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Printed in the United States of America.

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hothouselitjournal.com,
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Hothouse was printed by OneTouchPoint-Southwest
in Austin, Texas.

Dedicated to the writers
who make their home in Parlin Hall

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Editor's Note

I rewrote this editor's note many times. I imagined it as an homage to my time with *Hothouse*: an eloquent and smart signature before I join the ranks of former editors and let my contribution to this tradition rest between the pages of the issues I was a part of.

But, rather than being able to celebrate this accomplishment together, we'll now each crack the spine of this year's *Hothouse* some six feet apart from someone we love and someone who loves us. It feels lonely, knowing we won't be gathering among the cozy shelves of Malvern Books this year, but I'm comforted by the fact that we'll still be reading the same words, the same stories, the same poems.

Gracing this year's cover are the wildflowers of Texas. Each spring bears these flurries of color—reminders of our resiliency as living beings and Texans, as our cover artist, Jack Rouse, described them.

That's the message I want us all to take away from *Hothouse* in this time and beyond: we're resilient. Like its predecessors, this issue chronicles yearning and tenderness, loss and grief. It speaks to separation and reunion—to the things we've lived to write about.

The writers featured here shared intimate parts of themselves for us to see, and, in doing so, made this journal possible. Every year, I am humbled by the bravery and beauty of their words, and I'll forever be indebted to them for allowing me to share their voices with the world.

With gratitude,



Julia Schoos

Editor-in-Chief

FICTION

American

Megan Leal

We were cramped inside Dad's truck. Mateo and I sat squished in the back, his knees pressed against Mom's seat, and Dad's work overalls piled next to me. I had asked if they could turn up the radio, but no one reached for the dial. Instead, Dad adjusted the side mirrors, and Mom put on sunscreen.

Her skin burns red under the sun. Mateo and I had made fun of her once as she covered her arms with Aloe Vera. She took her chancla off her foot and threw it at us.

“;Cállense!”

We don't make fun of her sunburns anymore.

Dad has dark brown skin and doesn't speak Spanish. Once, when we were in the checkout line at *Mi Tienda*, the grocery bagger asked Dad, “;Quiere su leche en un bolsa?”

Dad said nothing as he swiped his card. Mom answered.

We rarely go to *Mi Tienda* anymore.

Before I had crawled into the back seat of the truck, I noticed there was another large chip in its blue paint. Mom did too.

“You need to get the truck a paint job,” she said.

“Or I could just get a new truck.” Dad smirked as he started the engine.

“Funny.” Mom rolled down her window and smiled at him.

We backed out of the driveway, letting in a breeze. The Texas summer had turned the truck into the sun itself, and there was no AC. I had complained about it to Dad once, and

all he said was, “I know it’s hot, but it’s not possible to fix it now.”

Mateo was poking me with the metal part of the seatbelt. “Ow! Stop it!” I squirmed away from him.

Dad snapped his head around and gave him a look. Mateo put his seatbelt on.

His skin is lighter like Mom’s. And he has freckles on his arms like she does. I’m just like Dad. I have his skin, and my arms are hairy like his. Hairy arms on a girl’s body.

Que fea. As Mom would say.

But I have his eyes too. Big and brown with long, dark eyelashes.

I caught his stare in the rearview mirror and looked away.

My hair whipped around my face as we drove. The stop sign that guarded the exit to the neighborhood was still knocked over, lying in the ditch. Dad stopped anyway. The wind vanished, my hair settled, and I wiped away the sweat that had formed on my upper lip.

“Are Tía and Tío coming?” I asked.

“They should be,” Mom said.

The bucket of baseballs slid across the truck bed as we turned onto the road that would take us to the park.

“No, not this way.” I said.

“I know, but it’s a shortcut,” Dad said.

“Mateo has to be there an hour before the game starts,” Mom added.

I sighed and rolled up my window a little.

We passed the familiar buildings that lined the street. The gas station with only two pumps and the elderly man who sat outside its doors. The Kroger with *G* missing from its billboard and a parking lot that was unusually crowded for a Saturday afternoon. The small Shipley’s Donuts that was across the street from *Sanchez Dentistry*. Then the taco trucks.

Each claiming to have the most authentic fajita tacos. Some selling aguas frescas, mangonadas, or elotes. The scent of limes now whipped through the truck.

I wanted to ask for elote but I already knew the answer.

We were getting closer to the light and I was hoping it would stay green. Dad sped up a little.

We passed *El Vaquero*. The hole-in-the-wall restaurant where every time we walked in I scanned the place to make sure no one I knew was there.

“Get over it, Maria.” Dad would tell me. He’d rushed us to the table, make Mom order for us, and we’d scarf down our food. Dad would finish first and look around, scanning.

We got stuck at the red light. It was the same two men who waited on the curb. Our windows were down so they targeted us first. One carried a dirty sponge, and the other held a window wiper. They pointed to the windshield. Dad shook his head, but they insisted.

“C’mon. It’s dirty. I clean it.” The man with the sponge started scrubbing the hood of the truck. Dad lifted his hand from the steering wheel and waved him off. The other man had already moved on to another car.

“Aye, pinche pendejo.” The man slapped his sponge on the side of the truck as he walked to the car behind us. I tried not to stare as he passed my window.

“We’re in America,” Dad mumbled, “we speak English.”

Mateo and I raised our eyebrows at each other.

“Babe.” Mom gave Dad a look.

“What?”

“You shouldn’t say things like that.” Mom turned to us then looked out the window.

Mom’s dad didn’t want her to learn Spanish. She had told us that he struggled to become a citizen because he didn’t know English. That when he became a citizen, he was jumped because he looked and sounded different. But Mom’s grandma

would not have a grandchild that couldn't speak the language of where she comes from.

The light turned green and the men returned to their sidewalk. I stopped myself from asking again if they could turn the radio on. Dad kept his stare forward as we drove.

His mom would wake him up early in the morning and make him crack pecan shells for her pies. He told us that Grandma was not allowed to speak Spanish at school. That she would be considered a wetback if she spoke Spanish.

“What’s a wetback?” I had asked.

“Something you shouldn’t call Americans.”

We drove into the gravel parking lot of the park. Trash spilled out of some trash cans and littered the ground. The port-a-pots were releasing a strong odor. And the sign that proudly stated, *North Houston Little League Park*, was covered in graffiti.

We spent about five minutes trying to find a parking spot before Dad said he would drop us off first. Mom and I found a seat on the bleachers as Mateo went to go warm up with his team. The line for the concession stand was already long and the man who pushes the cart full of everything from elote to paletas was nowhere in sight.

There was a game finishing on the field next to us. Little kids were chanting a song from the dugout. The umpire said, “Strike three, you’re out,” as the batter let the ball pass him. Parents on the home team cheered, while the other parents cursed at the umpire.

I decided to risk it. “Mom, can I buy something from the concession stand?”

“No, I told you to eat before we left.”

“But I’m hungry now.”

“There’s sunflower seeds in my purse.”

“I don’t want sunflower seeds.”

“Then you’re not hungry.”

Dad joined us just as Mateo's team got on the field. Mateo started his usual warm up on the pitcher's mound. Other parents now crowded the stands.

Dad stood close to the fence and crossed his arms as he studied Mateo's pitches.

"Dad, can I have money to get something from the concessions?" I asked.

Mom smacked her lips.

"Ask your mom." He shook his head as Mateo threw a wild pitch.

I grabbed the sunflower seeds out of her purse.

Tía Vero and Tío Omar sat down next to us when the batter stepped up to the plate. Mateo threw his first pitch. A strike. The crowd clapped. Dad gave a small nod.

I leaned forward to see them and smiled. "So what did y'all do last night?"

Tía Vero and Tío Omar were always getting into some exciting adventure.

"We saw this great band play. Their drummer did this amazing solo. Your tío over here nearly got into a fight with him after the show."

Mateo struck out the batter. I looked over at Tío Omar.

"It wasn't exactly a fight. More like an altercation."

"What happened?"

"Well, I went over to the band after they finished because I knew the guitarist and wanted to say hi. We go way back, he was a friend in high school. Anyway, here I was, polite as ever, when the drummer started flirting with your tía."

"He was not flirting." Tía rolled her eyes, but smiled.

"The cabrón was flirting."

I gave him a confused look.

"Oh. Um, the *dumbass* was flirting."

"Don't be using that language with my daughter," Mom said.

“Anyway, I probably had a few too many and we had to get escorted out of the club.”

I laughed as the batter grounded out to first and got out.
“So you had a typical night?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Tío smiled.

The game dragged on as Mateo struck out batters, outfielders caught pop-flies, and players scored. The sun was setting and the lights on the field turned on when I finally heard the elote man.

“Elotes! Chicharrones! Paletas!” He rang the bell on his cart.

“Mom, please.” I gave her my best puppy dog look.

“Fine, just because I want one too. But you have to order it.”

I hesitated.

Tía handed me money. “Here, order me one as well.”

“Never mind, I don’t want any.”

“Yes you do, just order it.”

“Say it slowly,” Mom told me, “Tres. Elotes. Por favor.”

Mateo’s team scored and the man approached the bleachers.

“It’s okay. I’ll order for you, Maria.” Tío reached for the money in my hand.

Tía stopped him. “No, she has to say it. She needs to learn.”

“Damn, let her be. She’s fine.” Tía raised her eyebrows at him and he handed me back the money.

Mom looked at me. “Your tía’s right, you should at least know how to say the basics.”

Dad glanced around at us, said nothing, then returned his focus on Mateo.

“No, it’s okay. I really don’t want any.” I stared at the cart. Hot chips hung in stacks on the side of the cart. Tubs of cut up mangoes and watermelon chilled in a cooler next to the

chile. The corn waited in a big pot, condensation forming on its lid. My mouth watered.

“¿Quéquieres, niña?” the man asked.

“What do you want?” Tío translated.

Tres. Elotes. Tres. Elotes. I took a deep breath as my mind practiced the words.

Say it. Just like Mom. I licked my lips and placed my tongue at the roof of my mouth.

The elote man looked at us confused but he waited. I took another breath.

“Um, tres of the elotes, please.” My tongue refused to say the words right.

The man grabbed a small styrofoam cup, filled it with corn, and looked at me.

“¿Quieres chile?”

“Uh, what?”

Tía let out a sigh.

“Un poquito de chile.” Tío answered, glaring at Tía.

The man smiled and handed me the cup. I felt small when I took it from his hands, but the smell of elote distracted me. I mixed everything together with my plastic spoon.

The corn. The mayonnaise. The parmesan cheese. And the chile.

Mom looked down at me and shook her head.

“Estás chiflada,” she said while reaching into my cup and taking out a spoonful of corn.

“Hey, this one’s mine.” I shielded my cup from her.

Tía lifted her chin at Mom. “Aye, hermanita, your daughter sounds like una gringa.”

“Okay. And?” Mom scooped out some of her corn and stared at Mateo’s game.

“Really Vero, leave it alone.” Tío gave me a reassuring smile.

I concentrated my eyes on my corn, mixing it around slowly. I had stopped bringing the spoon to my mouth. My tongue felt dry.

“No. What kind of Mexican can’t even roll her R’s?”

Mateo struck out the last batter, and everyone in the stands cheered. I stared at the elote. It had turned pink from the chile.

Dad clapped his hands once and turned to us. Other parents congratulated him for Mateo’s pitching. He looked at my elote. “You’re gonna finish that?”

I stood up and handed him my cup.

We all waited for Mateo outside the dugout. My arms were crossed and I stared at the grass as I stood behind Dad. Tía couldn’t help herself.

She nudged Dad with her elbow. “So when are you gonna teach my niece and nephew Spanish?”

Dad scraped the last of the corn and threw the cup away in the trash. Mom shook her head at Tía, and Tío’s eyes widened.

“They don’t need to learn.”

Tía pressed her lips together. “I disagree.”

“They’re not your children.” Mom mumbled, just loud enough to reach our ears.

Car engines roared. Children on the playground laughed. Metal cleats crunched on the concrete ground of the dugout. The lights on the other fields had turned off as Mateo walked up toward us. He hugged me as we made our way back to the truck, holding my face against his sweat covered chest.

“Ew, let me go.” I pulled away from him.

Tía Vero and Tío Omar waved goodbye to us, and drove away.

Mom told Mateo to take off his cleats and throw them in the back. She’d rather handle the smell of his socks than have dirt in the truck, and no one dared protest her. Before

we left the park, Dad was telling Mateo how he could have done better.

“You need to push off harder with your legs when you release the ball. That’s where the speed of the pitch comes from,” he said.

“I know.” Mateo rested his head on the seat and closed his eyes.

I saw Dad look at him in the rearview mirror. “Hey, you did a great job tonight.”

He kept his eyes closed, but a small smile formed on his face. “Thanks.”

Dad glanced at me in the mirror and smiled. He looked back at the road, and turned up the radio. With his left hand on the wheel, and his right on Mom’s hand, we drove home.

Encounters

DeShawn McKeel

Seen a person searching for something they didn't know they had been. In their eyes shone a missing truth. I hope they find it soon.

Overheard a homeless person yelling GOD IS GOOD and howling out to their heaven in a pious ecstasy while swinging a sign that read what they were yelling, like some oversized fly swatter shooing away pigeons who got too close. One wouldn't know the yelling person is homeless unless they told one such because, no matter the temperature, weather, day, or season, they're always in an all-white suit and hat that, from what I've seen, seem to be impervious to dirt, destruction, and death, and which reflects light in such a dazzling, nauseating way it made one believe God had to be no sorts of good to allow one of their devoted followers to wear such evil to the eyes. I just came to know this yelling person was homeless. Curious about both their suit and hat and how many they could have, and the church they may have been doing this work for, I questioned them. First, I asked about the church because I expected a long-winded answer that went unnecessarily deep into the details of not only their church but also religion. I did this as I thought it was more likely to waste my time than the answering of the question whose information I'd actually wanted. I assumed wrong. They swatted away the church question with a swift response of I belong to no church, I'm an atheist. To hear this pleased me as it meant that it would spare me from a religious spiel, and I didn't care enough to ask why an atheist was screaming about God's goodness. I just

wanted to know about their suit and hat. To my surprise, I learned they only had the one suit and hat. The conversation that ensued about the suit and hat left me wanting to know less. I asked how they kept them as clean as they did. They responded they didn't know. I asked where they got them. To both our surprise the homeless yeller didn't know how the suit and hat came to be in their possession. So, I asked if they had any other suits and hats. This confused them. I said any suits and hats they could have at home. To both our surprise we learned they were homeless. I asked how they could not know they were homeless. They said well I don't have any shoes on. I didn't know what that meant and so I left it at that.

