was getting larger.

“Erm...Father...?” I said, shifting my dazed eyes from the star to his face. We looked at each other, frozen in silence. Turning to gaze back up, I realized the star wasn’t getting bigger. It was getting closer. No sooner than I realize this, I heard Father yell, “Duck!”

We flattened ourselves against the Earth, and I felt a powerful gust of scalding air surge above us. I tried to lift my head and see what it was, but a hand on the back of my head pressed it down into the cool grass. I wasn’t sure if it was Father’s or Colt’s. We lay completely still, and the seconds felt like centuries. A low hum, like a beehive disturbed, began to grow louder. I closed my eyes to focus, to try and make it out. Beads of sweat began forming on my skin with the hot, stagnate air around us. The need to move became unrelenting. The humming grew louder. The sound came from every direction, invading my thoughts, the same way cicadas do, until it was all I could focus on.

Just as the sound became too much, a strong gust of wind ripped through the air above, whipping the back of my neck with warm wind. The star plummeted into the crust of the world, shaking the ground so that I knew this was what it felt like to anger Nai’a. After the ground stopped shivering, we picked ourselves up and looked in the direction of the fallen star. We exchanged wary glances, and then, as if by a silent agreement, we all began walking towards the star. Our steps were measured, cautious, and we barely breathed for fear any sound would trigger some unwanted event.

The soil around the crash site was burned to crisp black, and I doubted grass would ever grow there again. I wondered if that was how people knew where a star had once fallen. The star itself, however, was pristine. It was white, but not exactly. It was a translucent illumination more than a color. But it wasn’t at all what I imagined a star to look like up-close. It was much larger, and it radiated warmth. The anxiety I felt before vanished, replaced with a calmness I’d never experienced. The surface appeared as smooth and fragile as a spider’s web at midnight. I was taken by the urge to touch it.

I placed my hand on the star. It appeared as if the star reacted to my touch, and the light became brighter. The collar of my shirt tightened around my neck and I was pulled backwards, away from the star.

“What in the name of Raena do you think you’re doing? Do you want to get us all killed?” Colt’s face was not even an inch away from mine. Drops of saliva

hit my cheek. Somewhere off in the forest a wolf answered his howl. His mismatched eyes glared at me, full of both anger and fear.

“Hush! Look!”

Colt and I turned our heads toward the star, our eyes widening when we saw what Father was pointing at. Colt’s grip went slack, and I tumbled to the ground. But I couldn’t move. I couldn’t do anything but stare. In the spot where I had placed my hand just moments ago there was a crack. We watched as the crack spread down the side of the star and branched off in different directions.

When the first piece of star fell off, Colt spoke. “Is it...hatching?”

More pieces collapsed, and the outer shell of the star ceased to glow. Now, the brightness emanated from the inside. As the final pieces dropped, we learned what happens to fallen stars.

“I told you it was true,” Father said, more to himself than to us. We stood there, staring at the little baby who was glowing in faint starlight until Father stepped forward and picked her out of the fragile pieces of shell that once made up a star.

That was the year we lost Father to the wolves.

Thirteen years had passed since the night the great Goddess blessed us with Luna. As she swayed down through the field, I admired the way she moved and wished that I could someday be as flowing as she is, yet I knew that it would never be possible. My smile faded as I turned my gaze away from her and to the west. My eyes scanned the edge of the forest for any sign of Colt. Unsuccessful, I turned my back to the outdoors and stepped inside, readying myself for a few hours’ sleep.

I heard my name being called from the kitchen. Mother sat at the table chopping carrots and trying to hide her worry with a smile. I could see it in her eyes, though. She tried to be strong for us but running the farm alone hasn’t been easy on her.

“Luna forgot her lunch. Would you be a dear and take it to her?”

I smiled and nodded. I picked up the basket of fruits that Mother had prepared for her. As I turned to go back outside, she stopped me again.

“And on your way back...”

“Yes, I’ll circle around the long way and look for him.”

