2018–2019

Hothouse

LITERARY JOURNAL

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

HOTHOUSE

SPRING
2019

For more information about *Hothouse*, visit
hothouselitjournal.com,
or email us at uthothouse.editor@gmail.com.

Hothouse was printed by OneTouchPoint Ginny's
in Austin, Texas.

Dedicated to the writers
who make their home in Parlin Hall

STAFF

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Julia Schoos

MANAGING EDITOR

Luis De La Cruz

NONFICTION EDITOR

Kylie Warkentin

POETRY EDITOR

Jeffery Rose

FICTION EDITOR

Caitlin Smith

NONFICTION BOARD

Chandler Crates
Andilynn Feddeler
Samuel Rinkacs
Josephine Yi

POETRY BOARD

Sara Cline
Julio Diaz
Anna Dolliver
Jenohn Euland
Matthew Leger

FICTION BOARD

Demi Manlandro
Monica Salazar
Sydney Stewart
Allison Welch

WEBSITE TEAM

Eleni Theodoropoulou (Editor)
Kylie Warkentin (Editor)
Christie Basson
Anna Dolliver
Alyssa Jingling
Kevin LaTorre
Sydney Stewart
Alex Taylor

DESIGN EDITOR

Andilynn Feddeler

COVER DESIGN

Landree Lacey

MARKETING TEAM

Emily Ogden (Director)
Hollie Cira
Ashley Grey
Emma Hoggard

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

NONFICTION

Editor's Note

I remember the moment I received my first copy of *Hothouse*, the faint apricot cover adorned with a colorful greenhouse, won after a game of bingo in which everybody wins. I remember kicking off my shoes in an orientation dormitory in Jester, sitting on the tiniest twin bed I didn't know I could fold out, and reading the journal cover to cover. Between its pages, *Hothouse* held the stories of the writers who tread the halls of Parlin before me.

Hothouse is a composition of voices. Its words chronicle the people, the stories, the thoughts of those who have no choice but to write what lies between the world and them. Today, *Hothouse* bears the voices of the immigrants in our midst, the tales of first loves and first losses, the experiences of family and identity.

Each year, we dedicate *Hothouse* to the writers who make their home in Parlin Hall, the ones who bare their pens and paper for us to see.

It is my honor and privilege now to share with you the talent and wonder captured between the bindings of this year's issue.

With gratitude,

Julia Schoos
Editor-in-Chief

FICTION

Lizbeth Perkins Goes to Heaven

Kendall Talbot

I didn't know how to say goodbye to Lizbeth. I'd been putting it off for months now, pretending like nothing had changed. Like she wasn't dying.

Lizbeth talked of nothing but the fact that she was, indeed, dying.

"I want a big funeral, Penny. I want the church to be so full that some people have to stand in the back, behind the pews, like mass on Easter and Christmas. I want six pallbearers, and I want them all to be super ripped and super shirtless."

"I don't think Father Richard would be down for super shirtless pallbear—"

"Hush, I'm not finished. I want yellow roses, and yellow tulips, and sunflowers. 'Only the Good Die Young' will be playing on repeat. Actually, can you just get Billy Joel to come? He can only sing the one song, though, no 'Piano Man' or 'Uptown Girl,' okay? Save that stuff for the after-party."

"There's going to be an after-party?"

"Of course there's going to be an after-party. I might be dead, but the rest of you mouth-breathers will still be very much alive. And what's my life motto?"

I stared at her sitting crossed-legged on her bed, hugging a pillow to her chest. She stared back, thin eyebrows raised. I recalled another moment, a similar moment, that had occurred in this same room nearly a decade earlier. We were lying side by side on the bed, staring up at a ceiling covered in plastic glow-in-the-dark stars, whispering about Jake Ryan and his pink lips and how much we wanted to kiss them.

We'd been young and invincible then. We were still young now, by most standards, but I felt ancient, decrepit, and my heart was breaking.

"Life is just a party," I said at last. I'd always found it strange that she swore by the lyrics of a Prince song when she was such a self-proclaimed rock 'n' roller.

"Life is just a party," she repeated, "and you're all invited. Okay, now I want to be dressed in that little gold dress, you know the one. I wore it to that whore Lindsey's wedding last summer. I still can't believe she was the first out of our high school class to get hitched. Right out of college, too. How fucking ironic."

"Not as ironic as it would've been if you'd been the one getting married."

"Whatever. Just don't let my mother dress me, okay?"

"Okay."

"No, you have to pinky promise. She'll have me in some pilgrim smock, or worse, she'll dress me up like a nun."

"Wouldn't that be a bit sacrilegious? You aren't very nunish."

"Heresy can't protect me from that woman, only you can. Pinky promise me." She loosened her grip on the pillow and stuck out her right arm, her little finger wagging in front of my nose. I sighed but took her pinky, locking it together with mine. Again, I thought of that moment we'd shared under the plastic stars, all those years ago. We'd made out with Lizbeth's pillows, pretending they were Jake Ryan, then pinky promised never to tell another living, breathing soul about it. As far as I knew, that promise remained unbroken.

Lizbeth's parents were Catholic, really Catholic. Which I'd always thought was weird because, in the suburbs where we grew up, everyone was simply Christian. You had your Baptists and your Methodists and your Lutherans, and then a

whole bunch of people who practiced this thing called Nondenominational Christianity. My family was Nondenominational, which just meant my parents hadn't cared enough to choose a side back when they'd first decided they believed in God. I resented that at times, their lack of conviction.

Lizbeth had been told exactly how to show God she believed in Him: go to Mass every Sunday, don't forget Holy Days of Obligation, listen to the homilies, *pay attention* to the homilies, sing the Alleluia, take Communion, but you don't have to drink the blood if you don't want to, go to Confession, say a Hail Mary for your grandmother in Heaven, and in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Every week, rinse and repeat, like clockwork. As a kid, I'd found it fascinating. I would sit in a pew, nestled between Lizbeth and Mrs. Perkins, and just watch, mesmerized by the colors and the sounds and the movement. So much movement. Sit, rise, kneel, rise, make the sign of the cross, bow your head, raise up your palms, flip through the pages of your hymnal, hold hands, shake hands, nod along with the priest, mouth his words to yourself because you know them by heart. Like a choreographed musical number. It was impossible to take everything in at once, so I kept asking my parents if I could go to church with Lizbeth and, because they still didn't care enough, they kept saying yes.

Maybe I was born Nondenominational, but I grew up Catholic. The older I got, the less my parents attended even our flimsy church services, but I continued to go to Mass with Lizbeth. I learned the choreography, I memorized the lines, and I performed my newfound act of faith as often as I could get away with. Of course, I couldn't participate in every step—I had to stay seated in the pews while everyone else received the Eucharist. But that didn't bother me, because I wasn't there to take Communion. I was there because I liked the structure. I liked the solemnity. I liked Father Richard's

deep, gravelly voice. I liked the way he talked about God and the way it made me feel. I felt safe there, and my mind was quiet for once. Calm. I didn't have to think, just feel. That's what religion was supposed to be like. Being still and feeling God.

When I'd asked Lizbeth if she could feel God, she'd laughed so hard she fell right off the stool she was sitting on. We were alone in my kitchen, feasting on a meal of cheese puffs, red licorice, and Dr. Pepper because my parents had forgotten to leave money for pizza.

"*Feel* God?" she gasped when she finally caught her breath. "That's the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard. What does that even *mean*?" She pushed herself off the floor and hopped back up to sit beside me at the counter. Placing a hand on my shoulder, she gave me a stern look and said, "Has God been touching you inappropriately, Penny?" Then she almost fell off her stool cackling again.

Maybe Lizbeth was born Catholic, but she'd stopped believing in God a long time ago. She didn't believe in anything anymore. That's what happens when your parents are zealots. I got God in small doses, just for an hour or two on Sundays. It was all God all the time with the Perkins. Mr. Perkins read aloud from the Bible every night before the family went to bed. Mrs. Perkins cluttered their house with cross statues and paintings of Jesus. They taught Bible study, volunteered with the St. Vincent de Paul Society on weekends, invited Father Richard over for dinner once a month. The night I'd asked her about feeling God, Lizbeth had been over at my house to escape one of those very dinners.

"You really expect me to believe there's some omnipotent white dude just chilling up there in the sky, watching us screw up our lives over and over again but doing absolutely fucking nothing to help? Even though He's got, like, lightning bolts and shit?"

"I think that's actually Zeus, not God."

"Same difference. But my parents legitimately believe they're going to live forever in this guy's cloud castle after they die." She was waving her arms as she spoke, the piece of licorice in her hand flailing wildly. "Like death is some sort of eternal party, complete with singing and dancing and making out with hot angels. Death isn't a party. *Life* is the party, and everyone's too busy worrying about how to get into this Heaven place to enjoy it."

Life is just a party, and parties weren't meant to last. Wise words, Prince, but where did you go after the party was over?

"Don't you think you'll go to Heaven when you die?" I asked.

"If Heaven and Hell were real, I definitely wouldn't be going to Heaven. No fucking way." I snorted, and she threw her half-eaten rope of licorice at me. "But they don't exist," she continued, "so I'm golden."

"Then what happens to us after we die?"

"Nothing. We're just dead. Poof, gone." She grabbed another piece of licorice from the bag and began gnawing on it, tilting her head to one side and twisting a dark curl of her hair between her fingers. "Wouldn't that suck, though? If we did end up somewhere after we died, I'd be in Hell and you'd be in Heaven. We wouldn't get to hang out anymore. You'd have to pretend to be friends with my parents. Laaaame."

We didn't mention Heaven or Hell or God again that night until my parents got back and offered to drive Lizbeth home.

"Do you really believe all that religious bullshit?" she asked me as she slid on her coat.

"Maybe." Perhaps it wasn't God, but I felt something when I sat in that church. And if it wasn't Him, then what was it?

I'd found out Lizbeth was dying over the phone.

"You *what*?" My voice echoed in the empty stairwell. The elevator in my apartment complex was broken again, so I was hauling my groceries up seven flights of stairs. I had managed to get up four of those flights when she called.

"I said I have cancer, Penny." I heard her voice hitch a little at the word cancer, but then she cleared her throat and continued with renewed levity. "Yeah, it's everywhere. Well, not everywhere yet, but it's already spread a ton. Stage three. Doc says I can try that whole chemo and radiation package, but the shit's inoperable. Isn't life a bitch?"

I sat down hard on the steps, the grocery bags sliding off my shoulders. I was silent for a long time. It was like I was at church—no thinking, just feeling. Feeling and feeling and feeling.

"Penny? Are you still there?" Was I still there?

"You're making this up," I finally answered.

Now she was quiet.

"Lizbeth, please tell me you're just making this up." My voice was barely more than a whisper. I heard her sigh on the other end.

"I wish I was, I really do. But I promise, it's the truth. I wanted to call you first, before Mom and Dad, so you'd hear it from me."

"How did they find it?"

"I made the mistake of mentioning the blood in my puke to Doc. He ran a few extra tests and then he ran some more and, bada-bing bada-boom, here we are."

"You've been puking blood?"

"Not puking blood. Finding blood in my puke. There's a difference."

"Where did it start?"

"What?"

"The cancer, Liz. Where. Did. It. Start?"

A long pause.

"My esophagus."

I sucked in a shaky breath.

"I know, I know what you're thinking, that this is my own damn fault, that I should have taken better care of myself, I should have listened to the doctors and to my parents and to you."

That was exactly what I was thinking, but I couldn't say it. I couldn't say anything. My vision was starting to blur, but I didn't want Liz to hear the sob that was building up in my chest. I didn't want her to feel guilty, even though she should. She should feel guilty.

"I've got to go," I choked out. "I'll call you back later, okay, bye."

"Penn—"

I hung up and proceeded to cry, right there in the stairwell. I cried for a very long time, long enough for my butt to go numb and the ice cream in my grocery bag to melt into chocolate soup.

Sickly was not a word I would use to describe Lizbeth. Passionate. Reckless. Outspoken. Full of life. Lizbeth burned brighter than the sun in most people's eyes, especially in my eyes, and she knew it. But she'd burned too bright too quickly, and now her flame was finally flickering out. I should have seen it coming.

Lizbeth had been sick for most of her life. First, with gastroesophageal reflux disease. That lead to her diagnosis of Barrett's esophagus when she was sixteen. There were no more dinners of cheese puffs and licorice after that. She couldn't eat much, and what she did eat she couldn't always keep down. She lost fifteen pounds our junior year of high school. Rumors started floating around that she was anorexic. Kids

would come up to me when we weren't together and ask questions. *Why wasn't Lizbeth at lunch today, Penny? Is Lizbeth on a new diet, Penny?* I always told them to fuck off. It was the first time in my life I'd ever felt truly angry.

I kept expecting things to get better, but they never did. They actually got worse, and Lizbeth wasn't exactly helping. She knew she wasn't supposed to eat tomatoes or chocolate or anything with too much dairy. She did it anyway. She knew she wasn't supposed to drink coffee or orange juice. She did it anyway. She knew she wasn't supposed to *drink* drink either, but she did that anyway, too. She drank a lot. Too much. And she always threw it all right back up. One night, during our sophomore year in college, she drank an entire 175 ML bottle of Tito's Vodka in less than two hours. She spent the rest of the night throwing up her breakfast, lunch, and dinner, along with all the vodka, into a toilet. I spent the rest of the night holding back her hair and crying. I tried to hide it, because I knew Lizbeth hated when I cried. But I couldn't help it.

"Are you trying to make me feel guilty, Penny?" Her voice was raw and broken from the last hour and a half of vomiting. She laid her head down on the toilet seat.

"No, of course not," I hiccupped.

"Then why are you fucking crying all over me?"

"I'm just," a fresh sob racked my body, "sad."

"Why are you sad?"

"Because you're throwing up," I drew in a ragged breath, "so much."

Lizbeth started laughing, but it quickly turned to coughing, then dry heaving. I rubbed circles on her back and cried harder. When her body had ceased convulsing, she turned to face me again and smiled, the dried puke around her mouth cracking as her lips stretched upward.

"You're actually right," she croaked. "This is depressing, isn't it?"

I nodded through my tears.

"I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry, Penny." And for a moment, she looked sad, too.

"Please don't drink anymore, okay? Don't drink anymore alcohol."

"I promise, I won't."

But she didn't pinky promise.

The day we graduated from college, Lizbeth gifted me a 24x36 inch printed poster of her face. She'd unfurled the thing against the hood of her car, then shoved it towards me.

"So you don't forget me in Chicago," she said. I was moving there next week to start my first job. Lizbeth was staying here to go to grad school. It would be our first time apart, ever.