Later, after I continued on with my walk, I watched, what I assumed to be due to his actions and the mask he wore that looked like the ones people wore to sleep, a recently blind man struggle with using his cane. His face was twisted in sorrow. He appeared to have been mumbling something. He had trouble getting over the curb onto the sidewalk from the street. I would've offered assistance, but I didn't want it to come from what I and the blind man would've both known as a place of pity. Besides, other people watching went up to offer him help, but he seemingly didn't hear them and kept on struggling and mumbling. After a minute the blind man made it onto the sidewalk by himself. He walked down it in my direction. The sorrow in his face turned to anger in his hand, seen in the swing of his cane as he swung it violently without regard for himself or others. His cane tripped another man walking past. The tripped man, understandably upset, rushed to his feet to confront the cane swinging man but withdrew once he realized the man blind. He departed with an apology and promised to be more aware of his surroundings. The blind man ignored the pitiful apology and

empty promise and continued struggling with using his cane, swinging it violently and mumbling. When he reached the space in front of me, he stopped. He turned towards me as if he could see me and stared into me, passing my eyes into my core. He lunged at me grabbing both of my shoulders and pulled me into a one-sided conversation where he screamed at me, Do you know that the Sky is blue! No, do you know the Sky is blue! Of course, you know the Sky is blue! But do you know that the Sky is blue! I know the Sky is blue! I've always known that the Sky is blue! But recently I've forgotten and I don't know if the Sky is blue! Is it still blue? Do you know if the Sky's still blue? Do you? If so, please don't ever forget that the Sky is blue! If not, know that the Sky is blue! Then he let me go and went on struggling with his cane, swinging it flimsily, and crying and mumbling about the Sky being blue like nothing had happened. I didn't know what any of it meant and so I left it at that.

Thinking back on those two encounters from earlier today doesn't help to explain how I've come to this moment, where I'm standing in a crowd of no more than twenty people, and of them, the two I met earlier are huddled around me. We're all looking up, even the blind man, though not that he sees, but it is a reflex to turn towards where there are distressing sounds. Above us is a young girl no older than, I assume, sixteen on the edge of a building threatening to kill herself by jumping. I don't know how tall this building is, but I know it's tall enough to kill someone who were to jump from the top of it. The young girl is speaking in jumbled and stuttered language, pacing back and forth, screaming, crying. She's scared and I'm thinking she doesn't know why, how or when she got up there. She reminds me of myself when, somewhere, sometime before, in a place and position not too different from hers,

I hastily and impulsively decided to die, but deciding and doing are two different things, and I could not do, so here I am. I wonder what influenced her decision, and if she'll be able to do what I couldn't. I know what determined my own. I had been at a park when I was nearing my decision, but uncertainty kept me from being quite there when I saw a person in a state of excessive delusion. I watched as this person in their delusion cut off their shadow and collapsed to a void. Afraid and not comprehending what I'd witnessed, I was thrust to a decision. I thought, what could drive one, delusional or not, to detach from themselves? Excitement flared in me, burning away my fear. That person did what I was near deciding to do. They left behind their delirium, and it infected me. I was certain this incident was the guidance, the push towards my decision, my doing I needed, the push I couldn't give myself, but even then, with this new certainty, I could not do. The unnaturalness of seeing someone without their shadow made me think of what I had been missing, but I've never known what I do have to know whatnot. Maybe this young girl knows what she's missing. I'm thinking and knowing she will do.

Returning from my memory, I hear someone behind me say that she's just doing it for attention. The person next to them, their partner I presume, slaps them and says and if she is doing it for attention, she's doing it because it was the only way for her to get help, to be taken seriously! I want to laugh at the feigned empathy. The only way to get help they said, and yet they, and everyone in this crowd, have done nothing to help. We're all gawking at the spectacle. I'd help myself, but I don't want to deny her the ability to do. There's pleasure about the air of the crowd. The young girl's entertainment. How this will end is more concerning than how to make this stop. In the time it took me to watch this brief interaction in the crowd it seems the girl has calmed herself down. She's no

longer crying or screaming or pacing. I'm right, she will do. She's silent and is standing still looking down on us looking up at her. She opens her mouth and yells MY ONLY WISH IS TO BE FREE and she jumps. From what I see her eyes are closed and she's smiling. Seems she's made her peace. The crowd shares a surprised gasp that has underlying tones of pleasure as if some amongst us wanted her to jump and are satisfied she has. As I watch her fall, I'm thinking people fall faster than I thought they did, and I close my eyes and cover my ears to brace myself for her impact on the ground. I feel my face being caressed. I open my eyes and uncover my ears to find her nowhere to be found, and the air above me to be full of dandelion fluff. Someone in the crowd says I guess her wish came true. There's a moment of silence. The spectacle that brought it together is now gone, and the crowd disperses. The homeless person went on yelling and swatting away pigeons, and the blind man went on struggling with his cane and mumbling about the Sky being blue. I don't know what to make of any of this, and so I'll leave it at that and continue on with my walk.

And I believe that's the whole mess of it, more or less.

A Spider Killed My Mother, and Other New Poems

Zackary Davis

Rue promised his mother he'd kill himself on the next rainy day. She responded with her usual monotonous beeping, as had been her custom since falling into a coma. It was typical of her; she'd never had the taste for his humor. It took weeks for the rain to come after that, but even then it was little more than a drizzle. Rue was looking for something closer to a downpour, a storm worth writing about. The plan was to carve his last poem into his thigh right before he did it. Then some grad student could stumble upon his poetry in a few decades and have a thesis that writes itself.

The idea to drive somewhere with more rain came to him while he was on his toilet, the same place where he'd taken to writing his poetry for the past several months. He had a collection due at the end of the year, but he was a February poet, so the whole thing had been a terrible idea from the start. Rue dropped his cigarette in the toilet, capped his pen, and decided he should check his mail. It was three in the afternoon and he hadn't put on pants yet. There was a record on his player, but he'd felt too lazy to flip it so he'd been listening to the same seven songs since sunrise. There were three ashtrays scattered around his living room, placed as they were so that every seat had one within arm's reach.

A wrinkled pair of slacks he'd bought fifty pounds ago, before he'd taken up coffee and tobacco, stayed around his waist so long as he kept his hands in his pockets. The walk down to his building's mailroom was pleasant enough. With everyone else either wasting the day like he was or already

at work, Rue regretted even going through the trouble of putting on pants at all.

In the little silver box that he hadn't checked in a week, there were three magazines, two of which were nothing but poetry and the other was junk, a letter from a relative bound for the trash.

He might have gone out that night, but there was a firm difference between putting on a pair of pants that fit you well enough to grab your mail, and forcing yourself into presentability for an evening out. Rue was a guy who made it a point to understand such differences. Buried somewhere beneath half a dozen poems about packaged ramen, there was a sonnet about the motivation needed to get dressed in the morning. It'd been dismissed by every publication that still accepted his emails, but he was proud of it, nonetheless. In fact, all of his rejected poems were more endearing to him than his published ones. They still had the charm of never having sold out, they were just for him and whatever seasonal friend he tricked into reading his works. He called them his *works* instead of his poems because he thought it made him sound more professional. It did, to people who didn't read poetry.

There were a number of ways he'd thought of doing it. Jumping from his window, but he was only on the third floor. That prompted the thought to jump from his coffin of an office at the university. With his annual stipend of just enough to afford rice and rent, the school had also given him a small room on the sixth floor of the Liberal Arts building. Its white walls bleached his brain, destroying stanzas and synapses in equal measure. Whatever collection the university thought he could write in such a room he had no intention of ever starting. The more he thought about it, the surer Rue was that he'd have to lose another fifty pounds before he could fit through his office window.

Besides, while the sight of a splattered poet might have done some good for the artistic development of a few undergrads, Rue didn't much enjoy the image of the custodial staff scrubbing off whatever emergency services left behind. But above that, Rue knew he'd never do any such thing for no other reason than to see what life might be like without his mother.

An alarm went off on his phone, pants went on, and he was on his way to the hospital. On the first floor, there was a store off to the left that sold *Get Well Soon* cards, flowers, balloons, and all those other things you might want to cram into a sick relative's room. Rue bought a candy bar, then headed up to Intensive Care where they'd been keeping his mother.

The hospital room reminded Rue of his office, only it had a wider window and the ventilation was better. He closed the curtains and pulled a chair up to her bed.

She wasn't looking good, but still better than she had in the months preceding the coma. For years she'd been dyeing her hair, but now gray crept from her scalp and made her look like an unwashed paintbrush. Rue had to buy the dye for her when she wanted it, but she never let him help her apply it. That was her own labor, the secret she was intent on holding onto. He didn't think there was much chance a nurse would let him dye her hair as she was, even if it was just for old times' sake. Rue placed the candy bar and a book at the foot of the bed. It was a thin, purple collection of poetry called *Margo*. It was the first collection of the two he was contracted to produce for the university during his fellowship. He'd written it before the coma, but he'd never let his mother read it. Rue felt it was important that she first read it only after it was published, so she could hold it in her hands. So he could watch her turn the pages. Then, once she was done, if she'd liked it, he'd sign it for her. Then she'd sign his copy. And one

day, when they were both long dead, an archivist would put both copies on display in the darkest corner of an exhibit of 21st century Southern poetry.

Exhibit A: The son's copy, signed by the titular subject.

Exhibit B: The mother's copy, signed by her caregiver.

But entropy and whatnot. Things grow cold, pulses slow. And despite all that, the stubborn, old bitch still kept herself alive enough to fill a room with the lurid beep of her heart rate monitor.

“Happy birthday,” he said. It wasn’t her birthday, but pretending it helped him start the first promising poem he’d written in weeks. He wrote with a thirty-cent ballpoint pen in a notebook he’d bought in the hospital’s first-story shop. His mother watched him through her eyelids while he wrote. Always too keen to read an unfinished product. He pulled her sheets over her eyes and tried again. There was no stanza in his poem for the way her slight breathing pulsed the sheet like a grackle’s heart.

To cover his tracks, he dated the poem with his mother’s birthday. Dating a poem always stuck out to Rue as a great way to make it feel more genuine without adding in any extra work at all. He read it over once aloud so his mom could hear it.

“Not a fan?”

He looked back down at the poem. His handwriting was tragic and made his poem look worse than it was. Times New Roman made most poems tolerable, he felt. He set both his notebook and pen down on his mother’s thigh and pushed his chair back against the window. It’d begun to rain while he wasn’t paying attention. The glass was cold against his forehead and made his teeth chatter. The sheet slipped from his mother’s face and fell below her chin.

A dark finger slithered out the tip of Rue’s pen, inching out like a millipede. Another came out with it, and then two

more, each inflating as they wriggled further. A thin fuzz coated each angular tendril. Attached to the end of these fingers was a small bubbling mass of blotted ink. It bit down on the sheets and pulled itself free from the pen. This inkling spider stretched its legs out and expanded itself across the bed, staining the blankets a blueish-black where it touched, until it grew to the size of a large cat.

When Rue did turn around to see this dripping beast over his mother, he was disappointed that he felt no inclination to scream. There the spider was, its legs arched like hyperextended ribs over his mother, its eight marble eyes trained on him, and all he could do was sigh.

“How goes the writing?” it asked. Rue squinted and tilted his head. He scraped his tongue against the back of his teeth, searching for some worthwhile question among the plaque. The spider moved over his mother’s head, onto the wall, and into the corner of the room just above the window. It looked down on him and made clicks with its toothpick fangs.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the capacity to smile, but I am doing my best.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Rue. The spider, unable to smile, could still roll its eyes quite convincingly.

“Oh, do get over yourself, dear.”

Rue scoffed and half-hoped the thing would come down, wrap him up in its webbings, and finish him off before the nurse made her evening rounds. It wouldn’t be the first time he had a nightmare that took place in his mother’s hospital room. If he’d had his journal in hand, he would’ve made a note of it.

“Let me get that for you,” it said, letting itself fall to the floor and tap its way towards the bed. It grabbed the pen and notebook between the tips of two legs and dropped them in Rue’s lap before scurrying back to its place up the wall. He

clicked the pen open, turned to a fresh page, and waited for a line to come to him.

“How long have you been in here?”

“Longer than you, I’m afraid. Tucked under the sheets with your mom, if you’d believe it.” The spider spun two arms around each other in front of itself, “She stays quite warm at night too, and that’s very nice.”

Rue wrote that one down. *Mother: a glorified space heater for spiders.*

“I’m afraid I’ve a confession to make, Rue. I’ve been eating the chocolate you leave for your mom.”

“I’d just assumed the nurses ate it or threw it out.” The spider laughed and bobbed its body up and down. Rue was pretty sure he could hit it down with his chair if he was quick. His hands tensed on the arms of the chair. But before he could jump up, the spider sprayed silvery wads of web onto his hands and feet, tacking them down. The spider crawled down from its perch once more. Its legs made soft taps against the tile, like water dripping into a bucket, as it approached Rue. One leg at a time, it mounted him and wrapped its hairy legs about his body.

“Might I ask a more personal question?”

“I’ll scream.” Rue tried to scream, to call out for help from any nurse close enough to hear him. His stomach torqued and shot splinters through his diaphragm. The spider’s minty breath washed over Rue’s purpling face, and he could not make a sound above a murmur.

“Right, then,” said the spider, “Forgive me for asking, but I was wondering why you haven’t *pulled the plug*, so to speak. I mean, no offense meant, but this cannot be doing wonders for your writing.”

It’s not that Rue hadn’t thought about it. He’d been standing over her, almost two months into her coma, when he’d taken the pillow from behind her head and held it to

his stomach. That had been the first time he'd noticed her hair graying, and something about it made the pillow idea seem far too vulgar. But hadn't he earned that? For three years she'd taken over his life. Every meal, every shit, and every cramp, he'd been there to coddle her. Fair was fair, she'd say, reminding him of all the diapers she'd changed. Rue would laugh, kiss her on the forehead, and tell her he would stop buying her chocolate if she didn't start calling him sir. That did make it into a poem. *Call Me Sir, Mother* was the opening poem in his first collection. Because even though she kept him from ever writing a poem about a lurid love affair, or of a sunset along some far away lake, or even of a lonely night in a small-town motel, he still loved her. That had filled enough pages, and, according to his fellowship supervisors, had filled them quite well.