“Thank you,” Something small in her voice made me pause. I looked back. She had stopped her work mid-motion and stared at the pile of mail on the counter

across the room. Each envelope addressed to Father sat untouched. They would remain unopened, slowly accumulating until it didn't hurt her to toss them out. Mother says it isn't right to read another person's mail, and I admired her ability to accept not knowing what was inside.

I stepped closer to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She jumped slightly as my touch pulled her out of her thoughts and back to the present. She patted my hand. Her eyes flashed from my face to the door and back; a quiet reminder that I had work to do.

Outside, I squinted in the bright sunlight. The rolling hills and green grass always appeared alien to me during the daytime. I much preferred when they were blanketed in midnight shadows. Everything seemed more at peace in the dark, under the protection of the moon. It was nothing like the harsh spotlight of the sun glaring down at me now.

I found Luna close to where the star had landed that night thirteen years ago. We're not sure if she knows where she came from, but I suspect she does. She always plays at the crash site. Each of us labored to teach her to speak, yet she remains silent. Colt deemed her mute after she turned six and still wouldn't utter so much as a 'baa' to imitate the sheep she loves so much.

"An invalid," he spat and never again acknowledged her presence.

"Luna," I called to her. She was on the ground mimicking the motions of an ewe. The way the white dress framed her frailty reminded me of the wind bending tree branches. She made no motion that she had heard me or that she was even aware of my presence. I walked closer to her and set the basket down.

I crouched down beside of her, balancing on the balls of my feet. "Here is your lunch, Luna." My voice automatically shifted an octave higher when I spoke to her.

She turned her head toward me, gracefully, like a swan. She moved toward the basket, still on her hands and knees. Then, she took an apple and offered it to the ewe, who sniffed but didn't taste. Her expression was unreadable. She crawled from ewe to ewe offering the apple to each one. I sighed and shook my head. Luna was obsessed with animals, and it was obvious that she preferred their company to any human's.

Once Luna had offered the apple to half of the flock, I stood up, knowing that she didn't care if I left. I turned my attention to the forest and began threading my way through the trees at the outer fringes of the field. I called out Colt's name as I walked. After Father died, Colt changed. And I hated the new Colt.

The old one might have been maddening, but at least he was bearable. Now, all he does is wander through the woods. He doesn't talk to us anymore.

When we ask about what he's doing in the woods, he just says walking. Or thinking. Or looking for lost sheep. But I know what he's doing in the woods, because we don't lose our sheep—at least not anymore. Not since Luna came to us. Truth is he's hunting. He's hunting the wolf that killed Father.

After combing through the woods for almost an hour, I stopped and leaned against a nearby tree. My eyes drooped. On any normal day I would call off my search, go back to the house, and sleep in preparation for night watching. But something about today felt different. Something stopped my feet from carrying me home. The canopy of trees seemed to blotch out the sunlight, and I realized that I was deeper in the forest than I had intended to go. I was in wolf territory. You don't go into wolf territory unless you're lost, stupid, or Colt.

I heard a loud thumping noise, and I knew that it was the padded feet of the pack running towards me. So, I ran. I knew that was the wrong choice, but I had no better options. The pounding became louder, and I knew they were getting closer. The toe of my shoe caught on the knotted roots of an old tree, and I fell to the ground face-forward. I didn't get up. I awaited my end, but the wolves never came. The pounding in my ears quieted, and I realized I had been running from the sound of my own heartbeat.

When Father was alive, I always wanted to explore the forest. It would be an adventurer, I had said. But the truth is, after he died, I became terrified. I knew that was why I hated Colt so much. He was never afraid.

Night watch is the worst. Alone, in the dark, fresh meat for the wolves. It wouldn't be so bad, but there's no one to tell stories anymore. As the adrenaline waned, I closed my tired eyes to rest and catch my breath for a few moments



Colt wasn't there. The night stretched out before us – ominous, cold. It was the first watch Colt had ever missed, and I wondered what was keeping him.

