

Glass Mountain is a literary journal edited by undergraduate students at the University of Houston. Dedicated to showcasing the work from undergraduate and emerging artists around the world, *Glass Mountain* publishes issues each fall and spring.

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“Mutation I”

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glass mountain

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“To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason.”

– Donald Barthelme

1931–1989

Dedicated to our fearless leaders,
Audrey Colombe and Josie Mitchell

In loving memory of
Patricia Colombe

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

It is with gratitude and excitement that I welcome you to the newest volume of *Glass Mountain*. I hope this lovingly crafted journal arrived in your hands safe and dry—after all, Hurricane-slash-Tropical Storm Harvey tried its darndest to wash us away, but with luck, resilience, and a little help, we remain. We *thrive*.

When I began my college journey, I wanted so badly to stand out from the crowd. Following this desire, I enrolled in a small private university. I was certain that I'd be able find a place for myself as one of 5,000 students. After a year of struggling to keep up and fit in, I withdrew from the program. I imagined myself returning to that school after some soul searching and personal growth, walking through the doors triumphantly and neatly sliding into a preset slot... but as more time passed, I wandered off course so drastically until it seemed I'd never find my way back.

I never did go back. I walked a new path, ending up here, at a public university where I'm one of 43,774. Here, where I am surrounded by friends, mentors, and professors who know me. I carved out a space for myself, chipping away until I'm not only part of this community, I'm a leader. One of 43,774.

For many readers, *Glass Mountain* is one literary magazine, a single blade of grass in the saturated field of thousands and thousands of literary magazines. It may seem daunting, to choose to read emerging writers instead of picking up a literary magazine which publishes established, well-known authors. Yet I ardently believe that our little magazine is one of the boldest, sturdiest, greenest blades of grass ever. Our contributors produce fresh and inviting art that manages to astonish me every time. This volume is no different.

I hope the prose gives you pause, the poetry makes you laugh and cry in equal measure, the art strikes you in such a way that you trace your fingers over the page, the interview and review push together errant puzzle pieces of thought so that you can't help but say, aloud, "oh."

If that's too tall an order, and I don't think it is, then I hope Volume 19 remains with you for a little while—two weeks, two days, two minutes. Talk to Volume 19, then listen closely for a reply. I think you'll find we have a lot to say.



Kim Coy
Editor, *Glass Mountain*

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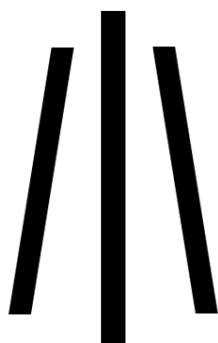
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Robertson Prize Winners

Clarity Lim

Poetry Winner

Clarity Lim is a graduate from the University of Houston living in Houston, TX. She has been published in *The Blueshift Journal* via the Speakeasy Project, and is the recipient of the 2016 Bryan Lawrence Poetry Prize, 2017 Howard Moss Poetry Prize, 2017 Lauren Berry Scholarship in Poetry, and is an Honorable Mention for the Provost Prize for Creative Writing in Poetry. Her goal in life is to provide a financially stable household for her future cats and dog.

How to Eat

Pinch grains of brown and jasmine loosely
 between fenced fingers, let your thumb be the
 base that holds earth as one as you
 guide a season's rainfall towards your mouth.
 Mix supple and dense specks as they orbit textures
 around your tongue's atmosphere, it'll taste like
 Amalgamation.

Grip the torn chicken, oily as it is.
 Let the flavors flock across gentle fingers like
 ones it felt during birth,
 being, beheading—
 It'll be the closest thing to mother earth that you'll touch today.

Consider the thought of pickles in a jar,
 you're out of pickled leeks and
 Pigeon-brand mustard greens so
Claussen will do this meal, you suppose.
 Fish around the too-small glass, nature's moss-
 colored fingers swimming away from your own—
 trickling out of room to flee in their
 salt-water aquarium. Pluck them kindly to say
Thank you.

Let your bapa tell you how grandma makes the best pickles in the world,
 how she learned thirty-some years ago from a friend,
 back when she knew nothing except survival and escape, and
 only needed two hands to count the deaths. Now-a-days,
 she's missing more teeth than family, but the gaps
 never become familiar.
 She cultivated a dying tree on foreign soil, yet
 never bothered to plant anything else.
Cucumbers from local farmers are the best to use.

The *tia to* in your mother's herb garden vaulted twice
as high this Spring, overachievers she's known for raising.
She reaps only when needed, leaving purple-red pigments
to tower over the rest of the *rau thom* who wait for
her shade. Her budding bronze shows rarely these days, afraid
of a farmer's shadow she once cast another life ago.

She'll catch you on the days you're too tired to hide
her heritage behind forks or spoons or chopsticks. Says
you stroll the Earth and stroke the Sun too close,
as if Nature went against everything she
nurtured you to be. But she isn't here today.

Dip into the porcelain gulf—
adopt the vibrations of its laughter as you
scrape it clean of clasping rice.
Feel the flavors soak you in as the
oils mix and embrace your grip.
Lick up the grains that lost their way,
harvest the last of the fowl; *If you don't eat your bowl clean,*
your face will have holes in the next life.
Remember to ask grandma how to make pickles next time you see her.

Victoria Hodge Lightman

Fiction Winner

Victoria Hodge Lightman has published personal essays and articles about the visual arts, including a cover story for *Sculpture Magazine*. After many years of personal essay and memoir writing experience, writing fiction is new for her. Originally from the Bronx, she has lived and worked in Houston for the last 30 years. Victoria will have flash fiction published in an upcoming online issue of *Cutthroat: A Journal for the Arts* and in the print version of *Found Polaroids Project*.

Tales: Some True, Some Not

Husbandry

Once upon a time, in the time of “just say *yes*,” there lived a woman people called Felicity “Fingers Crossed” Starlight. She earned this nickname because of her strict adherence to the mantra of the day. In order to always say *yes* but refrain from outright lying, she crossed her fingers behind her back. This is how Felicity found herself engaged to two men.

The first proposal came from the dairy farmer Herr Katz who called her his kitty. He’d say, “Come and sit in my lap, my kitzy katzy, and rest your soft head on my shoulder.” The second proposal came from the boat maker and fisherman Elvis Pescador, who would say, “Come and sit by my side, my lithesome flounder, my sweet speckled trout.”

One afternoon, as Herr Katz sat at the local deli waiting to be served a late lunch, Elvis Pescador arrived with a barrel of freshly brined sardines. The dairy farmer overheard the fishmonger boast of his engagement to Felicity. Herr Katz paused with his tongue sandwich halfway between plate and mouth and blurted aloud that he, too, was engaged to Felicity.

The two fiancés darted glances at each other and shouted, “Fingers Crossed!”

They petitioned the town registrar to intercede, as it was illegal to marry two people at once. The registrar called all three parties together. They sat Felicity down on an upholstered love seat and insisted that she uncross her legs and put her fingers where everyone could see them. Herr Katz unbuttoned her blue suede boots and rolled down her stockings to reveal her toes, and Elvis Pescador combed her hair straighter than ever. In this way, the registrar nodded that he was satisfied nothing could be construed as “crossed.”

The registrar said, “Felicity, I’m very sorry, but you must choose one of these men to be your man. You must choose to say *no* to one of them. Who shall it be?”

Felicity looked from one to the other and considered. Did she want to spend her life swimming in fish metaphors with Elvis Pescador? Or did she want to engage in animal husbandry with Herr Katz? Suddenly, her brown eyes filled with tears, such big fat sudden tears there should have been a flash flood warning posted on the door. She looked straight at the

registrar and finally said, “First one, and then the other. If I cannot marry them both, I can marry them consecutively, as many times as I want.” And so she did.

Not long afterwards, in no time at all really, Felicity invented a way to combine her two loves without upsetting the town registrar nor the nosy neighbors. Her solution also paid for the revolving door of marriage licenses and divorce decrees. Felicity became the renowned purveyor of Fingers Crossed Creamed Herring. And people came from across the country just to have a taste.

Good Morning, Sunshine

Back in the days when men could transform into bats and view the world upside down, and women could suddenly become birds with green and blue iridescent feathers, there was, high up in the Andes, a terraced park with a sprawling hacienda.

One day, as the widow Esmerelda strolled beneath the fifty-foot banyan trees wearing red from head to toe—a vermillion capelet, scarlet opera gloves, her hat and shoes cherry-hued—an enormous bromeliad fell onto her head. She transformed into a Masked Crimson Tanager, or as it is known hereabouts, a Tangara Enmascarada. She floated up like an untethered balloon, up onto a tree branch to catch her breath, when she opened her mouth, out came a cheerful, “wheet chu, chuck wheet.”

From the branch, Esmerelda had a good view of the comings and goings at her hacienda. While she adjusted to her new composition, she wondered how long it would be before she was missed. How long would her world stop spinning without her, how long would it take for life to go on?

Esmerelda flew into an open window to watch her daughter, already a fine young lady, play the spinet for dignitaries visiting from the southern slopes. She perched briefly on the music stand before she flew off to the kitchen to inspect the empanadas—not too greasy—and the camerones—very fresh. At night, she sat on an armoire to watch over her son as he slept. She contented herself with these brief interactions with her family, flitting from tree branch to windowsill, dining on honeysuckle nectar, eavesdropping on conversations, and so she passed the days.

Until Simon appeared looking for his sweet “amante.” Esmerelda looked down on the war hero’s worried face with great affection. Simon turned away from the house as if knowing instinctively he would not find her there, and he wandered into the garden, into the ferns and moss beds under the shady trees. Aloud he sighed, “Mi Corazon, where have you flown?” And Esmerelda, having waited long enough to know his love was sincere, perched on his shoulder and trilled into his ear, “good morning, sunshine.”

Simon knew it was his Esmerelda, knew her beautiful singular voice. And Esmerelda, having watched the world of her family spinning anew without her, allowed Simon to transport her to his palacio. He designed a golden cage for her comfort and safety, promised to always leave the door open so that she could come and go as she pleased. Together they had coffee each morning and he read aloud the daily news for her. They understood each other perfectly and they lived happily ever after in the cloud forest.

Inventory

In a distant time, there lived an artist named Daisy Gerber who made paper flower collages. Intricate cuttings set onto watercolor paper that had been painted black. Daisy used tweezers and a magnifying glass to set the petals and leaves and stamen. As she set about this tedious process, her mind fluttered about...where to land? where to land...what if she were a cat? Or what if she were a bird? What if she were a spoon? Would she want another spoon—not a fork, not a knife—to lie with her on dark quiet nights?

And, as often happened in stories like these, a knock on her door startled Daisy from her reverie about compatible silverware. She found a young man named Bucky who was in her neighborhood to sell assorted housewares. He had a popcorn popper, a butterstick melter, a tiny garbage can for used teabags, and many other similarly unnecessary items.

Daisy, attracted to the confidence in his voice, and his eyes, so kind and so wide, invited him into her studio. She asked Bucky, how did he become a salesman? And he told Daisy the story, of how, at an early age, he’d stumbled into a seminar on the “ABC’s of Selling.” He had thought

it was a woodworking workshop but before he could excuse himself, they'd already imparted the secrets of the trade and he was bound by honor never to reveal these ABC's. Unfortunately, they didn't explain the *what* he should sell. So here he stood with all the *how-to* ABC's and none of the *whatsits*. Bucky bumbled along from hill to dale trying to sell his superfluous wares.

At this point in the story, Daisy lifted a dusty, rose-colored curtain to reveal a vast inventory of her own. A light bulb flash later, Bucky became Daisy's exclusive representative, finding homes for her collages in the best collections until there was no inventory left. And, what with the laws of supply and demand, they grew ever wealthier.

Bucky built a workshop for himself where he made easels and frames and shipping crates for Daisy's artwork. In their spare time, this happy couple lay spooning together on dark quiet nights, imagining what it might be like if they were fireflies or crickets.

Nobody Knows

Long ago, there were things that nobody knew and information traveled at a lesser speed and sometimes never got to its destination at all. Nobody knew how this quickening happened. Nobody knew whether the people would forget important things when they had their brains stuffed full with weather conditions and American idols. Maybe they needed to leave room for day dreaming.

For example, there are things that nobody knew about Dear Pru. In fact, there were things that she didn't even know about herself. Why did she like catnip-stuffed bananas? Why did crumpled paper made her giddy? Why did she line up her mice in a row, tails first? Where did the sock puppet come from and why was it a comforting companion?