Rue felt spit gather in his mouth for the woman. The woman too selfish to die after he'd served his time. She'd now been wearing her diapers longer than he had. Rue hated his mother, not because of the time spent confined to her home, or for any of the messes he had to clean up while she laughed at him for his embarrassment. Rue hated her and felt that hate burn away the webbing that kept him trapped to his chair, because she had gone so far as to infect his poetry.

At fourteen, after he'd discovered Robert Lowell and decided he could do a hell of a lot better, he dreamt of his first collection every night just before he fell asleep. For years, the thought kept him up. And when he started publishing the occasional verse in small magazines, the dreaming got worse, spreading through his chest as if his veins had been filled with melting hail. The only place his mother was supposed to have in those dreams was that of waking him up in the morning.

Rue blinked; his hand was around the cable connected to his mother's life support. The spider curled its legs around

his stomach, its eyes creeping over his left shoulder. The soft beeping droned on.

“You can do it; nobody would blame you,” said the spider. Rue held his breath, counted backward from ten, spelled his name three times, tried to list all the reasons why he shouldn’t. The spider tapped him all around with the tips of its legs like a massage of toothpicks.

“Just think, your next collection will be a hit too. *The Poet Who Pulled the Plug*,” it said and laughed.

Rue fell back against his mother’s bed. The spider crawled around him and up the wall so that it stood just above the outlet. Rue cried, his hands shaking in front of his eyes, unable to force themselves forward around the spider. Helpless to stop the spider as it lowered two legs down and around the plug.

“It’s okay. You do love her.”

124 At Night

Christie Basson

“Maybe it’s still in her, the thing that makes it all right to kill her children.”

—*Beloved*

The mother comes to kill them every night. That first time, in the shed, they hadn’t seen it coming. It was flying, hawk eyes and claws, then the dimness of the shed and while they were still catching breath, she swung. Once. Twice. Slice. Baby through the air, like it too could fly. They hadn’t seen it coming then, but now they know to watch for it. For her.

She comes in the dark. The house creaks in warning, echoing her footsteps so they hear her coming. Up the white staircase, down the moon-dappled hallway. There—the floorboard before the door. The rattle of the doorknob. The whine of the hinge. She always appears in the door like a shadow come to life, still and slow and darker than the night. They hold their breaths, wondering if they can fool her so she thinks the job’s been done. It never works. She glides to the bed, shadows rippling over her face, moonlight treading fingers to hold her back.

They shy away from her hands, pretending to turn in sleep while holding themselves back from running. From leaping from the bed, flying down the stairway and into the arms of the night, away away away. They shudder from her touch, curl into themselves as her hands roam over their smooth soft arms and their smooth soft brows and their smooth soft

necks. They imagine her hands tightening, air fleeing from their lungs. They imagine joining the ghost and they shake.

Something stops her. Maybe the watchful eye of the moon. Maybe the way their breaths are ragged. Always she leaves the room, leaving their breaths intact. They don't know why. They know it won't last. They know one night she won't leave so easily. One night the bloodlust will take over, she will clench and clench and they will be gone. Just like that.

She can't sleep at night. She knows she will close her eyes, let them flutter shut for only a moment, and someone will take them. They will come, they will take, they will break them. Her children, her most precious things, those she made with her own body. She made them, they are hers, she cannot let them come. She must keep them.

She climbs the white staircase every night, the moonlight guiding her up the steps one by one. It creaks in reassurance, murmuring that it will keep them safe. That it will call her. The doorknob whispers in agreement, the hinge sings its loyalty. The house loves her children, cradles her children. The house will help her but is not enough. She must see for herself.

They sleep curled into each other. Smooth dark limbs folded and tangled and safe. They breathe as one, ragged, and she knows they must feel the danger. That they can be taken stolen used sold broken. Worked like dogs like horses like mules like animals. They must taste it in the air, and that is why they shudder and shake like leaves. She won't let it happen.

She runs her fingers over their small bodies, just to make sure they are real. She cradles elbows, smooths foreheads, twists hair. Their small lungs move and they turn in their sleep. Still alive. Still safe.

She wants to gather them in her arms and never let go. Clutch them to her breast and spit on anyone who dares to run a finger over them. Instead she folds their blankets over them. Leans down and kisses them. One. Two. Three. Leaves them in the arms of the moon and pulls the door shut behind her. She walks back through the house, running her palms over its walls, murmuring. Keep them safe. Keep them safe. Keep them safe.

The woman in the bed was holy. She wakes at night and watches the house breathe. She can hear the creak of its floorboards above her, hear the thread of the mother moving towards her children. Her heart is heavy now, in her old age. She has seen too much of the world and she wishes to forget. She wants childhood. She wants to be baby, wants to lick the sugar bowl like a child, wants to marvel at the sky and its colours. She was not afforded a childhood, and so she takes it on her deathbed.

Every day, she watches the mother and the children and she might have said something if she was her older self, her self, holy. Instead, she is a child, broken and old in the bed. She cannot find it in herself to warn the mother, to tell her that her children fear the monster inside her. Fear the fear, fear the animal. That her children are waiting for the day she kills them.

It is easier to close her eyes, to wait for sleep or death or oblivion or forgetting. Whichever comes first. But even now, she cannot rest. When her lids close, she goes back to that day by the shed when they came to take her grandchildren. Sunlight and flowers and children at her heels. And then no more. Stab. Stab. Slice. Swing. Scarlet running out of the shed, even the blood fleeing the horror of the scene.

When she hears the child by the door, hears the patter of feet and the groan of the house, she thinks of that. Blood fleeing, children fleeing. Running from the mother and the fear. Theirs. Hers. Children run into the night one by one, leaping onto the dark with outstretched arms, ready to be caught, and she listens to them go until only one is left. And when the woman in the bed, holy, too leaves, there is nothing to keep the fear at bay.

Leaving Kudzu

Livian Green

We have to leave for Oklahoma in an hour and a half, and Kudzu is still missing. She's not under the counter in the kitchen, where she likes to squeeze herself between the drain pipe and the extra plastic bags. She's not using her litter box or sleeping on the flannel blanket Mom made for her. She's not in my closet, where she hides whenever she hears a loud noise from outside. She hates loud noises, especially fireworks and drunk men and angry motorcycles that roar down the street in the middle of the night, even when it's raining.

I probably left the back door open. Or maybe Nina did. She's been forgetful lately even though she usually remembers everything, especially things I want her to forget. Yesterday she forgot to give me lunch, and she only stopped folding her old high school t-shirts and packing them into boxes when I told her it was three in the afternoon and the last thing I'd eaten was a pack of Scooby-Doo fruit snacks at 8:30 the night before. Then she made me a grilled cheese sandwich, but she left it in the pan so long that the bread turned black and crispy and she had to throw it away and start over. I asked if I could give Kudzu some cheese from the sandwich in the trash, but Nina just sighed and walked back upstairs to keep filling boxes. Kudzu didn't even like the cheese.

My room is full of cardboard boxes. There are so many of them that when I lay on the floor and look up, it's like I'm a giant in the middle of a tiny brown city that smells like paper and packing tape and old carpet. I laid on the floor for a long time this morning, imagining I was a giant on vacation in a

place called Cardboardelphia, until Nina told me to get up and keep packing. But now I'm taking clothes and pillows and Legos and Polly Pockets out of the boxes and setting them in piles on the floor. Kudzu loves to play in cardboard boxes. I think she might be curled up in one of them, snuggling with my stuffed animals or purring as she kneads on my sweaters and pokes holes in the fabric. I already called for her a million times, but maybe she's having a good dream and doesn't want to come out.

"Elaine!" Nina says, standing at my door with a box tucked under her arm. "What are you doing? Put those back."

"I'm looking for Kudzu," I say.

"She's not in those boxes."

"How do you know?"

Nina shakes her head in tiny jerks like a robot. Mom used to shake her head like that all the time, especially whenever she was trying not to yell at me or Nina or Dad. "I just know, okay?" Nina says. "Now put that stuff back and start taking boxes outside."

"But what about Kudzu?"

"She'll show up. Don't worry." Nina looks down, as if she sees something on the carpet that's more interesting than me. Then she walks away and I listen to her footsteps clunk down the stairs, making the third and eighth steps creak. I hear her pause at the bottom of the stairs and let out a long, loud breath. Then the front door opens and closes behind her.

I squash the clothes and toys back into their boxes and call for Kudzu one last time. When she doesn't come out, I run downstairs and out the back door. It's raining outside, the kind of rain that frizzes my hair and leaves smears on my glasses but isn't hard enough to make me turn around to grab an umbrella. Everything is wet and cold and covered in moss. Kudzu's probably hiding somewhere out of the rain. I wonder if it rains like this in Oklahoma.

I get on my hands and knees to peer underneath the back porch, but the only thing I see is a yellow-gray banana slug wiggling its eyes at me from a pile of damp pine needles. It's a big one, but I don't pick it up today. I check under all of the bushes and behind the heating box on the side of the house. I even look in the tiny gardening shed that Nina hasn't opened since Mom died; I brush spiderwebs from the door and search the shadows for the flash of Kudzu's eyes. She isn't there.

I stand in the middle of the yard and wipe my glasses with my sleeve. "Kudzu!" I yell, my voice muffled by the pine trees and the rain. Kudzu doesn't come out.

I don't know why she's doing this. She's scared of everything—cars, and rain, and snow, and the washing machine, and the microwave beeping when she's asleep. She was even scared of me at first, when Mom brought her home for me a few weeks before Dad left. I think it's because she used to live in a dumpster behind a restaurant in Seattle, eating leftover fried fish and hissing whenever the garbage truck came to take her food away. It's hard to trust people when you grew up in a dumpster. But I brushed her fur and cuddled with her and gave her treats and showed her how to play with toys, and she stopped being scared of me after a while. She's still scared of the rest of the world, though.

I open the back gate and look around the street. Nina's voice echoes from the front yard as she talks to a neighbor who came over to say goodbye. He makes a joke and she laughs, but her voice is too loud and I can tell she's faking. I know what Nina sounds like when she's happy, even though she hasn't sounded like that in a while. Not since she lost her job answering phone calls at the bank and decided we had to move. She says everything's too expensive in Washington. I close the gate and walk down the sidewalk toward Emma's house.

Emma is only eight, but she's in fourth grade with me because the school let her skip a year. She's really small, but she's strong and smart, too. I met her in first grade, when some girl was making fun of me for catching cellar spiders during recess, and Emma marched up to her and told her to leave me alone. Then the girl laughed at her and Emma kicked her in the shins. She got detention for a week, but she said it was worth it. Emma's my best friend in the world, after Kudzu. And I guess after Nina, but only when Nina's not bossing me around.

Emma's porch is hidden behind a row of overgrown holly bushes and is littered with rain boots and a few ceramic statues of dogs holding welcome signs. No one answers when I knock, so I ring the doorbell once, then two more times. The door cracks open and Emma's mom appears. "Hi, Elaine," she says. "Do you want to say goodbye to Emma?" Before I can say anything, she yells for Emma over her shoulder. Then she smiles at me. "Are you excited for Oklahoma?"

I shrug and study the raindrops on the holly leaves. Her smile fades, but then Emma comes outside and her mom closes the door.

"Hi," Emma says.

"Hi," I say back.

"Are you here to say bye?"

"No," I tell her. "I'm looking for Kudzu."

She frowns. "Did she get outside?"

"I think so. I can't find her anywhere, and we're leaving in an hour."

Emma crosses her arms and looks at the ground. "I wish you didn't have to go."

"It's not that bad," I say. "Nina says we can come back and visit. I bet I'll be here every weekend."

"I thought Oklahoma was far away."

"Nina says it's not."

Emma kicks at the damp welcome mat. “Maybe Nina’s wrong.”

I frown. “Are you going to help me find Kudzu or not?”

Emma looks up at the dark gray sky, at the rain that’s turned from a mist to a drizzle. “I can’t,” she says. “I have to do homework. Let me know if you find her, though.”

“*When I find her,*” I correct her.

“Where are you going to look?”

I look up and down the street, my eyes lingering on the shadows under bushes and front porches. “Everywhere, I guess,” I say.

“Elaine!” Nina calls from not too far away. Her voice is high and strained, and I can hear the slap of her sneakers against the pavement as she runs in my direction.

“I’ve gotta go,” I tell Emma. “Bye, I guess.”

“Bye,” says Emma. Then I walk down the porch steps and she goes back inside and closes the door.

Nina’s hair is pulled up in a bun, but dark strands fall into her face as she jogs over to me and grabs my arm. “What are you doing? I need your help moving boxes outside. We need to leave soon, and all your stuff is still in your room. Come on.” She pulls my arm, but I tug away from her.

“Kudzu’s still missing,” I tell her. “I need to find her before we leave.”

Nina’s eyelids flutter closed for a moment before she looks down at me, her smile more like a dog baring its teeth. “I know you’re worried about her. But Kudzu will be fine, okay?”

“How do you know? She’s probably really scared,” I say. “I need to help her.”

“No, you need to come back to the house. Please, Elaine.”

“No.” I take a step back. “You don’t care about her. She could be hurt, and you don’t even care!”

“Elaine—”

“All you care about is stupid packing and stupid Oklahoma!”

“Elaine, wait!”

But I’m running now, running away from Nina and away from the U-Haul in the driveway and away from the hundreds and hundreds of cardboard boxes in my room. I wait to hear Nina’s footsteps catch up to me, to feel her hand grab my wrist and yank me to a stop, but nothing happens. She doesn’t chase me, and I don’t stop running.

I run past houses where old friends used to live, past cars parked in driveways and ones on the curb, past pine trees and fir trees and hemlocks and spruces. I run until the rain on my glasses makes the whole world blurry, so I stop and wipe them on my sweater and then keep running. I run past neighborhoods locked behind gates, jumping over puddles and slick green patches of moss on the sidewalk. I run past Issaquah Elementary, which is empty and dark because it’s the weekend, and I run until my chest feels like it’s on fire and my throat is dry and aching and I’m soaked to the skin with rain. Then I stop and look around.

I know where I am. Of course I do. Nina and I used to walk all over the city when Mom and Dad were arguing. It was kind of fun: Nina and I would share a look when we heard them shouting upstairs, then we would put on our coats and rain boots and leave. We didn’t care where we ended up; I never worried about getting lost because Nina was with me, holding my hand, and Nina always knew which way to go. Sometimes we would play I-Spy, or collect pine cones, or skip down the sidewalk and sing silly songs and laugh at each other. Sometimes we would just walk. But that was a long time ago.