“Ah, well, the night waits for no one.” Father said with a crinkled smile. He hummed, but I didn't hear it. I looked at him and it was as if he aged right before my eyes. Or maybe it was just that it was the first time I had ever really looked at him, really saw him as anything other than my hero. He was just a man, a man who had been worn down from numerous years of hard times and night watches. The wrinkles ran through his face like deep trenches. His eyes seemed to have sunk in their depths.

“So, any particular story you’d like to hear tonight?”

I shook my head no. He never told the story about the stars anymore. He didn’t have to. We had Luna to remind us of that story now. Instead, he told the story about the wolf-people. He said that there are some people who have survived wolf attacks, managing to escape with nothing more than a couple of bites and scratches. He said it would have been better for everyone if they had died.

“People who live with a wolf bite change,” he said. “They reject the goddess Raena, instead celebrating the New Moon when the night sky is completely void of the goddess’s good light. They celebrate by becoming one with the wolf and killing other shepherds’ sheep. By killing other shepherds.”

I shuddered, wondering why he chose this night to tell this story. He never told this story on the night of the New Moon. He usually went for a more hopeful story, one about the goddess, as if trying to summon her back to us on the bleakest night of the month. But tonight, his story makes the weight of the blackness press in upon us. He stops talking mid-sentence. I glance up, my ears straining to hear what he hears.

“Since Colt has taken the night off, why don’t you do the same?”

I was about to object when I heard it. A low, rumbling growl. Fear stole my ability to form words, even sounds. I sat, frozen, as the beast crept closer.

“Be quiet and slow,” Father whispered, “Stand up and walk home.”

“What about you?”

The question lingered in the air. The response was a loud snarl. It was close enough now that my eyes could make out certain features about it. Bared teeth, bristled fur, yellow eyes. It was the eyes that struck me. There was nothing where the right eye should have been. My breath caught in my throat, and I almost choked. There was only one man in town that was missing his right eye.

Mr. Than Lyall owned the dairy farm on the other side of town. He’d tried a couple of times to add sheep to his livestock, but no one wanted wool from him. Father was the town’s wool man, and Mr. Lyall didn’t like that. He thought he could double his profits if he controlled the town’s wool, dairy, and meat supply. And he could have, but Father was standing in the way of that. Looked like the story about Luna wasn’t the only one Father was telling the truth about.

“Go, now.” Father said. So, I went, and I didn’t look back. I didn’t want to see what I was picturing in my mind.

That’s a lie. I try to make myself forget that I did look back. Anyone would have.

I looked back just in time to know I should have done something—anything—more than running away.



My eyes flew open and I wrestled myself up from off the ground, forgetting where I was for a moment. I looked around half expecting to see the blood-matted fur of a wolf standing proudly over my Father's body. When my heartbeat settled, and I'd caught my breath, I brushed off the bits of leaves and dirt that had attached themselves to me. I started trying to find my way back to the field. I had run deeper into wolf territory than I ever wanted to be, and my dream reminded me of what I didn't want to think about. The week after the funeral, Mr. Lyall had come to our house, offering to buy our flock.

"I know you won't be able to care for all those sheep on your own, Mrs. Shafer, now that your husband is gone and you're a widow." His voice was sweet, but his undertones stabbed like a cold knife.

"Thank you for your concern, Than, but I will be just fine," Mother said. Everyone in town knew Mr. Lyall hated being called by his first name, thinking it a form of disrespect. I was proud of her for standing up to the man who had killed her husband and didn't even bother returning the body.

"Mrs. Shafer, I know you're trying to be heroic, but no one expects you to take over your husband's farm. A woman of your age cannot possibly sit up all night with the flock."