Dear Pru loved a fellow creature, known in these parts as RAG. They crossed paths every day and he always said, "Good morning." And they passed again every evening and he always said, "Good night." One day, Dear Pru stopped RAG on the path and said, "Do you know, that nobody knows, that I love you?" And RAG replied, "Yes, ma'am, that's the way I like it."

There are some things that needn't be front page, bold-type headlines.

Kentucky Derby

Let me tell you about the time there was this whole mishpocheh. It started when Louise met Big Tim, whose real name was Aaron. Aaron earned the nickname Big Tim because of a typo he made setting the linotype for a headline. On the front page, of course. It should have read: big time, as in “Mayor Wins Re-election Big Time.” Printed in 72-point Helvetica bold, it read “Big Tim.” Needless to say, Big Tim never lived this down.

Louise worked as a copywriter for the paper, a local rag that made money selling personal ads...sofas for sale, men looking for companionship, roommates wanted...that sort of thing. She loved Kentucky bourbon and horses.

In late April, Big Tim, who had been crushing on Louise for some time, wrote a note on a slip of pink memo paper. He asked if she would accompany him to the Kentucky Derby. Louise, truth be told, had been waiting for exactly such an invitation. And they drove off one Friday morning in her Toyota Celica, heading south and west.

Louise and Big Tim got to know each other big time—they had ten hours in the car to talk, talk, talk. They told each other their family legends, they told how they came to be doing their jobs at the paper, and they told of their mutual attraction until it was refined and chiseled into a romance. It wasn't until they reached Louisville at dawn the following day that Louise realized Big Tim, or Aaron as she now called him, had no plan. Aaron had no tickets for the race, no hotel reservations, and not a lot of money.

They found a diner and sat at a booth drinking coffee as the sun rose higher. And talked about what to do next. Their first adventure together, they hadn't yet established their roles, staked a claim, or defined who did what best in the relationship. How would this partnership work? Aaron was a seat-of-his-pants, wing-it kind of guy. Louise liked to be prepared.

As she sat looking out the diner window at her bug-splattered car in the parking lot, she wondered what in the world she was doing in Kentucky on a hot May morning. Aaron began singing, “Camptown ladies sell their lawns, doo-dah, doo-dah.” And she laughed and paid the check.

They drove as close to the racetrack as possible and joined other “wing-it” types on the lawn of a house. Paid the residents \$20 and watched the people and pageantry from the hood of the car. Faces sunburned, they

listened to the race on a transistor radio that blared from the porch, heard cheering from inside the stadium. They spent the night in the car and headed back on Sunday for the East Coast. Louise thought, what a fine mess you've gotten me into, Aaron.

Once home in her very organized apartment, Louise re-wrote the romance again and knew with a thrill that she would go anywhere with Big Tim Aaron. At forty-something, she was ready for an imperfect relationship. Her instincts read him as sincere, and she sincerely desired a good companion. She prepared for surprising happiness.

Dining and Discourse

"Don't get too comfortable," Julia Newberry's mother always said. But somehow, over the many years of living in one house, she had done just that. The time came now to reevaluate what comfortable meant.

It happened one morning, this idea, this directive, this thought. It was time to get smaller and she didn't want to take all of these possessions with her. Julia wanted to lighten her baggage to only the most essential. She thought, perhaps a dinner party would do it. She would ask the guests to take home their place setting, linen, crystal, silver and porcelain. Julia called the event her Delft Blue Plate Special. And many people came.

Julia set the dinner party in her garden, under the wisteria with tables assembled from sawhorses and plywood. She'd known every one of the 30 guests for 30 years or more and she searched photo albums and found a picture for each menu card and placed them carefully around the table. Family and friends. So many things to give away, to find happy homes for. Julia felt relief.

Of all the vintage linens she'd collected, that she'd ironed and starched hundreds of times, she kept one small, embroidered handkerchief. So delicate, feminine, a trace of lipstick, infused with a lingering perfume.

Of all the dishware, the pottery, plates and vessels, she kept one lacy, gold-rimmed tea cup. What did she need with more?

Of all the crystal that sang as she washed their rims—she never went to bed with dirty crystal—she kept one small vase so she could have freesia on her nightstand in springtime.

She kept her gardening apron, a watering can, a spade. Julia

looked forward to spending more time in the garden, she wanted to be surrounded now only by the most ephemeral. To accustom herself to the coming and going, so she could withstand the approaching losses.

Julia gave away all the rooms in her house but one. She kept the library, with its handsome fireplace and a door that opened directly to the garden. The leather chesterfield sofa made a tolerable bed. And she had a reading lamp, a chair, a desk.

Books on the upper shelves, those she read first, while she could still climb the ladder. She read clockwise around the room. As Julia finished a book, it would leave her, and the shelves slowly emptied. For once, Julia was glad to be a slow reader. After the books were gone, she opened the ribbons on packets of brittle letters, read them too one by one, and set them aflame in the fireplace. Finally, she read her journals consecutively from the early diaries of a rebellious teenager to the recollections of later years, and buried them in the garden under soil and stones.

Lighter and lighter, she almost floated. Even her bones felt hollow, she could live on air like an epiphytic orchid. Julia relinquished and held on to her 98 years, it was all there. In the handkerchief, the cup, the freesia. Who could have asked for a better life?

For the Birds

Ms. Brown Nuthatch wore a hat of sprouted wheat topped with a jaunty blackberry twig. Ms. Baltimore Oriole came with her purple thistle chapeau. Ms. Eastern Bluebird wore a crown topped with an unripe fig. Wanting to look their best, the ladies fluttered and gossiped on their way to the annual garden luncheon.

The three old friends had raised chicks together year after year. The hard work of feeding open-mouthed young, rubbing Vicks on their chests when they were congested, until they were fledglings ready to be launched. They shared the ever-present fear of predators. Squirrels and cats to be certain, but more frightening: an attack from the above. The horned owl or the white-tailed hawk might swoop into one's nest at any moment.

But not today. Today was a late spring day, fledglings flown, empty nesters once more, the ladies in their finery congregated in the branches

of an American elm at the Botanical Gardens. They admired the fragrance of the early roses and the late gardenias. Ms. Nuthatch pointed out some ripe cherry tomatoes; they'd help themselves to some on their way home.

But first, a point of order. A reading of the minutes. And then the program, a lovely aria from a trilling Ms. Swainson's Thrush. Next on the agenda, tea and scones.

"How lovely," said Ms. Oriole, "the scones are covered in sunflower seeds, my favorite."

"Oh," said Ms. Bluebird, "do try the Hot Cinnamon Sunset tea, it will positively make you blush."

And so they enjoyed the pleasant, nearly perfect, nearly summer afternoon. They commiserated with Ms. Cardinal who had recently lost her husband. So sad, as cardinals mate for life and her loss was keenly felt by the company. To perk everyone up again, Ms. Western Meadowlark began a favorite song and all joined in to sing the chorus.

Quite an arousing performance for their human counterparts below, who applauded as ice cream melted in their waffle cones.

The time came to leave the civilized Botanical Society and head back to forest and meadow, helping themselves to the juice of cherry-red tomatoes. As they flew away home, they wondered what the summer had in store for them. Pleasant days and nights, nuts and berries in abundance until the wheel of the year turned again. Then they would abandon summer's leisure to preen their feathers and await charming suitors bearing gifts. For unlike Ms. Cardinal, they chose a new partner each autumn and they looked forward to the ritual dances and special benefits of the mating season.

Regrets Only

Back in the day, there resided in our fair city a blue-blooded, Yves Klein Blue-toed kitty named Queenie who wouldn't be caught dead without her pearl and lace collar. Queenie lived her life looking forward, maybe kitty corner or sideways, but never backward. Until one day, when she came nose-to-nose with a long lost friend named Cocteau. After a few airy kisses, he pulled a silver box from his waistcoat and handed her an embossed card. Adjusting his coal-black beret, Cocteau told her of a plan

to publish his journals and asked did she mind if he mentioned her name and some of their shenanigans from the old days? He had a publisher already. And, of course, there would be photographs of late nights at the bijou, costume parties, literary salons, and gambling on horse races.

Queenie's gray-blue whiskers twitched and her perky ears pointed up. "Why, Cocteau, my old dear bosom pal, I thought you were a painter. Wasn't that a sketchbook you always had in your hands? You mean to tell me that you were taking notes all the while? And why would you endeavor to separate the mystery from reality?"

Cocteau, looking at his fingernails, pronounced, "There is no reality."

Queenie thought otherwise. Seeing that his mind was made up, she looked backwards for the first time. She gathered up all the misadventures that she wanted to disown and took them to the thrift shop and dropped them into a box labeled: Regrets Only.

The Cowgirl and Dr. Wakelove

Once in the Old West, there came a Cowgirl riding her crimson horse across the emerald landscape. Suddenly she noticed that her hands were falling asleep. She reined in her horse, and tried to shake shake shake her hands awake. Nothing worked. Taking inventory of herself, she realized that numbness engulfed her: body, heart, and soul. The Cowgirl dismounted her horse, who quickly forgot about her, looked around at the sparkling landscape and remembered that she was an outsider here. Even from within her numbness, she felt the need to go "home."

So the Cowgirl pulled on her best pair of Lucchese boots, donned a traveling dress with her sunniest sun hat and headed east into the rising sun, where she met the famous Dr. Wakelove in the park at the center of the city, in the center of this state, which is the center of the universe.

They found a lake. They tiptoed into a rental boat and paddled to the center of the lake. Dr. Wakelove said, "Close your eyes, Cowgirl, and listen to the city sounds. What do you hear?" She listened to 360 degrees of sounds. She heard children playing games in the meadow, cooing rock doves in the Sycamore trees, taxi horns honking, water lapping against the boat, an airplane droning overhead, dogs barking, people walking, a bat meeting a baseball, *thwack*.

“Listen harder,” said the doctor. She listened as hard as she could and soon she heard her heartbeat, which syncopated with the traffic, stopping and going. She heard the blood sloshing in her veins like the ebb and flow of the lake water. When all of these rhythms were both inside and outside of her, the pins and needles finally subsided and she could feel her feet and hands as if melting from a frozen storm.

She opened her eyes. She heard herself alive in the world. And her feet tapped to the music of a Klezmer band that played on the shore. Dr. Wakelove took her hand and bowed deeply, she pliéed, and they danced a polka under the trees. “Thanks, Dad,” she said, and touched his silver hair for luck and went back to the west, where she collected cat whiskers and drank begonia tea.

Homecoming

There lived a fine woman in old Newburyport named Eliza, who suffered long separations from her seafaring husband, Captain Roys. The whaling life dictated long gaps of time during which she took complete responsibility for all things on land.

One day, from her widow’s walk, Eliza recognized her Captain’s familiar gait on the path coming from the harbor. Her heart beat rapidly as she ran to meet him at their garden gate. Hand in hand they crossed the threshold. Captain Roys dropped his bags and she helped him take off his high-laced boots. He took the freshly foaming mug of ale that she offered and inspected the house.

He mentioned the cat hair floating along the floorboards, in the corners and under the divan. Oh! she thought. But how could he possibly know of all the cat hair she *had* plucked from floor, furniture, from the cats themselves? Well, she determined to do better keeping the house ship-shape.

While her husband captained the good ship *Fleetwing*, Eliza piled tumbleweeds of white cat hair into the casement windows of the widow’s walk. The windows soon filled, but she kept piling the cat hair into the room. So much hair, ah-choo! the room looked like an ear wadded up with cotton balls. So much hair, ah-choo! she couldn’t see her husband walking home from the harbor. When she heard his key in the lock, she

clapped, eager to show him all she'd done...though she couldn't stop sneezing because she was, after all, undeniably allergic to her feline companions.

Vexed, the Captain spun on his heel without a word and walked out into the garden. There he bitterly complained about the weeds in the flowerbeds, what had she been thinking to let them get so overgrown? She sighed and knew what her next project must be. Once again, he went out into the Atlantic, and once again she rolled up her sleeves, donned knee pads and long gloves—for she was allergic to some of the sticky, prickly weeds—picked up spade and hoe to weed the flowerbeds and vegetable garden and even the potted herbs. She preserved the evidence of her labors by filling the garden paths with dead, weedy refuse and the piles grew so high that she didn't hear the Captain return until his high-laced boots quietly padded into her vision. She looked up as he shook his head disapprovingly, moustache twitching.