I know where I am, and I know where I want to go. Timberlake Park is down two streets and one to the right. I’ve caught my breath now, but I don’t feel like running anymore,

so I walk in the direction of the park without making eye contact with the woman who passes me on the sidewalk and casts a concerned look in my direction.

I know I should be looking for Kudzu. She's not going to be in Timberlake Park—it's too far from home, and there's no reason for her to run all this way in the rain. But I have to go there. I'm too close to just walk away.

The trees close in around me, blocking out the rain. It's really raining now, not just sprinkling, and the droplets patter against leaves and make pine needles shiver. The forest smells like wet dirt and rotting leaves and strong, sharp pine sap that burns the inside of my nose. I can hear the waves over the sounds of the rain and the wind. I step over three slugs and four snails as I walk along the dirt path to the beach.

I stand at the edge of the forest and look out at the bay. The shore is covered in pebbles smoothened by the salty waves and is littered with damp pieces of driftwood. If I squint, I can just barely see the gray shadow of Mount Rainier hiding behind the clouds. Everything on the beach is cold and gray, just like the water and the sky and the rain. I wonder if Oklahoma is as gray as Washington.

Mom and Dad took me and Nina here three years ago to tell us they were getting a divorce. "Things aren't working out," Mom said, as if we didn't already know. "We're sorry we have to put you through this." She looked at Dad, who looked at the line where the sky touched the bay and said nothing. "I hope you can forgive us."

"Whatever," said Nina. That was her favorite word when she was seventeen, and she used it with Mom and Dad the most.

"Yeah," I said, "whatever." I picked up a smooth, flat rock and tossed it into the water. Then Nina showed me how to skip rocks the right way. She got six skips from one rock, and she guided my hand when I couldn't get the swing right.

Mom and Dad stood behind us, five feet apart, and watched. I only got up to two skips.

Rocks clatter under my feet as I walk to the edge of the water. I let the waves lap at the tips of my purple boots and watch the water rushing in and out, in and out. Raindrops fall gently on the surface and make it ripple. I wonder where Kudzu is. I wonder why I'm standing here instead of looking for her. I wonder if I even care.

“Elaine,” Nina says from behind me. She doesn't say it like she's mad or confused; it's just a statement, just the truth. I wonder how she found me, how I didn't hear her walking down the path. “Elaine,” she says again, and kicks up pebbles as she walks to me and touches my shoulder. The warmth of her hand makes me realize how cold I am.

“I don't think Kudzu is here, Elaine.”

“I know,” I say, staring at the waves. Nina's reflection dances in the water, but I can't tell what she's thinking because the ripples warp her expression like a mirror in a fun-house. Then she sniffs, and I know that she's crying.

“We have to leave in fifteen minutes,” she says. “We have to get to the apartment by our move-in time.”

“I haven't found Kudzu,” I say. “We can't go yet. We can't leave her here, Nina. Please. Please, don't make me leave her.”

Nina takes her hand off my shoulder to wipe her eyes. “She's okay, Elaine. Trust me. She's okay. We'll come back for her.”

“You don't know that!” I kick the water, splashing us both with freezing droplets. “You don't know she's safe! She could have been hit by a car, or eaten by a coyote, or stolen by someone who wants to sell her! She could be dead!”

“She's not!”

“How do you know?”

“Because I took her to the shelter!” Nina yells. Her words echo across the bay before they’re swallowed by the clouds and the rain.

Finally, I look at her. “What?”

She sinks to her knees. “I took her to the shelter. I—I surrendered her. The apartment says cats aren’t allowed, and—and I didn’t know what else to do. We couldn’t take her with us. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to be mad at me. But this is worse. This is so much worse. And I’m sorry, Elaine. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I watch her wipe her eyes again and say nothing.

“I promise we can come back for her. Maybe we can move to a better apartment when I make enough money, move to one that allows cats. Then we can bring her with us. But we can’t right now, okay? We can’t.”

I stare at her, then look at the waves.

“We have to go now. Please, Elaine. We have to get there on time.” She takes my hand and pulls, but I don’t move. “Come on.” I stay still, staring at the bay and the mountain in the distance. “Please.” Her voice trembles, but I don’t say anything. Then she drops my hand and picks me up like I’m a baby, like I’m four years old and she’s taking me upstairs for a nap because Mom told her to. I let her carry me off the beach and down the path and through the neighborhoods and past the U-Haul hooked to the back of her gray Honda Civic. I let her put me into the backseat and buckle my seatbelt and give me an activity bag full of word searches. And I let her drive away while I look out the window, watching raindrops race each other to the bottom as pine trees and gray skies melt into a blur behind them.

The Neighbors Across the Street

Sara Cline

So much held in a heart in a lifetime. So much held in a heart in a day, an hour, a moment. We are utterly open with no one in the end—not mother and father, not wife or husband, not lover, not child, not friend. We open windows to each but we live alone in the house of the heart. Perhaps we must.

—Brian Doyle, “Joyas Valadoras”

“Have you ever seen them around?”

“No,” Tom said. “But it’s not like I sit at the window all day looking for them.”

“How long have they lived there?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know.” The chair let out a groan as Tom got up from the kitchen table, moving to join Jim at the window in the front dining room. “Always. Since we moved here, anyway.”

“What about their morning newspaper? Or opening and closing their curtains?”

“I don’t think they have a subscription.” Tom sighed, picking at a piece of crud on the glass. “Their curtains stay closed, as far as I can tell.”

“And you don’t think that’s odd?”

“I don’t think about it.” Tom returned to the kitchen and began rearranging the loaves on the bread table, then the fruits in the fruit bowl.

“I just don’t get how you can live here for five years and not bother to meet your neighbors—or at least find out what they look like,” Jim said. “Do you know what they look like?”

“I don’t get why you care so much,” Tom said shortly.

The two said nothing. The blinds made a whirring sound as Jim pulled them shut with the cord. “I think they’re an older couple, anyhow. Probably waiting around in their house to keel over and die,” Tom said.

“Alright, then,” Jim said.

“Alright.”

The two men finished their evening with a few rounds of croquet in the backyard and two hand-rolled cigars. When it was sufficiently late, the two stood and moved to the front door, exchanging a few parting words.

“Darling, is that you?” Tom’s wife, Martha, called from their bedroom down the hall.

Tom pretended not to hear. “It was good to see you, Jim,” he said, shuffling forward and waving Jim out the door.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to get rid of me,” Jim said with a laugh.

“Yes, well,” Tom said. “Goodbye, Jim.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re leaving, Jim,” Martha said gaily, emerging from the hall in her silk nightgown. She sidled up and pulled Jim away from the door, leaning on his arm like a persistent housecat. She smelled of brandy.

“It’s lovely to see you, Martha,” Jim said. He tried not to look at Tom’s reddening face.

“Oh, likewise, likewise.” Martha turned to Tom and swatted at him playfully. “You didn’t tell me we were having company!” She looked at Jim and shook her head, looking positively jaunty. “I don’t know why he tries to act like he’s ashamed of me.”

“I think Jim ought to get home to his own wife, Martha,” Tom said.

“Oh, we were just having a bit of fun, Tom,” said Martha.

“We had plenty of fun already,” Tom said gruffly. He stared levelly at the cross on the door. He offered his hand a second time, his voice firm. “It was good to see you, Jim.”

“Yes, I suppose I should be heading off now. There’s always next time,” Jim said, taking Tom’s hand and then nodding curtly at Martha. “That is, if you aren’t tired of me yet,” he joked—a halfhearted attempt to ease the tension.

Martha wandered off to the kitchen, calling over her shoulder with only a slight slur, “Tom is always chasing off our guests. I say, why bother inviting people over at all if you aren’t going to entertain them?”

“Forgive us,” Tom said, his voice low. “She’s having a bit of a rough time what with... well, you know. We had just cleared out the old office, begun painting it blue.” Tom rubbed his one temple customarily. “She’d become quite giddy about the whole affair, the planning. I’m sure you can understand. It’s quite a shock to the system to expect one thing and receive different news entirely.”

“Oh, no worries at all, Tom. No worries at all.” Jim shifted awkwardly.

“It’s a mourning of two things at once, I suppose. She hasn’t quite come to terms with it, that’s all. Yes, that’s all.”

“I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. You two have my sympathies, Tom.”

“Goodnight, Jim.”

“Goodnight, Tom.”

Tom shut the door with a sigh. He walked to the kitchen and leaned against the counter, watching his wife throw together her evening nightcap. He rubbed his one throbbing temple. “Did you have to come out practically naked?”

Martha said nothing. She looked at her husband as she shook the cocktail shaker. She looked at him as she poured her drink. She looked at him as she sucked down her drink and

set her glass in the sink. “Goodnight, Tom,” she said. “And turn the heater off, will you? It smells awfully like smoke.”

In the morning, Tom rose and dutifully set out a glass of water and two painkillers on Martha’s bedside table. He shut the door to the office with the newly baby blue walls, finding it left open again. He washed the cocktail shaker and tumbler in the sink. He sighed. When he drew the blinds to let the sun in, he found that the neighbors’ house had burned down.

Sleep

Sara Cline

1 year, 8 months, 17 days.

It had been that long since Ronan's glassy cobalt eyes bulged from their sockets in terror before slamming permanently shut—that long since they gave his crumpled body its new home: a room of running tubes, blinking lights, and freezing temperatures. It had also been precisely that long that Hendrix had dreamt of seeing Ronan wake again.

For the first two months, that had been a pipe dream. Nursing his own shattered forearm, Hendrix had watched helplessly as Ronan deteriorated—he was as good as dead, if not for the life support keeping his heart beating. Of course, despite only showing up a grand total of three times in all those weeks, Ronan's deadbeat family still had the gall to try to stick their claws into Ronan one last time and tear him away. "Pull the plug," they said. "Let him go home to Jesus," they said. And even though Ronan was a full-fledged adult and absolutely estranged from his bible-thumping parents, they had the legal right to do so. So, swallowing his pride, Hendrix pleaded with his rich lawyer uncle—something he'd never done, because Orwell's time and money wasn't really his to take, or even ask for. He fought Ronan's bigoted family all the way to Supreme Court, winning in his first non-thrifted, non-ill-fitting suit. Riding the rush of their win, Orwell shared a secret with Hendrix: cryogenic preservation. It's what Orwell had squared away for himself when he finally kicked the bucket—they'd freeze him until medical technology could

thaw him out and fix him up. So, with Orwell's relenting wallet, that's exactly what they did with Ronan.

Hendrix tapped a staccato beat with his fingers against the cool linoleum floor where he sat. It was the song that had been playing over the stereo when the wreck happened. That song had stuck itself into the folds of his brain matter like congealed wax. It was the itch he couldn't scratch. A broken record, a useless fucking parrot. He followed its tempo often and inadvertently.

Hendrix was startled by a shrill gasp.

"Hendrix," Linda, the research assistant, caught her breath. "You scared the shit out of me. Why are you still here?" She frowned. "You know we close the lab up to visitors after ten."

Hendrix looked up and delivered the sheepish semblance of a smile. "I know. I just thought I'd wait out here."

"On the floor?"

"I don't see why not," he grinned for real this time, patting the floor welcomingly.

Linda sighed, tucking a rogue strand of hair behind her ear. Her pity and exasperation were clearly at odds with each other. "Well, *I* do. Nobody's here, Hendrix. Please go home. You don't have to be here for him every waking second, alright? We're keeping him safely in torpor."

Hendrix frowned. He'd been here for Ronan this long. Why stop now?

Linda's voice softened. "It's the home stretch, Hendrix. I know your anticipation is up because we've finally amassed all the necessary donor parts and started the procedures, but there's still some more to do. We won't thaw and wake him when you aren't here. I promise that you'll be the first thing he sees when he does. So, how about you promise me you'll go home and try to get some sleep?"

It had been well over a year since the accident, but Hendrix still wasn't used to the saccharine, pitiful way people talked to him, like they needed to swaddle his little infant feelings. Still, it had been hard not to come to the hospital, so it was hard not to come to the lab. It's the same thing for people who visit loved ones' graves—there's no good, logical reason; you just want to feel connected.

Still, he only liked being a *mild* nuisance to people. So, he went home, brushed his teeth, and deposited himself in bed. It was a funny ritual, really, because he didn't sleep much; he hated being at home, away from Ronan. But he thought it was good to trace out the steps and remind himself of at least the notion of what it was like to be human. They were like little plot points on a grid: eat, sleep, get dressed, walk, speak, attempt normalcy. He just tried to steer a course that hit most of them.

Hendrix made up for his lack of sleep with caffeine, anyway. He mechanically bought a coffee every morning. Occasionally, he'd accidentally buy two—an old habit that pained him when it resurfaced. The first time it happened, he'd blanched, a little in disbelief at his delirium, before paying for both and immediately depositing the second drink in the trash as he walked out the door. Ronan had always preferred sugar water with a hint of coffee, anyway. Hendrix drank it black.

He made up for the lack of dreams, too. Daydreaming. It wasn't rest, of course. And it sure wasn't *restful*. They were just mini movie reels that wormed their way into the darkness of his wilting eyes. He didn't welcome them, either; he just resigned to let them happen. Most times, it was a reel of the scene right before he'd watched Ronan's pale body crumple and contort like a misdirected paper airplane. Ronan was deliberately facing away, his arms folded tight across his

chest as he stared out of his passenger window. Hendrix felt as though he was outside of his body, looking in. He could hear that blasted song on the radio, marching on toward its inevitable crescendo. He wanted to tear the damn radio unit out with his bare hands, to rattle his former self and say, *“Look at the goddamn fucking road, you piece of shit.”* But no. His eyes kept flicking from the road to Ronan.

They'd been on the way to the airport. Hendrix sat there, his mind racing, as three words tried desperately to bubble out of him. Three words. Just. Three. Little. Words. But instead, what came out was: “Please don't go.” But those weren't the ones that Hendrix meant to say, and they damn sure weren't the three words that Ronan needed to hear. It drove him crazy to watch it play out again; he wanted to scream at himself for being such a coward, but he was forced to watch the entire scene play out exactly as it happened. The words unsaid were left buzzing around in his head like a firefly that he couldn't seem to smash between his palms. The fly just got stuck in his brain matter, along with that stupid song, its light somehow burning even brighter.