"My farm, my children, and I have been managing just fine since my husband died," she said. "Have a pleasant day, Than. Thank you for stopping by." Then she shut the door in his face. I applauded her, but she silenced me with one quick glance. She was familiar with all of Father's stories, and when I had told her about the missing eye, she knew the truth. After Luna's arrival everyone in our house lived by Father's stories. The next day Mother drove into town. I watched as the truck disappeared down the dirt road. The dust left behind rose from the ground like ghosts, wispy and unsettled.

She returned home that evening with two 220 Swift rifles. One for me, one for Colt.

Father hadn't believed in guns. I protested, but deep down, I knew he'd want us to have them now. He'd like this idea, better than the alternative anyway. When Colt walked in to see the rifles and Winchester cartridges, he smiled. It was the first and only time I saw him smile after Father's death. Each of us learned how to shoot, except for Luna, of course. She watched the guns with wary eyes and

a frown. The rest of us take no chances, and now, shooting has become second nature – the gun like a detachable appendage. Talk of Mother’s purchases spread through the small town like fire, and Lyall stayed away. Still, Mother took no chances and accompanied me every night until I turned thirteen. Colt could have saved her that hassle. He was three years older than me. But he doesn’t watch anymore.

“Did you find him?” Mother asked the moment I stepped inside.

“No,” I replied.

“Oh my, Raena! What happened to you?”

“I fell,” I said, then excused myself to my room so that I could sleep a few hours before nightfall. I didn’t tell her about my scare or running through the woods and falling. I didn’t tell her about trying to find my way back because I’d gone too far into wolf territory. But, more than anything, I didn’t tell her about seeing Colt’s hat lying on the ground near some empty cartridge shells.



Night seemed to arrive the moment I laid my head on the pillow. I pulled my clothes back on and laced up my boots. I grabbed my rifle and stepped into the kitchen to tell Mother goodnight. Her face drooped downward, lips pressed into a permanent frown. Large drops of water formed in the corners of her eyes, and she was wringing her hands, pacing across the tiny kitchen. She paused to glance out the window. Whatever she was looking for didn’t appear.

When she noticed me standing there she lost what was left of her composure. Tears surged forward like a thunderstorm that’s been brewing all day in dark clouds and has finally let go of the rain.

It’s Colt, I thought. She’s always worrying about him. I knew he still hadn’t come home because his bedroom door was open. When he’s here it’s always shut, keeping him in and everyone else out. I wanted to tell her he wasn’t coming, but that would just turn her thunderstorm into a hurricane.

Mother choked on her words, “She didn’t come home.”

I was out of the front door before she had finished sputtering out her words. I ran towards the place where the Star had landed so many years ago and brought us our greatest treasure. We couldn’t lose Luna. We’d lost so much—first Father, now Colt—but we couldn’t lose Luna. She was our gift from Raena.

I stopped running when I saw the burnt black grass. The pieces of star dissolved into fireflies that night after Father had picked Luna up. The black grass had

remained, unchanging after all these years. My eyes danced across the field in search of Luna's effervescent glow. I felt my heart shrivel up like the petals of a wilted rose when I saw that my only company was the sheep. My breath escaped me. Her lunch basket sat, knocked over, near where she had been playing before. The half-eaten apple lay a few feet from there. It was such a sad sight, seeing the lonely basket and the discarded apple. It made me think only something bad could have happened to her. I bent forward, leaning my hands on my knees for support.

A low rumble originated from the core and then reverberated outward until reaching me; it was a familiar sound. From the forest one lonely yellow eye leered at me from the fringes of the brush. I lost control of myself.

"Where is she?" I screamed at him, "Where's Luna?"

He drew back his ears, flattening them against his head and pulling up his lips to reveal his glistening white stalactites. At first, I was terrified. I didn't want Mr. Lyall to have the satisfaction of taking me too. Mother would have to sell the land and sheep. The rifle slung over my shoulder seemed to weigh heavy on me, but I raised the gun up to shoulder level and aimed it at Mr. Lyall's forehead. My index finger rested on the trigger. I was itching to pull it, to never have to worry about seeing that one yellow eye shining out at me from the darkness. Mr. Lyall didn't move. He just stood there waiting for me to pull the trigger and plant a bullet in his brain. I lowered the rifle. My hands were shaking. Was it considered murder if you killed a wolf you knew was human? Probably. But that hadn't stopped him from killing Father. I thought about Colt and how he had spent years attempting to have this chance that I have been given. It wouldn't be wasted. I steadied my hands and aimed once more for the forehead.