"I'm not going to forget you," I said, taking the poster from her outstretched hands and rolling it back up. "You're my best friend. Being 1,000 miles apart isn't going to change that."

"We'll be 1,126 miles apart."

"An extra 126 miles isn't going to make or break us, Liz."

She stuck her tongue out at me. I was going to miss her so, so much.

"I got you a little something, too," I said, reaching into my purse.

"Is it a giant poster of your face?"

"No."

"Well then I don't want it."

"Okay." I shrugged and withdrew my hand.

"Just kidding, just kidding, I want it." She was grinning like a five-year-old on Christmas morning. I shook my head but pulled out her graduation present. Her smile dimmed a little.

"Is that a… pillbox?" It was a pillbox, a pink one decorated with the days of the week written in curly white script. I'd thought it was cute, but I could tell Lizbeth was confused.

"It's kinda supposed to be funny," I said. "But practical, too. You know, because I won't be there anymore to remind you to take your meds."

She took the pillbox from my hand, dark brow creased. "But these are for old people."

"And sick people."

"I'm not sick."

"Liz, you take like five different medications a day."

"Okay, but I'm not *this* sick," she insisted, gesturing with the pillbox.

"Debatable."

Lizbeth huffed out a loud breath, but she kept the pillbox. When I called her from Chicago later that month, she told me she was actually using it. But just because she was putting her pills into the pillbox each week didn't mean she was taking them back out.

The decision to move to Chicago had been the hardest decision I'd ever had to make, and Lizbeth was every reason why. I was going to miss living with my best friend. I was going to miss seeing her every day, hearing her talk about everything and nothing at all. But mostly, I was worried about her. Who was going to remind her about her doctor's appointments? Who was going to hand her a cup of water when she asked for a cup of rum and coke? Who was going to tell her to actually take the pills in her pillbox? But was it really my responsibility to take care of her if she wouldn't even take care of herself?

I couldn't ask Lizbeth, so I asked God. I went home for the weekend and sat in the pews of the Perkins' church, like I used to when I was younger, and I prayed. Father Richard once said in a homily that praying was just talking to God. I

talked and talked and talked, some in my head and some out loud. My small voice sounded deafening in the vast, empty space. I asked Him if I was making the right choice to move away. Was I being selfish? Did Lizbeth really need me nagging her all the time? Was I even making a difference?

What should I do, God?

But He wouldn't tell me. I felt Him there in the church, same as always, but I didn't understand what it meant, what I was supposed to take away from this one-sided conversation. Maybe I wasn't doing it right, the praying part. Maybe I wasn't phrasing it right. I'd never prayed about something so important before. I was good at the scripted prayers, the Our Fathers and the Hail Mary's, but there was no rhyme or reason to the words I uttered under my breath now. I was writing this prayer in free verse, and I wasn't sure if God understood me any more than I understood Him.

I never stopped trying, though. I never stopped praying.

I'd called Lizbeth every day after she told me about the cancer.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Fine."

"The chemo isn't making you sick?"

"Of course it's making me sick, it's fucking chemo."

"But you said you were fine."

"I am fine, Penny. As fine as I can be."

Which wasn't really fine at all. How can anyone, even someone as fierce and flippant as Lizbeth, be okay with dying? No, she wasn't fine, she was angry. She was angry at the doctors, at her parents, sometimes even at me. But mostly, Lizbeth was angry at herself. She would rage on the phone for hours at a time, screaming obscenities and cursing a God she didn't believe in, and I would listen and wait on the other end, silent, until her fury transformed back into humor and she became herself again.

When she moved back home to live with her parents, I knew. She was giving up. I flew down there for a few days, to be with her. It was the first time I'd seen her since she started the chemotherapy. Her dark curls were long gone. She wore a yellow bandana in their place. The ashen skin of her face was stretched too tightly over her cheekbones. She was so thin, the thinnest she'd ever been, and I was afraid for her. Under all the jokes and offhand remarks, I knew she was afraid, too.

"Whatever," she was saying. "Just don't let my mother dress me, okay?"

"Okay." We were sitting across from each other on her old childhood bed. I glanced up at the ceiling, but the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars were no longer there.

"No, you have to pinky promise. She'll have me in some pilgrim smock, or worse, she'll dress me up like a nun."

"Wouldn't that be a bit sacrilegious? You aren't very nun-ish."

"Heresy can't protect me from that woman, only you can. Pinky promise me."

She held out her pinky finger to me. It looked so bony. It looked so breakable. I hooked it with mine as gently as I could, afraid I would hurt her, but her finger grasped mine with unexpected, almost desperate strength. I met her eyes.

"Pinky promise me something else, Penny."

"Of course, anything."

She let out a shaky breath.

"Promise you'll pray for me," she whispered. "Pray that it won't hurt. Pray that, if there's a God and if there's a Heaven, He'll let me in."

"I promise."

She squeezed my pinky finger in hers.

"I pinky promise."

The Neighborhood

Mary Margaret Burniston

Little Lilly holds her breath.

The sun blinks sleepily, stretching its arms in a golden and pink yawn. The sun paints the impression of the gate against Little Lilly's face, black bars cutting vertically across her rosy cheeks, blue eyes. Little Lilly stretches her fingers through the bars, wiggles her fingers.

"*Please*," Little Lilly implores the Neighborhood.

The Neighborhood tilts its head. It sees Little Lilly and her red ball where it rests on the opposite side of the fence.

Little Lilly reaches again, her shoulder pushed up against the fence. The bars feel so cold against her skin.

The Neighborhood sees Little Lilly, sees her and her red ball. But mostly it sees that she wants something outside of the Neighborhood. It sees that the Neighborhood is not enough for her.

The sun lies down beneath the hills to rest its head. In the twilight, Little Lilly can scarcely see the red ball anymore. She sits back; she lets out a huff of a breath. Little Lilly knows that it's past bedtime, that her mother will be pacing impatiently across Little Lilly's room, waiting to read to her the story of the Neighborhood, then tuck her into bed. Little Lilly knows the stories of what lies beyond the gates, of what wakes up when the sun falls asleep.

But Little Lilly is brave.

She reaches through the fence again, reaching for the red ball.

Something reaches back.

The sound of Little Lilly's shriek rouses the neighbors. They wake in their beds, eyes snapping awake like doors slamming open, one after the other. The neighbors wake, disoriented. They hear the cry. They look to their sides, to find their husband or their wife looking back at them with that same expression. The neighbors hear Little Lilly's shriek, but they do not go to their windows, to their doors. They breathe a sigh of relief. They say their prayers to the Neighborhood, and they fall back asleep.

Mariane Smith waters the grass. It looks proud-lipped and straight-postured in the early morning sun. She imagines that each drop of water she gives the grass trickles down into the Neighborhood's veins. Sometimes she imagines that the Neighborhood waits beneath the dirt with its tongue extended, parched, awaiting a drop of water.

A door opens; a door closes.

Susan White adjusts a pair of huge, round sunglasses on her face. Her pink button-down cardigan is so straight, the pleat in her pants so exact, that Mariane's lips sour. Susan's house sits peacefully with its neat buttery shudders and red door.

"Beautiful day," Mariane says, like a test.

Susan looks from her doorstep to Mariane's front yard. Her gaze travels from Mariane's white heels and navy blazer, to the hose in her hand, to the spot in Mariane's yard now so saturated by the hose that it's little more than gurgling dirt.

"The most beautiful," Susan says.

"Where is Little Tommy today?" Mariane asks. "Wouldn't he like to come out and play?"

Susan holds Mariane's gaze. She considers.

"Little Tommy," Susan calls without taking her eyes off Mariane. "Come run and play."

The pitter-patter of feet responds. Little Tommy teeters out onto the Whites' front porch, charging towards his mother until he can grip onto her leg. He gazes up at her with wide, doting eyes. Susan carefully stoops to his level and whispers something in his ear. Little Tommy's gaze turns to Mariane. He nods, then bumbles off the front step and to Mariane's yard.

Mariane slowly turns the water off.

"Hello, Little Tommy."

"Hallo, Miss Smith," Little Tommy says in his most grown up voice. "Might I play with Little Caroline?"

Mariane looks to Susan; Susan's expression gives nothing away, but her arms are crossed, her eyes unreadable beneath those dark sunglasses.

"I'm afraid Caroline is otherwise occupied."

Little Tommy pouts, kicking his foot against the grass.

"Besides—" Mariane's voice takes on a hard edge. "Caroline is hardly a little anymore."

Mariane turns back to Little Tommy. She smiles. She nods her head towards Little Tommy's yard, where a red ball of his own sits amongst his yard. "Come on now. It's a beautiful day to come out and play."

Susan frowns. She calls for Little Tommy, and he comes.

After tables are set, neat lines of glimmering forks and napkins folded like swans; after dinners are had, and polite conversation along with them; after desserts are stolen by naughty children, the church bell rings. Wives fix their lipstick, adjust their hair, and call for their husbands and children. The sounds of doors opening and closing is the only sound of the evening save for the ringing of the church bell.

The Whites and the Smiths walk together; what else are good neighbors to do?

Susan looks at Mariane. Mariane wears lipstick the color of blood. Her blonde hair is bobbed and curled, bouncing above her shoulders with each step like a bounding puppy following its master.

"How dark it is tonight," Mariane says, seeing Susan's eyes on her.

Susan smiles a demure smile. "How very."

Mariane takes Susan's arm in her own. They are friends, the two of them, yet somehow all Susan can see when she looks at Mariane holding her arm is Mariane's sharpened nails. Susan walks faster so that she and Mariane pull away from their grunting husbands, her babbling child.

"Have you seen her?" Susan whispers, a scrap of a sound that, if it were to catch in the wind to be carried to unwelcome ears, could be tossed out without a thought.

Mariane looks at Susan. There's a hint of purple eye shadow on Mariane's eyes; it looks like bruises in the fading light.

"Who?" Mariane purrs.

"Don't play that game," Susan admonishes.

For a second there's nothing but the hollow clicks of heels against the sidewalk.

The corner of Mariane's lip tilts. They are thinking of Diana Palmer, the once-mother of Little Lilly.

"Does she look dreadful?" Mariane asks.

"Positively."

Mariane and Susan grin wickedly. They look across the street to the park where the remaining Palmers stand. Diana Palmer wears gray and a grimace, eyes as puffy as her trembling lip.

The ladies giggle.

"Not so holy anymore, now is she?" Mariane scoffs.

The laugh fades from Mariane's lips first. Her lips settle out of the laugh, bright red even in the darkness. Susan watches as Mariane's eyes go to Diana's fidgeting hands, resting somewhere beside her leg as if searching for that little phantom hand waiting to take her own.

"Tragic, though isn't it?" Mariane says, almost as if she were thinking aloud.

Susan tilts her head. "Tragic?"

Mariane's brows push against each other.

"It's an honor, Mariane," Susan says, just above a whisper. Her words sound wispy in the night, nearly threatening.

Susan looks over her shoulder; Mariane follows her gaze. Their husbands walk with their hands in their pockets, trying to stay far enough apart that neither smells the bourbon on the other's breath. Little Tommy trails behind Caroline, star-struck. Caroline wears white, like a ghost. Little Tommy has to crane his neck to look up at her; this is why, likely, Little Tommy trips over the crack in the sidewalk. Susan and Mariane slow, but they do not go back to him. Caroline does. Little Tommy stares at one of his hands, scraped against the sidewalk, which is blossoming crimson red. Caroline offers a hand. Little Tommy takes it, and the two walk hand in bloody hand.

"It's an honor," Susan repeats. "To sacrifice like that for the Neighborhood."

Mariane's eyes flash bright in the darkness.

"Harold!" she barks with something like fear in her voice.

Her husband springs to attention, like a bobble head tapped atop the head to animate into life. He follows the fear in his wife's eyes and rips Caroline from Little Tommy. There's surprise in Caroline's eyes, but quickly her eyes and her body are concealed by the huddle of her parents around her. The Smiths hurry across the street and into the park.

Little Tommy reaches a hand out to his mother.

"I did it, Mommy. Just like you asked," Little Tommy tells her.

Susan kisses the top of his head. She takes his hand to brush across her fingertips, then paints Little Tommy's face with tiger stripes of his own blood.

"You did," Susan agrees. "Yes, you did."

The neighbors hold church in the park. The Realtor with his white collar and solemn eyes waits at the pulpit, a half tree sawed off and smoothed into a podium. The Realtor with his restless feet looks out over the quickly filling park bench, line one after the other in neat rows. The streetlights are dimmed tonight, casting the park in gossamer shadows. The Smiths file into a bench near the front, the holy family that they are. The Whites are already seated at the front bench to the Smiths' left. Susan and Mariane give each other polite smiles; what else are good neighbors to do?

The church bells ring one last time before the neighbors fall into silence.

The Realtor dips his head. In the shiny baldness of his head, you can almost make out the reflection of the stars above.

"To the Neighborhood, to the power and glory of its holy gates," the Realtor begins.

"Amen," Mariane murmurs.

"*Amen*," Susan says louder.

"To this community, sustained by the grace of the Neighborhood." The Realtor opens his eyes. "Without it, we are nothing."

Diana Palmer holds company after church. She didn't plan to, but after the Realtor closed his sermon—*Heavenly Neighborhood, hallowed are thy gates*—they filed towards her home with their casseroles and bottles of lukewarm wine, so what else was there to do but open the door? Now they mill

around, gaping at picture frames turned face down, pictures with holes cut in them with precise scissors. They arrive on her doorstep, like ghostly silhouettes against the night and whisper to her about how much honor she must feel. When it is all too much, Diana runs in what looks to the world like a steady walk. She closes the kitchen door quietly behind her and goes to the sink. She splashes water on her face, then grips the sink's edge until she thinks that she might not faint. It isn't long and it isn't surprising that the kitchen door doesn't stay shut long.

"Lovely night," Mariane White says.

Diana Palmer turns on her heel to face her and sees Susan Smith beside her as well. "Is it?"

Diana Palmer has a wild look in her eyes, like a starved wolf with its legs cut off.

"It is," Susan insists, firmly.

"The Neighborhood, it ate my Little Lilly whole," Diana tells the ladies.

"It did," Mariane agrees.

"Swallowed her whole," Susan intones.

Diana downs a glass of wine. It tastes buttery and bitter.

"I can still remember the day the Neighborhood brought her to me," Diana says. "It left her on my doorstep, swathed in a little pink blanket. It wanted me to have her, so why did it take her away?"

"The Neighborhood was hungry," Mariane says with her bloody lips. "It must be fed."

Susan looks at Mariane with sharp eyes. "It must," she agrees.