She followed him into the kitchen where the breakfast dishes soaked in the sink. "Haven't you even done the dishes?" he fumed. And she thought, well, there are plenty of clean dishes and of course, she does them all the time. Eliza made a silent vow to take special care of the dishes. So, when next the Captain went to sea, as soon as the front door closed, she took up his breakfast plate from the table and flung it at that door. As it broke and clattered to the oaken floor, she felt liberated. She flung another plate and then a saucer and all the teacups until there was such a pile of broken porcelain that she shouted, "Avast!"

Becalmed, Eliza realized that no amount of industry would prove worthy of his admiration. She harvested the vegetables and left him a ratatouille in the ice box, festooned the room with garlands made from her flower garden, and wrote a note of farewell. With her cats in a hat box, she left through an open window and headed back to the city of her childhood. Confident she would find someone to truly love her exceptional organization skills.

Winter Green Man

Do you remember once long ago, the first time you met the Green Man? He was young and it was springtime and he played the fool for you, acting

like you were the only nymph he desired in the whole green world. Of course, you were pretty then, too. And flattered. You smiled at his antics as he did his best to entertain you. You let him stroke your cornsilk hair and take you to his mossy place, the soft embankment beneath the nurse log. Afterwards, when you became harder to please, he wandered off with a minstrel band. You completely missed his days of summer, his prime manhood, how hard he worked at his craft, and honed his seductive arts for the solstice. Now, when you have just about forgotten him, he reappears. You hardly recognized him at first, he'd become a wintery Green Man, thorny and cauliflowered of ear. But as you stared into his eyes, you could see your own darling self again, and you remembered all the brouhaha. He, as clever as ever, gave you back your smile.

Pineapple Crush

The spritely woman named Pineapple Crush tromped through the woods until she came upon the Lost River, where the currents flowed and rivulets formed and pooled around broken tree limbs. She stood quietly by the river, transfixed by her rippled reflection in the water. She unlaced her hiking boots and peeled off her smart wool socks to test the water temperature.

The moment she dipped her toes into the water, the moment she was most vulnerable, she noticed that she wasn't alone. A chestnut brown bear met her gaze. He nodded. "They call me Pumpkin, do you come here often?"

Pineapple Crush stood frozen with five toes trapped in the icy water. She had hoped to find many lost things in this river, like her blue credit card, a red-and-silver earring, and several pairs of tortoiseshell reading glasses. She'd never expected to find a bear named Pumpkin.

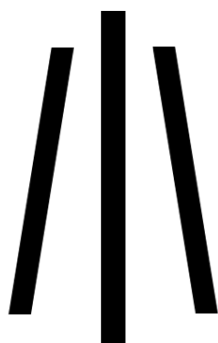
Autumn leaves floated by like maple red canoes. The air smelled like chai spices and the cloudy sky cast them in and out of shadows. At last she plucked her foot from the water. "Forest creature," Pineapple Crush addressed the bear, "are you lost?" It was a good question because this little piece of wildness was just a prelude to the city—in fact, you could see the tip of the spire on the Gotham State Building poking up above the blazing, orange-leaved elms.

Pumpkin said, “No, not really lost. Or at least not accidentally. I am scouting out meeting places for the Lethargic Artists Retreat.”

Everything went quiet and still until a superb starling sang out from a branch overhead, breaking the spell. “You can call me PC, all my friends do. Would you mind if I touched your fur coat?”

“Not at all.” Pumpkin yawned widely, relieved that autumn appeared imminent and soon it would be time for a long nap.

Her nails were longer than his and raked his fur in a pleasant way. He yawned again and asked her to lie with him on a shelf above the river bed. And PC agreed to stay with Pumpkin until he fell asleep. And after that, they met every autumn by the Lost River—PC looking for items she had lost that year and Pumpkin looking for a caress and a lullaby.



Art, Fiction, Nonfiction,
and Poetry



Proxy

Sandeep Kumar Mishra

Ink on paper

A Van Gogh Print

Jane Costain

Drab yellow background,
 ill-fitting cap,
an unbecoming green.
 Veined, sallow skin, thin lips,
meager flesh, downcast eyes.

The print hung alone
 in our living room.
“An old man,” I thought,
 until one day I was tall enough
to read its title: “Head of a Boy.”

That moment, I was no longer
 the only child in the house.
I realized a world of altering
 perceptions and sudden shifts—
a solitary child, disturbed
 by a work of art.

Now I see other things—
 the poverty of no certain age,
not just the human frame barely able
 to support worn garments,
but the spirit that hungers in isolation—

those colors, intense but jaundiced:
 the dull yellow, reminiscent
of sun and flowers,
 and the melancholy green
that once spiraled
 into olive trees and cypress.

Event Horizons

PM Flynn

The top of trees are the horizon:

or, from heights above, forests are a longer line
curving below an edge of sky becoming dawn
or dusk where light divides a day, twice;
heart to spirit and mind to soul—this body.

Man, covered with the fleshy shell of time
and place, like a season's pecan harvest:

To crack them—a machine chain pulls each nut,
snapping shells one at a time, uncovering the life
inside, pieces breaking and falling into a hopper
with the bruised seeds blending into a bigger pile
under the metal framing of control and foundation
met on the street, in an office or break room;
life to seed, and seed to soil again; words spoken
to hearts or thoughts shared with conscience.

There, naked, seemingly flawed black spots appear
on the new skin, grown under the shell; to harden
into roots, branches drawing water to the small flesh
of smooth wrinkles tied to bare ground, that now die
after living from the highest branch of its tree.

Artistic

Kelly Doyle

I used to cry over pizza because it smelled too strong. The air would rise from the plate until it pressed against my face like a wet towel. The smells of tomato and oregano would merge, blending into a hot cloud that hovered around my head and seeped into my mouth and nose like steam.

“What’s wrong?” my mother would ask, glancing down at the reeking triangle of melted cheese and orange grease. That was a question she asked often and I never knew where to begin. So much was wrong, so much that I could not separate the individual pieces, could not break the sensory mess into something coherent. So I just cried. And this happened often. If the kitchen fan was too loud, if the lights were too bright, if someone sneezed and it took me off guard, I cried. I screamed. My mother would watch with big, blue eyes and try to comfort me, but she would never turn down the fan or dim the lights. I never asked her to.

She did, however, stop ordering pizza. On some level, I might have been vaguely aware that she resented this fact, this lack of pizza, though I didn’t know that it was because pizza is served at birthday parties and swim meets and Friday night movie nights, things I was not part of. It never occurred to me that my lack of friends might be somehow related to my problem with pizza or my difficulty with words. I thought it stemmed from my hair.

I kept my hair short. Another kid told me I “looked like a boy.” This bothered me, of course, but I could not grow out my hair because I didn’t like when it touched my ears.

This first started to be a problem when I was eight. It was the day before the first day of school and I was nervous. I started thinking about my hair then, for no reason in particular, and I realized that it was touching my ears. All the time. Once I started thinking about it, I could think of nothing else. It was constant. Not a moment went by where I wasn’t conscious of that clinging friction on the tops of my ears. It distracted me immensely and with the pressure of pending school, I couldn’t take it, so I cut it with kitchen scissors.

When my mother saw what I had done, she sank to her knees and grabbed at the discarded strands, rubbing them between her fingers. “What did you do?”

"I got it off."

"Why?"

"It was touching my ears."

"So?"

"I hate that."

She grabbed me then by the upper arm and pulled me into the bathroom. "Look," she said, "look at yourself. And you have school tomorrow. Just wait until your father sees." At the mention of school, my heart began to pound again. The back and front of my hair still hung a few inches off my head, but around my ears I had pressed the scissors to my scalp. I could see the white skin underneath, like a bird with plucked feathers.

"I don't like it when it touches my ears."

"You're going to have to learn to ignore it. You have beautiful hair," she sighed. "Or you *had* beautiful hair."

I tried to let it grow again but when it reached my ears, the feeling returned, so I cut it again. I cut as little as possible, just around my ears, and hoped my mother would not notice.

"Amy!" she exclaimed when I emerged in the kitchen the next morning. She reached for my head but I ducked from her grasp. I did not like to be touched.

After she picked me up from school that same afternoon, she took me to a hairdresser. "It's called a pixie cut," the lady told me as she snipped at what was left of the damp strands. She had long, fake nails and I could feel them scraping against my scalp. I did not speak. She mistook my taciturnity for dissatisfaction. "You'll look adorable. It's very in."

Later, when we were leaving, she asked my mother if I was alright. My mother swiped her credit card and signed the receipt. "Yes, she's just quiet." She pulled a mirror out of her purse and handed it to me once we were in the car. "What do you think?" She asked.

"I love it," I said, but when we got out of the car I saw our neighbors, Mrs. Anderson and her daughter, Lacey, in the front yard. Mrs. Anderson was pushing Lacey on the swing that hung from a big oak tree and Lacey's hair flowed behind her in a long stream of russet curls. I covered my ears as she leaned back and shrieked. Mrs. Anderson raised a hand and my mother waved back. I saw her watching Lacey with an odd little frown on her face as we walked towards the house. My hands still covered my ears.

We went to the hair dresser once a month, as soon as my hair grew close to my ears, before I could cut it myself. I did not like the water dripping on my neck, the individual strands pulling at my scalp or the roar of blowdryers in the background, but I got used to the hairdresser's nails. They did not bother me so much after a while.

Despite my hair, I had one friend at school and we spoke one time. Her name was Charlotte. She wore pink lip gloss and a ponytail and chewed gum constantly. I didn't like the gum chewing, but she was nice enough that I made an effort not to feel disgusted.

One day at recess, I was crouched on the ground using a stick to trace shapes in the wood chips when she approached.

"Do you draw?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips. I could see cherry lip gloss smeared at the corner of her mouth.

"No."

She furrowed her brow. "Paint?"

"What?"

"Do you paint?"

I dropped the stick. "No."

"Sculpt? Sketch? Anything?"

"No."

"No?" She pulled the lip gloss out of her pocket and spread it blindly over her lips. I could see a glob forming. "Well, you better start."

"Why?"

"The teachers say you're artistic."

"They do?"

"Yeah," she rubbed her lips together. "Severely artistic."

I looked down at the swirls I had been drawing in the dirt. "I didn't know that."

"Well, they talk about it enough." I didn't respond and finally she gave me a little wave, saying, "I'm going to go swing," before skipping off to join another group.

I replayed Charlotte's words in my head and the more I considered them, the more sense they made. This was why Mrs. Jacobson was always so frustrated with me. She was waiting for me to do something, to realize my potential. I wished she had told me earlier.

That day, when I got home from school, I asked my mother if she thought I would be an artist.

“Do you want to be an artist?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. With the sudden inclination to find out, I retreated to my room with a stack of printer paper and a mechanical pencil. I set to work and quickly found comfort in the monochrome lines that moved from its point. There was something about the precision of its single tip, the specificity of each movement that calmed me. I drew with the knowledge that I was good. I didn’t have to prove anything. Suddenly all of the attention that had once been focused on so many external things was directed to the single point of the pencil. Everything else faded away.

“What are you doing?” My mother’s voice followed a light knock one day after school. “You’ve been in there for ages. Don’t you want to go outside?”

I wasn’t sure why but, as the door swung open, I shoved the accumulating stack of papers under my bed. She opened the door to find me sitting in the center of my room on the carpet, empty handed. I blinked up at her.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Amy?”

“Nothing.” I must have looked at the bed because her gaze followed mine and suddenly she was on her knees pulling my drawings into the open. I tried to stop her at first, pushing at them with my hands, unable to find the words that would tell her to stop.

“Is this what you have been working on?” She laid the stack on her knees. I nodded solemnly and she began flipping through, surveying each sketch for a moment before moving on to the next. Towards the bottom, there were five consecutive sketches of the same bird, each one clearer than the last. She looked at me and her eyes shone. “Amy, these are beautiful.” My chest swelled. She was so pretty, her white skin and yellow hair soft against the blue of her eyes. I loved the feel of her gaze, even if I could rarely meet it. “Why didn’t you tell me you’ve been drawing?”

I shrugged, but the next day when I returned home from school, I found a set of charcoal pencils and a sketchbook waiting on my bed.