"No."

The voice was a melody. I turned, and Luna was standing just four feet from where I stood. She was glowing like the moon, and her silver hair danced in the breeze. She smiled at me and walked closer. She placed her hand on the barrel of the rifle and pushed it downward, so that it was aiming at nothing but the ground. She shook her head again and said, "No."

She looked towards the forest at Mr. Lyall, and I followed her gaze. Mr. Lyall sat as if waiting for something – for Luna. I looked behind him as more pairs of yellow eyes peered out at us. Dozens of wolves stepped forward and sat with Mr. Lyall. I dropped the rifle and took a step back. Luna didn't budge. There had to be hundreds of wolves.

“Do not be afraid,” Luna whispered, and she walked towards the wolves. I couldn’t speak to stop her. She walked over and touched Mr. Lyall on the head. He opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out. It almost looked like he was laughing. Luna turned and looked at me, smiling.

“Do not worry about the sheep. I will protect them.”

“What do you mean?”

She said nothing more. She placed her hand on a wolf that was standing close to her. The wolf moved forward, coming towards me. He stopped only inches from me and looked up into my eyes. My breath caught in my throat. The wolf’s eyes were familiar. One green. One blue.

“Goodbye, Geoffrey.”

Those were Luna’s last words to me. I watched as hundreds of wolves returned to the forest. Luna turned away from me and ran into the forest with them. I realized that she was never meant for us. Raena had not sent that star to our family. It was meant for the forest.

Luna belongs to the wolves.



Over the Shoulder of the Moon

Abby Lewis

I lay in bed and stared at the springs of my sister's bunk above me. The mattress creaked and popped as she tossed in her sleep. Sometimes I worried the mattress would break, and I would be smothered to death by the weight of my own kin.

We had two windows in our bedroom. Our bunk bed was shoved in the corner at the intersection of the two outside facing walls. One of the windows was to my right, half concealed by the top half of the bunk bed. The other window was behind where I slept, over my right shoulder. I never liked how, whichever way I faced, I could not hide from both windows. I always saw the blue light streaming in from one window or the other. Although we lived in the backwoods, there was the occasional headlight that illuminated our room as a car turned the corner. And it always had to turn the corner. We lived at the end of a split loop that snaked off, shed its way into gravel, and slithered into the mouth of Douglas Lake.

Sometimes when a car came by it turned down the lake road, then came roaring past our house moments later, its exhaust pipe popping and spitting as if it were terrified of the lake.

The outside of our house was lined with underpinning, which rattled the wood it clung to during a storm. As I slept that night, I dreamed a wolf pack visited our house. They scratched the underpinning and paced across the front deck. The deck was old and warped by rain; the boards sunk with the weight of the animals, then snapped back into place when they passed.

Sometimes the wolves barked—a sound like a dog kicked mid-yelp, whine to firecracker whimper in an instant. They stood intermittently on their hind legs, raking their front claws over the underpinning as if they meant to uncover us hidden inside.

When our parents first bought the house, it was nothing more than a shack. It had a main room and one bedroom. They brought Grandpa along when they went to look at it. The first thing my mother saw when her husband opened the door were weeds and even small trees growing through the floorboards. They were simple wooden boards with large gaps between them. Mother said it was hard to believe there was even a floor there at all. Whenever she told me this story, I would picture a rectangular concrete block of a doorstep before a white door in the middle of an open field with the woods and river beyond. That's all there was in my mind—a white door, and no house.