I love you. The words were so simple to say now, post-accident. He'd been practicing them in the mirror, a mantra, for Ronan's eventual return. I love you. He'd said them to Ronan's lifeless ventilator body, too. IloveyouIloveyou Iloveyou. Sometimes they sounded so small. Yes, they were the standard words that you say when you spend a square fuck-ton of time caring about one person. But reducing the giddy nausea and the laughter and the whispered nothings and the garbled utterances of ecstasy and the easy touches and the ugliness and the springing-tears-that-burn-like-nothing-else into the pre-packaged confines of eight letters and three spaces is like trying to fit the entirety of the ocean into the confines of a thimble. They couldn't really capture his feelings webbing up in between his toes, aching in his fingers,

crashing over him and filling his lungs until he felt so full, satiated, anchored. But he needed to say them anyway. He needed Ronan to know.

In the end, Hendrix got what he had wanted—Ronan didn’t leave. He didn’t *get* to leave. He never went to the airport, never travelled thousands of miles away to go to grad school in Hong Kong like he’d wanted to, never got to send postcards filled with his lilting handwriting and messy doodles. Instead, he came blazing back home by the glory of flashing lights, a fluid swan song waxing and waning. See, Hendrix had gotten what he’d wanted, hadn’t he? For Ronan to stay? Hendrix could see him every day now—at the hospital, at the lab. Every single day.

Like the way that the seams of your socks will inevitably etch into your skin after a long day, the car crash was etched into Hendrix. And every time he dreamed it, he paid careful attention to the last moment that Ronan had looked at him. Ronan had been seething, calling Hendrix immature and selfish—among other abuses that fell out of his mouth—but his eyes were open, actually looking at Hendrix. Both blue eyes still in their sockets, bright and alive and looking at him. Hendrix wanted nothing more than to see that again.

Days melded into each other until finally Ronan sat in front of him. Hendrix sat with bated breath, words flitting around in his head with nowhere to perch. It struck Hendrix now how utterly *small* Ronan looked, no longer encased in his frozen chamber: a tiny paper doll, awash in his personal ocean of white sheets. But Hendrix didn’t care. Ronan’s eyes were finally opening.

“Ronan,” Hendrix breathed out, smiling in disbelief. He grasped Ronan’s hand, gently stroking the back with his thumb, though probably more to comfort himself than to comfort Ronan. “Hey, tic-tac. It’s me, Hendrix.” He paused,

feeling suddenly bashful. “Sorry, I don’t have to tell you that. You know that.” He looked back to the research director standing in the back corner of the room, monitoring. “He knows that, right?”

“His long-term memory should be intact, yes, if a little confused at first. He’s coming into consciousness after a long hiatus, so just give him some time.”

“Hendrix,” Ronan repeated hoarsely.

“Yeah,” Hendrix breathed, tears pricking his eyes. He blinked rapidly to clear them. “That’s right. Hendrix. Good.” He cleared his throat, glancing at the back of the room again. “Sorry, I don’t mean to talk to you like a child. I just . . . I don’t know how to talk to you.” He laughed. “So, um, hey, shithead. I’m your boyfriend, I guess, if you didn’t know. But, like, a really poor one, honestly. I know I could lie, in case you have amnesia, and say I’m pretty great, but no, I’ve been really shitty.” Hendrix shook his head, backtracking. “Do you know where you are?”

Ronan stared at him blankly.

“You’re in a hospital. Well, a lab-hospital. You—we—got in a car accident. You’ve been, uh, out of the game for quite some time—1 year, 8 months, 17 days, but hey, who’s counting? There’s a lot of celebrity gossip you’re gonna want me to catch you up on. Our DVR is also very full.”

“Car accident,” Ronan repeated.

Hendrix nodded. “But you’re back now. That’s all that matters.”

Ronan was quiet for several moments. “Was I driving?”

“No. I was. Apparently, it was both mine and the other driver’s fault, but I took my eyes off the road, and—” He looked down, not bothering to wipe the fat tears that had begun slipping down his face. “I’m really sorry,” he said finally.

“It’s okay,” Ronan said.

“Don’t say that. It’s not. I could’ve killed you. I *did* kill you.”

“It’s okay,” Ronan repeated.

“No, see, this is where you would normally say ‘Yeah, okay, it kinda was your fucking fault. What, you like driving with your eyes closed, you numbnuts?’ or something like that.”

“Why would I say something rude like that?” Ronan said, the hoarseness in his voice dissipating, but the strangely perky tone remaining.

Hendrix quirked an eyebrow. “Did you guys perform a lobotomy on him, or what?” Hendrix joked, turning back to the doctor.

“No, of course not. We didn’t operate on the brain at all.”

Hendrix shifted uncomfortably. “Sorry. I know, recovery time and all that. I just am eagerly awaiting your bad comebacks, that’s all.” He grinned cheekily at Ronan, then sobered up again. “Yeah, I’ve never had to welcome a boyfriend back to the conscious, waking world before, so I have no idea what I’m doing. Honestly, who let me be the first person to talk to you? Shouldn’t you have filled him in first, Doc?” He looked over his shoulder.

“Yes, probably.”

Ronan spoke up, “However mean I’ve been to you, I won’t be mean to you anymore, Hendrix. I’m sorry for my past behavior.”

“Ronan, for the love of God, stop,” Hendrix groaned. “You literally have zero to apologize for.” He scooted closer, whispering, “And please try to say *something* a bit sassy, for my sake. Please.”

“I have no reason to think that you’re not a good boyfriend.” Ronan’s eyes landed on the doctor. “Could I get something to drink? Like a Coke or something?”

The gears turned in Hendrix's head. "Wait. You hate Coke!" he cried.

Ignoring Hendrix, the doctor responded, "We have to be careful with the reintroduction of foods and liquids, to avoid Refeeding Syndrome, but I'll see what I can do." He buzzed for an assistant.

"Seriously, though, you've always said that Coca Cola tastes like sugar and battery acid. Should I be concerned?" Hendrix half-joked, looking back at the doctor again.

The doctor responded dryly, "Well, there have been a few documented cases of organ transplant recipients taking on the personality traits of their donors—rare and not particularly supported by evidence, though. In this case, there were quite a few grafts and transplants, with several different donors, so if the myth were true, I guess he could have amassed quite a few new traits after the operations. There's no reason to believe such a myth, though."

Hendrix looked into Ronan's eyes, searching for the semblance of something familiar—searching for something that would tell him this is alright, that he'd made the right decision to let Ronan be brought back.

He realized something, then. Where two blue eyes once sat, there was now one brown and one blue.

"Oh," he said. "You had to replace one of his eyes."

"Yes," the doctor came up from behind, flashing a flashlight into each eye. "And, from the looks of it, it was quite successful. Heterochromia actually occurs at a somewhat common rate in the natural population. Two different eye colors would be nothing to bat an eye about—no pun intended."

Hendrix felt a bit sick. He knew that he should be happy that Ronan was awake and actually *talking* in front of him—and he *was*, but he had always imagined this playing out differently—those blue eyes narrowing at him and saying "Why are you crying? You big baby. I was always gonna come

back. I was hoping for Halloween or Friday the 13th, but whatever. I'm here, aren't I?" (and he always imagined a big sappy kiss and a cinematic crescendo of violins, but don't tell anyone). But these eyes were looking at Hendrix in a way that they never had before, so brightly accepting. All Hendrix wanted was for an eyebrow to quirk up or narrow at him skeptically. All he wanted was for that mouth to open and call him out for all his shit, for being a shitty driver and a shitty boyfriend who never said, "I love you." He wanted Ronan to lean over and shove him too hard in the shoulder, so that maybe this moment would feel like *home*, but instead a blank look sat plastered on Ronan's face as Linda adjusted his saline drip.

Hendrix ran his thumb over Ronan's hand, looking at the alternating flesh tones amidst Ronan's once pale skin. He could make out the stitches that pieced each piece of skin to the next—a patchwork of other people's dead and forgotten. He wondered how many people could've been saved if all the donor parts hadn't gone to Ronan—a kidney donated by Hendrix, a spleen, a liver, a lung, several skin grafts, an eye, all the blood donations. Probably like eight people.

Hendrix cleared his throat, realizing that Ronan was watching him. "It's pretty cool, honestly. You're like a necromancy superhero," he grinned. "A regular Solomon Grundy."

Ronan stared back at him. "A what?"

"Uh. You're like a quilt. A collage." He smiled. "A work of art. But you've always been a work of art." Hendrix winced as soon as the words left his mouth. He waited for Ronan to say "*Gross*," or "*Ew, please never say that again. You sap. You dopey sap.*"

But, instead, Roman merely said, "Thank you."

Hendrix ran his hands gently across Ronan's hands; they were rough now, like they'd replaced his baby-soft skin with

that of an old carpenter. He'd be pissed about that, Hendrix thought. Well, the old him would, at least. Hendrix's stomach felt like it was digesting itself. He realized, then, that he still hadn't said those words.

"Ronan, I love you," he said.

"Thanks. You too," Ronan said.

Eventually, Ronan recovered enough to come home, and Hendrix dutifully took up the role of personal caretaker—dressing his wounds, feeding him, reading him old text messages, playing old videos to jog his old personality back. But it wasn't that he didn't remember. He was simply someone new. Even as Ronan's self-sufficiency grew, he continued to talk in words alien to Ronan, arranging his mouth into a version of a smile that was all too symmetrical, not the smile that Ronan had always placed precariously on one side of his mouth. In fact, New Ronan says he likes Hendrix, just "not in that way." Still, they live together. They eat together. They sleep in the same bed together. They've even adopted a slightly revised form of those three words. "I loved you," they say to each other.

Nothing is the same, but it doesn't matter. Hendrix will spend the bulk of every waking hour waiting for nighttime, when he can succumb to the oblivion of sleep. He trembles with impatience as he lays in bed, letting the soft tendrils of sleep grab and pull at him until he can look again into two crystal blue eyes, can place his hands against familiar, pale, unmarred skin.

"Honey, I'm home," Hendrix says, tipping his invisible hat. He dips Ronan theatrically.

"I've been waiting for you, shithead," Ronan says, grinning.

There is beautiful silence, and he can breathe again.

POETRY

Boogie Boogie Birth

Chloe Nguyen

In the beginning, there was a line.
And the line extended endlessly
A boundless stretch in two directions
The line was taut, immense force on the area
Tense with stress and
Fissured under the pressure of the universe-to-be
The line split into two lines in two dimensions
Binary linear fission
Emission of line
And two became three
And three became
Quadrillion rays of line
And rays became segments and segments began
To undulate and gyrate
Into curves and swirls, swerves and spiral
Microbes, viral corkscrews
Squiggled into jiggly shapes
Upend appendages!
Joints conjoin and groins rejoice
From amoebas freely eating
To Tiktaalik's walking record
In the crumbly key limestone
The Mantis prays (so devout)
Religion was invented when people were
But the Flying Spaghetti Monster
Was brutally banished by the gluten-free folk

Hammurabi could never predict
Lasik, Copernicus
Did not know banjo string
Theory, or Mr. Clean's Magic Eraser
Confucius never played the kazoo
Or indulged in Vegas
Cirque du Soleil with the tigers
The dinosaurs went extinct
But so did Yogos
All this progress and
I, a collection of lines and bends,
Have still not been debugged
Of the appendix glitch

Elegy in Dirt

Matthew Leger

I.

As the white keys keel over,
air dampens, so comes musk.
There is a violence in creation:
the bishop whips angelus bells,
the furrow exalts the plow,
pen meets paper & suddenly
the dead writhe in sodden holes.

Twilight
outside your mother's house
I jar the silence,
strum shadows out of streetlights.
Your brother has a child now,
the embalmer buys a ring or maybe
a daisy milks the furloughed sun,
beetles decorate an elk carcass
& an almost-nephew, dappled
in red ribbons like a tree, may sing
the beginning sprouts out nothing.
My garden dies every May.

How absurd, to resurrect & stab you
I who cower to car alarms
I who turned my back, mangle
 urns, you who
ring doorbells & run into the sun;
Cohen wrote 80 verses for Hallelujah
 & I am so tired
of seeing through your eyes
at night, grasping at straws of nothing
as light withdraws, melting towards
the roof of warmth, unaware the scalding
spoon will fall to the bedroom floor,
unaware mother will get *that feeling*
at work, unaware my father will punch
angels through the wall once the phone's
unearthed—it took me years
to start revising poetry & now
I have many stupid ideas of heaven.

II.

When the chord of a poem is struck
the dead bite their tongues
& grow mirrors
 coveting, they drill holes
in our heads with soporific heat, sprinkle
 (flight of gore, lull of opiates)
& grope arbitrary sonograms, reminiscing.

Still, children dance
in schoolyard reverie; scratching
elbows, composing elegies in dirt
for their endless selves to come.

It is in this realm
I will assume all of myself,
& you, having corralled your wasted heads,
will arrive in the marcescent labyrinth,
neck chained to a bed of poppies,
Junkie Orpheus crossing the undulating
heavens of your mother's throat.

With keys, I replant my crop,
infix messages in its wake.

Mesquite King

Kerri Kilmer

A fox is dead on the fence post

caught

between barbed wire and sky,

a new crucifixion.

red and grey and velveteen they hang

each one different, each the same.

oh look how he smiles, my love, look at his gaze

he has been cut, cut to the quick

and the flow of pollen and blood ebbs with the sweet sun-
rise.

hush, hush,

the jack rabbit cries and suddenly he is a king

and the mesquite trees and the sea of grass sing.

he is a king of small things who find their justice in wrung
necks

and hollow pelts swaying in

a

contrary

autumn

breeze.

Volume

Matthew Leger

It is the first day of the last summer
and I want nothing but dismantlement.

In my listlessness:
pages are slippery, smoke on my thumbs;
cicada's purl, dissonant maracas;
and of the men and women at the pool
I am the only one with my shirt on.

This heat has hatched something inside me:
it is buoyant, like the child floating
facedown in the water. The whistle of
katydids. Toned, gallant strangers scramble,
mouth to mouth in the sun, beer stuffed icebox.
Life goes on, something is bursting inside
me, the only one with my shirt still on.

Fine Art.

Lilian Garcia

My papi's hands
are not sculpted marble.
My papi's hands are brand
new silver quarters,
rough and ridged around
the edges.

And after a long day out,
working under the Texas sun,
he lets me pop his fingers.
They crack like freshly
opened coca-cola.
Not the ones in cans,
but the ones in tall elegant
glass bottles directly
imported from Mexico.
One by one.