Things changed after that. My teacher let me draw in class and my mother stopped questioning the hours I spent alone. I felt that Charlotte

had told me the secret of my existence. Suddenly I had the key and I knew which way to turn it. I was meeting and exceeding expectations that had previously seemed impossible. My mother would often come up to see what I was working on and she would wear the true smile that made my heart flutter.

"I can't wait for you to show your father," she told me. My father was not often home and was rarely involved in what I did. He worked hard, my mother told me often. His job was very important and very demanding. "Don't bother your father," she would say, "he doesn't need the added stress. He has enough to think about." My drawings seemed to be the exception. She would place one in my hands and shoo me into their room when he got home from work. She would tell me to leave one by the coffee maker before I went to sleep, draw one for his office, for his birthday. "Scott, did you see what she was working on today?" I heard her ask one night in the hall outside my bedroom.

"The deer? Yes, that's a nice one."

"But did you see how hard she was working? Scott, she's so much better now. She's so much happier. I feel...I feel like a normal family."

I think he kissed her then because she got really quiet for a moment, then I heard her giggle. My mother had a giggle like a child. It was pretty the way she was pretty. Sweet and soft and girlish.

My mother stopped being so careful after that. She sang loudly in the hallway outside of my room and she cooked new foods. "Maybe you could grow out your hair now, Amy. What do you think?" she asked one day.

I shook my head. "I like it this way."

"Well, okay. But one day you might want to try it long again," she said. "Haven't you seen Lacey Anderson's hair? All the way down to her waist."

"I've seen it."

Maybe in an effort to change my mind, maybe because she was feeling hopeful, my mother decided to invite Mrs. Anderson and Lacey for lunch one Saturday afternoon. Before they arrived, my mother called me into the upstairs bathroom to clean up. She positioned me in front of the mirror and began to brush my hair and I realized that it was getting close to my ears. For a moment, I looked between my beautiful mother and myself and I wondered if maybe I could stand it. I reached both hands up, curling my fingers around my ears, and imagined tucking my hair behind

them like my mother. My breath quickened as I conjured the feeling, the friction, the movement with every turn of my head. I didn't like it, so I leaned over the sketchbook in my lap, rubbing the tip of my pencil into the corner of the page until slowly my breath returned to normal. When I felt calm again, I began to flip through the pages, surveying my old sketches.

"Amy, what's that?" She paused for a moment.

"Oh." I held it up to the mirror so, standing behind me, she could see. "That's you." She looked at it for a moment before pressing both hands to her cheeks. Her eyes welled.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she whispered, pulling a tissue from the box behind the toilet and carefully dabbing at the corners of her eyes and looking up at the ceiling. "That's beautiful, Amy. I'm so proud of you." I scrunched up my face as she placed a kiss on my cheek. "I know you and Lacey will be wonderful friends."

Lacey had just started first grade and her hair was just as my mother had described, long and beautiful, russet at the roots and light as tree bark at the tips. "My mother says I should be very nice to you," she said when we sat alone on the carpet of my bedroom. She paused, as if waiting for me to tell her that it was true. "She says I shouldn't rough house."

"I don't like to rough house."

"Why not?"

I narrowed my eyes at her for a moment, feeling older and smarter. "Because I don't."

"Why is your hair so short?"

"I like it that way."

"Oh." She flipped her hair over her shoulder and ran her fingers through it. "I like long hair." She turned away from me then, grabbing a doll off of my shelf without asking and started to play. I watched her hands move over my things, her voice high and squeaky as she mimed situations that would never have occurred to me. Every time she looked up, I averted my eyes so she wouldn't know I was watching. The longer I sat, the more uncomfortable I felt, the more the carpet scratched at my legs, the more the sound of her voice pushed against my eardrums. I held my sketchbook in my lap, squeezing it tighter with every passing moment and running my index finger along the edge of the pages. I was

relieved when my mother's voice beckoned us from downstairs, putting a stop to Lacey's game. "Time for lunch!" She and Mrs. Anderson were already sitting at the table when we emerged. There were four plates at four spots.

Lacey scurried across the room, letting out a delighted squeal, and climbed clumsily onto my seat. I stumbled after her, flinching conspicuously, and my mother's eyes widened as she looked to see how I would respond.

I hurried over to the table, holding my sketchbook under one arm and extending the other, pointing at the chair. "That...that...that's..." Lacey saw my outstretched hand and confusedly clambered off with her mother's help.

I sighed, sat down, and said, "My chair." The sketchbook rested on my knees.

Lacey put her hands on her hips as confusion was replaced with irritation. She looked as if she was preparing to argue until her mother gestured for her to climb onto her lap. She did so, with a huff, and wrapped her arms around her mother's neck.

"Alright, let's eat," my mother prompted. She tried to catch my eye, but I was annoyed so I did not look at her. The sandwich in front of me was plain butter and white bread. I knew it was mine because everyone else ate turkey and cheddar cheese. The fan seemed to catch the smell of the cheese and push it around the room in bursts. I made no move towards my plate.

"Amy, aren't you hungry?" Mrs. Anderson asked. I could see in my periphery that Lacey was practically standing on her lap, cheeks filled with food, wobbling and waving her sandwich for balance. I said nothing.

"Amy?" My mother leaned over the table, still I did not move. "Don't you want to eat? It's how you like it."

Nothing. Mrs. Anderson looked to my mother for an answer but she shook her head lightly and turned to her own lunch. "Lacey, tell us about school." They moved on, began a conversation that I was not a part of.

"I can read," Lacey said a few minutes later.

"Is that so?" I could read too so I didn't understand why my mother sounded so overjoyed at the news, but she was smiling and nodding and her pretty eyes were sparkling. I forced my gaze back to my plate.

"Yes. I can read lots and lots of things. We read all the time when I'm

at school and Mrs. Morris says I'm very good."

"Wo-ow." I looked up again when my mother giggled. I couldn't help it. It was that giggle that I loved, that soft, delicate, giggle that never hurt my ears. "That is wonderful, Lacey. I'm so glad that you love school so much." She reached out her hand but when Lacey did not meet it with her own, she dropped it back to the table.

"School is fun. Recess is my favorite."

"What do you do at recess?"

"I play tag with my friends and one time my mommy drove by the playground when I was playing and she went hooooooooonnnkkkkkk!" Lacey stood up again, balancing her tiny feet on her mother's knees. She turned to face her mother. I was watching now in utter bewilderment, not bothering to hide it. She put one hand on her mother's shoulder and pushed her other palm flat into her mother's nose.

"Hooooooooonnnkkkkk!" Her mother made the noise this time and Lacey exploded into a fit of giggles. "Hooooooooonnnkkkkk!" It was louder now, too loud, and suddenly it mingled with the sound of the fan, the blowing of the air, the smell of the cheese, the bread growing stale on the plate before me, and I couldn't take it. I clapped my hands against my ears and let out a moan. "Oh." Mrs. Anderson seemed to register the pain on my face. She blocked her daughter's palm as it approached her face again, but this only made it worse. Lacey let out a shriek of delight, fighting against her mother and exploding with screams and laughs. As the sound grew, my lungs seemed to shrink. My breath came fast and shallow. My heart pounded. I pressed my ears harder and moaned again. My mother saw that I was nearing the edge, the maximum I could take in any one moment, so she stood quickly as if to rescue me but her chair raked against the tile floor. At that, I let out a long, extended scream and when I ran out of air, I did it again. Long. Piercing. When I stopped, everyone was watching me, but the room was silent.

"I am so sorry," Mrs. Anderson said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. We should go." I lowered my hands from my ears.

"No, no, no!" As Mrs. Anderson stood to leave, my mother held out her hands, gesturing for her to stop. "No! It's really fine! It happens sometimes. But Amy, Amy is just...you know..."

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Anderson put a hand on my mother's shoulder and tried to stand again, "It's truly alright. I am so sorry we upset her. I admire

you so much. You do such a good job and..."

"No!" Now my mother's voice was protesting, almost indignant. "It's not that bad. Amy just... Amy is..."

Mrs. Anderson shook her head.

"She does art!" my mother yelled then. There was a pause. Mrs. Anderson opened her mouth to speak but did not seem to know what to say. I looked down at the sketchbook in my lap. "Yes, Amy does art!" My mother let out a long breath. "Let me show you. Amy?" She turned to me. "Do you have your sketchbook?"

I extended it to her reluctantly, feeling stripped as she snatched it from my grasp. She moved behind Mrs. Anderson, holding the book over her shoulder and flipping through the pages with shaking hands. "See? Do you see what she can do? She came home from school one day and said, 'I'm going to be an artist' and has been making these ever since. Can you believe it?"

"Wow," Mrs. Anderson nodded, rubbing her hand up and down Lacey's back as my mother displayed one picture after another.

Finally my mother reached the last drawing and let out a nervous laugh. "See? She's... see?"

"They are beautiful," Mrs. Anderson said quietly, almost sadly, "but we really must be going." She lifted a hand and closed the book. My mother looked at the shut cover for a moment then pulled it into her chest as Mrs. Anderson gave us each one more smile. "Amy," she said, "you are so very talented."

My mother led the Andersons to the door and when she came back, she looked exhausted.

That night, I lay in bed and drew until my mother came in to say goodnight. We had not spoken much since the Andersons left and I was feeling uneasy. She came in later than usual.

"Hey, honey," she said, lowering herself onto the edge of my bed. She brushed my cheek with the back of her hand and I allowed it because her eyes were shiny and sad.

"What's the matter, Mom?"

"Nothing is the matter, Amy."

"Did lunch go okay?"

“Yes, yes it did.”

“Good.” I began to draw again. My mother leaned over to catch my eye but my focus was on the paper.

“Amy...” Like so many times throughout my childhood, I allowed her to sigh, stand up, and take a step away from me. I clutched the pencil tighter, forming a house and a yard, a swing hanging from a tree, a car in the driveway, and a little family holding hands. A mom, a dad, and a little girl. “Who is that?” my mother asked, stepping closer again as I began to shape their faces, their expressions. “Is that...?” Her voice, lifted, sounded hopeful as I formed a smile on the little girl. She pressed a hand to her chest.

I drew the hair next, long and flowing, and pointed with my other hand. “Lacey,” I said.

“Oh.” There was such a long stretch of silence after that that I stopped and looked up to see what was wrong. My mother’s hand was still pressed against her chest, lips together, hair tucked behind her ears. Her eyes, resting on me, had grown pink around the blue. After a long moment, she shook her head and turned to the window so I could no longer see her face.

“Did they like my art?” I asked.

“The Andersons?”

“Yes. You showed them. Did they like it?”

She leaned her forehead against the glass. “I shouldn’t have done that, Amy. I’m sorry.”

“Did they?”

“Yes, they did, honey. But it doesn’t matter either way. I’ll love you no matter what. You don’t have to be artistic.” She took the sketchbook from me and slid it underneath my bed before turning out the light.

She left then, but I remember thinking before falling asleep that I hoped she was wrong. I pictured Charlotte standing with her hands on her hips, mouth firm, eyes hard. Her tone said that it wasn’t up for debate. I was artistic, whether I liked it or not. That knowledge wasn’t oppressive. It was freeing, and it changed everything. I might not have known it at the time, but it wasn’t the art itself that brought this change, that opened doors, that taught me how to function; it was the definitiveness of the charge. It was the way she told me instead of asking. It was the way I *knew* instead of hoped or thought.

I reached down and pulled the sketchbook out from underneath my bed. I ran my finger over the cover then down the spine, and in that moment I decided to believe Charlotte. To believe myself. I slept with the book held against my chest.



Chairs at Rest

John Chavers

Photograph

Café Americano

D.M. Becker

The a.m. sends them speeding to a cup of coffee.
The usual crowd, each needing a cup of coffee.

Infinity scarf girls share their spiced Chai gossip
and Ray Ban boys daydream with a cup of coffee.

The barista flashes a Cinnamon Dolce smile
while brewing yet another steaming cup of coffee.

In back, the part-time, espresso-injected trainee
wipes away spilt drips, cleaning up a cup of coffee.

That picky lady and her black tea superiority,
snubbing the good of a redeeming cup of coffee.

That iPhone man and his quick Americano dreams,
absorbed in business and forgetting his cup of coffee.

The Doubleshot speed of keyboard clacking echoes
chic voices, convening over a cup of coffee.

Smart young men contemplate the Macchiato lips of
bright young women meeting over a cup of coffee.