Beyond the kitchen doors, there's the delicate sound of silverware against a wine glass in toast. A sudden distant roar abruptly ceases the sound. The neighbors draw a collective breath. Diana pushes through the kitchen doors; Susan follows. Susan clicks across the house to the far windows. In the

distance, she can see a fire, raging and furious. The fire wraps its arms around the Wilsons' house and squeezes tightly. Amy Wilson lets out a strangled cry and rushes from the Palmers' house in a tight, clicking run. The rest of the neighbors hold back, aghast. Pretty Caroline Smith blinks with confusion. The mothers hold wine glasses to their lips, to cover their admiring smiles. The wrath of the Neighborhood is as fierce as it is venerated.

"See," Susan White says to Diana Palmer, joining her on her front porch to gaze upon the fire. "I told you the Neighborhood was hungry."

While the rest of the neighbors are transfixed by the fire, Mariane Smith sees an opportunity. With one hand behind her back and the other holding a small hand, she hurries Little Tommy away from the Palmers' and deep into the wilderness of the community. They hurry beyond the blue streets. In the darkness, the houses all look the same, the colors of the shutters or the numbers on the doors all lost against the darkness. Mariane and Little Tommy leave behind the façades, the holiness. The woods push up against the houses, breathing humid breath on their backyards, waiting on the tips of its toes.

In the wilderness, the darkness feels thicker, visceral. Little Tommy is curious, watching Miss Smith with wide considering eyes. He is not used to the woods: the trees with their roots like snakes, their branches like clawing hands. But Mariane holds his hand so tightly he could hardly fall if he tried.

Mariane slows only once they have reached the fence. She releases Little Tommy's hand. From behind her back, she brings out Little Tommy's little red ball. Little Tommy sucks in a breath, eyes wide with wanting.

"Come on now," Mariane whispers.

Mariane hurls the red ball over the fence. It bounces against the ground and settles beyond the fence, just out of reach. Little Tommy follows its progress with widening eyes.

"It's a beautiful day to come out and play," Mariane purrs.

Little Tommy scrambles towards the fence, just as Little Lilly did.

Mariane turns back towards the community. In the distance she hears the scratching of the fire. When she smiles, it is a smile of relief.

And though the Neighborhood knows he has been tricked, he is pleased.

La Arnia

Sahib Chandnani

There was a warmth in holding her to his chest, her heartbeat a soft reply to his own. She loved the feeling of water in between her small toes. He loved watching her smile. Sunlight rippled across the surface of the water like a golden carpet, and he wanted nothing more than to see her claim that path into the horizon as her own. To see her stand on the waves, water between her toes and a twinkle in her eyes, was to see his angel take her throne.

"Daddy," she would ask, "is it true that the world turns around the sun?"

"For some people."

"For who?"

"For everyone but your daddy."

"What makes you so special, huh?"

"You," he would say and then scoop her back up into his arms. Today his precious cargo was covered in sand and sunscreen. She giggled as he nuzzled her belly button. He carried her to the edge of the water as she squirmed in his arms. Both of them knew what was coming. He held her by her hips and pushed forward. He laughed as she squealed through the air. Then, for a moment a pang of anxiety started in his stomach. He imagined his baby sprouting wings and taking to the skies. After all, all angels are fated for flight, but the familiar splash as the water reclaimed her brought him back to the beach.

He helped wrap a towel around her as they walked up the long path back to the car. She bumbled back and forth be-

tween her father and the handrail like a pinball as they snaked up the slope towards a large clearing. "La Arnia" had been their special place ever since his wife had brought him here on their first date so many years ago. It's where she told him she loved him for the first time, where he proposed to her, and most importantly, where they decided on their daughter's name.

That night, they had set up a picnic blanket right at the edge of the water. She had been sitting in his lap looking out at the waves as they rolled up the beach reaching for them. He tried to think of something to say to her, but she usually did most of the talking. He was distracted by her curls. It was the first thing about her that caught his eye, and for as long as he could remember there was nothing like the smell of her hair. The best days of his life began by waking up wrapped in her ringlets. That day was no different, but the smell was particularly overwhelming.

He smiled as his daughter bumped into him, brushing her locks against his arm.

The night they named her, the sun was going down, and as usual, they were the only two people on the beach. She shifted a little in his lap.

"How do places like this exist by accident?" she asked.

"I don't think they do."

"But why make something so beautiful just like that?"

"Well, right now it seems like it was made for just the two of us,"

"What makes us so special, huh?"

"The fact that we take the time to notice in the first place," he said as her lips spread into a toothy grin.

"You're so damn cheesy!" she said. "But really sometimes I just can't believe this all isn't an illusion."

"But that's exactly what it is!" he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked. When she was confused, her face would scrunch up around her nose. It was what he missed

the most about her. The way she would hang onto every word when he trailed off into his long-winded explanations—things only she had the patience to listen to.

"It's called Maya. Everything we see, hear, smell, feel, and taste is Maya. Maya is reality," he said.

"And reality is an illusion?"

"Yeah, exactly. My mom used to always tell me that what we experience is temporary, but what we take from it is eternal."

"That's beautiful."

"Yeah, imagine hearing that as a twelve-year old."

"I think that's exactly what I would want our child to be like."

"What do you mean?"

"Boy or girl, they're only here for a little bit, but I hope they'll be impossible to forget," she said. He couldn't help but break into laughter. She always had a way of finding beauty in everything—even in all of his ramblings. He talked. She listened. Like waves they danced in a constant ebb and flow.

Maya was getting tired, and he could tell because she had lost the bounce in her step. He swung their bag over his shoulder and lifted her into his arms. Within minutes she was asleep and the sway of his shoulders was echoed by her soft breathing.

He could only remember coming to La Arnia alone once. Long before Maya or his wife, he stepped through the beach that evening with a heavy heart. Something about that place seemed to evade him when he was alone. It was a reminder of how necessary it was that La Arnia be shared. But accompanied only by his thoughts, he decided to explore. There was an area on the side of the beach where some of the cliff crumbled into the water. He climbed the cliffside until his fear of heights reached a compromise with his ambition for a view. He settled on a flat edge of the rocks, and pulled out a notebook. Staring out into the sheer vast-

ness of the inlet, with only a pillar of stone between himself and the sun, he was taken by the spectacle. So he coped by scribbling:

There is a beach in the north of Spain
that I want to take you to one day:
A stone-cradle oasis
like cupped hands
with singular intentions
"come as you are."
Here the water is a palette gone perfectly wrong,
A rushed stroke with a heavy hand
allowed evergreen leaves through the gates of heaven—
the happiest of mistakes are still blue.
There are no lines, only gentle curves in this place—
there is no need for boundaries where the only obligation is to be.
A place where life thrives so passionately it is silent,
except for the waves who whisper amongst themselves
which nautical things have come to pass beyond the rocks.
And of course there's the stone pillar:
frosted with green fuzz and
the only defense in this place from the infinity of the horizon.

He promised himself he would never come back alone. It was too easy to get lost in thoughts only mortals are burdened with. Now, he wishes he had learned back then how to come alone.

Maya was getting heavy. Four years of carrying her back from their beach days were taking their toll on his arms. As he neared the top of the slope, she woke up with a start. She rocked her head from one side to the other, eyes wide with panic. He put his arm on her back. She relaxed instantly. The sleep returned to her eyelids as they fell. He sighed and kept

walking. Between the beach and the nearest road there's a sprawling field of grain interrupted only by ant-tunnel walkways from the few people who knew about their special place. Out of habit he followed the thin line of dirt in between the grain stalks, so he didn't notice when the sun blinked out of the sky. What brought him out of oblivion was a flash. Out of thin air. First one and then another and another until his view was speckled with blinking lanterns.

"Maya," he said as he patted her back. She lifted her head slowly as the sleep in her eyes was replaced by wonder. Seeing her eyes made him smile. She jumped out of his arms landing on the ground with an awkward plop, her curls bouncing up and down. She shuffled around with open palms hoping an unlucky firefly would find its way into her hands. He pulled off their bag reaching inside for an empty water bottle.

"Try this," he said, handing her the unscrewed bottle and cap.

"No daddy!" she said pushing the water bottle back towards him. "I don't know which ones are friends!"

She really was her mother's daughter. Who knew that hearts of gold were genetic? He put the bottle back into the bag and lifted her onto his shoulders. As she swiped at the air, her tiny feet knocked against his chest. Even after all these years there were times when he was overwhelmed by how much of his wife he finds in their daughter. His mind faded into memory to the rhythm of her feet.

Their honeymoon was a dream. Ten days in the city of love, and one of the only things they both agreed upon was the best night of the trip. It was a blurry night not because of setting but because of substances. His arm was around her, and they swayed as they walked. It was midnight, but sleep was the last thing on their minds. As the buildings around them twisted like a Frenchman's tongue, a foggy Eiffel Tower came into view.

"Let's go." She pointed, and the decision was made. The tower was ablaze with lights, and the people underneath were no less impassioned. The rumble of the bass line bounced off of the cross-beams and tourists and locals alike were witnesses to the movement. The two joined a crowd of drunken teenagers and middle-aged couples with the coordination of a sleepy Maya, and if the martinis weren't enough the music was getting them to where they wanted to be. Neither of them would remember the name of the band in the morning, but at the time, the only genre of music being played was bliss. He doesn't remember lifting her—only how the rhythm of her feet fell seamlessly with the tap of the drum. His body became an extension of the band: his hair was the strings of a guitar as she strummed his head with her fingers, his chest a bass drum and her legs the pedal, a guide for the synthesizer keys in his toes to follow.

When the last of the crowd cleared out, only the two of them were left sitting on a small patch of grass facing the tower. She laid in his lap, fast asleep from a mixture of exhaustion and intoxication. Here he was, a man, imperfect and undeserving, in the company of an angel. When he felt this way, there was only one outlet for his musings. He never showed her much of what he wrote. He was scared she would wonder if he thought about anything else, but these days he wishes he made her read every word as many times as she could tolerate. So he pulled out his notebook and wrote an ode to a perfect night in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower.

His return to the present followed a pang of guilt in his stomach. Today his wife's voice drowned out the pitter-patter of Maya's steps against the moist ground—a melody Maya never heard. He felt selfish for keeping Maya to himself. She was a gift he always intended to share.

"Daddy are we almost there?" Maya asked. She was tired of how talented the fireflies were at evading her small hands.

"Almost."

"Can I have my jacket?" she asked. He put her down, and took off his bag.

"It's in the front pocket," he said and held it just out of her reach. She giggled as he made it bob up and down, teasing her until she finally lost her patience with him.

"Daddy!"

"Okay! Okay!" he said. He handed her the bag as she fumbled with the zipper. He helped her open it and she reached inside with pursed lips as she felt around for the plumpness of her bright pink coat. He bent over to zip up the bag and noticed an envelope on the ground. She looked down and noticed it too.

"What's that?" she squealed. He picked up the envelope and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"Something very important," he said and clicked the button on his keys breathing life into the headlights of the car. They climbed inside, and Maya strapped herself into her car seat. Within minutes she was asleep again, and he was left with his thoughts. He felt the paper against his chest. It was warm. He drove carefully making sure not to wake her. As he pulled up to a red light, he glanced back at her. She was breathing softly, and touching the envelope in his pocket he wondered what her mother was telling her. He wondered if she recognized her mother's voice.

Trace my jawline
as if it were flushed metal,
smile when you're met with
warmth and rusty whiskers,
I'll reach into your gilded ringlets
and polish the gold beneath.
Oh, how I've waited to bathe in your light.

Eyes to put diamonds to shame,
what is brilliance to
she who blinds?
Hold me close and now we're
star-crossed beams,
but only matches made in heaven
are fated for the skies.

You were forged of
Silver and the stars,
refined to a luster
as I cast myself in nickel and dime,
we crossed paths
somewhere in between,
and became star-crossed beams
steel lovers dreaming of the heights.
But Eiffel Towers
bar beams like me,
tarnished bronze
battered and brined.
And now you are a star
amongst crossbeams,
and it is a privilege to
look up and see you smile.

How Cursed Women Love

Christie Basson

It started years ago, before I was a speck in my mother's womb who was not yet a thought in my grandmother's mind. Which means, of course, that I was not there. Despite that, this is a story I know better than anything else. It is, after all, the start of everything.

It was a clear, moonful night. Silvery shadows, the beach stretching clear next to the silent hymn of the waves, a constant murmur of water over sand. A woman walked into the ocean. She didn't hesitate, didn't look back. I imagine it was graceful, the way the waves crashed around her. The way she stepped into them, arms open. It would have been peaceful, or maybe not. We'll never know because hands pulled her back before the ocean swallowed her forever. But they were too late —by then it was too late, the damage was done. A woman ran away from home. A woman flew from a skyscraper. A woman set a house on fire. A woman gutted her husband. A woman cried herself into the grave. A woman started talking to the trees. A woman had a child and hated it.

A woman leaped into traffic.

Madness runs in my family. Well, it runs in the women of my family, like a bloody disease that only sticks to X-chromosomes, spilling through the blood of my grandmother's daughters and theirs. Abuela thought she was cursed, and her daughters believed the curse spread to them too. Well, we all did. How could we not? At first, they thought we hadn't inherited it, breathed happy when year after year their daughters didn't show any crazy. We thought we were in the clear,

safe. But then Camilla jumped in front of a silver Ford F-150 truck at noon and got herself killed.

I was there when it happened. When the silver nose of the truck hit her, she didn't scream. She flew like a ragdoll, her hair snapped back, dark hair like a mane. It was slow motion, the way she twisted through the air, almost graceful until she slammed into the pavement. A sick crunch of bones, the dead thud of her flesh. The pool of blood almost crawled across the road before they moved her body. The aunts didn't have to ask, but they did anyway. I told them about the gleam in her eye. The determination on her brow, the arc of her foot before she pushed off. I didn't know much about the look of crazy, but if that wasn't it, I didn't know what could be, I told them. I didn't tell them about her last words. Those were mine.

While the aunts fretted about this, consoling Aunt Mia in Abuela's kitchen, we met outside in the garden. It was spring and the bruised irises were just opening up, hungry mouths blindly nudging at the sky in search of something warm. We gathered under the pecan tree, brown legs stretched over the dead grass, ignoring how it scratched at our calves. We sat in silence for a while, until Rosa broke it.

"So what, now we're all gonna lose it?"

We were still wearing our black dresses, hair pulled back, curls tamed. My dress was climbing up my neck, biting at my jugular. I pulled it away with two fingers and looked up at the sky, where white clouds were puffing their way from one horizon to the other, rushing to make it before they were whipped out of existence. Most disintegrated before they reached the end of the trek.

Maria was softly sobbing. She was the second eldest, after Camilla, and maybe she was crying in part because she was now the leader. She was always the cautious one, and even at nineteen she looked older, graver and blander than any teenager had a right to be. She looked like her mother but a little

smoother, her dark hair thicker and her wrists more graceful, if only by a bit. Next to her, Linette lay on her back, an arm thrown over her eyes. She hadn't said anything since they lowered the coffin into the earth.