I scratch at the calluses in his hands,
pick at the hardened skin on his
palms. Heavy in my arms his hands lie.
I untie the laces of his work boots.
I'm fast, the tan leather
strings have nothing
against my small fingers.

Small rocks shoot across the room
as he takes off his shoes.

Mi papá wiggles his toes
against the brown carpet.

I bring him a cold water bottle
from the fridge. He
inhales the water in one
gulp. Then he's Nowitzki,
he shoots the bottle
into the trash can.

A three-pointer.

He points to his brown cheeks,
Un beso, like always, he asks.

I give a quick peck on his sweaty
skin, the salt makes me squirm.

He brings me to his lap.

Our hands are arte fina,
he whispers.

We were crafted
by our ancestors,
our hands deserved to be loved.

Priceless, he says.

We are worth more
than you can imagine.

Our hands reach the stars
and pluck them At our will.

frozen peas for rosh hashanah

Finn Chlebowski

i.

the congregation pleads ashamnu
beats their ribs, forty lashes
in the shape of a tender belt buckle
repentance is delivered, albeit creased
the envelope, the book of jonah
on the back of a carrier pigeon
sealed with a pool of sweat, syrupy
your rabbi's too cheap to pay for air conditioning

ii.

the congregation practices tashlikh
sin extends from the hand and dives
headfirst, boldly shed to puddles of seafoam
twist ties of white bread plastic unfasten
like fish, sandwich crust from the cafeteria torn
god's judgement ensnares all, she casts her net
an internet article about ducks—bread can
can fatten them up, frozen peas are best

Suspicious Person in the Neighborhood

Kateri Whitfield

I eat eggshells for breakfast
almost every day
and they still taste as good as the first time
but lately while I'm eating them
a woman has been peeping
into my window and mocking me.

She has long red hair a red bandana jeans and different shirts
Was riding a green bike yesterday morning
She seems very suspicious
I have called the police and they want to question her.
This is in Hyde Park.

Hair—long red
Shirt—various
Pants—jeans
Age—20s
Sex—female
Race—white
Build—slim
Chews on a toothpick occasionally

If you know this person and she is harmless
Please let me know. Otherwise
I carry eight expired EpiPens
in my pockets
and I'll stab her with one.

All of Human History in Rats

Annie Diamond

i.

girls in my eighth-grade science class sat with wrinkled noses because they didn't want to do dissections. we were dissecting cow hearts and there was something gross about blood on latex gloves, something cruel about playing with a necessary organ. our teacher, a woman worn, told us about the last time she was bothered by what we do to our dissection subjects. she was working as a post-grad in a psychological pharmaceutical lab. they needed autopsies of the trial animals, the lab rats, and they needed the cause of death to be something that wouldn't affect the brain chemistry. they also needed lots and lots of rats, so they needed a cheap way of doing it. my teacher's job was to scoop up a rat from its cage, make the requisite observations, and bash the rat against the sink. she had to do it quickly, had to do it with force to succeed at her job—woman of science, rat catcher, pied piper, slammer-of-rats-against-sinks. eyes unfocused, expression dazed, she told us once there was a rat that wouldn't die:

so she hit it against the sink again and again and again and again and...

anyways.

ii.

Rats!: the children's version of a swear. The playground plague upon your house. Rats brought in the bubonic plague to Verona in the 1400s. Mercutio's revenge indeed.

It wasn't the rats, not really. It was the fleas on the rats. Brought by ship on rats, the fleas jumped ship and went forth and multiplied. The rats weren't even the vector, just the carrier.

(those are terms that eighth grade science taught me)

But rats are more visible than fleas. People are afraid of the most obvious. Cats, dogs were killed by scared people who thought they caused the plague. Jews were comparatively more hygienic than the average medieval villager, clean enough to have less rats, less fleas. They were killed by scared people who thought they caused the plague.

I wonder if the murderers ever learned what actually happened. I wonder if those scared people ever realized what they did. If so, what do you say?

Rats?

iii.

Anyway, now we test our medicine on lab rats. Also, our makeup but mostly our medicine. Rats and/or mice are really great test subjects! Their physiology is relatively similar to our own. Enough to test symptoms of neural transmitter medication before moving on to the human trials. Plus, they breed fast. And die fast—dissection for the greater good.

We'd probably be outraged if they were cuter, but they're not, so who cares. Progress stops for no man, much less no rat! Dying children have been saved by lab rat tested medication. It's an easy trade. It's for a better cause than the meat industry, after all.

(I, a coward, couldn't bear to kill what I eat. If I lived on a farm, I would become a vegetarian. I, a coward, am lucky for the quirk of temporality. If I were a medieval villager, I would be dead. Could I bash a rat against the sink with my own two hands?)

The thing about rats is that they're human-like. Just not enough to have our sympathy. Rats may have similar aortic chambers and similar pathological characteristics, but it takes more than that to win our hearts. Rats practice cannibalism. They feast on the same flesh they're made of—cannibalize their own children. Humanity has reached a consensus on that being kind of fucked up.

iv.

two anecdotes about rats: once my mother told me how rat poison works, in order to ensure I never ever ever touched it. see, the only thing you want in your house less than a rat is a dead rat. so you need to get the thing out of the house. rat poison's ingenious really—it creates an overwhelming desire for water. as they lie dying, all they can think about is water. they crawl outside to quench their unquenchable thirst. and then they die.

it is apparently incredibly painful.

the second: we often do our psychological testing on rats because sometimes it's unethical and/or because sometimes we can't find undergrads willing. we learn about memory and other human things from the animal studies. once upon a time, scientists tested addiction. press a button, a treat came out. the rats pressed and pressed and pressed the button. then, they added the chance that nothing might come out. they pressed and pressed and pressed the button. then, they added the chance that they might get shocked. they still pressed and pressed and pressed the button. then they took away the chance that something might come out. they might get nothing and they might get shocked. two options: nothing and bad.

the rats pressed and pressed and pressed and

in which moses uses he/him pronouns

Finn Chlebowski

gc2b arrives
wrong name
on your doorstep
packaged afkomen
hide, hide
smeared door frame
first born sons lamb
blood
split your breasts
red sea of flesh
unleavened bread
bound,
flat chested
burning bush
serpent staff
you swallow
glass vial
sharps container

three of wands

H. G. Seavey

the mountains are purple
as are my feet
daffodil
and violets for feet
wholly unknown
the mountains a mirage
or parts of a whole
three holes from which
three rods rise like
beacons of vegetation
in three-pronged leaves
eaves of shelter
the timber cut and halved
unseen brooks, rivers to sea
holy unknown
clogged with trees
or parts of them
like wands and violins
bathed in complementary yellow
i am a locust
fleeing from bees
i am a poet
in search of locusts and honey
perhaps
i will bury myself for 17 years

Watercolor

Andilynne Feddeler

In sunlight my wrists are paper, navy veins like rivers
Trickle, pulled by gravity, into sickly dewdrops on bathroom tile.
Dip the washcloth in warm water; wring it out; wipe the floor.
On my knees I pray that this time is the last and that this time
I will close my eyes and dream in watercolor. I am so tired of oil.
With wet hands I pull the blinds, turn off the light, run a bath.
I drop rose petals into the bubbles, and one by one, they melt.

I like to crawl into water when it is scalding and burns my skin,
Puckering the loose ends of my body. I sink into the foam
And I hold my breath. Vanilla and lavender and honeydew
Mix with the sweat—the scents of sex and blood and salt.
In the water's reflection I am pink and distorted, a lion's mane
Wrapped around my shoulders. Run my fingers through my hair
And let the storm above the drain whisk away last strands of gold.

When the candles burn out and the moon peers in through the blinds,
I pull the plug and watch the water disappear. Standing in the
Last remains of rose-colored wash I do not feel clean.
I feel stripped and I feel naked, barren and wet and slippery.
My skin is not soft—it is rough with the scars of past soaks,
Periwinkle and sunflower-stained tubs of oil, bubbles, soaps.
My wrists are still dripping and my face is still pink.

I look in the mirror and stare back at me, tilt my head and
Through parched lips bare my teeth. My wrinkled fingers
Reach in the cabinet for the bandages I like, the alcohol to clean.
Slowly patch myself into a mummy, wrapped in gauze and skin,
Before the blood begins to crust. Steam escapes through the vents.
Leaving the last remains of foam to soak into the porcelain, I
Spread charcoal and clay over my skin, smoothing out the peaks.

After twenty minutes I rinse the grey grout from my pores;
I do not feel refreshed. I trade towel for tea and sip from a honey mug.
Soft voices speak through the stereo and I slip into the sheets
That line my bed. This time, I hope, I will curl with the fabric.
Counting the seconds backward until drowsiness becomes darkness,
I wait and wait and wait. My legs are ribbon, my eyelashes like
Paintbrushes, dipped in water, ready for the next stroke.

Page Torn from a Locked Diary

Chloe Nguyen

Do not wait for me while I
Hedge bets, prune hedonistic
shrubs into swans, hem and haw over
monochrome puzzles, Guzzle glass,
deplete my supply of
raspberry jelly

Do not wait for me
While you learn to drive
on the left side of the road, sprout
new moles from your
earthy wrists, flay and flick the faded
sticker on your back
windshield, bow with stoned
heads at a headstone

Do not wait for
Me while mayflies pile on windowpanes,
the record store reincarnates as a butcher
shop, the next water bill is due

Do not

Wait for me.

NONFICTION

Whatchu Know Bout Dis Here?

DeShawn McKeel

Midnight sky skin Blackens under a midday sun. Summertime in the South; weekend fun; Saturdaze. Distant figures dance in a heat haze. From the echoes can be heard kids loud laughing, and their bare feet beating on burning concrete. They're playing Tag-You're-It, Hide-N-Seek; Manhunt, Cops & Robbers, and Racing. Mommas and Grannies yelling, "Stay in or out ain't tryna air condition the whole damn neighborhood?" Daddies and Uncles out smoking, drinking, barbequing, and teasing, bullying all the kids. Aunties, the candy lady up the street; on the corner. She's got all the best snacks, treats for the cheap: chips, cool-cups, candies, chocolates, ice creams, color flavored pickles and drinks, and some special stuffs for the Grown Folk and Big Kids.

All the Hustlas, Ballas, Gs & Macks ride by swangin in Coupe deVilles, Impalas, Buicks, Escalades on choppas with spinners, tippin on 3s & 4s, trunks beating so loud, so hard, windows shatter, pictures are knocked off walls. They're bumping Screw. They're bumping old school music. Music so old it makes Granddaddies ask, "Whatchu know bout dis here?" Knowing damn well you don't know, but it's familiar. It's music your parents were conceived to, music you might've been conceived to, music your children might be conceived to, and theirs, but you're not worried about children right now. You're still a child yourself. All that's on your heart is impressing on your crush, getting them to notice you, though it's all for naught, it doesn't matter, you're too busy being consumed by the playing and chilling with the neighborhood kids, your friends, your homies.

As the day winds down your only worry and concern is making it home before the street lamps turn on. The setting

sun gives way to a dusk that has within itself an omen of your punishment to come. You wouldn't make it in time. The street lamps are already on. You stop rushing and bask in the cool breeze left by the departing day. You continue on home bracing yourself, knowing Mommas or Grannies is going to be waiting for you at the door. When you arrive you find that you were right, Mommas or Grannies was waiting at the door and the first thing they say isn't of any obvious concern for your well-being, but instead, "I thought I told ya ass to be home before them street lights come on? A hard head makes a soft behind! Getcha ass on in here!"

So that night you get a whipping and you're supposed to be on punishment, but as you lay yourself to bed, tears still falling from your eyes, you think to yourself: "It's summertime and Mommas and Grannies would rather you be outside, and out of trouble and their way, and so they'll let you go back out tomorrow." And, in fact, they do, and you get the chance to do it all again. The chance to Blacken your skin under a midday sun; the chance to loud laugh and beat your feet on burning concrete; the chance to play Tag-You're-It, Hide-N-Seek; Manhunt, Cops & Robbers, and Racing; the chance to hear Mommas and Grannies yelling, "Stay in or out, ain't tryna air condition the whole damn neighborhood!"; the chance to be bullied by Daddies and Uncles; to help Aunties' profits; to watch in admiration as the Hustlas, Ballas, Gs & Macks ride by swangin in Coupe deVilles, Impalas, Buicks, Escalades on choppas with spinners, tippin on 3s & 4s with trunks beating so loud, so hard windows shatter and pictures are knocked off walls, and their music gives you the chance to hear Granddaddies ask, "Whatchu know bout dis here," as if you somehow came to know within the day, but it's still familiar, it's still music your parents were conceived to, music you were conceived to, music your children might be conceived to, and theirs, but you're not worried about children right now; you're still a child yourself, and all that's on your heart is impressing on your crush, getting them to notice you, and when it's all for naught, being consumed by the playing and chilling with the homies.

Though this time, as the day winds down, you have no worries or concerns, you made sure to save yourself enough time to get home before the street lamps turn on so as not to get another whipping. You're walking with a friend; their home is a bit before yours. Y'all are bickering, teasing one another about your crushes, joking, being free. Y'all come to their home, it's across the street and they run to it. All the while you're waving them goodbye, unaware of your surroundings (forgetting that Mommas and Grannies are always preaching to you about being aware of your surroundings, and later looking back on this you'll feel as if you committed a grave sin) when an officer on patrol driving by stops and says, "You waving me down, *boy*?" Now, you've been called boy before by Mommas, Grannies, Daddies, Uncles, Aunties, Granddaddies, so you were used to it, but there was something about this *boy* that made the hair on your neck curl tighter. This *boy* brought out a fear in you that many don't know, experience, or understand until later in Life. This was a fear of Death.

So, now you're in a situation where you have no power to choose between two options: Survival or Extinction. You're afraid, you want to run, but you know you can't and shouldn't. The officer is like a rabid dog that'll give chase and won't quit until after it has you dead in its jaws. You don't know this, but you understand it, you feel it; it's instinct. It's in your blood, it's inherited, for whatever reason you think back on Granddaddies asking, "Whatchu know bout dis here," and you realize the familiarity is more than just the music—it's the accumulation of knowledge and experiences and memories of all the lives before you that worked and work to secure your survival, and the survival of those after you; you're reminded of Daddies and Uncles teasings and bullyings and realize it's just their way of toughening you up for a world that means to break you, destroy you; you're reminded of Aunties business and realize it's her way of providing for you in a world that only seeks to take from you; you're reminded of Mommas and Grannies' threat of being home before the street lamps and realize it's their way of protecting you from the darkness of the world; you're reminded

of the midday sun Blackening your skin, and see that even it must be snuffed at the end of the day, and realize that you can and could become of the ultimate Black. As you realize all of this and prepare yourself for extinction, the officer stares you up and down one final time and drives away to continue the rest of their patrol.