The aura inspires social “*Con Panna*” passions
with low-fat whip, gleaming atop a cup of coffee.

Each morning promises White Mocha potential until I see
“*De-AN-uh*” scrawled on a well-meaning cup of coffee.

The Teacher Reads a Final Note to His Class

Caleb Westbrook

“Tomorrow you will die.
In two days the worms will make their home in your body.
In three days you will be forgotten.
In four days the world will be no more.”

Wide eyes. Wide silence.
Are they students still? Is there a definite line between one age and another?

“Four days ago the world was nothing.
Three days ago creation burst forth.
Two days ago you were unknown.
Yesterday you were a child.”

Shifting eyes. Shifting confusion.
“Sir, what about today?”

“Today was a part of yesterday.
Today is a part of yesterday.
Today is today.
Today is a part of tomorrow.
Today will be a part of tomorrow.”

Narrowing eyes. Narrowing question.
“What redeems the time?”

There is a land below the light blue sky,
Above the deep blue ocean,
Past the final shore.
Corporeal and Ethereal have no meaning there.

Buck Moon

Rebecca Oxley

Why does the moon sit like a lover's gift on the horizon, so full and amber
it could fill the weight of my stomach with grief,

so full that a child may look to it for the flash
of a hero's signal across its mottled surface?

But it rises becoming a shy lantern,
hiding its light behind a cloud.

After all, it has no place for promises,
no carefully stitched pocket around its wide waistline.

The child forgets as it mutates into a silvered orb
that it once held her hope for something extraordinary.

I won't forget you lied:
there are tides to remind me.

Real

Victoria Marino

I talked to a hole in the wall under our kitchen table until I was eight years old. It was less a hole and more an imperfection in the hardwood that was about an inch long and shaped like Ohio. Although my father would roll his eyes when I asked, he would let me eat under the table so that I could have pretend conversations with it.

The table was pressed up against the wall and had a large white flower painted on it. It was always littered with papers and bills, and we only ever ate at it together when we were putting on airs for other people. Usually, we would get our food and go our separate ways. I had talked to the hole in the wall since I was small but it wasn't until after my mother died that I felt compelled to eat with it. My maternal grandmother, who insisted on living with us for about a month after my mother died, stood with her arms folded and shook her head when she saw me about to crawl under the table with a plastic bowl of spaghetti. She shot a glance up at my father, who stood nearly a foot and a half taller than her, and told him, "This is getting ridiculous." He looked back at her with tired and bagged blue eyes and threw his hands up in the air.

I snuck out of the kitchen and sat on the hallway steps, anticipating a real battle. Earlier that day, I muted the TV to better hear them arguing from the next room. "Their mother just died two weeks ago and they are four- and six-year-olds. I don't think it's strange that they want to sleep near me," he said to her. I had once thought to ask her if she wanted to come sleep with us too when I snuck downstairs and heard her crying softly on the couch in the middle of the night. But when my foot unleashed a loud creak from the steps, the crying stopped, and I ran back into my father's room.

I clutched the bars of the banister with both hands. From where I sat, I could see my grandmother's pink slippers shifting in and out of view. As her figure moved, my father's stood still.

"I don't get it either, but maybe it helps her," he said. My grandmother laughed so loudly at this that even my little brother peeked out to see what was going on. He put his little hands over his ears the way he did whenever anyone in the house argued.

"She isn't hurting anyone and I have bigger issues to deal with than

this. If talking to a damn wall makes her happy then I'll let her do it."

I lied when I said I saw you appear to me as an angel once. I don't know why I said it and I regretted it the second I saw Dad's face brighten. He believed my comforting lie for at least a moment. He asked me what you looked like and if you had said anything, and the flicker of hope dimmed from his eyes when I stuttered and tripped over my words. We never spoke of my sin again and I never confessed that lie while on my knees with the Lord's name on my lips.

I want it to blacken my soul forever.

As soon as the lunch bell rang, there was a mad rush to get out the doors to recess. Emily and I, along with a few other girls, lagged behind. There was no point trying to beat the boys to the field anyway. I rolled up my sleeves and used my shoe to scoot down the high itchy socks of my uniform. "Do you want to look for worms with me?" I asked Emily.

"What do you think?" she said, and I rolled my eyes. She flipped her hair back with her hand, revealing purple nails. Another girl warned her that painted nails meant a demerit. Emily scoffed. "I don't care. My parents don't care about dumb shit like that."

Before we could make it out the door, the new transfer nun, Sister Margret, tapped me on the shoulder. Emily quickly shoved her hands into her dress pockets. "I want to talk to you, Victoria," she said. My friends stared at me with wide eyes.

"I'll catch up to you guys," I told them. They exchanged glances before joining the rest of the fourth and fifth graders.

Sister Margret motioned for me to follow her across the school to the convent. "Your teacher was telling me what a special girl you are, your mother being gone and you raised by your father."

"I guess so," I said.

Sister Margret smiled before asking, "Have you ever been in the convent before?"

I shook my head.

She held the door for me and I looked around the nuns' living quarters. To the direct right of the door was a tiny dimly lit chapel. When Sister Margret noticed me looking towards it, she put a hand on my back

and guided me in. The only light source in the tiny room came from the four miniature stained glass pictures where beams of sun shined through. In one of the pews, a nun I had never seen prayed silently. When our eyes met, I smiled. She remained stone-faced. We stopped at the convent's back door which led to a small fenced-off garden surrounded by trees. I had never noticed it before. A gray bird picked from a bird feeder while another sang in the distance.

Sister Margret directed me to a statue of Mary which sat in a patch of flowers against the ivy-covered bricks. The statue's bare foot crushed a snake and a small smirk was etched across her mouth. Sister Margret told me about some long dead saint who had no mother of his own and so adopted Mary as his new mother. She advised me to do the same.

"Why can't I just pray to my real mom?" I asked, still staring up at the statue.

"You may not pray to the dead. You may only pray for them. God, Mary, and the saints are the only ones who can receive prayers," she said.

"I don't understand." I did not see why I should trade my real mother for one I had never even touched.

"You do not need to understand. You must only have faith. Kneel down and say a prayer to her. Do you know any Virgin Mother prayers other than the Hail Mary?" she asked. I nodded.

I knelt by the figure and repeated the lyrics to a song my class had learned for the May procession a year prior.

"O Virgin Mother, Lady of Good Counsel, sweetest picture artist ever drew; in all my doubts I fly to you for guidance. Mother tell me what am I to do?"

I felt hot and embarrassed, kneeling in the grass while someone watched. Tears were beginning to form in my eyes and I bit my tongue to keep them at bay. When I finished praying, Sister Margret nodded and told me I could go back to recess. When I got to my feet, she looked down at my socks and frowned. "You should wear stockings instead. That way you won't be able to pull them down. They are also more ladylike."

I went through the gate of the garden and ran as fast as I could to the school doors in an attempt to get to the bathroom. I wiped away tears as I ran. I passed Emily, who grabbed me by the arm and swung me around. "Why are you crying?"

"I don't know."

I think my fondest memory of you came after I had a bath. I would cry and shiver. I would scream that it was too cold. And every time, without fail, you would wrap me in a towel and rock me until the tears subsided.

*Sometimes you would even sing.
There's no one to rock me when I shiver now.*

It was raining hard the day I returned back to school so we had recess inside. I believe now that the other first graders in my class had been instructed not to talk to me about what had happened. I would have almost preferred they had, because each set of eyes burned me like the tip of a cigarette. They stared at me from the second I was dropped off till the second I was picked up. All the while I bit my lip to keep from crying. I knew those little faces were expecting to see tears.

During recess even Emily was silent, touching me softly on the back every so often. Only one boy asked me anything at all. He asked me how my mother died.

"I don't know," I told him. It was my turn to stare as I kept my eyes trained on the ground. I remained by myself during recess and pretended to read a book near the door. Emily lingered at a distance. From the hallway, I overheard my teacher talking with one of my classmate's mothers who, like my mom, often volunteered to help with school activities.

"I'm sorry. I know she was your friend," my teacher said. Through the soft mumbles of their conversation I managed to hear something that nearly made me faint.

"Maybe it's for the best the baby didn't make it. It would have been too hard on him, having three kids that young."

Do you remember those stickers we put on the ceiling over my bed? The ones of stars and clouds and a castle? One night, as Dad put me to bed, he said that when he looked up at them, they made him think of you and how he could imagine you somewhere beyond the stars. He choked on his words but I felt guilty because I never thought of them so poetically. They had always just looked like clouds to me.

“It looks like I am going to a public high school after I finish freshman year here,” I told Emily as she walked me to theology class. I looked down at the red and tan squares on the floor and realized my shoes were untied. The hallways were so poorly lit that I had to move towards the window to see what I was doing.

“Are you fucking serious? You aren’t even moving that far. Just keep going here!” she said as she punched me lightly in the arm. A teacher walked by and looked Emily up and down. He walked into a classroom, pulled out a ruler, and motioned for her to follow him. He put the ruler to her skirt and gave her a demerit for it being too short.

“Wow, that’s not inappropriate at all,” I said under my breath. He gaped at me and wrote me five demerit slips for insubordination. We were then both sent down to the office. “Yeah, I am definitely not going here anymore,” I told Emily as I signed a piece of paper telling me when to report for my Saturday detention. Emily told me she understood, and gasped when the bell rang. She took off to her class and I nearly tripped down the stairs running to mine.

When I got to class, Deacon Norris gave me a demerit for tardiness. He walked back to his desk, exited out of the solitaire game he had been playing on his laptop and told the class to pull out their morality notes. Today, he told us, we would be focusing on the sin of abortion. Occasionally during his lecture, he would stop to take a bite out the hoagie he had on his desk. Every time a hand raised he would roll his eyes before waving his hand at them to signal they could speak.

“What if a woman has been raped?” a normally quiet girl asked.

“It does not matter, because the child is still half of the mother,” Deacon Norris said.

I raised my hand, which he ignored for at least three minutes. When he finally called on me, my lip was beginning to bleed from having been bitten down on so hard. “What if the mother’s life is in danger?” I asked. “What if the mother will die if she has the baby?”

At this, Deacon Norris smiled and went into a lengthy story about a friend’s wife who was told that her pregnancy would be fatal. “But she was determined to bring that child into the world,” he said.

He never told us if she lived or died.

I never listen. That's all I heard growing up. Dad would say I was too angry while others said I was out of control. But at least I was consistent. I never listened to anyone. No one is going to tell me what I will believe. What I will become.
But Mother, maybe you can tell me what I should do?

Everyone had to squint in order to see the sloppy handwriting on the dusty projector. As the class scribbled notes, Deacon Norris sat at his desk and patted a sauce stain on his white shirt with a napkin. Nearly fifteen minutes after the bell rang, he stood and began to lecture. As he spoke, I scribbled caricatures of my classmates. Class was nearly over by the time I tuned into what he was saying.

"It used to be that unbaptized babies just went to Hell when they died, but that upset many people. The Vatican eventually changed this to the babies going to limbo when they die." Upon hearing this, I scrunched my face. Deacon Norris's eyes trained on me and he asked me why I looked confused.

"How can people just decide that they can change things like that? How can anybody know what is real and what isn't that way?" I asked. I felt a quick rush of satisfaction when I heard a few of my classmates murmur in agreement. Deacon Norris walked down the aisle to where I sat, placed both of his hands on my desk, and leaned down so that we were eye to eye.

"Get out and go to the office. I've had it with you."

I grabbed my backpack and walked out into the dark and empty hallway. I dragged my feet as I walked with my shoulders slouched and didn't walk any faster when I heard a voice yell, "Go!" I stopped midway through the hallway and turned around to the sight of my teacher's shadow in the distance.

When I got to the office, the woman sitting at the desk put a finger up as she talked on the phone. I sat on one of the stained couches and traced my finger along the engraved initials in its wooden armrest. I wondered what I would even tell them I was down there for. Asking a question? Questioning my faith? It was starting to feel more like someone else's faith anyway. To my left, on a small table made of spotty old wood, was a small bronze decoration of Mary. Her pupil-less eyes stared at me and her lips were thin and stern.

Oh, what are you looking at?

Once at the aquarium, you were so worried about a sickly-looking fish that I thought you were going to call 911. As the rest of his school swarmed into one large silver mass, that one fish stayed behind and floated alone at the bottom of the tank. I think I knew that fish was dying.