"We don't have to," Isabelle said. She had Daniela's head in her lap, pulling her fingers through her hair. Danny was the baby, even though she was fourteen now and didn't look like a baby anymore. The sharp lines of her collarbone rose and fell as she tried to tame her tears. Her face was red and splotchy and she clutched Isabelle's velvet dress between thin fingers.

"Juliet, could you tell before she did it?"

I didn't know what Rosa wanted to hear. Whether you could see it coming or not hardly made a difference. What would madness even look like in Rosa's fierce gaze? Would we recognize the madness in her blood from the madness of her spirit? Half the time Rosa was doing something wild, something dangerous. I looked at my cousins, trying to see crazy take over Linette's sharp chin or Maria's steady eyes, Isabelle's gentle smile or Danny's curious eyebrows. I shook my head. "No, I hadn't seen it."

"Did she know?" Danny whispered. "Did she know it was taking over?"

"I don't know. It happened so fast." I closed my eyes, trying to keep the image of her leaking blood at bay. Trying to unhear the crack of her spine. "I hope not."

We were used to fearing for our mothers, those of us who still had mothers. We were used to fearing for Abuela. We did not know how to carry that kind of terror for each other. How had our mothers done it for so long? Carrying so much fear in their bones must have made them heavy, must have broken something inside them that we could only start to understand now that the madness was coming for us.

We were all wondering was the crazy would make us do. It had killed Linette's mother slowly, turning her body into something so sad it couldn't bear to live anymore. Abuela said she died of grief, cried herself out until there was nothing left inside her. It had made Danny's mother run away from home when she was sixteen. She was the youngest too, and her leaving almost killed Abuela. She came home with a baby and a bloody eye. Isabelle's mother had tried to jump from the balcony of the 5th floor hotel room she was cleaning. She broke her back and now she had to use her chair to everywhere. The crazy made Rosa's mother slam a knife into her husband's stomach four times. He bled out on the living room carpet, his breath still reeking of beer even as blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth. Camilla's mother talked to trees. It started when she was a teenager, her soft lilting voice murmuring to birches and pines, peach trees and apple saplings, and no one could make her stop. Maria's mother set the house on fire with a box of matches she had bought at the convenience store. She had stood outside on the curb and watched it burn to the ground, firelight playing over her face as the flames licked the house away.

My mother's madness was harder to find. The aunts didn't call it crazy, but then they never really talked about the way the madness crept into their lives. It hurt too much, and not the kind of hurt that got better with words. My mother had a child she couldn't love. Child meaning me, and although no one ever confirmed it, it must have been her crazy. That was the only way to explain it, the way she was with me. Distant, like there was a pane of glass between us and she didn't know how to break it.

Those were the kinds of crazy we knew—Camilla in front of the bus, Abuela walking into the ocean—but it wasn't hard to imagine other ways we could turn mad. We didn't talk much the rest of that afternoon, Camilla's death heavy in the

garden air around us. Camilla, our leader since infanthood. Camilla the brave, Camilla the smart, Camilla the beautiful. She was what was best of each of us, twisted into one body. A body cracked open on the pavement, a body bled empty. A body now buried under so much earth she must be suffocating. Camilla, the one who went first, always.

Before we went home that day, we held each other almost desperately. We were scared of who the madness would claim next, how it would change them. When we hugged, our fingers bit into skin, like leaving purple stains would make us remember each other and ourselves. Our mothers watched with sad eyes. Behind them, Auntie Mia ran her fingers over the oak tree in the front yard, her voice a soft mutter, hitching only slightly through her sobs.

After Camilla's service, the church felt foreign. It was the same one we had come to for as long as we had lived, the same one Abuela had brought our mothers to when they were children, but something about it was different. I wondered if this was how it was after Linette's mother died. I was too small when it happened to really remember. Linette has always been the motherless one to me, the one who came to her aunts and Abuela when her father didn't understand her, who asked them questions I didn't even ask my own mother.

It was hard listening to the priest talk about mortal sin when I could feel the danger running through my veins. I didn't know when it would strike, what it would do. It could be years before it took over, or it could happen tomorrow. There was no way to know. Danny nudged my knee with hers and when I looked up, she crossed her eyes. I couldn't help smiling. Behind her shoulder, my cousins sat stacked upon each other, a line of dark hair and dark eyes. In the pew behind us, our mothers were mirror images, older, more subdued. They were more religious than us. They carried rosaries, hung crosses in their homes. My own mother talked to

God like he was a close friend, her voice conspiratorial when she prayed. I tried it once, but I felt like I was mumbling to myself, like whispering into the deadness of a landline with no one on the other side.

Nevertheless, I prayed because that's what a good daughter did. More than anything, that mattered. Being good. I went to school, I made good grades. I helped my mother, indulged Abuela when she tried to make me something I wasn't. All the while, fear was damming in my chest, just behind my breastbone, piling on itself until I was scared to leave the house. Camilla's death had taught me it wouldn't help to have someone with me, but still I clung to my cousins, heart sisters that they were. Our fear knit us together, tighter than before.

We were almost obsessive, the way we watched each other. Like maybe we could catch the crazy, in that split second before it took over. Like the arch of an eyebrow or the pull of a lip would give it away and we could slam ourselves into it, wring it out of existence like bloody executioners. Sometimes that's the way the fear became. Angry. We were like caged animals. Waiting for the butcher to claim the next of us and make us nothing more than bloody hunks of meat with pretty hair. Or worse, make us do something we'd have to live the rest of our lives with, something that killed the inside parts of us until we wished we'd rather died.

It was three months after Camilla died and I still had nightmares. In them, her body flew through the air, cracked into the ground, bled over the road, and then she stood up. Looked at me, her twisted, broken index finger pointing at my heart. *You could have saved me. Why did you let me die?* It wasn't my Camilla, that creature with the bloody hair and only half a face, but still I writhed in guilt. Begged it to forgive me. Most nights, that's how I woke up, lips still pleading with the dead. It helped to walk to the kitchen. Fill a glass

of water, feel it running down my throat. Feel the cold tiles under my feet. Remind myself I was still alive, remind myself I couldn't have stopped it. It was on my way to do that when I found my mother standing in the dark kitchen one night.

"Mom?"

She looked a little dazed. Stared at her hands before glancing at me. She looked almost guilty. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice soft.

For the curse? I was about to ask, when I realized she must have heard me scream. Must have known I was caught in sleep, and she didn't save me, didn't run a hand over my brow, didn't tuck my hair back. She left me to plead it out with the dead by myself.

"That's okay," I said, voice tight. "I know it's the curse."

"What?" She was still whispering.

I pushed past her, opened the fridge so I didn't have to face her. "Not loving me."

A moment of silence. I moved a bottle of pickles, the glass bottles clacking together. Turned back to her, trying to keep my face smooth.

"What? No, that's not right." She looked stunned, almost frail in the light of the fridge. It haloed her body—her dark hair, the bony curves of her shoulders. She reached for a chair, sunk down at the wooden table. For a while she just stared at her hands, her head low. I edged closer, pulling out the chair across from hers. The fridge door slammed shut behind me, the room suddenly dark.

"When I was ten," she started, "my mother brought home a baby. Your Aunt Tia. She was such a tiny little thing, all twisted into herself. But she had the loudest voice." My mother shook her head. "She could scream like no one's business."

She quieted, twisting the wedding ring on her finger back and forth. Back and forth. I was scared to breathe, scared to interrupt the memories playing out across her face. Finally,

she sighed. When she continued, her voice was soft, a shamed creature slinking into the quiet of the midnight kitchen.

"I hated her. Before her, I had been the youngest. I was my father's favorite. Abuela spoiled me. And then Tia was there, wailing through the night. Always needing to be fed and changed and loved. My parents were busy with her, my sisters adored her. I was jealous," she said, pain twisting her face together. "I don't know how I knew to do it. One moment I was watching her sleep, and the next the pillow was simply there. When she screamed, it was quiet, muffled. And her body was so small—" her voice broke. I stared in shock. This couldn't be right. This wasn't right. "Your Abuela stopped me just before I could kill her. She wrenched me back and by the time I came back to myself, I was sobbing. We didn't understand about the crazy back then—it would be five years before Mia started babbling to the pines out back and six months more before Emilia jumped from that balcony." A tear ran down her cheek. "It wasn't until years and years later that we understood. Even so, I don't think your Abuela ever forgave me. She never trusted me, and I can't blame her."

I was too numb to speak, scared to break the crystal form of this story, but somehow my mother could see the question in my eyes. "No, they don't know. Abuela made up a story about me trying to drown myself in the bathtub when I was a child. I couldn't bear the shame of Tia knowing. Of any of them knowing."

I reached across the table and folded my fingers around hers. They were cold, brittle.

"It wasn't you. You couldn't stop the madness any more than Tia could help crying. It isn't something we control."

She tried to smile. "You are a good daughter, Juliet. I am sorry I am not the mother you deserve."

I was ashamed then, of the way I had thought of her love. I saw, suddenly, how careful she was. How soft her grip was

on my fingers, how her body curved away from mine. How long had she been afraid the crazy would take over again? How did she hold her baby, that infant me, without shaking with fear? So many years since I was small enough to fit under a pillow, and yet her eyes were guarded.

"I do not think cursed women were made to love," she said, almost to herself. Her eyes drifted to the lone street lamp outside the kitchen window. "How can we love when we cannot even trust our own bodies? They always betray us."

I imagined her hovering by my bedroom door, listening to me crying. Not trusting herself to hold me. Not trusting her bones because she wasn't sure they would follow her orders. She was right. This wasn't a way to live, always scared the madness would strike. Would return and finish the job it had failed at so many years ago. We sat in the dark, her hands featherlight around mine—a habit I don't think she could ever break—until the morning light edged into the room, creeping over the room until it washed us golden too.

I called us together, back to Abuela's backyard. Just the cousins, because old habits died hard and my aunts would not understand. Abuela might have a heart attack. We sat in the shade, the smell of flowers sweet in the air. I told them my theory. They laughed. And then they thought it over and their laughter died.

"Why would you think that?" Linette asked, squinting against the sun behind me.

I had known this was coming, and I knew what I had to do. Still, it was hard giving them away. For months, they had been mine, something of Camilla's I could claim. Something just for me. Now, I shared them because they were salvation and that was something we all needed.

"Before she jumped into the road, Camilla said something to me."

As one they leaned forward. My beautiful cousins. Linette

with her suspicious mouth. Maria was hopeful, her old-woman eyes wide. Danny was already crying, her eyes glossy. Rosa silent, solemn for once in her life. Isabelle smiled at me, like I needed encouragement. They deserved to know as much as I did.

"She said, 'It's not a curse, Juliet. I'm not crazy, and neither are you. We're all just a little sad and a little lost. We're just human. I'm sorry about this.' And then she squeezed my hand and jumped."

We cried, the way we hadn't at her funeral. We cried for our grandmother who almost lost herself in the ocean. Cried for our mothers, our aunts, who thought themselves doomed before they had a chance to live. Cried for ourselves, cried for Camilla who was beautiful and sad and cracked herself open on the road to see what would come out. We made a pact, sealed with tears and pinkies, that our daughters would not be next.

A year later, Isabelle stopped talking. Six months after that Rosa lost her left hand on the train tracks. The day before she turned twenty, Linette overdosed on painkillers. Yesterday. That was only yesterday, and I'm looking at her now, sleeping on this hospital bed. Peaceful, almost. *Happy birthday, cousin*. Her dark lashes flutter over smooth cheeks. My cousins come one by one, filing into the hospital room slowly. Not so long ago we were here for Rosa. Held her while she wailed, clutching the stump of her arm close. We are too intimate with hospitals and grief, and yet we always come. Maria slides into a chair by Linette's shoulder and lifts her pale hand, careful of the tubes snaking from her wrist. Places it on her belly and smiles.

"She's kicking," she says, her hand resting over Linette's. We take turns doing the same, feeling the steady tread of the baby's feet. It feels like hope.

The Seventh Child

Quinn Vreeland

One cup of broth and four cups of flour were beaten until stubborn by a wooden spoon. The dough then sloughed from the bowl with a soft thump onto the counter. Its shine from the chicken broth dulled with another layer of flour, but it persistently fought back to be seen. A heavy marble rolling pin slammed in a divide and pushed out to change the ball into a more desirable flat shape that could then be cut apart. Rosalind pressed against the glutenous nature, covering the constricting and damaged dough with more flour to keep it off of her. She needed to make it into a squared shape to get the dumplings to the right size. No one liked imperfect dumplings, least of all Rose.

She looked out the window between horizontal and vertical strokes of her rolling pin. The sun hit her lavender field to turn the flowers a dusty grey against the protruding lime from the forest line beyond them. The combination sent her eyebrows together and pursed her lips. Then again, the sun ruins most things if not kept in check by clouds. Taking a moment from making dumplings, Rose pulled at the ribbon holding up the lace curtain to cover the view. Her eyes were pressing gently at the start of a headache.

"Hey, I was using that light!"

Rose turned to remember that James was in the room. He was already putting the book about nineteenth-century gardening down when she offered, "I can open it up again."

"Oh, don't worry. That book is complete crap anyway. I don't know why Theresa even has it."

Rose smiled. "She says it works for the lavender and poppies. She's not one for changing what works."

James replied with a raised eyebrow that completed his outfit. With his worn suit jacket, he looked like the botany professor he should have been. "Well, maybe that's why you two need me to take care of your roses. That book said you needed the soil to have an acidity of 6.0 when they really do well with something a bit more basic."

"And here I thought it was just because you had a certain magic about you," Rose replied over her shoulder. She had gone back to her dumplings as they were getting to the right thickness. The pot next to her rumbled and she turned down the heat before checking the broth. The lid opened to steam that broke open her nose and filled her chest. Rose's chicken broth wouldn't let you smell anything else. It even got James to stand up from the reading chair.

"I'm already starting to feel full. You really are the best cook in the world."

Rose pushed away her humbled pride by biting her lip and with the retort, "And the best cleaner too."

James took the spoon from the counter to give the broth a taste. "Your new nephew is one lucky kid."

Bang. Rose dropped the lid with his comment. "Fuck." Luckily, it was just water, so she wiped it up with her stocking and reached to get the lid.

"I'm sorry, Rose. I thought you knew that Agatha gave birth yesterday."

"No, no. It's fine. It's wonderful even. I don't get much news out here. I dropped the lid cause it burned… but yes, it's wonderful. Did you say it was a boy? I think that's seven for her. Careful, it's still a bit hot. Can you move your hand so I can put the top on? Thanks. I love all her babies. What a great mother. I might need your help with these dumplings."