Now, you're left alone. The street lamps are on. You're unsure of how much time has passed. You want to hurry home knowing that you'd still get a whipping anyway, but you're still afraid to run. You feel the rabid dog lurking in the shadows ready to pounce at a moment's notice. So, you walk, and as you walk you watch as the dusk turns to night and see how the light becomes darkness, and you let it shroud and consume you. When you make it home Mommas or Grannies is waiting for you at the door, but this time they aren't angry, and they let their worry show. They ask where you were, what's wrong, why are you crying, they acknowledge that there's been a change within you. You tell them what happened. They sit you down and give you the talk; the talk you've heard maybe a million times; the talk that you never really listened to, that you never understood, until now. The talk about being Black in America. This time around you heard the talk, you understood it, you heeded it, you consumed it, you remembered it word for word, and not only for yourself and your Life, but for all those who come after you and for their lives.

The next day you felt the midday sun Blacken your skin in a different way, a way it always had, a way you hadn't noticed until now; you heard the frustrations in Mommas and Grannies threats differently, you heard the love and care; you felt the purpose behind Daddies and Uncles teasings and bullyings, you felt the fear they had of not being able to protect you; you now knew what Granddaddies meant when they asked, "Whatchu know bout dis here," for you weren't a child anymore. The bliss that came with your innocence and ignorance was stolen the moment *boy* left the mouth of the dog. You knew you were Black, you had always been, but this didn't upset you, for this enlightenment allowed you to be truly free now.

Call Me Monster: A Reimagining of Gender in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Sara Cline

Though there exists a wealth of feminist scholarship on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, much of it is outdated, bound by gender essentialism. Anne Mellor was a notable contributor in this arena, writing that Victor Frankenstein's act of creation "eliminated the female's primary biological function and source of cultural power"—reproduction (355). Though a compelling reading, this feminist framework relies on an essentialist view of gender, in which being female is operationally defined by the capacity to give birth. Since Mellor's 1982 article, gender studies and feminism have evolved, challenging gender essentialism and its harms against trans communities. Moreover, I argue that Shelley herself saturates *Frankenstein* with an inherent critique of rigid gender roles and gender essentialism; thus, the novel can be usefully reimagined as a transfeminist narrative that features the creature as an agential transgender, non-binary protagonist and lays the foundation for acceptance of sublime trans bodies (like sublime nature scenes), as well as the positive reclamation of the term "monster" by LGBTQIA+ communities.

Frankenstein's creature can be read as a trans/NB (transgender, non-binary) figure. Though one might dismiss this exercise as merely an anachronistic reading, Shelley wrote the monster into a particular set of circumstances that seem to continually resonate with trans readers. Indeed, Susan Stryker writes, "I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual

woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" (238). Young trans woman Filisa Vistima equated her preoperative body to that of "Frankenstein's monster" before committing suicide two months later (Stryker 246). "I am Frankenstein's Monster: An echo of Susan Stryker's call to action," reads the title of Jessie Rae Fisher's 2018 article, in which she maps her queer and trans identity onto the monster. Similarly, in a 2017 article entitled "Being Frankenstein's Monster," Jude Samson parallels the creature's journey for acceptance with his own long journey into identifying as a trans man and transitioning. As Anson Koch-Rein notes, references to Shelley's novel abound in trans narratives and "trans-affirmative scholarship (Barad, Cromwell, Noble)... from memoir (Bono, Breedlove, Link & Raz, McBee) to poetry (Cannon, Ladin)" (44). Thus, reading the creature as a trans character offers a useful and important exercise in empathetically understanding trans issues.

From the very beginning of the novel, the creature is set up as a non-binary figure. Shelley opens with the Milton epigraph: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? [...]" (Shelley 21). Though perhaps not Milton or Shelley's original intent, these lines can be read as a transgender outcry: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me *man*?" (my emphasis). Indeed, many trans individuals, in the face of Judeo-Christian rhetoric, ask God this question of why they were made "this way" (their biological sex incongruous with their gender identity). This epigraph sets up a framework in which the creature can be read as a trans figure. The creature can also easily be read as non-binary because he is of ambiguous gender (Economides 99, Butler 48–49, Zigarovich 260), visibly apart from the norm, queer or *other*. In fact, he is exceptionally non-binary, in the denotational sense of "non-binary" (i.e., not fitting into the two prescribed categories). The creature lives in the gray area between human and non-human. As such, the creature

suffers from a forced liminality: he occupies the outskirts, locating himself in hovels and extreme Arctic landscapes to avoid persecution. He spends a winter watching the De Lacy family from afar, vicariously participating in their joys and sorrows, for fear of meeting them and having them violently cast him out, like others had (Shelley 99–100). Like a non-binary body, he is not immediately identifiable; his defiance of labels makes him a categoric unknown, begetting fear and anxiety.

The creature's body, too, parallels the trans/NB body. When Victor creates the creature, he utilizes parts from human corpses, “bones from charnel houses” (53). Thus, it is entirely possible that the monster is an amalgamation of “male” and “female” parts; it becomes even more likely when Victor notes that “the materials at present within [his] command hardly appeared adequate” (52). In that light, the creature can be read as an intersex character—born of ambiguous sex, with both female and male sex characteristics. Moreover, Victor recounts that he was interested in “the structure of the human frame” (50). His surgical efforts can thus be compared to that of a gender reassignment surgeon performing on an intersex body—Victor performs an invasive *assignment* of gender on a gender-ambiguous new (infant) life, without consent. (It should be noted that intersex individuals do not necessarily identify as trans and/or nonbinary—some do, and some don't; however, their struggles parallel trans/NB struggles, especially in regard to societal reaction to their gender ambiguity or androgyny, wanting to easily categorize them into gender essentialist binaries). Additionally, as Susan Stryker asserts, the creature's body mimics the post-operative trans body because it “is an unnatural body... the product of medical science. It is a technological construction... flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (238). Indeed, much of the horror expressed by characters in the novel—including the creature himself (101)—derives

from the creature's aesthetic appearance: He was "hideous... a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (56). Yet, the creature's body is also described in sublime terms. Mary Shelley utilizes several intertextual references to Percy Shelley's poem, "Mont Blanc," highlighting the monster's sublimity: Like Mont Blanc's "terrifically desolate" landscape, "the creature's body is 'hideous,' 'ghastly,' 'scarred,' 'unearthly' in its ugliness and threatening," the "antithesis of... pastoral [N]ature" (qtd. in Economides 106). The Montanvert summit had a "very uneven" surface, "like waves of a troubled sea... interspersed by rifts," and the mountain was "bare perpendicular rock" (88); this image is not unlike the creature's pockmarked appearance, with "shriveled" skin that "scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath" and hair that was "lustrous black, and flowing" (55). Indeed, the sublime landscape and the creature both violate the human aesthetic desire for symmetry and smoothness. Ironically, though, Victor greatly values sublime images found in nature: the summit of Montanvert was "wonderful and stupendous" and "filled [him] with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy" (87–88). This parallel begs the question: Why do we have a sense of awe, respect, and wonder for sublime nature, but not sublime bodies (disabled bodies, scarred bodies, trans bodies)?

Indeed, Victor continually exhibits ironic and contradictory thought processes regarding the world around him and the creature. In the same vein as his sublime nature and sublime bodies logic, it is ironic that, in his studies, Victor wonders "with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or careless did not restrain our inquiries" (50–51); truly, it is Victor's own "cowardice" and "carelessness" that prevents his becoming "acquainted" with his own creature, is it not? Moreover, Victor's question

could also easily apply to issues of gender: how many trans and non-binary people could we come to know and understand, if we were not so strained by our cultural anxieties and stigma toward gender nonconformity? Instead, we treat them as monsters, similar to how Victor's progeny is written off as a "creature," "dæmon," "monster." But, as Stryker asserts, "Just as the words 'dyke,' 'fag,' 'queer,' 'slut,' and 'whore' have been reclaimed... words like 'creature,' 'monster,' and 'unnatural' need to be reclaimed by the transgendered" (240). Indeed, Stryker reminds us that 'creature' denotes "nothing other than a created being, a made thing" (240). And though we infer that Victor means to call his creature a demon, Shelley uses the term "dæmon:" a Greek term for "personifications of natural forces or places" in the form of demigods (Economides 105), asserting the creature's fundamental *naturalness* rather than his unnaturalness, as well as his agential power. Though one might argue that this word choice was an inadvertent mistake by Shelley, she does subtitle the novel as "The Modern Prometheus." Thus, the creature takes on mythic proportions, as a heroic Titan and a symbol of defiance, agency, power, *fire*.

As mentioned prior, the word "monster" is being positively reclaimed by some queer and trans activists; I argue that Shelley's novel helped lay the foundational groundwork for this reclamation. Historically, monsters have been conceptualized in myth as amalgamations of "elements from groups marginalized through race, gender, sexuality, and cultural difference" (Click et al. 365). "Monster", then, is a term of demonization for the non-normative. It is a healthy departure, then, that in contemporary culture, "Born This Way" singer Lady Gaga refers to herself and fans as "little monsters" "as a term of unity and pride," (Click et al. 365). Long before this, however, Shelley's creature conceptualized monstrosity as community: when the creature asks for a mate, he says, "It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from

all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another" (126). Moreover, Shelley's particular use of the word "monster" allows for the reconceptualization of the monster's visible otherness as something sublime, fantastical, extraordinary. As Stryker notes, the word "monster" derives from "the Latin noun *monstrum*, 'divine portent,'" and came to refer not only to living beings of "anomalous shape or structure" but also "fabulous creatures like the sphinx" (240). "Monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. They served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, 'Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening'" (Stryker 240). Thus, Shelley paved the way for the term "monster" (and related terms of monstrosity) to be reclaimed as a symbol of community and the sublime extraordinary.

More than just the body parallel, the creature's struggles are reminiscent of trans struggles. As Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert point out, the creature finds that he is without a history: the books of man do not apply to him (340–344). Though they assert that this fact makes the creature akin to a woman—after all, "what is woman but man without a history" (342)—it is even more applicable to queer and trans folk, who have been given an even more marginalized place in canonical history. Moreover, the two scholars write that the monster is "as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society" (344). Again, their argument can be extended to trans individuals: the monster's lack of name evokes trans struggles because even when trans folk rename themselves, their chosen names are disregarded, in favor of their dead names or derogatory slurs. Moreover, in the same way that trans people often struggle to find work, housing, and accepting company, the creature laments that he has "no money, no friends, no kind of property" (105–106). Like many LGBTQIA+ youth, the creature also deals with a lack of parental acceptance—

Victor saw himself less as a father and more as “the author of unalterable evils” (83)—and like many queer teens, he feels like an abomination against God, making him sympathize with Lucifer, the fallen angel (89). The threat of violence is another parallel: the scene in which the creature is “grievously bruised by stones” is not unreminiscent of the hate crimes that occur against people who get “clocked” as queer or trans (94). Relatedly, queer individuals often suffer miscarriages of justice, which is symbolized in the novel by the death of Justine (whose name connotes “justice” and who wrongly died at the hands of patriarchal justice). More tangentially, Justine offers a trans parallel when she is forced to confess: The priest threatened her with “excommunication and hell fire,” leading her to “subscribe[] to a lie” (79). This event is not unlike when queer folk are both encouraged and threatened into renouncing their queer identities, for fear of the righteous damnation put forth in Judeo-Christian rhetoric. Finally, and most unfortunately, both the creature and trans people struggle with self-loathing: “your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself,” he states (188), continuing on to ask “where can I find rest but in death?” (189). With many trans writers seeing parallels of themselves in the creature, the creature’s final act of suicide is especially somber. But it is also a call to action: we must dismantle the patriarchal, transphobic structures that disempower and outcast trans/NB individuals, or their deaths will continue to be on our hands.

Though, insofar, many of these trans parallels were likely not intended by Shelley, she *does* infuse her novel with an inherent critique of gender essentialism, making the transfeminist lens more apt than Mellor’s gender-essentialist lens. Indeed, while Mellor’s feminist critique hinged largely on operationally defining “female” by reproductive organs and the ability to give birth, *Frankenstein* subverts that definition. Though the

women in the novel are employed in stereotypically feminine, domestic roles, they are not depicted in the act of giving birth. Instead, Victor—a male—gives birth: “After so much time spent in painful *labour*,” he bestows life—“the most gratifying *consummation*” (my emphasis) (51). Shelley continually pairs male characters with the diction of birth: Walton speaks “with the joy a child feels” about his “laborious voyage,” and the creature was a thing “such as even Dante could not have *conceived*” (my emphasis) (25, 56). Furthermore, both Mary Shelley and her mother (Mary Wollstonecraft) scorned the Mother Nature rhetoric that depicted women as passive birth-givers, as “mothers, [who] didn’t need the rational abilities of men” and whose “weak intellects only dimly took part in the world of culture” (Hust 142). Most notably, it seems to be an incredible oversight that Victor did not merely create an infertile female creature (without a womb and/or without female genitals), since his concern was that “a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth” (144). In that lens, if Victor had not possessed such an essentialist view of woman as being inherently reproductive, perhaps he would’ve created a barren female creature, and the creature’s revenge would not have continued; this fact frames the novel as a critique of gender essentialism.

Though Shelley likely did not envision that her novel would be reimagined as a trans narrative, it is not a far cry, either. Shelley’s novel continually questions the arbitrary labels of “male” and “female” activities and traits, while also implicitly highlighting the damage that gender essentialism can beget. Moreover, in light of the number of trans/NB individuals who have profoundly related to the creature’s plight, reading the creature as a trans/NB character is a valuable exercise in empathetically understanding trans/NB issues. As Stryker writes, “my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against

the conditions in which I must struggle to exist" (238). With his profound eloquence, the creature gives a strong voice to the struggles of the marginalized and silenced. He has a powerful, Titan-like agency, threatening to swallow the world "in the whirlwinds of... rage" for their wrongs against him, committed just because he is non-normative (90). Thanks to Shelley's careful construction of the novel, *Frankenstein* has laid the groundwork for the positive reclamation of the term "monster," putting forth a narrative in which readers can conceptualize trans rights as human rights and trans/NB bodies as sublime bodies, full of agential power.