Her husband and my grandfather assured her they could fix everything. They could fix the floorboards, no problem. They could fix the heating and the ventilation. They could even expand the house, adding an additional room for each child as she arrived and knocked on that white door.

They kept their promise. The house as I knew it was indistinguishable from the house I imagined when Mother described it as it had once been. Yet there were things about the property that terrified me as a child. Since I was the middle child, I was there to witness one of the additions my father spoke of. During the construction, my foot got caught in an open-air vent. The child that I was saw this as the house reaching for me, trying to gulp me down into the place where the plants still grew in the darkness below the floorboards.

When the wolves came in my dream, I was afraid I would have to seek out that place under the house to escape them. I lay immobile all night, listening to their whimpers and whines outside the window.



None of us had ever seen a coyote before. We saw wild animals, of course. When one lives in the backroads of east Tennessee, one is bound to encounter wildlife. But the critters we saw were nowhere near as fierce as this one. Raccoons would pillage our trash cans at midnight, deer fed in our backyard, and on rare occasions we spotted a fox. But coyotes had always been akin to creatures of legend. They lived in the wild—in the real country of Nebraska, Canada, or the Dakotas, and in the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico. Coyotes were always the terrors in the stories my mother told around the campfire at the lake. There were not real to me.

We stood huddled around the corpse in the predawn light. We saw it just as we were driving out of the woods. If you were to look back at the trees, they would seem to form a natural gate, as if the landscape knew the highway was coming, and only the grass was brave enough to extend its tips to the edge of the old

interstate. The corpse lay in the middle of the field. When we spotted it, we pulled over and arranged ourselves in a circle around it as if we had known all along it was here and we had come to mourn.

I was the last to leave the safety of the van. The only thought in my head was that this would be the first time I willingly approached death, the first time I would stand and look it in the face. I did not want to go, but the rest of my family greeted it with curiosity and an odd fascination. They were already there beside it, pointing and chattering like magpies.



We used to own a white cat named Tiger with a tail like a red panda. He was a rambunctious cat who often climbed atop the fridge, so he could mark it (his urine would trickle into the freezer), and he slept in an open drawer of my dresser. He lay in wait in the hallways for us to pass by, then he would lunge out and rake us with his claws; he once sliced a gash on the outside of my sister's leg from her knee to ball of her ankle. But he wasn't a cruel cat. He simply did not know how to contain his energy. He would run out the door at every opportunity. One night, he did exactly that. Mother stood at the door and called for him until his head poked from the tall grass across the road, outlined by the light of the door. A second head emerged beside his, this one orange rather than white. We couldn't believe our wild cat had found a playmate wilder than him. At first we were worried the fox would hurt Tiger, but as we watched, astonished, the two leapt circles around each other and engaged in friendly tussles.

This memory stays with me not because it is memorable—quite the opposite. I remember it because we only watched them for a short while. We grew bored, accepted what was there before us. Tiger was a wild cat, and here was the proof. Once we knew he was safe and having fun, we locked the door and went to bed, as if this was an ordinary night like any other. I now find it strange how quickly we adjust our perception of the world to match what is before us when we are children.

But something about seeing this coyote felt different. It wasn't the same as seeing Tiger with the fox. It was more frightening, even though this animal was dead.

My younger sister asked if the coyote was a wolf. She was nine, the baby of the family, and her latest obsession was wolves. We had a poster on the back of our bedroom door of a wolf standing on a rock with a full moon aglow over its left shoulder. I never liked that poster. The door was the only way in and out of our small room, and the wolf guarded it like a hound of Hell.

Mother said it wasn't a wolf. She explained how coyotes are like wolves, but smaller.

I moved closer to where my little sister stood by the coyote's head. It was stretched out on its stomach as if it had just lain down to rest. Its fur was speckled in varying shades of brown rice. Its eyes were open, and its mouth. I could see the tongue resting between its two canine teeth, as if it had died mid-pant. My little sister and I could only see one of its eyes from where we stood. The eye was fixed on something in the distance, toward the trees. The direction of our house.