Rose grabbed the counter for stability. She still had to make the dumplings.

"Yeah. Poor kid. The seventh child and the only boy. He's probably already been forgotten. There's not a man alive Agatha can stand. I'm amazed her husband is still alive."

And I'm amazed she has the time for another one. Rose pulled a knife from the top drawer and started to cut down in two-inch thick strips… *not another one. Please. I can't put Theresa through this again.* She kept her hand on the counter to keep it from shaking. *It's not my fault… well maybe it is… but Agatha should have stopped years ago.* Her body was dropping a few degrees and her stomach was falling with it… *Maybe Theresa already knew and didn't want me to find out. Maybe she's sparing me her pain.* "Does Theresa know yet?"

James raised his eyebrow back into its detective stance. "I'm not sure. Probably. Everyone at that university is so gossipy that everyone should know by now. Her Royal Majesty of Femininity had her first flaw: a baby boy."

Rose laughed, making a slight curve in her cut. It was okay. *I was okay.* She could throw that bit away later. No one had to know. Except maybe James.

"So what would you like me to do?"

The change focused Rose a bit more. "Here, I need you to stir the broth while I drop these in. I have to do them one at a time or they'll stick."

Rose cut the strips horizontally so she had a counter full of two-by-four inch rectangles of dough. The edges were thrown away and the first row was piled up and laid onto her arm like a grainy blanket. They were then individually dumped into the boiling broth between James' stirring. They did this for every row, waiting a few minutes between each round until the counter was just a workspace of white dust and the pot was filled thick with dinner.

"I'm sorry to miss out on your cooking, but I have to prune your roses and then home to my own dinner." It was already midday.

"Alright, James. Thank you for helping. And sorry about earlier."

"Don't worry. When you're making food, you can cover whatever window you wish."

That's not what I meant. Rose took the spoon and James kissed her cheek. She had forgotten about the window. Her clumsiness and rambling felt more telling than anything else. It might not be to him. Probably because he couldn't feel cold sweat pushing out of her skin or the thickening of air that comes with mentioning children in her house. Maybe he couldn't hear how loud it reverberated. Instead, he was able to just leave and slam the door to seal it in until Theresa got home.

Stirring the dumplings, Rose opened the curtain above the sink a bit to look out over the field again. A cloud was covering the sun so that the lavender warmed into separate colors of silvery green leaves and the tips of bruising purple. It was nearly perfect. Just like the crooked piece of dumpling she forgot to omit from the pot. It was already ruined anyway. Negative emotions weren't good for cooking.

Rose added the shredded chicken from a small bowl next to the stove. Each piece plopped in and splashed her. It wasn't hot enough to hurt, and she was wearing an apron, so her dress would be safe. She put a lid on the pot and cleaned out the bowl with some hot water before toweling it off. There was no way she was going to get emotional. Everything would be fine. Plus the house needed to be cleaned up. There were unpiled books and gardening tools to be put up and a bed to be made. Not enough to fill up the time, but maybe enough to fill her.

The books were the first to be arranged. Rose took a leaf from the bouquet on the coffee table and put a mark on the open page about the white-throated sparrow so she could close it. No reader wanted a page forgotten, even for reference. Plus Theresa had started a lovely story about a visiting bird that Rose wanted to hear again. Then she piled on top *Gardening in the Eighteenth Century: A Guide to New Tools*, *The New Botanist*, and *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. She took the pile to the nightstand on the right side table in the bedroom to match her own on the left of *The Farmer's Almanac*, *Growing to the Stars: Planting with the Zodiac*, and *Witch's Gardening Guide: Gardening with Love and Energy*. Even though the books would be back on the coffee table by morning, just for a moment, it cleared something away.

Around the house were hanging vines, tall bushes stuffed into small corners, and pots to fill empty spaces between books and candles. It would have smelled more musty were it not for the fields of flowers outside that kept the rooms somewhere between sickly and sweet. Most of the plants inside were only to be watered on Sundays, but the basil in the kitchen, the bush in the bedroom, and Rose's special vine on the porch all needed something a bit extra. *Just because I didn't want to have kids didn't mean that I couldn't take care of things.*

Kids were loud, unlike her basil which would melt down by wilting before dying. They also were expensive and took a lot of energy to keep up with, unlike her slowly growing vine that she had been keeping up with for the past twenty years. This vine was as much a child to her if not more so than any tiny human could be. Children stop growing after a while, hers didn't. It is true that children take a while to shape and flourish like the bush in the bedroom, but if she messed up and cut a bit too much, it would grow back. If she fucked

up a child that would be it. She wouldn't be able to live with herself ever. Even when Agatha would bring her children to visit their great-aunt, Rose would hide away in the kitchen to make food. Food and plants she could do. Children, not so much. They don't even come with a consistent instruction manual. Just last year, one of them had a fit because there were nuts in the dessert. Why she would eat a hazelnut chocolate brownie without realizing there were nuts was beyond Rose. Plants weren't brilliant either, but at least they didn't pretend to be.

She had to sit down after watering everything. Her heart and mind were racing to see which could go faster and it numbed her feet so it hurt to stand. Theresa always wanted children but said it was fine if Rose didn't. But it was going to be her way of contributing to the life that she spent her entirety studying. A botanist scholar making a smaller one. Or maybe a little ornithologist. But it was too much for Rose. The word "child" or "baby" held the same feeling as "rape" and "dyke" used to have in this house. A thick word that became impenetrable by conversation. Now those words breezed through but signs of new human life broke at Rose, sealed her up.

The door struggled open and gave out a, "Hello, darling."

"What are you doing home? I thought you were going to be late today. The chicken and dumplings aren't even done yet!" Rose had barely turned to see her wife before she began to lose herself.

Theresa stepped forward, putting her bag of books down to grab Rose's hand. "They canceled the meeting today so I came home early to see my wife. Is everything okay?"

Rose was now standing with her other arm crossed and her back hunched over. "Yeah. It's fine. You just surprised me is all. How was your day?" Rose grew a small smile and kissed

Theresa. She then made her way to the stove to pretend like the pot needed stirring.

Her wife's voice faded in and out with her thoughts.

"Well today started with one of my students…" *She obviously doesn't know yet or would have mentioned it* "...remember that I left my book…" *unless she doesn't want to make me feel guilty again for not being what she wanted* "... and Betty says hello of course. She is still going on about your cookies…" *Smile in appreciation. Laugh a little. Okay, so she's at least not upset. Unless, of course, she wants me to mention it.* "...paling in comparison to the *last* essay she wrote that completely misread the cultural significance of moss…" *She's rubbing my back now. Oh! And now she's holding me. It feels so nice. So why does it make me so nauseous?* "...which is basically like diapers." *There!*

Rose stepped to the side away from the stove and out of Theresa's hands.

"Are you sure you're okay sweetheart? Something seems to be getting at you. Is there something you want to talk about?"

They both knew what she was hinting at but each refused to say anything. Rose had just cleaned her marginally messy house and everything was in order. The last thing she needed was a muddy topic to ruin her floors and break through her chest. "I'm just worried because of something James said about the roses. The leaves are starting to turn yellow. I was going to try a spell on them or something tonight."

"You know I support your ways of working with plants, so don't think that's going to distract me Miss Metascience. Why don't you tell me what's really bothering you."

Rose looked out at the little grey cloud that was coming over the tops of the pine trees. The wind was still but the cloud still looked to be moving fast.

"Is it the fact that Agatha had another child? Because that's wonderful news! I'm glad to have a baby in the family.

I'm happy. Rosalind. I am happy." She reached out to touch Rose on the shoulder.

Before she made contact, Rose was heading for the door. "I…I need to get some lavender for the biscuits tonight." She grabbed the pruning shears that she forgot to put away and closed the door behind her. Theresa wouldn't follow because she knew that it wouldn't help. Rose left her shoes on the porch. She needed to feel something to ground her and the slight pricking of dried grass and twigs worked well.

Running into the lavender field, her skirt and petticoats brushed the tops of the fragrant flowers. Near the middle, she stopped and sat down so her knees could get nice and wet from tears. It took a few heaving sighs for her to start thinking again. She was useless and inadequate. Imperfect for a wife that devoted her life to her. *I know she is okay that we never had kids. It's too late anyway. But she still deserved more.* She was actively hurting her wife by rejecting her dreams and then running away. *But she says that I was her dream and that she cares for me. That's why she came home early. That's why she built this home with me.* Pain on pain. She made it more severe by dealing with it alone, her wife left to feel isolated. *And now I'm isolated too. Again. And Again. Lost in a field of purple and mud.*

The cloud had covered enough of the sky to deepen the plum of tart lavender flowers surrounding her. The bluish welcome of the pines darkened like the tear stains on her embroidered dress. It was a dark royal heaven and all she wanted was to run out of the palace to find the corner in the small provincial village that no one thought to look in. Maybe then she could be far enough away for people to forget and move on. For Theresa to have a child. To rewrite history and realign the planets and bring a child forth from the ground to gift to the one woman she ever dared to love.

So she ran.

Out of the field and into the woods, she ran. There was no stopping her. Even the tears in her dress and the cuts on her feet were something that pushed her forward and made her lighter. She needed something to stop her and tell her it was alright; something not covered in the humidity of pity and guilt; something open and cool and warming and new; something like a clearing; like the clearing that she came upon.

The trees opened up to let in the sun from above. The cloud must have moved on, or maybe this was far beyond its breadth. Finally out of reach. She walked forward onto the buoyant pine needle floor. A breeze hit her skirts to dry up the sweat and cool off her legs. She stretched out her arms to the sun and closed her eyes to start spinning. Her mind stopped so her body started. Her dance was accompanied by laughs gargled with tears, and her lungs breathed out the last of the stuffed perfume of home. She spun towards the center of the clearing and made a final stomp with a *crack*.

Something wet pushed up her heel and she looked down at the divot in the ground she stepped in. It was a small nest of eggs. One of them was adhering to Rose's foot and making its way into the scratches. She stepped back to get out when the viper bit her. A mother destroying the monster; a baby killer put in her place. Rose had let another life fade before existing and she was finally being punished.

She stumbled back as her leg began to warm again. This time it was a fire that was enveloping her instead of the sticky hotness of before. It felt good to be burned away. Cleansed and forgiven. The hammer finally fell and pierced through her skin. Rose leaned against a tree at the entrance of the clearing and slid down its side. Now was a time to relax. Her dress could lay skewed and her legs could be dirty and it could still feel good. She never knew it was possible. *But at least she can have a child now. Even if it means having to move in with Agatha. She's a woman. She can survive.*

She closed her eyes and gave herself to her dream.

Before her was her beautiful wife with her hair down in a thin skirt dancing away with a little boy. There was no music outside of their laughing, but it jingled enough to keep them going. They spun about the house, somehow careful of all the ceramic pots and glass jars. It was the family Theresa always wanted in the house they built together.

Her book was open to the page with the white-breasted sparrow again as she pointed out the bird to the boy. She read off the page with all of the little creature's appearances and habits. Then she created a funny little story of how it got its first cricket.

They sat in the kitchen looking at someone making dinner. Something with dumplings that smelled like a warm vent on a cold day. Theresa looked on with sadness.

The boy got up and pulled at her shirt and asked about a photograph that was on the counter. Theresa picked it up and pointed at Rose. "This is me with your Aunt Rose. She would have loved to have met you, you are so alike. She also loved my jokes about Mr. Sparrow. And she made the best dumplings in the world, not like Uncle James over there. They used to say that she would the pound her love into the dough until it was perfect."

POETRY

You know, the box of chocolates tells you exactly what you're going to get

Sara Cline

last night I slept like the living.
and this morning when I woke
the early worm caught the bird
the leopard changed its spots
and the spade was not a spade.

stuffing fireflies in my mouth
I can forget the taste of your mortician fingers
but the rain is burning the ceiling inside out
my wine glass becomes putty
the music cuts
and we dance the suicidal hokey pokey.

you should know that
before I left your party
I remembered to frisk the carpet
break the windows
feed and water the television.
I climbed out the chimney
and left a rock in your shoe.

you should know that now
every pot that I watch boils
and there's some place like home,
some place like home.

Sand Dancer

Isabella Stork

The sterling silver cage hung from the ceiling
overlooking the glassy water, a raven perched
on a thin wire. I stretched out its wings
three times a day, but that three often became
five until one day, I swallowed it.

When the sun's rays would glint on the
cage, I would feel the raven's beak
pecking my heart—an electric reminder
that hollowness feels like a forgotten timer.

And when the last sand dollar floated on the shore,
I held the thickened bones of memories. I
broke its pieces to count the doves
that once soared in your spine.

Te llamo

Deanna Maria Noriega

The AC is working hard.
Huffing and puffing, it smells like waiting
for you to get off work.
I sit listening like an empty fruit bowl on the floor.

It is more than a wish—
hot pulp balloon
squeezing its fat body up the chimney
of my throat, crawling slowly,
vinous skin pulling—

now I can't think of anything
other than your name; it hums
in the oven of my mouth like a trapped fly,
wings beating against teeth
like fan blades.

You said, *don't turn me into a poem.*

It's more like a threat, cauterized
deep in the heart of my jaw,
which you kicked under the bed this morning.

I said, *tell me you love me and look directly*
into my thighs.

Now I'm rolling in the dust, clotting my lips
with a silver shock blanket.
Putting your name out with the pages it's filled.

I run my tongue along a dead language,
the door knob, the rails. Inhale
a flight of syllables to keep it down.

Still, something's humming
when I look up and see a pair of eagles—
the dalliance of my one note grief
sinks in the West to a dirty tune.

The City in Which I Love You

Deanna Maria Noriega
after Li-Young Lee

My beloved you are not in the unanswered letters,
unaddressed and crammed inside the pillow
beneath a coma's matted hair,

nor have I passed you on the short walk to the liquor store
where I let *la viejita* pick for me and I pay
extra for cigarettes that smell like your last apartment.

It's been raining for weeks on end, water slapping pavement
like fat dog tongues against bare skin.
I lose my umbrella on purpose and strike a match.

The city in which I met you chimes every room blue—
it moves sad and fast like you, singing a chorus
every night of house keys and crying sisters.

I ride around the edges of you, licking your wounds
at every stop, watching your mother
dig beside the tracks.

She wades through aging torrents of salt, repeating,
"God bless."
"God bless."

Is the light so clogged now, awaiting your pallid hands
to pour it back into its nest? Sometimes I miss you so much
I forget you're alive.

In the city in which I lack you, smoke colored water
is rising on its hind legs to rattle leaves
onto my porch

and blues go blooming over the flower beds,
and white bellied planes go whistling overhead,
and no one comes with good news.