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“In Every Room I Enter After Dark”: The Intimate Self in a Television Age

Kerri Kilmer

Television, both now and in the past, has filled a unique position in our modern media landscape because of its ability to shape our lives. In his essay “E Unibus Pluram,” David Foster Wallace argues that we as individuals depend on it not only for entertainment, but also for our very self-identities and conception of the world. Wallace attributes our lack of human connection in our real lives to an intractable divide between the watcher and “watchee” with respect to television. While not directly addressing it, this premise relies on the implication that what we are actually missing is an intimate connection with other people which the form of television bars from us. Affective theorist Lauren Berlant defines intimacy as communicating “an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others” where the most important element is that “the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness” (Berlant 281) rather than being a purely introspective condition. With this definition in mind, we can analyze television contemporaneous to Wallace, specifically *The X-Files*, and demonstrate that it actually does represent intimacy and love. Further, television gives us the means to find, internalize, and use that intimacy to connect not just with the show itself but ultimately with other people. Ultimately, what Wallace believes cannot exist (thriving human connection in a television age) is actually a necessary and inevitable product of the medium.

One of the more predominant concerns of “E Unibus Pluram” is the role that television plays in defining and then co-opting Americans’ self-identities and relationships to other people (or lack thereof). One strength of Wallace’s argument is that despite criticizing it as representing a “genuine crisis for U.S. culture and literature,” he is still careful to avoid “talking about television as if it were an entity” (Wallace 36) that can be corrupting or evil itself. In other words, television alone may lack power to corrupt, but it is precisely the distorted human element hidden behind its screen that makes it potentially so dangerous. This idea of an inherently distorted human consciousness and reality continues in his description of how television shifts us away “from some community of relationships to networks of strangers connected by self-interest and technology” where we not only lose our real human connections, but replace them with characters who seem like “close friends” even when we know that the *“performers are beyond strangers”* (Wallace 26). Whether intentionally or not, television relies on a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy of entertainment that relies on exploiting the audience’s willingness to seek and identify with other people. Rather than reaffirming our places in a real or solid world, television projects the “real” back out to us while being seemingly self-aware that it is representing no such thing. The audience is therefore left adrift, having given up their sense of a grounded self or community for one that can never accept them into it by virtue of television’s requirement to be watched by someone outside of it.

An implication inherent to Wallace’s distinction between the imagined and real community is the idea that our humanity is always relational. In other words, we do not define ourselves in a vacuum but require others to shape us, whether that is by rejecting or accepting what they represent. In this regard, his analysis squares nicely with Berlant’s

requirement of intimacy having a shared narrative, since one of television's purposes is proliferating a certain narrative and plot to as many people as possible. Where they differ, however, is that Wallace seemingly rejects that television can provide the 'publicness' that inward feelings of intimacy require to become actualized as real human connection. It might be shared, but it is not personal enough to reflect back some truth of ourselves or our affective states. Rather, television's representation of human life only further reinforces "the deep thesis that the most significant quality of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is... rooted in the phenomenon of watching" (Wallace 26) which leads to television replacing our interior lives for itself (Wallace 32). The 'border' of television has enveloped not only our affective realities, but the very means by which we understand them.

Within this understanding, television begins "to substitute something nourishing and needed" so that "the original genuine hunger... subsides to a strange objectless unease" (Wallace 39). The "genuine hunger" in this case is the need for an intimate community or relationship. Wallace believes such intimacy is incompatible with interior lives that have been forced to desire televisual representations that will always exclude them. An important nuance of this is that the desire for love and connection need not be entirely pleasant. However, by relying on television to create our identities and outward affective displays to others, we only deaden and ignore this almost physical "hunger" rather than address it, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion and harm. In other words, we seem to know that we're replacing true intimacy for an "eternally temporary *reassurance*" (Wallace 41) that can only exist because of the transitory nature of television and its effect on our private lives. It draws us in so completely as to undermine that very fact. The further we identify with or even love the characters we see on the screen, the more we are

distanced from the actual intimacy and love that television was mimicking to begin with.

Wallace's argument against television's alleged inescapable warping of our inner lives and relationships may be succinct, but it does not follow that it is therefore complete. Wallace would be correct if the television culture of ennui of the 1990s and beyond had been bred and sustained as he described it, but I do not believe this is the case. To prove this, we need look no further than where Wallace himself is pointing: the world of 1990s primetime television shows. More specifically, I believe no show simultaneously typifies and rejects Wallace's distrust of the wildly popular and major-network-fed social ideation than *The X-Files*. *The X-Files* began its run in 1993 and ended nine years later (for the first time at least) after a total of 202 episodes and one theatrically-released movie. Despite ostensibly being about the quest of FBI special agents Mulder (the “believer”) and Scully (the “skeptic”) to find the truth about a government conspiracy to hide alien life, many in the audience were much more interested in the budding relationship between the two main characters.

Even while series creator Chris Carter swore “that Mulder and Scully would never become romantically involved” (Silbergleid 49), the show still hinged on them joining into “a solid partnership based on mutual respect and admiration” (Haggins 16) of such a nature that many in the audience were able “to make *The X-Files* into the narrative fans would like to see, rather than the narrative it is” (Silbergleid 57). More specifically, a romantic interpretation held so much sway that it finally became canonized with a New Year's Eve kiss in season seven's “Millennium.” While the show itself initially resisted the change, there was something inherent in both the structure and content of the show that not only allowed but also actively facilitated intimacy in its most essential form: both publicly offering some displays of intimacy between

its two main characters (however subtle and situational they may have been), and offering a shared narrative between audience and show that could not have existed without those representations of love in the first place. Displays of intimacy on *The X-Files* not only showed audiences what a model of human connection could be but also gave them a medium onto which they could fulfill the private-meets-public requirement of that shared experience which Berlant describes. With this aspect of *The X-Files* in mind, Wallace's separation between television and its audience is increasingly insufficient to prove that television has killed intimacy either on-screen or off.

Furthermore, the very distinction between on-screen and off, on which Wallace's argument rests, is also more tenuous than it first appears. As previously mentioned, fan involvement and pressure not only shaped the show in isolated incidents, but it altered its very premise and outcome. The show had always featured a conversational “push-and-pull we associate with more intimate ‘partnerships’” (Bertsch 109) between its two leads. *The X-Files*'s view of human connection was therefore not one that even required a common understanding, but the freedom for a dialogue that can shape the shared narrative and experience of the relationship itself. This structural feature directly facilitates the very audience involvement that Wallace seems to say is not possible: that we can shape television just as much as it can shape us. When the show finally does acknowledge the romantic relationship between Mulder and Scully, it actually “underwrite[s] the narrative of government conspiracy... the truth that Mulder and Scully know turns out to be the answer that viewers have been seeking all along” (Silbergleid 61) in the form of “love between heroes” (Silbergleid 60). In other words, not only does the intimate audience involvement prompt such a shift in the first place, but it is self-replicating and affirming to

such an extent that the entire series is understood in this new light, affecting not only interpretations of characters but the very characters themselves.

While audiences shaped *The X-Files* more than Wallace might have accounted for, it is still true that the show worked back onto them in other ways. For example, the only thing that allowed audiences to take so much control of interpreting and affecting the show's outcome was the fact that it was initially denied them. In this way, “*The X-Files* and its popularity can be read as literalizing the ways... our lives and relationships have been shaped by television” such that if “[Mulder and Scully] become lovers, they would... become conventional representations of... an outdated set of social relations” (McLean 8) which helps prevent the kind of ideological tyranny that Wallace worries about. The show was aware of its power to shape audiences and their lives, and as such maintained a distance that allowed audiences to fill in the gaps of meaning themselves. Television becomes meaningful for audiences not just for what it shows, but what it does not, which allows us to reflect on it without it imposing ideals of relationships and human connection onto us. By denying us what we may initially want, television facilitates us taking a more active role in defining what we value from it. And what we want, however unconventionally shaped, are the forms of love and intimacy that television can offer.

The result of this set-up is that *The X-Files*, with its “emotional realism within a slightly off-center world,” allows it to focus on “the moral... struggles that take place in this very American milieu” (Haggins 24). Mulder and Scully’s inability to address both their love and quest for the truth does not “diminish the significance of the quest” itself (Haggins 24). Just like McLean, Haggins emphasizes the estrangement of *The X-Files* and the way it offers us an inherently critical (if not negative) gaze through which to view the world. In doing

so, it allows us to express dissatisfaction not just in our own lives but also in the very structures of power and society. The most important aspect of *The X-Files*'s world-building is that it shows us our own world as a place that is far more mysterious, nuanced, and sometimes beautiful, than we could see on our own. Ultimately, *The X-Files* provides us the vocabulary to express our cultural and personal discomforts, giving the public expression of both our intimate fears and loves a voice so that we can more fully know and even love people in the world as they are, rather than as we want them to be.

At this point, it is clear that Wallace and *The X-Files* have very different views on the processes and values of television, especially as they reflect back on the audience's role in discerning those values. Wallace suggests that we must move beyond television in order to become ideologically intimate with other people again; *The X-Files* suggests that this intimacy has already developed precisely because of its influence. Resolving this tension requires turning to the scholastic world of television and media studies and determining the role it establishes for such televised affective displays. Televisual theorist Lynne Joyrich condones reading television through a postmodern lens. In this framework, television and its content (in the form of shows) only produce "a sense of intimate contact" because of "TV's fiction of presence" (Joyrich 30), a similar concern to Wallace's idea that television only pretends to invite us into its world. However, she takes a much stronger position than him in claiming that any intimacy television claims to produce must be fictional because it springs from that fiction of presence, rather than merely being hindered by such presence. In such a media landscape, "the self is but a style, confirmed only by others and lacking expression of its own" because of the inherent dissonance of television trying to represent "a culture that is figured as divorced from history and references" (Joyrich

30). This image of a transitory self clutching onto a similarly unstable representation of the world may seem frightening at first glance, but it is also incomplete.

In fact, according to Dr. Berlant's definition, one of the most important components of intimacy is the ability to be defined by others and to form those very histories and references through a shared narrative and view of the world. In the context of *The X-Files* this arises in the way that "unlike most of the people they investigate, Scully and Mulder at least have the privilege of comprehending their alienation in abstract form" (Bertsch 123). By viewing the world through these two characters, we not only see how they interpret their own lives, but how they connect themselves to otherwise forgotten histories, peoples, and places. One of the most enduring and alluring features of *The X-Files* is the way "the show would move along the margins of our secret world" (Phillips) and the way it showed plights of marginalized and exploited people who existed on the fringes of American life and Mulder and Scully's own understandings of the world. This framing allowed the people and their experiences to become recontextualized, rather than forgotten. They persist, as author Brian Phillips notes, "in every room I enter after dark" (Phillips). As such, we can question both Joyrich's claim that television inherently obstructs affective connection and her crisis of selfhood in the first place. Further, neither she nor Wallace makes it clear why we should continue to value an opposing unadulterated sense of self. In contrast, Mulder and Scully represented and reinterpreted not just themselves, but other people who did not have the narrative power to do so otherwise. The world of *The X-Files* demonstrates that understanding one's self is complementary with understanding others through yourself (and vice versa). Mediating our alienation through others is exactly how we as individuals and

as a culture move past that loneliness and into the possibility of intimacy both on screen and beyond.

The final element in resolving the tension between different readings of televised intimacy is that this confusion amongst scholars actually mirrors the way television as a whole has many “heterogeneous elements” that allow it “to question, scrutinize and transform other parts.” As such, new phenomena on television (and thus new ways of understanding its role in our lives) are always being produced (Keilbach and Stauff 83). In other words, television itself may be so primed to create various potential forms of intimacy and selfhood that claiming any kind of universal crisis is fruitless. The structure of television both resists categorization and invites it in order to survive, much like how *The X-Files* resisted fan theories about intimacy but then adopted them. While the expressions and iterations of those phenomena themselves might change, it is dangerous for us to be locked “into the rhetoric of the perennially new” and become blinded “to the fact that not only have things remained the same, but that older concepts yield interesting insights” (de Valck and Teurlings 9). This insight makes it clearer that Wallace is not only misguided in believing that television is moving towards some irrevocable disconnect between one’s self and others, but also that this change is happening at all. Instead, when we discuss television’s constant revision of itself and multiple iterations (in the forms of various television shows and series), it is that *constant* that should be emphasized. While taking this pluralistic viewpoint means we may not be able to totally disprove Wallace’s or other postmodernist views of television, they can still be, and are found to be, inadequate in their current forms to explain the essential potential of television as typified in the form of *The X-Files* to shape human lives and intimacy for the better.

Perhaps the one conclusion that these disagreements about television share is acknowledging its inimitable power to mimic and unsettle how we think about and live our lives. With twenty years of distance from both “E Unibus Pluram” and *The X-Files*, I believe it is clear that neither Wallace’s crisis of self-expression or of intimacy came to pass, at least not in the form he anticipated. Further, the conditions for those crises to occur never seemed to exist in his time to begin with. As *The X-Files* has showed us, the inherently performative nature of television has only made it all the more equipped to address fears about the distance between representation and reality. The show possesses a unique awareness of its capability to invite audiences into the physical and ideological space of its world through the intimate relationship between Mulder and Scully. In doing so, *The X-Files* distorts our familiar landscapes and psyche just enough so that we think more critically about our intimate lives in an increasingly connected world. Rather than rejecting television or television shows at large because they do not ask the questions we expect of them, it is more appropriate to recognize how they allow us to articulate and define our shared narratives about love and intimacy that would not have been possible without this public, televisual space. To quote agent Scully herself: “The answers are there. You just have to know where to look” (“Pilot” 07:59–08:03). Television may have not shown us a perfect mirror to find ourselves in, but neither has it stolen any ‘true’ understanding of ourselves from us. Instead, we are shown how to find the answers of human meaning and intimacy in places and ways we would never expect. Mediating ourselves through other people and other modes of expression is just the beginning of an opportunity to reach the intimacy and human connection we seem to want so desperately—to find the truth that we know is out there.

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Contributor Biographies

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Special Thanks

The 2020 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 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 Alexander Klotz and Terry Sherrell and OneTouchPoint—Southwest for their wealth of publishing knowledge and their generosity in sharing it; and to our second home, Malvern Books, where we hope to tell our stories again soon.