But I wanted to spare you pain.

My dad's girlfriend Kim shut her back door as I sat in a rusted lawn chair by the edge of the small curved pool. I watched my younger brother, Nick, and Kim's son play on a floating noodle in the leaf-cluttered water. Kim took her baby daughter into the house when she became fussy. The child squirmed in her arms as she opened the heavy screen door and left us to play on our own. I flipped my phone open and scanned a text from my dad.

I'll be at Kim's soon. Please be good for her.

My head shot up at the sudden sound of splashing and gasping. Nick's arms flailed and he tried to reach for the float that had drifted back to the shallow end of the pool. Kim's son looked at me.

"He can't swim!" I said as I jumped in the deep end. I stretched a hand out to him but his eyes were crazed and wide. "Calm down, it's not that dee—" He grabbed me with both hands and dunked me before I could get all my words out. I kicked and I punched but his skinny arms continued to bob me down again and again. Fully submerged, I felt my lungs tighten and began to fade out. As the pain grew, my mind flashed the quick image of my father coming home to both of his children drowned. I decided that if I gave up, Nick could at least save himself by using my body to float.

As I was pulled deeper underwater, my arms started to go limp. I looked up for a moment and could see nothing but flashes. Feeling completely hopeless, I did something I mocked others for doing. I began to pray.

Hail Mary full of Grace the Lord is with you.... I grabbed Nick by the waist and yanked him down deeper into the water. I bobbed on top of him and got to the surface. With that desperate breath, I felt the life slapped back into me.

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.... He pulled me down into the water again, but this time I reached for the edge of the pool.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of death. Amen. Finally, I prayed to my mom. *Help us, Mommy.* I opened my eyes to find my body half draped over the pool's cement side with no memory of pulling myself up. I dragged myself across the grass, coughing up water and fearing that the throbbing in my head would split it open. I managed to get a glimpse of Nick being pulled up by Kim's son who had thrown him the long float.

I'm a real fucking hypocrite, I thought before blacking out on the lawn.

We visit your grave far more than we ever went to a church. Dad insists it's the right thing to do. To stare and talk to a hole in the ground. Each time we go, it's the same. Dad stands and cries and Nick either stands with him or dusts off your grave and pulls stray weeds. But I stand off to the side each time. It was only when I went alone that I allowed myself to cry.

Tell me, do I ever remind you of that fish at the bottom of his tank?

A block away from my childhood house sat an old cemetery. Half of the graves were over a hundred years old, and very rarely would I ever see a fresh plot dug up. Once in a while, a girl from my class who lived in my neighborhood would walk around the grounds of the cemetery with me. Alex's parents were very religious, and my father did not like her family.

"No good ever comes from religious fanatics like that," he told me once when I mentioned who I was going out to play with.

"Then why would you send your own kids to a Catholic school?" I had asked.

He shrugged and laughed as he answered, "It was cleaner at that school than the public schools."

I didn't even like Alex, but she was the only person willing to go to the cemetery with me, so I always tried to be nice to her. On one particular day, towards the end of our fifth grade year, we walked along the uprooted and weedy path parallel to the many unorganized and scattered graves. From a distance, we watched as a small group of people gathered around a coffin that was being lowered into the ground. "I've never seen a funeral here in person before," I said as I watched a few people pat their eyes dry.

“Too bad that person can’t get into heaven,” Alex said with a touch of sadness in her voice. I whipped my head around so fast that my ponytail hit my face.

“What are you talking about? You don’t know if that was a good person or not. Good people go to heaven, Alex.”

“This isn’t a Catholic cemetery, so they are probably from a different religion, so they are going to Hell.”

I shot Alex a glance and shook my head. “People from different religions probably think Catholic people are going to Hell. I don’t think I want to believe in a religion that decides people are going to Hell for things they can’t control like what religion they got roped into.”

Alex pulled me off to the side near a shaded tree and, spitting her words, began to explain that what I was saying was a sin. As she spoke, I looked at a grave with a picture etched into it. A young boy, no more than five, smiled brightly on its surface. *If he didn’t get into Heaven, then I don’t want to go either*, I thought. Finally, Alex warned me that this type of thinking would send me to Hell.

“I don’t care,” I told her.

*They told us that when Mary was ready to die, Jesus had her taken up bodily into heaven. Mary did not have to die an earthly death like you. And Jesus never had to talk to a hole in the ground like me. I used to be jealous and bitter to the core that he could spare his mother that way.
What made him so special?*

It was the first day of spring when the school was told that one of its students had died overnight. For years we had prayed over the loudspeaker for his health. Now we prayed for his soul. The entire school went to his funeral and his parents stood at the podium hand in hand and addressed the crowded church. Both their children, their only children, were now dead from the same disease. Together, they spoke of how their faith was stronger than ever despite losing their daughter and, now, their son. They could both rest easy now, they said, knowing God had their son and he was safe. This had happened for a reason.

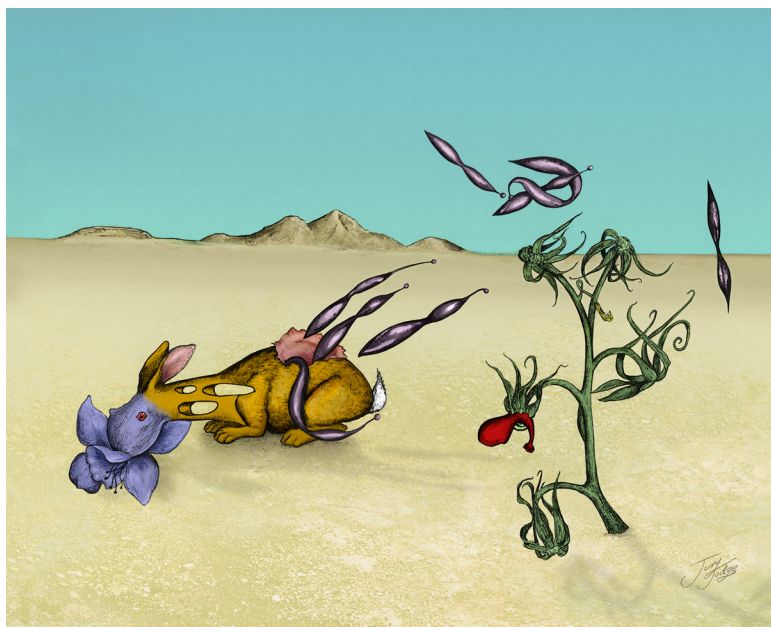
As I sat in those dusty pews under that dingy roof, I could not decide

if that was the craziest or the bravest thing I had ever heard.

*Memory is a fickle thing and no matter what I write, it will never be enough.
I cannot build you with my fragments, but at least nobody had to tell me you
existed. I know what I know because you were real. I remember your touch. You
carried me.*

*I don't need faith to know that. I can't feel in my heart what I never
saw with my eyes.*

Anyone who can is stronger than I.



Tomato Menace and Floral Rabbit

Jury S. Judge

Digital Illustration

Elegy for my Years of Faith

Patricia Schlutt

St. Therese herself said
I am embarrassed by my body and aren't we all?
We clunk within it. It moves too fast; we slam into it
and bruise.
I have spent
years of my life
sweating out of my body and into my spirit,
climbing the summit of myself until I arrive at silence,
counting the bones that wash up
beneath my skin like wrecked ships
in a drying lake.

I kneel again: the emaciated Christ above me
embarrassed by his body as it hangs
blood-heavy and emptying
into the silent room,

the room where all corners are so thickened
by my sorrow that the air could crush
me if breath
arrives too largely or suddenly
in my ribs.

What Absence Tastes Like

Bianca Glinskas

Nobody plays with you anymore, Little lamb. Now you travel
nowhere under nobody's arm, do not nestle in dad's breast

pocket, do not peek your head out from any backpack. You occupy
no miniature place setting at the dinner table. I'll play a game

with you. It's called make-believe-I'm-praying. Little lamb, little
treasure, with your two black beans staring blankly. Can you

see me? The way my eyes glue to the wall and glaze over for the span
it takes to sink a city. Do you watch the landslide visualizing

in my bumpy pink mind meat through my socket
frames? I swear sometimes I hear a shrill flatline

beeping. "Code Blue, Room 2." Too much blood.
Too much puss. Two lungs give up. I tip-toe pace my small

cluttered room like some unwelcome trespasser, pivoting
and pausing as if lost in the ten by ten space. Little Lamb,

there are ghosts in every thing. Even the daylight here
feels dreary—weighed by dust, ash and asthma

gasps. Little Lamb, how do I release
all the dead end love that has pent up in my chest for these four

years? It is sore. It needs to get to Her. Skyward, I suppose?
Who knows? Should I string my helium heart on a line, send it up

like a balloon? Her ghost is everything. Everything is Her ghost. Nobody
ever told me the lump in my throat would only grow. I have choked

ever since she texted me from the ambulance. “I loveh
yoi too,” like She was drunk. No. It was the pus, the blood, two

lungs drowning, and the searing pain stealing Her away already.
Here goes: Little lamb, I am stuck. I feel as though I have swallowed

my sister. My lungs are dressed for a funeral—in all black, in her ashes.
My room is a casket. I have buried myself beneath a daily

suffocating. I’d like to know what you think, Little Lamb. You take away
nothing. There is only Her gasping body turning to corpse right before me.

Little lamb, I’ve been walking on the ceiling, tripping on the chandeliers
and doorframes. Upside right is only a dream away from here, an endless

stream of “what if”s, getting stuck in the sticky act of wishing.
Little lamb, you are, I’m sorry, a symbol: like evidence—like a knife,

or the scar left by one. You are all roots and forget-me-not history.



New York City

Estefania Garcia

Digital Illustration

Mannequin Model

Tamika Thompson

I answered Nguyen-Nwagwu's classified ad requesting "gorgeous dolls" to work as mannequins for one reason: I was broke and lived in Manhattan. Back home, Grandmother had taken a tumble down the basement stairs, forcing her to shut down the blind pig that she operated out of her house. With no cash coming in from that after-hours liquor and gambling business, money was tight. It was 1993, and cleaning plates at the old folks' home—as sweet as many of the sickly ones were—was only bringing in sixty dollars a week. If I didn't find cash fast, I was going to have to leave the university because I was hungry all of the time and unable to keep up with the student tuition contribution that I owed. Quitting school and ending up back at Grandmother's blind pig was not an option. Well, it was, but not for me.

It was the gorgeous mention in the ad that hooked me. I had known since I hit puberty that people found me pretty. That was the whole reason I'd gotten on the bus to New York City. To model. But so far, no agency seemed interested in my "look" because it was too "commercial," which was code for my tits and ass were too big.

So I went to Nguyen-Nwagwu's. Never mind that it cost me more than a slice of pizza each way to get there. Never mind that I had no idea where PAS was. When I asked a fellow pedestrian about the oddly-named street, I had pronounced it like "pause," and that snaggle-toothed jerk glanced at the newspaper in my hand, belly-laughed, and said, "That's not PAS, you nitwit. P-A-S is short for Park Avenue South."

And how, exactly, was I supposed to know that without asking?

I got off the subway, and the wind met me on the stairs. I buttoned my peacoat, rewrapped my scarf, and pulled my skullcap down over my ears. The mall was on a dark street, lit only by the headlights of passing cars. It was October so the sun had gotten off work around five.

Cabs honked and brakes screeched. The subway rumbled below. I stood just outside the Eastside Mall. That leaning, window-filled complex wasn't even on Park Avenue South. PAS was just the cross street.

At the revolving doors, two police officers, wearing latex gloves and smirks, were handcuffing a naked woman who yelled, "There is nothing indecent about the human body! Clothes are for the brainwashed!"

Accustomed to seeing bizarre things, everyone on that Manhattan block filed by with their eyes to the ground and their hands in their pockets. I, on the other hand, had been in town for two months. I actually noticed the arrest and wondered how that woman—tall, black, and out of her mind—had gotten to this place in her life. Even though I was hungry and broke, I was feeling superior because I had all of my scruples and would never be her, naked and carrying on like she had no home training.

Inside, under the mall's fluorescent lights and din of talkers, walkers, homeless, and shoppers, I was relieved to be warmed by the heat coming from the vents and the jacketed bodies rushing by. I checked the directory for Nguyen-Nwagwu's Girl and Teen Wear. It was on the main floor, an unusual stroke of luck that meant I didn't have to go up or down anymore stairs.