Vanini Came to Me in a Dream

Emma Hoggard

He showed me glimpses of
Fountain's spray and lichened cobbles and sullied leaves
That reached my gaze in brightened marvels
Of light and cleaved
Looming mosaic domes from their pendentives,
Prosaic fiats from complaisant amanuenses.
Inside their ancient cathedral
The Sadducees welcomed us,
Told us our sins weren't too mortal,
Then sent us back into
A world of darkening asterisms
And muddled whispers of aphorisms.

So with hearts confused,
Souls plagued by contusions
Seeping unnoticed beneath our jumbled façades,
And two millennia's accumulation
Of corrosive suasions
We'd stumbled through a maze of hazy porticoes,
Eyed the cornerstone whose inscription
Reads: Est. A.D. 0,
And clasped our palms together
As we invented our own sacraments.
And as I slept I revered,
Silently, the fading martyrdom
Of those who came before,
Of those who got me here.

first daughter, first emigrant

Luisana Cortez

pure water boils at a hundred degrees,
brackish showers persist out of illusion

and lag like a donkey malnourished, coy and drunk,
she tells me.

& it bubbles, & pelts the skin like ancient stones,
or, like a stream of light melting

over mossy pebbles of a floor that corrodes into ground.
she understands,

forth from a bucket, she says, over her head, scrubs, dries,
understands.

scouring skin must hurt. living, breathing tears.
it must feel like something.

what vacancy in this metaphor of violence or of pleasure,
what unfinished, unfelt poetics.

the theory of pain folds itself dumb and green. a dark, oak
desk where nerve endings

are fleeced, where capillaries are burst, and they worm
away in a flourish of bruise.

dust motes in ample silence, the contortions of man,
the first hooked, trembling finger.

this is about words incarnate that do not recognize their
own bodies, but crouch, run,

peer over them, inhabit, give verse for a daughter to
mine.

Visiting on Holiday in Huntington Beach, California

Chloe Nguyen

Upon the sidewalk,
Cleansing spit shrouds the desiccated body.
The earthworm resurrects, wriggling.

I grind my teeth as I stare at the vacancy
In the driveway where Ông Ngoại used to park,
Diesel only, no airbags.

The path back to grandmother's house
Eases thoughts of grandfather pointing
At trees and bushes past sunset, ghost stories in his mouth.

Ever since
The day we bore white cloths dark upon our heads,
The house seems like a cavity.

I remember how we watched our humble pyre swallow
The white headbands
And imagined the phoenix—
A different kind of ghost story.

the summer before

Matthew Leger

I.

in a seaside town where wind
chimes howl like holy ghosts,
the summer ashed into fall.
cacophonies of car alarms
drowned out taut calls from
friends/family/lovers/god as
floodgates failed; chemicals flowed;
into a labyrinth of leaves we slipped.

II.

i was headed wherever i should not be,
outside the veins of an electric daydream.
i can still hear the susurrus of the underpass,
of endless underpasses collapsing in on
themselves in the rearview mirror.

Butter for Lovers

Isabella Stork

White keys tiptoe an arpeggio across my throat—
a brambly beat with a metronome. I count the
moon's friends hiding behind the velvet loveseat.
I count golden specks on the pearl lamp whose
hourglass feels no shadow. Stay still, darling.
Greasy palms tangle my wrists in long brown hair.
A table set for two waits for no one, and a wet tragedy
swirls on the plate as butter starts to melt like
leaning in for a kiss. Only to feel a pair of cold
wire hangers. The yellow coat's frame in my
imagination, it hangs. The insides of the brown oak piano hold
my skull by a string. Every chord pulling me in closer
to picture frame tunnels where I see bright
butter flowing from my throat, the metronome still
ticking its tune. I mustn't spill any on the ground.

Pastina Lullaby

Kendall Talbot

Ah, *patatina*, what to do with you?
How would you like some *pastina* to chew?

A little pasta for a little girl,
Tiny stars, *stelline*, shining like pearls,
Swirl together inside Nonna's big pot
With milk and butter until sticky hot
Like the recipe calls for, unwritten
But remembered through time in the kitchen.

Ah, *patatina*, what are those tears for?
Did you burn your *piccole* fingers sore?

Weathered thumbs fumble over tiny cheeks
To stroke and soothe and shush the ache that leaks
From her eyes, fiery stars submerged
Under water, drowning in pain urged
By the stabbing heartbeat in each finger,
Where Nonna's fairy kisses still linger.

Ah, *patatina*, I will miss you so.
Hush, no crying, it is my time to go.

Time is like the steadfast swirling of stars,
Until it takes back something that was ours,
Closes its eyes in sleep; that little girl,
She did not know what pain was, the harsh whirl
Of waking but not wanting to be awake,
Now she burns her fingers to dull the ache.

sinner

Marissa Williams

a man at the crosswalk called
me a sinner.
he said it like i cared, like i should be
sorry and at one point i was.
small-town texas made me sorry
because all i knew were hayfields and
cows and
three churches looming in the town square
like priests at communion.
the world felt very
small.
the world felt like water pooled between
god's cupped hands,
and i had already slipped through
the cracks. he did not reach down
from on high and draw me from deep waters.
he drowned me in them.
to be clear
this was not a baptism
this was a sacrifice,
this was a punishment.
small-town texas has no stoplights
no sidewalks
small-town texas could not afford new textbooks
but it could afford bigots.
small-town texas had no fucking dykes
and small-town texas made me ashamed
made me angry

made me stop giving a fuck
when i realized the world is bigger
than ranches and sins and wrinkled
hands clutching bibles.
the world is bigger than handfuls of water.
the world is bigger than crosswalks.

on birthstones

Selome Hailu

if i'm to be given rubies for my hot
summer entrance, then,
tell me, what month gets glass?

you were transparent, and purposeful
were held and could hold
transformed sunlight at will
and warned of how you'd hurt me when you broke

red and reckless,
i should have listened.

Corpse Blossom

Isabella Stork

When I turned 18, I found out
you smoked cigarettes.
The scent of your clothes
reminded me of a gold coin's clink in
stale casino slot machines,
and the jars of pickled cucumbers lined
on the deck. I painted it one summer,
but it was always peeling.

When I was 21, I found a dusty
water bottle in the corner of
the garage where you used to
drown your cigarettes.
A pile of long, slender corpses
waiting patiently at the bottom.
Orange, papery limbs swaying with
each drop down.

But today, I found one cigarette
floating atop the shadowy water.
And I can't seem to stop
imagining this ritual
of an orange and white corpse
slowly floating up for air.
The stirring waters, a gasping breath.
A cigarette's clink in a slot machine.

Inviting the Eyes to Diving Practice

Laura Doan

On a Monday, or a Thursday, someday
Of chlorine heaven, he called to her eyes:
"Mommie! Watch me hold my breath under water!"
Plooshe—his round head sinks like her purse pennies.
Her eyes rest in the soft pops of book words;
Water balls riff and chase as he falls…….
He's holding the air inside. His lungs like
flapping ducks searching for a warmer sky.
"Stay here," he thinks, *"keep promise to her eyes,"*
But her eyes are sunk too far in her glass,
In the mosquito dead in her iced tea,
To stop. Really stop. To watch him not breathe.
"Look at me holding my breath!" he just said.
"I can do it for so long!" .....
.....
.....
Twenty years.....
.....
Forty years .....
.....
Time passes still through the pool refractions,
Requests for the watching eyes come much less;
Shy want curls in itself on the pool's floor:
"Do they see my garbage strings neatly bowed?"
"Do they see my lemon tree so well-pruned?"
"Do they see my shirt wrinkles pressed in lines?"

And still it's too much to watch himself dive,
Too much to stop breathing without the eyes;
Want uncurls, a snake tail-rocking water
Which is disturbed much too quietly…….
"Does no one see that I'm still not breathing?"
Say the penny faces in mother's purse,
Say the mosquitoes choked still on sweet tea.

NONFICTION

Memoir as Collective Memory: Black Women's Burdens in *Men We Reaped*

Selome Hailu

At its core, Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* is "a rotten fucking story," as Ward bluntly declares before opening its first chapter (Ward 8). From the very beginning, in the memoir's prologue, Ward commits to telling the story of "how the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility festered and turned sour and spread," leaving no doubt that the book will relate a long string of suffering and sorrow. And despite the arresting nature of her warning that pain lies ahead in the novel, the warning itself is far from shocking. Among the bestselling and most critically acclaimed contemporary black literature are such novels as Jones' *An American Marriage*, Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*, and Gyasi's *Homegoing*, all of which center around intense racial violence, families in agony, and the profound presence of death. James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* even structures itself around a multitude of black death the way *Men We Reaped* does. How and why have such depths of pain and trauma become commonplace in our conceptualizations of black life? Comparing these works draws attention to the consistent image of black women as humble fixers, as silent leaders of thankless work, and this reflects the way black women move through society in real time. *Men We Reaped* serves as an artifact of the societal tendency to place the weight of humanity's burdens onto black women.

Ward sets her somber tone before the memoir truly begins, using formal features not only to bring up the topic of

death, but to introduce its relationship to the living. The epigraph, for example, is a structure which allows a work to take on the meaning of the included quotations and suggest identification with them. Therefore, by invoking Harriet Tubman, Tupac Shakur, and A. R. Ammons, she assumes responsibility for their collective ideology. Tubman, saying "when we came in to get the crops, it was the dead men that we reaped," creates a metaphor in which she compares tending to death with a slave's compulsory work to manage the harvest. On a similar note, Shakur laments "Why all my homies had to die before they got to grow?" in a song titled "Words 2 My Firstborn," suggesting a feeling of responsibility to teach the impressionable that they must question and address the death they see around them. The epigraph concludes with A. R. Ammon's elegiac "[I]t is my place where/ I must stand," in reference to the site where the speaker's brother died, taking ownership of it. Ward's selections of quotations to digest before the opening of the memoir not only have commonality in themes of death. They consistently discuss an inferred sense of duty to hold onto the implications of death, using language (the harvest metaphor, the teaching of a young one, diction such as "I must stand") that connotes responsibility and work.

By orchestrating this conglomeration of voices and claims, Ward derives momentum to delve into the story with, further defining *who* has the responsibility that the epigraph introduced to navigate and interpret death. Immediately following the epigraph is the table of contents, which serves to answer this question. The bolded men's names represent a roster of deaths, and they interrupt the progression of an ambiguous collective figure: "We Are in Wolf Town [...] We Are Born [...] We Are Wounded [...] We Are Watching [...] We Are Learning [...] We Are Here." The unspecified party, unbolded, appears in the background of the deaths in the table of contents with a narrative of its own. It suggests that this "we" may

fill the role of burden-bearer—of allowing their own story to serve as the outline for that of others. And as the "We Are" chapters prove to be those in which Ward brings focus back to herself, as well as to other black women, she characterizes black women's voices within the chorus of the epigraph.

Ward published *Men We Reaped* as a memoir, but as it focuses far beyond the scope of just her own life, the classification alters literary form to comment on cultural form. A memoir is generally understood to be a telling of one's own story, usually explaining the origin of the writer's success and lifestyle. Thus, as posited in *The Washington Post*, "the memoir you might expect Jesmyn Ward to write would sound something like this: Black girl from poverty-stricken, small-town Mississippi gets a break [...] Triumph over adversity [... but t]his is not that book" (Tucker). A more classic memoir would follow this suggested storyline, evoking the difficult circumstances of her upbringing and subsequently following the chronology of her career: attaining prestigious degrees, dealing with loss, then using memories of her loved ones as inspiration for her writing, and ultimately winning the National Book Award for *Salvage the Bones* in 2011. Despite having a multitude of material and achievements to frame a memoir around, Ward elects to use the deaths of important men in her life as her outline. In this way, her memoir serves as a document of collective memory: hers, her family's, her friends'. But this makes a profound implication: if a memoir is one's story as a person, then by framing hers around these men, she effectively defines her life and story in terms of others.

The deviations from traditional form made in *Men We Reaped* must be understood to reveal Ward's intentions as much as the content itself does. There exists a relationship between the unorthodox style of the memoir and the meaning of the deaths she writes about wherein "form does not

merely process the raw material of content, because that content is already... informed...the true bearers of ideology in art are the very forms, rather than the abstractable content itself" (Eagleton 11–12). If we subscribe to this idea of "revolutionary art as one which transforms the modes, rather than merely the contents, of artistic production," then we see that Ward, in transforming the mode, changes the general ideology ascribed to the genre of memoir (Eagleton 31). Rather than evoke hope and suggest freedom from the past as memoir is known to do, Ward's break in form inextricably ties her to the past. By devising a *form* which bears the burden of the past and of other people's lives, she in turn suggests that *she* does the same.

In creating this relationship between form and ideology, Ward sets up the content of *Men We Reaped* to serve as a collection of evidence of the form's suggestions, detailing the ways she and other black women in her life become responsible for sustaining the weight of their community's pain. The tendency spans long before she was born. In the chapter "We Are In Wolf Town," she describes her Mississippi lineage, calling upon various individuals on both sides of her family with a multitude of different relationships to each other, but the common denominator she establishes for all of them is that "men's bodies litter [her] family history. The pain of the women they left behind pulls them from beyond, makes them appear as ghosts" (14). This "pulling" and "making them appear" both demonstrates that the black women of DeLisle keep the dead men alive, and forcefully. Each following "We Are" chapter expands on this, illustrating precisely what sacrifices black women make to push through the disarray resulting from the lives and deaths of black men: "We Are Born" is Ward's mother's forfeit of her own idealisms; Ward writes that she "relented [her desire to stay in California] because she loved my father," "she could not dance in the kitchen" be-

cause she felt weathered as her family grew and her husband cheated, and "she'd also come to realize the hopelessness of her dreams that our growing family would bind my father to her and encourage his loyalty" (48, 53, 55). Each detail of her parents' relationship is framed around the ways her mother let go of joy to accommodate for her father and establishes how this stemmed from her mother's responsibilities to look after her own siblings while Ward's single grandmother raised her. In turn, Ward traces these behaviors as she inherited them from her mother, marking her early memories. From the present, she remarks on her pervading guilt for a whipping her brother Joshua received, saying she feels "still ashamed that I did not step out of that dense grass, that I did not climb those steps and grab his hand and lead him down them as an elder sister should, that I did not say: *Here I am, brother. I'm here*" (51). She plainly posits that keeping him out of trouble is what she "should" have done, and she holds onto this tone of regret as she mulls over everything she could have done to improve his life and, ultimately, to keep him alive. To "pull [him] from beyond and make [him] appear as [a] ghost," she places herself at the scene of his death by narrating the events of the car accident that she, in truth, has no access to. She forces herself to plunge into the depths of the "many bodies and cars and histories and pressures moving all at once" into Joshua's pain, but ultimately gives him the credit for teaching her that "love is stronger than death" (231–232). Thus, while this is Ward's own memoir, she not only creates a form which elevates men as its defining features, but she tasks herself with the burden of endowing the form with content which honors their memory.