We watched the breeze lift a few hairs on its stomach. Then the eye snapped toward us. My sister's fingers wrapped around my wrist.

"You saw that, right?" I asked, voice low. She nodded. I glanced at our mother. She hadn't noticed. She was looking at the trees, wondering how the coyote wound up here, stranded in the field just off the main road, right next to the Dandridge Memorial Gardens Cemetery.

"Mom." I was ashamed of the tremor in my voice, so I said her name again, louder. "We should go. I think it might still be alive." The eye was locked on us. My sister and I dared not look away. Mother looked at us, then nodded.

My sister and I each put a hand to our hip where our imaginary guns sat holstered as we back-stepped to the car. It was mid-August and the wheatgrass in the field was dry and short; it snapped little BB gun shots underfoot and clung to the fabric of our jeans.

The coyote was gone when we passed by on our way home that evening. I know for certain because I watched the spot where it had been as we made the turn on to Burchfield.

I read the Swann's Chapel Church sign as we passed. This week's message: "Hell has no exit." I let out a dry laugh and sat back in my seat. Then I began to bite my nails. Although nail biting was a nasty habit of mine, I was nowhere near as bad as my younger sister. She ate away at her nails so often that she was down to the cuticles. Thinking this, I glanced over at her and watched as she tried to conceal the blood welling around her thumb.

Our mother later sold Tiger to a farmer without telling us. I had claimed the cat was my favorite pet, but it was my younger sister who noticed his sudden absence. I was too busy reading books to pay any attention. He had been gone for three weeks before my sister confronted our mother and forced her to tell us the truth. She had thought—hoped—we would simply forget he had existed.

What terrified me was not what she had done, but the fact she was—in my case at least—correct in her belief that we wouldn't notice his absence. I prided myself on being an observant and conscientious person, even at a young age, yet for weeks I did not notice my favorite cat was missing.

If I could forget something as important as a pet so quickly, then what else had my mother kept hidden from me over the years? What other pain was I oblivious to? I began to wonder if my childhood—if my memory of my childhood—was even accurate.

My early years were not bad; I was not *afraid* to live in our house. That is too strong of a word. I was mistrustful. I lacked the ability to establish who was friend or foe, and whether my own memory or interpretation of a person was accurate, including my own parents. My mother has always been a quiet woman. Her motto is to stay calm, and to do everything in her power to maintain a calm environment, even if that meant withholding things from us.

One summer my father experienced a stroke early in the morning. Our mother called an ambulance, and they placed him on a stretcher and wheeled him into the vehicle. I remember waking up to the sound of the wheels rolling across our deck. I had thought it was my father getting the grill out of the garage (we were supposed to have a cookout that day), so I fell back asleep, only to wake up later to a silent house. My sister was still asleep in the bunk above mine, but our parents were gone. Mother had assumed it was best not to wake us; she figured they would be back before we awoke.

But what if it had been something serious? What if my father had died while I slept, oblivious? Was ignorance really a blessing, as my mother seemed to believe, or was it more than that; was she simply minimizing her own level of stress by leaving us out of the equation? I wonder, even now, about the things she does not tell me, the things she believes it is better I don't know.

My mother was not unkind. She loved us in her own way.

Sometimes there were deer behind our house. You had to lean across the sink in the kitchen to see them over the back deck. Whenever our mother came into our room in the morning with water stains on her shirt, I knew it was because she had spotted deer out back while washing the dishes, and she wanted us to see them.

We would watch those deer until they wandered out of view. Then we would ease open the back door, creep onto the deck, and continue to stare as they fed

from the neighbor's pear tree. Sometimes the deer had to arch their necks like giraffes to reach the good pears. Once we saw a doe stand on her hind legs to reach a particularly high fruit.

Not long after Mother gave away Tiger, she discovered two kittens under our front porch while mowing the lawn: a black one and a white one, two sisters. We named the black one Tadpole and the other Olivia. Their mother, who was found later, was black like Tadpole. We called her Raven.