The shop immediately gave me the creeps. All of the signs on the walls were made of neon lights: Juniors, Little Miss, Toddlers, Sale, Clearance. The ceiling's tray lights were orange. Disney songs swirled out of the store's speakers. As I timidly entered, the tune was the "Siamese Cat Song" from *The Lady and the Tramp*. I felt as if I'd slipped into a late-night arcade where the games had been replaced with twenty racks of clothes.

Maggie Nguyen-Nwagwu was near the cash register and looked like what you'd expect for that type of hyphenation—half-Vietnamese, half-Nigerian, with long, straight hair, cropped bangs, and everything on her either thick, flat, or fat.

"How old?" She asked this without inquiring about my name. Maybe she had a name picked out for me already.

"Eighteen." I knew I looked sixteen, because of my puffy cheeks and kid-sized, five-foot, two-inch frame. My on-campus friends even called me Baby Girl, though we were all freshmen.

"Any modeling experience?"

"No."

"The previous three models quit. It's hot in that glass. The clothes might itch. You have to stand still the entire time. And it ain't gon' make you famous. Why do you want the job?"

"I need the money. And working as a mannequin makes sense, don't you think? Seeing as how society asks women to look like mannequins—to paint our faces, sew fake hair into our tresses, and dress up in so-called

sexy clothes that always seem like they belong to somebody else. Fashion is a euphemism for costume, wouldn't you say?"

Maggie smiled with one cheek.

A woman wearing a cloak that I imagined she had borrowed from Little Red Riding Hood entered, accompanied by a girl with chubby cheeks. Looking at the two of them reminded me of my mother. Moms had decided to start a new life with a fuck-all who liked kids too much. They moved to Toronto and left me with Grandmother when I was seven or eight—about Chubby Cheeks's age. I wanted to ask Chubby Cheeks if this was her mother. And were her parents divorced. If so, I'd tell her to a) *Make nice*; b) *Don't put up a fuss if your mother remarries and your stepfather puts his hands down your pants. Just wear more difficult pants*; c) *Never tell your mother that you hate this new man because he likes to sit too close to you on the couch*; d) *Be a good girl and grab hold of your mother's hand before she slips away*.

Turning toward the woman, Maggie's dour face switched to honeysuckle and her voice went from thunder to a bell: "We have a sale on holiday dresses in Girls and Teens. Those racks in the back." Maggie pointed with an orange acrylic nail about the length of a popsicle stick, and the woman, with two long braids coming out of her Little-Red-Riding-Hood hood, followed Maggie's narrow finger.

Chubby Cheeks walked up to me and, staring, shoved her hands into the pockets of her down jacket. The girl smelled of Juanita's Mustard and Pretzels from across the mall. Feeling as if I had a tiny audience, I turned back to Maggie, who was smiling at Chubby Cheeks.

When Maggie looked at me, and I smiled at her, Maggie's grin melted away. I must have reminded her of someone she hated.

"Ms. Nguyen-Nwagwu, why do you want your models to pose as mannequins? Couldn't you just have the girls walk around the store—"

"They are not girls! They are dolls!" Her voice was thunder again. She leaned over the glass counter. There was wine on her breath. I felt her body heat against my neck. She wore a fuzzy, pumpkin-colored sweater, and I sensed that she was sweating inside of it. "Only perverts look at girls. But everyone looks at dolls. For years, folks have walked past my shop, never glancing once. But when I have a doll there, wearing my carefully cultivated fashions, those same people look up from their conversations, step forward, press their breath and fingerprints to the glass, and let the mystique of the store enter them as they enter the store."

Now, Maggie knew good and damn well that her “fashions” were not “carefully cultivated.” They were likely stolen or bought at quarter price from somebody’s uptown swap meet. I even cut a glance at the “Winter Fashions” rack and could tell by the white residue on the fabric that the garments had been dry-cleaned. But my stomach rumbled, reminding me of my overdue meal plan bill, and I just smiled and nodded.

“You come here straight after school. Get in by four, get changed, get in the window.” She pointed to a tiny door behind the “Winter Fashions.” It led to a rounded glass display case facing the mall. The platform was elevated—a tan-carpet stage. The few people walking by never glanced at the short mannequins in there.

“The after-school crowd is when I make my money—Tuesday through Thursday. Even more so than the weekend. You be up there, I pay you cash, you do that three days a week. Ten dollars an hour, four hours a day. You get one hundred twenty dollars each week.”

I didn’t tell her that I had no clue what mannequin modeling was. That Supreme Court in the Twentieth Century ended at 3:45, so I was doubtful I could make it here by four. That I had never made so much money in my life and hadn’t known one hundred twenty a week for posing in a window had been possible. I didn’t tell her that her eyes, so dark they looked like crude oil instead of pupils, gave me the heebie-jeebies. I just nodded. Grateful. Drunk with gratitude.

“Thank you so much!” I thought of shaking her hand, but she frowned when I spoke. I settled for words only. “Thank you! Thank you. I promise, you won’t be sorry!”

The next day I left class during the fifteen-minute break and arrived at Nguyen-Nwagwu’s at four on the dot. She put me in a red holiday dress with a satin bodice, lace about the high-collared neck, and tulle at my knees. Since the get-up came from the young teen department, it squished my breasts flat and required a petticoat to make the skirt bouncy. She rounded out the look with thick, black tights—also lace—and patent leather Mary Jane shoes that she’d rubbed with petroleum jelly to generate a shine. My hair spilled down my back in gelled-up ringlets, and she coated my face with rouge, crimson lipstick, blue eye shadow, mascara, something that she called “liquid foundation” that took her

fifteen minutes to mix, and powder. About a pound of powder.

"I'm only showing you the makeup part once, doll." Maggie breathed her barbecue potato chip breath into my face as we sat in the dingy dressing room. She spun me around to face the full-length mirror. I looked even younger, like a fourteen-year-old clown.

"You really are gorgeous, doll. You need to take this face, this hair, and those tits, and get the hell out of this shithole city. Go to Paris. Milan."

"I'd need an agent for that."

"Agent, my ass. Just go. Strut around. Who could say no?"

In the glass case, I stood between two white mannequins with blonde wigs—one wearing the green version of my dress, the other wearing the black and gold version. Every part of me itched. The stockings itched. So did the collar, the stitching of the bodice, the headband that pinched back my hair. The shoes were tight. I was no longer a model. I was a standing itch.

The lights at the top of the glass case made me feel as if I'd just opened Grandmother's stove and was peering in to remove a sweet potato pie.

Maggie walked out of her store, into the mall, and stepped right up to the glass. She was outside. I was inside. Yet we were less than a foot apart.

"Choose a pose, doll." Maggie's voice was muffled by the window between us. "Choose it. Stay in it. Don't move. You need to look plastic."

"What kind of pose?"

"Like them!" She giggled, which was the first hint that she might be warming to me. Why did I always seek the approval of people who didn't deserve it? Like with my mother and stepfather every Thanksgiving, helping my mother boil the eggs for the potato salad, never making eye contact with my stepfather so that I wouldn't have the urge to pluck out his eyeballs, thinking that if my mother chose him over me I must have done something to invite his touches. Never mentioning the "misunderstanding" that had never been a misunderstanding to me. The "misunderstanding" that I remembered any time a boy touched the small of my back or kissed me. The "misunderstanding" that seemed to be tatted on my conscience.

Maggie pointed to the two dummies standing on either side of me. "Think plastic, doll."

To my left, green-dress mannequin—I mentally named her

Gretchen—had a tilted beige head, with eyes cast to the floor where Maggie’s high-heeled boots were holding up her chunky frame. Gretchen’s arms were in front of her in a robotic hand pose.

To my right, black- and gold-dress mannequin—I mentally named her Bianca—stood with her right hand on her hip, her left hand at her side, and her toes pointed inward, penguin-style. Bianca’s face was looking directly at me.

A combination of the two seemed to suit me. I didn’t want to cast my gaze too high, because my eyes would get tired. I mimicked Gretchen’s low, sad look, though not too low. I wanted to be able to see people as they passed. I took a page from Bianca’s book and put my right hand on my hip and my left hand at my side. My feet I kept firmly planted, but I knew from my ballet days that I couldn’t lock my knees or I’d risk fainting after a while. I kept them slightly bent, with my feet facing forward.

“That’s good, doll! Keep it up.”

Maggie scurried away, presumably back inside the shop.

The mall was busy but nobody noticed me at first. Folks walked by, probably assuming that the black dummy standing between the two white dummies in the window of Nguyen-Nwagwu’s shop was a mannequin.

Then a man, wearing an AC/DC sweatshirt, walking alone, and staring into a bag of records he’d bought from Harold’s Old Time Rock ‘N’ Roll, glanced my way, did a double take, and stopped smack dab in front of me. He lifted his cap, scratched his head, and said, “Oh, shit, yo. I’m losing it.” He stepped closer to the case. Closer. Closer. He knocked on the window.

“Ayyy. You real?” His breath created a circle of fog on the glass.

I remained stiff. Kept my eyes focused on the ground near his sneakers. Tried to ignore the tears pooling in my eyes from not blinking for ten minutes. I held my breath. Or I tried to. Shoot. I accidentally breathed.

“You are real!” He ran into the store and shouted, “Tell me I’m not losing my mind. Is that a real girl in there or a mannequin?”

He and Maggie talked for five minutes, but it felt like two hours. I couldn’t make out what they said, because it sounded as if she’d walked him to the back of the store. With nothing to look at, I noticed the window case smelled like Grandmother’s basement when the carpet got wet from the leaky washing machine. Mildewy. Dank. It was still hot as hell. And

the Disney soundtrack played “Under the Sea” from *The Little Mermaid*.

When Record Man left Maggie’s shop, he came back to the glass holding a second bag of whatever she had conned him into buying. He waved and smiled. “Goodbye, mannequin!”

This episode was the only mental stimulation a girl got when she was standing in a veritable snow globe without the snow.

Maggie’s voice came from the doorway behind me. “It worked, doll. Keep it up. You’re doing great.”

I felt cheated. Ten dollars an hour was not enough. I’m sure whatever he bought cost more than that. Her headbands and socks started at twelve dollars. All of a sudden, this too-good-to-be-true dream was exactly that. Because, first of all, there was all of that itching. Then as soon as the mind got loose of activity, the urge to pee became paramount. Maggie and I hadn’t discussed breaks, but I knew that I wasn’t supposed to break my pose and let any passersby know that I was a real girl. And, of course, it was hot, and the three-layer petticoat was only making the heat worse. What was I supposed to do about the sweat dripping down the sides of my face? Mannequins don’t sweat. And the hotter I got, the heavier I breathed. Surely someone would notice my huffing.

I thought about Grandmother. I imagined her sitting in her recliner, with her red wig, ruby lips, massive gold and rhinestone earrings dangling down to her shoulders, counting out pills and cussing the bad luck that caused her to bust her hip and have to shut down her gambling business. She was stuck and having to rely on her holy, self-righteous, judgmental preacher ex-husband to make her mortgage. I thought about Grandmother. Because I was standing here for my spending cash but also to send money to her.

A white-haired man of about fifty plopped down on a bench directly across from the glass, his shirt open to the fourth button revealing three gold chains on a hairy chest. For three long minutes, I could feel his eyes on me. Slowly, he stood and walked to the case.

“Smile.” Unfriendly, his word was a command from a man used to getting his way. His voice reminded me of my stepfather’s: *Let’s see that smile. And that flat belly.*

Hairy-chested Smile Man shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned back on his heels. “Smile, or shall I give you something to smile about?”

Did he think I owed him a smile? I had a metal baseball bat resting

against my nightstand named Nigga Please, and I'd have no problem taking it to his dome. But I couldn't say that. I couldn't even move my nose to scratch the itch growing there. Why did my nose decide to itch now?

A woman in a black pantsuit hurrying by must have heard the man shouting at me. With her coffee-colored lipstick, brunette bob, and leather purse tucked against her side, Miss In-A-Hurry stopped and asked Smile, "Who are you talking to?"

Go away, I wanted to say to both of them. There was no way they were on the market for kids' clothes. *Just get the hell on*. It's what I'd wanted to say to my stepfather whenever I entered a room and his eyes came to rest on my body. *Stop staring at me. I am not here for you to lech after*.