Is there an ideological problem with embracing the commonly expected black woman's role of cleaning up after tragedy? Ward certainly demonstrates an awareness of the implications of the gender dynamics in her community, un-

derstanding "what it meant to be a woman: working, dour, full of worry. What it meant to be a man: resentful, angry, wanting life to be everything but what it was" (162). Therefore, taking on the role of making sense of pain and death risks becoming complacent to this harmful dichotomy; *Men We Reaped*, in trying to tell a woman's story by paying respects to the men in her life, might be seen as submitting to patriarchal structures. However, to adjudicate the progressiveness or lack thereof in the memoir, we must first define feminism and progress. In Bernice Fisher's "What is a Feminist Pedagogy?" she establishes that while it is common to see feminism as solely that which is anti-sexist, anti-hierarchical, and stresses women's experiences, a holistic definition is broader than this. She argues that feminism is not only the work, experience, and concern of women, but that it must reach and include men and relationships with men to be truly active in inciting progressive education and social change; a feminist pedagogy "can help us understand that unity is not merely discovered but built, and that the kind of learning that ends in action begins with action" (20). If we subscribe to this theory, *Men We Reaped* becomes a profusely feminist text. Instead of searching or pleading for community, Ward builds community where it didn't exist before in pulling together her generations of ancestors with young men they'd never meet and the women they cared for and who cared for them. While she does, in writing this book and labeling it a memoir, accept the male-inflicted burden of healing a community, she does so on her own terms, unlike the burden-bearing she identifies in her matrilineal ancestors.

Instead of forsaking her dreams to repair her family like her mother and grandmother did before her, Ward attempts to repair her family and heal her own pain by *using* her dreams. Ward's pursuits in her writing career not only serve her wish to do right by the men that she loved and lost, but they serve

as a method of self empowerment. In an interview, Ward recounted the measures she took to write this story on her own terms, choosing not to think about the material for years until enough time had passed so that she felt she could "look at the choices [she and the men] made and find meaning in them and weave them together" (Brown). When she considered the chronology or lack thereof in her manuscript, she found that "there was something physically wrong trying to tell it any other kind of way," and refused to reorder it. Ward discusses a commitment to the truth, suggesting that she felt compelled and required to write this book by the machinations which killed these men, not by men themselves. Instead of forever succumbing to the shame that she "did not say: *Here I am, brother. I'm here*," *Men We Reaped* helps her to address and absolve this guilt. While she could not save her brother from childhood whippings or from death, Ward is able to conclude this book, "the hardest thing [she's] ever done," with the emotional presence she spent years wishing she'd attained, saying she now has the ability to "write the narrative that remembers, write the narrative that says: *Hello. We are here. Listen*" (251). The chapter "We Are Here" echoes back to her age-old guilt and confronts it, reimagining the traditional black woman's burden. While the memoir does serve as an attempt to do right by the passed men, it is not an act of subservience. It allows her to navigate and make sense of her pain using the talent and passion for writing she held onto throughout her grief, and employs Fisher's model wherein "learning that ends in action begins with action." Her processing of her "grief, for all its awful weight, insists that [Joshua] matters," and affords reverence and invokes empathy for her killed brother (243). This reverence and empathy work directly to combat the southern legacy of racism and sexism which not only contributed to the plights of the men, but to the resulting subordination of women.

Thus, by subverting the expectations for both a memoir and a feminist text, *Men We Reaped* defines its own tools for progress. The book is laid out in terms of men's lives, but Ward maintains full agency for this choice. It is a testament to the resilient strength of women while acknowledging what might compel a woman to forfeit her independence for a man. These contradictions and complications in both form and ideology allow Ward to address the nuances of race, gender, and death. She lays out the tiresome evidence of these forces, specifically the pain they implicate onto black women such as herself and her mother. But instead of trying to wholly resolve institutional corruption and declare resistance against the trauma that black women are societally expected to endure, she commits to the truth. By representing the flaws of her community honestly —the burdens of black women included—she exposes the powers that be and the systemic causes for their suffering. She disorients the reader with a distorted timeline of narratives, and this disorientation forces empathy for Ward. She garners respect for her initiative to, through this literary work, alleviate her disorientation in real time. *Men We Reaped* does not offer simple solutions to the complex, generational trauma of black men and women; it cannot. Instead, to address nonlinear, chaotic problems, she navigates nonlinear, chaotic emotions. She chooses, above all to be present. To be "here."

Works Cited

Brown, Jeffrey. "Jesmyn Ward Reflects on the Task of Writing 'Men We Reaped.'" *PBS*, Public Broadcasting System, 20 Sept. 2013, www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/jesmyn-ward-reflects-on-the-task-of-writing-men-we-reaped. Accessed 20 Apr. 2018.

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Taylor and Francis, 2013.

Fisher, Berenice. "What Is Feminist Pedagogy?" no. 18, 1981, pp. 20–24., www.jstor.org/stable/20709295. Accessed 22 Apr. 2018.

Tucker, Neely. "Jesmyn Ward's 'Men We Reaped," a Grim, Beautiful Memoir." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 23 Sept. 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jesmyn-wards-men-we-reaped-a-grim-beautiful-memoir/2013/09/23/1b546b7e-1bc9-11e3-a628-7e6d-de8f889d_story.html?utm_term=.339a81d132de.

Ward, Jesmyn. *Men We Reaped: a Memoir.* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.

Disrobed and Staged

Prena Sachdeva

SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE
VOL. CXIII[1] NOVEMBER, 2018 NO.1

The day of reckoning had come for her, as it must for all. At first, she had been excited. Buoyed by an exhilarating sense of giddiness like that of a little child stealing cookies from a jar she is not supposed to touch. Now that he had caught

1 No particular significance to the volume of publication.

her with her hand in the cookie jar, she almost regretted her naughtiness. She knew that he would know. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she had worried and worried, and now the day of reckoning had come. William Faulkner knew that he was the model for the general.

It was not like it was hard to see that. Where else would one find a handsome white haired five-and-a-half-foot tall general who is not a general and dabbles in Hollywood? Unlike many of their contemporaries, like Ernest Hemingway and Willa Cather who simply sold the movie rights to their work but left all the screenwriting to screenwriters (which in Hemingway's case included Faulkner), Faulkner worked in the film industry for a substantial period of time. A time during which he worked as a contract writer with five out of the eight biggest movie houses in America: MGM, Universal, Twentieth-Century Fox, RKO and Warner Brothers.[2] Faulkner's foray into Hollywood was so notorious that she would have been surprised if people did not realize to whom the story was referring. So this situation was something she had already anticipated when she nervously sent the story for publishing with all the others. Even so, as her little bright blue eyes took in and sized up the five-and-a-half-foot man who was a giant in American literature, Mary Flannery O'Connor was intimidated.

Intimidation—that was the root of the entire problem. Mary had once told some reporters how "the presence of Faulkner alone in their midst made a great difference in what the writer could and could not permit himself to do. Nobody wanted his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited was roaring down."[3] Probably the real reason

2 Solomon, Stefan. *William Faulkner in Hollywood: Screenwriting for the Studios.* U of Georgia P, 2017. *EBSCOhost*.
3 Moreland, Richard C. *A Companion to William Faulkner.* John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

Mary did not read him is because he made her feel that, with her one-cylinder syntax, she should quit writing and raise chickens altogether.[4] While she usually tried to keep clear of Faulkner so that her own little boat would not get swamped, this time she deliberately rowed her little boat parallel to Faulkner's, and stationed her mule and wagon beside his dixie limited.[5] She wanted the world to see that though the boat was tiny, the mule and wagon slow, they were her own and not copies or adaptations of the literary behemoth. The truth was that "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" was an experiment in expressing her anxiety as an author who wanted to escape Faulkner's viral influence. By building Faulkner into her story and contrasting his narrative voice with hers, she meant to preserve a sense of her own identity as an author.

This is clear enough in the death sequence:

> *The speaker was through with that war and had gone on to the next one and now he was approaching another and all his words, like the black procession, were vaguely familiar and irritating. There was a long finger of music in the General's head, probing various spots that were words, letting in a little light on the words and helping them to live. The words began to come toward him and he said, Dammit! I ain't going to have it! and he started edging backwards to get out of the way. Then he saw the figure in the black robe sit down and there was a noise and the black pool in front of him began to rumble and to flow toward him from either side to the black slow music, and he said, Stop dammit! I can't do but one thing at a time! He couldn't protect himself from the words and attend to the procession too and the words were coming at him fast. He felt that he was running backwards and the*

4 O'Connor, Flannery, and Sally Fitzgerald. *The Habit Of Being*. Vintage Books, 1980, 272.
5 Ibid., 273.

words were coming at him like musket fire, just escaping him but getting nearer and nearer.[6]

In a story where paragraphs average about fifteen lines, paragraphs written in the General's point of view are always longer, with this one coming to a whopping thirty-four lines long. The truth is that Faulkner finds it very difficult to shorten his narratives, as his imagination tends towards expansion. While even the novels that Mary wrote resembled

6 O'Connor, F. (1989). *Flannery O'Connor, Collected Works*. Library of America, 261.

short stories, Faulkner's short stories displayed a longing for the novel. These aspirations exerted enormous pressure on the descriptive and evocative capacities of his work, which he fulfilled through repetition and layering of themes to create what many people rightfully acknowledge is consummate literary artistry.[7] This artistry, though, staggers under the weight of unwanted information and multiple but unique allusions that make reading Faulkner a painful pleasure for most of his readers.

The General suffered from the same inclinations in Mary's story. In the span of a single paragraph, he alludes to 'words' in three different ways, as a "black procession," as a "black pool," and as "musket fire;" by layering the metaphors atop one another, he reiterates their meanings through repetition. He then incorporates these metaphors by describing them as entities in motion, using phrases like "began to come toward him," "flow toward him," and "were coming at him fast... were coming at him like musket fire" That these rapidly moving entities are antagonistic is also apparent in his reaction to this barrage. In the first line of the paragraph itself, the General describes the announcement of words as a "war," and his reaction to it is no different from that of a soldier defending himself. He first tries to avoid it by "edging backwards to get out of the way." The words are again imbued with strange sentience as they notice this maneuver and next try to surround him by flowing "toward him from either side." Again and again, he commands them to stop, but they are relentless, inevitably ending the sequence with him falling, as "his (metaphorical) body [is] riddled in a hundred places with sharp stabs of pain."[8]

7 Matthews, John T. *William Faulkner*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 5.
8 O'Connor, F. (1989). *Flannery O'Connor, Collected Works*. Library of America.

This categorization of words as a remorseless adversary alludes to the kind of scary verbosity that plagues Faulkner. It is as if he cannot stop the words rushing towards him, attacking and demanding that he surrender to them through his pen. Anyone familiar with Mary's writing would be able to discern the difference in approach. To display this difference, she crafted this long paragraph to resemble a complete story in itself. The title "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" could as easily be used to describe this paragraph as it could to describe the entire story. Indeed, she deliberately structured the mini-story such that the sequence of events in it mirrored the sequence of events in the larger story. Particularly, the General's struggle with his enemy, history, reflects Sally's struggle with her enemy, a history of embarrassment.

Both of these stories begin with the protagonist discovering something unexpected in extremely public situations as they are on a stage. The General is irked and "had not expected to have a hole in his head" at the graduation ceremony, and Sally Poker is shocked to discover "two brown Girl Scout oxfords" protruding from the bottom of her dress at the Atlanta movie premiere.[9] For both of them, the rest of their stories revolve around dealing with the emotions and memories engendered by this unexpected occurrence. The General's combat with words like "Chickamauga, Shiloh, Marthasville," and memories of his wife, son and mother's faces represent his struggle with his own history that he had blissfully forgotten until now.[10] And that this struggle is made possible by the hole on top of his head is clear when he remarks that "if it hadn't been for the little hole in the top of his head, none of the words would have got to him."[11] It is also clear in Sally's visceral reaction that she is still dealing with

9 Ibid., 260, 256
10 Ibid., 260
11 Ibid., 260

feelings of intense embarrassment on account of her previous wardrobe gaffe after which "she gave the General a yank and almost ran with him off the stage."[12] Her desire to not "be cheated out of her triumph" at the graduation ceremony as "she so often was" stems in a large part from this uncomfortable memory.[13] Both of them also end up losing against their respective foes; words riddle the General with sharp stabs of pain until he dies and that, in turn, leads to the realization of the very scenario Sally is most worried about.

Even though, or perhaps *because*, the stories mirror each other in the plot the distinctness of the two voices shines through. While Sally's narrative is firmly grounded in reality even as it talks to broader concerns of the self and the Southern obsession with glorifying Civil War culture, the General's narrative is more akin to a dream sequence. In the space of a single paragraph, his voice circles around and overlaps and deposits layers upon itself, creating an extremely dense artistic effect. However, clarity is mercilessly sacrificed for the sake of these artistic aspirations. While crafting the paragraph-story, Mary deliberately refrained from using the closing impact that accompanied most of her story endings because she wanted to further heighten the contrast between their voices. The General makes a "desperate effort to see over" the enemy to "find out what comes after," but no realization is shown coming.[14] This lack of realization or lack of redemption starkly juxtaposes this mini story to the larger story.

In the larger story, even though Mary did not directly show Sally being hit with the realization, the image of the General's corpse on a wheelchair being rolled at high speed by an oblivious blond youth to stand in the long line at the Coca-Cola machine certainly jars the reader. One thing she had

12 Ibid., 261.
13 Ibid., 252.
14 Ibid., 261.

always concerned herself with was the problem of the novelist who wished to write about a man's encounter with God, with revelation, and how to make this experience understandable and credible to an audience in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental. And so as an author she had to make sure that this encounter carried enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance.[15] And that's precisely what this image of the South does–by depicting the South's oblivious future forgetting its history and chasing after symbols of modernity, Mary leaves the reader rattled.