Our front porch was long, longer than the house, and, to reach the two kittens asleep under the middle of the porch, my younger sister and I used a giant fishing net that our father used for snaring catfish. We crawled under the deck as far as we could go and fed the net out in front of us until it hovered above the kittens' sleeping shadows. Then we reeled them in. Olivia was the wildest; she flailed and hissed and scratched her way free, every time. She would race off to the woods behind our house with her tail as big as a feather duster behind her.

We learned to ignore her and focus all of our attention on Tadpole instead. Tadpole squealed and squirmed when we put the net over her, but once we dragged her to us, we held her close, brought her inside, and placed her on a bed where we could cuddle her. We knew what we were doing was a kind of cruelty, but we wanted Tadpole to be our housecat. We wanted a replacement for Tiger; we felt we deserved this. And we wanted to tame the wilderness beneath our house, to take hold of it and claim it as our own.

But one day, Olivia and her mother walked side by side into the woods behind our house; we never saw them again.



The passing of a car woke me the next morning long before the sun. The yellow headlights mapped the wall in front of me. The silhouette of the blinds looked like horizontal claws slashed through a moon. The car's muffler popped as it sped past, and I imagined I heard a final few whimpers from my dream wolves as they fled back to the woods and the real moon, one that could not be damaged so easily.

I fell back asleep and dreamed I woke to daylight and my mother telling me there were unusual claw marks on the outside of the house and several streaks of saliva on our bedroom window. I looked at her face to see if she was telling the truth. Then my gaze shifted to the poster of the wolf on our bedroom door, and the blue moon beyond.

After that day, I began visiting the small bridge behind our house. I would stand at the edge of the bridge for a long time, then walk to its middle. I glanced over my shoulder at our house at the top of the hill. Always, I could just make out my mother's face as she stood at the kitchen window. I told myself that on the day her face was not in the window when I looked, I would cross the bridge completely; I would find out where the wolves went, where the wild cats wandered, where coyotes lay themselves to rest, where it was the moon led them. I would learn where the unspoken, vanishing beings hid because I would become one of them.



Judges' Biographies

Ron Rash

Ron Rash is the author of the 2009 PEN/Faulkner finalist and *New York Times* bestseller *Serena* and *Above the Waterfall*. He is also the author of four other prizewinning novels: *The Cove*, *One Foot in Eden*, *Saints at the River*, and *The World Made Straight*. He has written four collections of poems: *Eureka Mill*, *Among the Believers*, *Raising the Dead*, and *Waking*. He has written six collections of stories, including *Burning Bright*, which won the 2010 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. He is twice the recipient of the O. Henry Prize and has garnered awards such as the Appalachian Book of the Year in 2002, a Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award in 2010, and a David J. Langum, Sr. Prize in American Historical Fiction in 2012.

Lydia Davis

Lydia Davis is a short story writer, novelist, and translator. She is widely regarded as a master of the short story and known for her “flash fiction” pieces. She has published six short story collections and one novel, *The End of the Story* (1995), along with a collect volume, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, which collects all of her short fiction from 1986's *Break it Down* to 2007's National Book Award-nominated *Varieties of Disturbance*. Davis has won many prestigious awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1997, a Mac Arthur Fellowship in 2003, a Philolexian Society Award for Distinguished Literary Achievement in 2013, and the 2013 Man Booker International Prize.

Dustin Parsons

Dustin Parsons is the author of *Exploded View: Essays on Fatherhood, with Diagrams* (University of Georgia Press 2018). He has previously served as the non-fiction editor of *The Mid-American Review*. Awards for his writing include an Ohio Arts Grant in 2005, a New York Fine Arts grant in creative non-fiction in 2011, the 2013 *American Literary Review* Prize in fiction, the 2014 *The Laurel Review Fiction Award* and a “notable” in the 2014 *Best American Essays*.

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