Mary had another purpose behind crafting this story within a story. It places Faulkner and herself on the two extremes of the writing spectrum. While she had developed her tendency towards short story writing to the extent that she could tell a story within a paragraph, the General, who is a stand-in for Faulkner, distorted even a simple paragraph into a story with novel-like aspirations. It is a bold distinction to make, to be sure. However, the anxiety she felt to differentiate her voice from Faulkner's as another southern writer demanded such boldness. M. Coindreau told her that Styron's book, *Set This House on Fire*, was a great success in France—he translated it—and that the French think Styron is the greatest thing since Faulkner.[16] She had read his book *Lie Down in Darkness*, and to her way of thinking it was too much the long, tedious Freudian case history.[17] But many others had commented on how similar that book is to T*he Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Styron has himself admitted that he was imitating Faulkner in the start but then stopped and

15 O'Connor, Flannery et al. *Mystery And Manners*. Noonday Press, 1969, 161–62.
16 O'Connor, Flannery, and Sally Fitzgerald. *The Habit Of Being*. Vintage Books, 1980, 498.
17 Ibid., 356.

started all over again to escape the overwhelming influence.[18] Mary had heard Walker Percy, her good friend, once say that "Faulkner has been both a blessing and a curse to the South—a blessing because he is probably the greatest American novelist of this century and a curse because he [is] so powerful and influential that many Southern writers, younger writers [are] publish[ing] as imitation Faulkners."[19] Mary agreed with Percy—she herself was intimidated, but she had always had a distinct voice, and, though she had read many literary masters all at once during her college education, there was not a wrinkle of their influence in her stories.[20]

This anxiety was not too different from the anxiety Sally Poker exhibits, albeit towards a different end. While Sally was anxious to be seen as a part of the old General's legacy,

18 Inge, M. Thomas. *The Dixie Limited*. University of Mississippi Press.
19 Ibid.. We know the fact that O'Connor was friends with Walker Percy from her letters in *The Habit of Being*.
20 Based on a statement made by O'Connor in her letters in *Mystery and Manners*, where she explains that since she had read all the masters at once, she hadn't been influenced by any one of them. The style of the statement has been exaggerated here to resemble Mrs. Turpin's in her story "Revelation," in preparation for the revelation she gets at the end of the story.

O'Connor was anxious to be acknowledged as distinct from the old General in her life. However, the means each take towards their different goals are quite similar, and that is to put the object of their anxieties on display. "See him!" Sally shouts five times, in the space of a single short paragraph.[21] Similarly, this story was a shout from Mary for her and Faulkner's differences to be acknowledged. While Sally puts her grandfather on a stage to display him, she had put Faulkner's writing on a metaphorical stage to display it.

True to this resemblance, Mary's state reminded her of Sally waking up screaming "See him! See him!" from her dream, only to find the old General observing her, clothed only in his hat and a terrible expression. Just like her creation, Mary too had been found out. All five-and-a-half-feet of Faulkner stood before her with a similar terrible expression. She had disrobed his writing and put it on a stage in her story to calm her anxieties and now the day of reckoning had come.

Without appearing to, Mary noticed Faulkner's feet. He was wearing suede lace-up oxfords—exactly what you would have expected him to have on. Mary had on Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks.[22] His eyes, shining with a peculiar light, looked straight at her, drilling into her soul. He spoke in a clear voice, directly to her, as if he wanted to make sure that she could never pretend that he had said it to someone else that, "you had been writing O'Connor until you went ahead and wrote Faulkner into your story." She heard what he said, and the meaning of his words didn't come to her slowly, it hit

21 O'Connor, F. (1989). *Flannery O'Connor*, Collected Works. Library of America, 253.

22 Another nod to Mrs. Turpin's behavior in "Revelation" where she notices people's feet and confirms her judgement of their worth through this process. Sally's obsession with not wearing the right shoes in the graduation ceremony is also meant to contribute to this atmosphere of self-consciousness and societal judgement.

her suddenly and all at once as if what Faulkner meant had been written in a book and he had thrown the book at her head. She sank heavily into the chair behind her. As this book hit her, its meaning mysteriously transferred into her skin, soaked into her hair and was drained into her brain until it resided at the center of her consciousness. By writing Faulkner into her story, and what now seemed to be purposelessly contrasting their voices, she had forced her readers to interpret her voice in relation to Faulkner's voice. In her stubbornness to be acknowledged free of Faulkner's influence, she had led her writing to be influenced by his presence. Just like Sally, her worst fear had come true and she had not even realized it.

Marx, Homer, and Commodity Commensurability

Jacob Lundquist

Karl Marx, commonly known as the father of modern communist writing, is less well-known for being an intense scholar of the literary world. Recent critical attention has been devoted to Marx's obsession with writing and, in particular, classical literature. Little attention, though, has been given to the relationship between Marx's writings and classical Greek epics. This thesis therefore attempts to fill this absence in modern Marxist writing and scholarship by analyzing Marx's use of and engagement with the Homeric epics.

Marx understood the Homeric epics as primarily historical texts. That is to say, he placed them squarely within the trajectory of the historical development of capital, arguing that the Greek epic is a direct result of the undeveloped history from which it arose. Marx argues that art is a product of its context—historical, social, economic—inasmuch as social relations and capital always reflect their historical moment in economic terms. Marx used literary classics, like the *Iliad*, as a method of thinking through his critiques of classical political economics, as well as to contemplate the changing nature of capital.

Some of Marx's references to the *Iliad* are intensely specific, but nevertheless perform a similar function in locating the historical nature of the development of capital in the work of art. In *Capital*, Marx discusses four successive steps that are taken in the genesis of a money commodity. Before it is possible for one commodity to be generally exchangeable, there are three forms of value that must first be expressed.

The first, the simple form of value, is one commodity expressed through only one other commodity—one log being traded for five beads. The second stage, the expanded form of value, occurs when commodities enter into a market and are exchanged for one another by human actors. This chain is functionally infinite, limited only by the number of available commodities—one log can be traded for five beads, some flour, a book, etc., *ad infinitum*. The third stage, the general form of value, occurs when all products in the market acquire a general equivalent. This general equivalent then transitions to the fourth stage, the money-form of value, when a money commodity becomes the common expression of value in all commodities.

When discussing the procession of the commodity form, detailed above in a highly simplified manner, Marx argues that the simple form of value transitions to a stage of the expanded form of value in the market of commodity exchange. Marx writes that in the movement from the simple to expanded form of value "different simple expressions of the value of one and the same commodity arise according to whether that commodity enters into a value-relation with this second commodity or another kind of commodity" (*Capital* 154). Commodities are given value in relation to the other commodities that they are put on the market alongside. In expressing this idea historically rather than theoretically, he then gestures to Homer's *Iliad* as a prime example. Marx finds particular resonance of this idea hidden within the Greek epic, but cites it only haphazardly, and only in the second edition of *Capital*. His footnoted reference to Homer reads, in Ben Fowkes' generous translation, "In Homer, for instance (*Iliad*, VII, 472–475), the value of a thing is expressed in a series of different things" (*Capital* 154). In these particular lines of the *Iliad*, the Greek army trades onshore with ships that have just sailed in. Stanley Lombardo's translation reads:

"The other Greeks / Went on board to barter for their wine, / Some with bronze, others with iron, hides, / cattle, or slaves" (Lombardo 141); Robert Fagles translated this as "Achaean soldiers bought their rations, / some with bronze and some with gleaming iron, / some with hides, some with whole live cattle, / some with slaves" (Fagles 230). A close reader of Marx is guided to the *Iliad*, to a particular section that details a process of commodity exchange and, coincidentally, proves the historical nature of Marx's argument about the shifting forms of commodity value.

Fowkes' editorial edition, though, unintentionally misinforms the faithful reader of Marx. The editorial edition of page numbers done by Fowkes is helpful but misleading, as the German original note simply reads "*22a Note zur 2. Aufl. Z.B. bei Homer wird der Wert eines Dings in einer Reihe verschiedner. Dinge ausgedruckt*" ["Note to the second edition. E.g. in Homer, the value of a thing is expressed in a series of different things"] (*Das Kapital*, 76). By adding line numbers and a work, Fowkes gives specificity to what, in Marx's German edition, was simply a motion towards an author. Marx only gestures towards a piece of Homeric writing, rather than citing specific line numbers, let alone a particular work. From this it is clear that Marx, in referring to Homer as a whole, requires of his readers a general knowledge of the classics. The nonchalant feeling of this footnote shows Marx to be a literary man who demands of his audience the same commitment to reading and engaging with historical, fictional scholarship.

Marx's footnoted reference to the *Iliad* expresses, through literature, Marx's economic philosophy. The literary, for Marx, not only gives examples of his economic principles but also, in its reception by the public and subsequent engagement with the commodity market, *becomes* those principles. The literary therefore becomes economic, while simultaneously making the economic simpler and more concrete. As

a tool of comprehension, this footnote shows Marx to be deeply invested in classical literature while, at the same time, relying on it for the creation of new meaning in economic writing. Without an evidentiary basis for economics (the likes of which we have now), Marx relied on literary documents for much of his evidence. Conjecture and logical argumentation pushed his arguments to their fullest form, while classical literature and scholarship gave them the evidence that they would have otherwise lacked. The economic evidence for Marx's arguments had yet to be investigated and standardized, and thus Marx relied on his expansive knowledge of the classics as the stage upon which to play out his philosophy of economics. However, to simply argue that Marx alludes to Homer's *Iliad* out of a lack of evidence is simplistic. The *Iliad* represented, to Marx, a particularly important historical document that stood as testimony to the epoch in which it was produced. Homer's writing gives Marx insight into an inaccessible (because it is pre-capitalist) step in the procession of commodities, before a general or money-commodity form of value appeared. Thus, for Marx, literature makes accessible the inaccessible points of economic history.

Homer's writing in the *Iliad* (and that of his contemporaries) exemplifies the period during which the simple form of value transformed into the complete form. This means, similarly, that Marx's comprehension of literature was deeply historical, and was necessarily attentive to the circumstances of its creation and publication. Marx's use of the *Iliad* also gestures towards what will later constitute his critique of ahistorical readings of the arts. To Marx, philosophy (or literature in general) was not enough on its own; rather, literature, reading, and the related projects therein must pay close attention to the historical era in which they exist and are produced. It remains clear that communist theorists and activists need to take seriously this commitment to the classics, if for no other

reason than Marx's massive amounts of quoted material from Virgil, Homer, and other authors from the ancient world. The father of communism was highly immersed in, throughout his career as writer, the literature of the ancients. Marx's devotion to classical literature, far from simply being a piece of biographical data to add to his secondary works and criticism, is in fact a deeply illuminating portion of his writing.

Bibliography

Fagles, Robert, translator. *Iliad*. By Homer, Penguin Books, 1990. Lombardo, Stanley, translator. *Iliad*. By Homer, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

Marx, Karl. *Das Kapital: Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. Hamburg: Institute for Marxism-Leninism. 1890.

Contributor Biographies

Chloe Nguyen is a third year Biology major pursuing certificates in Creative Writing and Forensic Science. When her hands aren't full with caterpillars or pipettes, she grabs a pencil and creates poems. She strums her uke as she sings, runs late to most things, and double-knots her shoestrings. She hopes to one day become a dentist who doesn't scare children.

Christie Basson is a South African immigrant and a second-year double majoring in English and the Humanities Program. She has a love for pretty words, a tendency to cry at movie trailers, and picks flowers when she's not supposed to. She hopes to change the world someday, even though she's been told it's pretty hard.

Deanna Maria Noriega is an English Major with a Creative Writing Certificate. She is graduating this spring from the University of Texas as a distinguished college scholar. Next is grad school and the publication of her first book. After that, who knows? Maybe she'll teach poetry, maybe ballet. Maybe both. She still wants to be a Patsy Cline impersonator.

Emma Hoggard is a second-year English major and History minor from El Paso, Texas. She is a writer for *Spark Magazine* and is on the *Hothouse* marketing team. She enjoys thrift shopping, romanticizing the Renaissance, and owning too many unread books.

Isabella Stork is a senior studying Biology and Creative Writing. She is from Seattle, Washington, and will be applying to medical school this summer. As an aspiring doctor, Isabella hopes to use her

personal experiences as a way to advocate for women's health issues, particularly gynecological cancers. She is obsessed with great food, rainy days, and Japanese pens.

Jacob Lundquist is an EHP student interested in reading, writing, music, dogs, and very little else. Jacob's thesis deals with Karl Marx's comments on the Homeric epics, as distilled in "Marx, Homer, and Commodity Commensurability," with specific focus on the necessary interactions between communist theorizing and aesthetic and literary practice.

Kendall Talbot is a fourth-year English and Marketing major, also pursuing a certificate in Creative Writing. She is an adamant proponent of pros/cons charts, sugar cubes, and the Oxford comma. In her free time, she enjoys watching period dramas over a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Therapy and irritating her family with nonstop love and affection.

Luisana Cortez is a chicana majoring in English and Plan II at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work often focuses on the gender experience for people of color, the blend of languages, the ghostly memory of childhood, and southern gothicism. You can find more of her poetry or short stories in *The Harpoon Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *A Velvet Giant*, *Kingdoms in the Wild*, and more.

Marissa Williams is a senior English and History major. She is a proud Scorpio and a devoted cat mom. In her free time, she enjoys sad music, pretending to study at coffee shops, and trying every vegan restaurant in Austin. After graduation, she plans on pursuing a writing career.

Mary Margaret Burniston is a second year Government and Humanities major with an English minor and a Creative Writing Certificate. As a child, she was ousted from her normal classroom to

a remedial reading class and was so offended by the fact that she decided to become a writer.

Matthew Leger is a fourth-year student pursuing an English major and a Creative Writing certificate. When he's not writing poetry or crafting a biography at 4 a.m., he's likely recording music, biding his time. While he enjoys his newfound sense of humility, he hopes to one day improve at writing about himself in the third person.

Prena Sachdeva is a fourth-year English student from India doing a BDP certificate in Ethics and Leadership in Law, Policy, and Government. Most of her free time is spent reading—which she enjoys a lot and being anxious, which she doesn't enjoy as much.

Sara Cline is a third year Psychology and English Honors major. Her work has appeared in *A VELVET GIANT*, and she was recognized as a finalist in the 2018 James F. Parker Fiction contest for her short story, "Dinner's Served." She is currently an intern at the University Writing Center and is working on a collection of poetry in the CRW Certificate program. She spends her free time napping, working on jigsaw puzzles, going to pole dance class, and consuming copious amounts of mindless entertainment through her computer screen.

Sahib Chandnani is a junior at the University of Texas at Austin majoring in Computer Science and Plan II. He is also a member of the UT Spitshine Poetry Slam team. Writing is his escape from the world of technology.

Special Thanks

The 2019 issue of *Hothouse* would not have been possible without the dauntless writers who submit their words to us every year, nor without the tireless efforts of our general and editorial staff.

Our most special thanks, however, go out to Brad Humphries and the faculty and staff of the UT English Department, for their steadfast support and wisdom; to Sherry Terrell and OneTouchPoint Ginny's for their wealth of publishing knowledge and their generosity in sharing it; and to our second home, Malvern Books, where we have been fortunate to be able to tell our stories for years.