"The black one." Smile actually licked his crusty lips. "She's a real person. They can't fool me. Just because I have migraines and see flashes of light don't mean I'm stupid."

"She's not real." In-A-Hurry stepped so close to the glass that I could see a paperback and a bottle of water at the top of her handbag. "She's a dummy that looks like an underage hooker."

I got your underage hooker, trick! But I didn't say that either. And why was I mad at In-A-Hurry? I had nobody but Maggie to thank for my appearance. And myself.

"Wait. I think I see sweat on her lips." In-A-Hurry took out a pair of glasses and put them on the end of her nose. "Or is that the lighting? It might be the lighting. It's making her lips look really big too. People would pay to have lips that big on a face that small."

Kiss my entire ass went unsaid as well.

Three more people came up behind In-A-Hurry and Smile, but I couldn't see them as clearly because my head was tilted down.

"Smile, bitch!"

Now I was a bitch. Right. If I had a gun, I would have shot him. My right temple twitched and throbbed. My neck was on fire with itch. I needed to pee. My muscles were beginning to ache, and this fool was seconds from making me crack. No. No. No. I wouldn't give up.

"Have some decency," In-A-Hurry said. "Oh, my God. You're right. She is real!"

"Sit on my face!" a man behind Smile shouted.

Cheers started up. And hoots. A woman yelled, "Stop yelling at her," with no sense of irony.

Another woman answered, "Whatchu mean, 'stop yelling at her?' Serves her right. With all that makeup and those nipples poking through the dress. She knows exactly what she's doing."

Everyone laughed.

I'd been shamed before. At seven, for sitting too close to my stepfather on that couch "just asking for it." It was my fault that his hands had been in my shirt and pants and were creeping toward my underwear. *Just horsing around. A misunderstanding. Look at how she is dressed!*

But, now, shouldn't the glass protect me? Shouldn't the fact that I was pretending to be a pretend thing make them leave the real me the hell alone? Is this what lions and gorillas felt like when they had visitors at the zoo? Is this why the animals tried to get to the back of their enclosures? They just wanted the eyes and words to stop?

The crowd seemed to be about twenty deep now. Across the mall from Nguyen-Nwagwu's was Saul's Slurpee Shop. It was packed. Who got slurpees in Manhattan a week before Halloween?

Yep. I wanted a slurpee. I never drank slurpees, but I wanted the cool syrup on my tongue. If I could, I'd order a red one. Didn't matter if it were strawberry, cherry, or watermelon. I just wanted it to be red because red seemed like it could cool a tongue. I spotted Deonte from my Spanish class standing in line at Saul's. I hoped he didn't turn around and see me. Or if he did, maybe he could step inside and give me a sip of his slurpee.

Deonte turned around. Walked over to the raucous crowd. Pushed his way to the front. His twenty-four ounce cup was less than a foot from me, and dripping with juicy condensation.

"Zenobia?" He sounded as if he were disgusted with me. "Zenobia? What the hell?"

I remembered the passage he and I discussed in our Race and Ethnicity in America class. It was an Audre Lorde essay, "The Great American Disease." In it, she said:

"One tool of the Great-American-Double-Think is to blame the victim for victimization: Black people are said to invite lynching by not knowing our place; Black women are said to invite rape and murder and

abuse by not being submissive enough, or by being too seductive, or too..."

And here Deonte was, chastising me. I was out here trying to earn cash to eat. Instead of asking what the hell I was doing, he should have been asking, no, demanding, that the jeering, cheering mofos fall the hell back.

Hey! Someone whispered from inside the glass. It wasn't Maggie's voice. I was stiff and felt I couldn't turn at this point without damaging a muscle. Muscles that I previously hadn't been aware existed on my body ached. Would I be able to move if I tried to? I was turning into a mannequin. For real.

Hey. You can take a break from posing.

Was Gretchen talking to me?

Hey, you're smarter than this. Why are you holding a pose for a living?

It was definitely Gretchen, to my left, in that green dress. But the crowd didn't seem to notice her speaking.

My neck hurt as I turned my head. Gretchen was still in her original place, her eyes stiff, her mouth closed. Of course her mouth was closed. What else would her mouth be? She was a mannequin.

Hey. Over here.

I snapped my head the other way. It was Bianca talking, but Bianca's mouth was closed too.

"Doll!" Standing in front of the crowd, Maggie smacked the glass with her open palm just as someone snapped a photo, camera flash bright as headlights. "Stay in your pose, doll!"

I remembered Grandmother, with her medicine in her hand, and I stiffened, returning to the pose that I'd been in, my eyes looking at the floor. And this was just how it went, right? By choosing the cash, I made myself an actor and agent in my own oppression. Audre Lorde would have had a thing or two to say about that.

"Yo, lady," said a man with a purple beanie and gold fronts in his mouth. "Is that some kind of robot you got in there?"

Maggie didn't answer him. She glared at me and stomped off again.

Why are you following her commands? Bianca sounded angry. Or was that Gretchen? Their voices were beginning to blend inside of our echoless

chamber.

The crowd grew to perhaps forty, whistling and shouting like spectators at a football game. The seam on the left side of my dress was separating, my hip flesh exposed.

“Yeah, baby! Bust out of that red thang!” Another witless man. I wanted to know who had said it, but how to lift my head?

You should not apologize for what you want.

“What I want?”

Yes. What you want. The voices of Gretchen and Bianca merged into an in-unison chastisement.

“What do I want?” Yes. I was talking to two mannequins. I realized it too. But by that point, the mannequins made more sense than the crowd outside of the glass. My panties and tights were damp. I must have released my bladder at some point. And once you lose your pee, your mind is quick to follow.

To be free. Gretchen answered from my left. *So do we. We don’t want to have to pose anymore.*

I lifted my head, my neck muscles burning. The crowd stepped back. A man shouted, “Oh, shit.” They’d all been so certain that I was real, but once I started moving toward the glass and making eye contact with them, they became frightened. Why is that? Was I only acceptable when I played along, was a good sport, made nice, did what I was told, remained a puppet of their imaginations?

“Doll! You have another hour of work.” Maggie slammed the door that would have allowed me out of the enclosure. The fastening of locks came shortly after.

Don’t let her stop you! Bianca whispered.

Freedom! Gretchen whispered. *Remember, we want it too.*

A man put his tongue on the glass and licked it. “Come out, sweet little baby doll. I’ll do that to you! You’ll love it.”

The tongue. The tongue was not a misunderstanding. That’s what I’d tried to explain to my mother years ago. How could anyone ever misunderstand a tongue? Human lips and teeth had to be parted for a tongue to be extended.

The crowd laughed.

I removed the silver pole from Gretchen’s back, and, with three firm cracks, I broke the window. Tongue Man tripped over himself backing up.

The glass rained down on the floor between us. The crowd backed up, one woman screamed, but no one left. Maggie was right about that. They couldn't turn away from a doll.

I used those patent leather shoes to kick out the shards of glass near the bottom of the frame. I grabbed Gretchen in my left hand, Bianca in my right, and I stomped out of the display case. Smile, In-A-Hurry, and Deonte scampered away.

"I'm calling the police!" Maggie's orange nails were like claws that she pointed at me. She looked on the verge of tears.

"I plan to do the same." I dropped Bianca and Gretchen at Maggie's boots. The dummies' small frames were twisted in angles of arms and legs and fabric. Their feet had become detached, which made me feel bad because how could they run to their freedom? Their faces, on top of their bodies, were turned toward me, their mouths in pouty smiles that seemed to be saying, *thank you*.

Tongue Man tried to run. I charged past the crowd toward him. He tripped and landed on his side. Standing over him, I spit in his eye, kicked him in the groin, and, when he was curled in a ball on the mall's tiled floor, I called him an animal, told him that it didn't matter where I sat on the couch, he and all men needed to keep their tongues inside their monkey mouths!

There was blood on my legs and arms. Perhaps I'd grazed some of the glass in my exit. But I didn't care. I had given up on the cash. I'd have to come up with another way to eat. I was certain that hunger had shrunk my stomach. I was certain that I could have a cup of tea with a side of pear and feel full that night. Because I'd be drinking freedom tea.

I walked away from the glares, ripping at the itchy fabric that had left welts on my skin, and kicking off the shoes, and plucking out the pins, and tearing off the stockings so that when I made it out the mall's side door and to the cross street, I stepped onto Park Avenue South barefoot and stark naked.



Robber of Hearts

Matthew Barrett

Photograph

The first night after my mother left

Candice Mazon

the house felt three times smaller
because I bumped into her with every turn.
I would come into the kitchen
and see her washing dishes.
I would look into her bedroom
and see her reading a book.
I would go into the living room
and watch her flip channels
until she settled on a cooking show.
My mother was everywhere:
sitting on the stairs,
washing her face in the bathroom,
in the laundry smelling of fabric sheets,
cooking dinner as the sound of sizzling garlic
became the night's melodies.
She was there in every corner
all at the same time.
Each memory that I had of her
came to life,
and she filled all the empty spaces in our home.
Hundreds of the same woman—
one telling me to fold clothes,
another asking how school went,
one in my little brother's bedroom helping him get dressed.
They multiplied every second
until there was no room for me to move,
until I couldn't breathe,
until I drowned in thoughts of her
swimming in a sea where she is still within arm's reach.

Until I realized she wasn't there anymore.

The 300th night after my mother left,
the house felt three times larger.
And I realized this house has been tremendous
for a long time—
that it has grown in years.
First, taking the four of us in
then gradually stretching
to accommodate the growing bones of my brother,
the increasing apathy of my father,
the amount of clothes I kept and never threw away,
and the sadness that my mother carried.
It expanded millimeter by millimeter
in infinite directions
for as long as it could
until my mother realized
there was no room left for her
anymore.

Socialization

Lupita Eyde-Tucker

Miss Barry was my brother's kindergarten teacher. Two years later she became mine, too. I already loved her—a red head Jersey-version of Farah Fawcett. That first day she embraced me with her warm eyes and my name printed neatly on my desk, the first time I'd ever seen it

written in bold, black marker. I liked raising my hand, being helpful. Making friends was easy. We got chocolate milk on Wednesdays. Eric Marlin's head was too big for his almost-six-year-old body, but his blue eyes sparkled when he laughed. His freckles

and boyish confidence encouraged me to stand near him. Every day, waiting by the door for the 3 o'clock bell, we joked around in line. I asked Andrea to tell Eric I liked him. She whispered to me: "She's Chinese-looking," he said. "She has a weird name," he said.

At home, I searched my face in the mirror, saw things I'd never seen before. And all I could do about my name, was hate it. Miss Barry told my parents I didn't belong in kindergarten, after Christmas break I moved across the hall to first grade.

My new friends were Brownies: Monique, Gloria, Patrice, and Cindy. On Valentine's Day I got 18 cards, a prized Peanuts valentine from Dean. When I'd see the kindergarteners at 3 o'clock, I'd wave at Andrea. I would've waved at Eric too, but he never looked at me again.

Infant Boy*Candice Kelsey*

There's a stocking
Waiting just for you
This Christmas
Or whenever
You are born
And detained
By a sheriff
Declared by the court
A placement
With social workers
County services
Foster parents
And visitation
Three hours
Three times a week.
Yes, there's a red Santa
Stocking
In the cabinet
Of a family services agency
With a safety-pinned
Post-it note:
Infant Boy.
Waiting
Just for you.



The Forest of Giant Plants VII

AJ Perez

Acrylic paint on canvas

Apartment House Trailer

Ethan Plaut

Later, the boy will think about Miss B and what actually happened to her when the apartments burned.

But now he stands at the edge of the four-wheeler trail, kicking its gravel across the complex's paved parking lot and thinking only of pebbles sliding over a frozen pond. It is August, though, hot and humid even at night. The bugs dodge summer scabs to find fresh skin below his shorts. They cannot latch to the boniness of his twelve-year-old legs. He looks up and sees in the security lights that smoke is rolling across Miss B's apartment. Everyone else is running away, all frantic and sloppy in loose robes and sagging pajama pants, some in only underwear with wide eyes like the polar swimmers he'd watched run down the boat landing and into the icy bay last winter. They are so convincing.

The heavy man from the corner apartment is way behind everyone else, half-limping across the lawn with his fish tank on one shoulder. Even that speed seems to surprise the man and he trips. The fish tank explodes. The man stands only to go down again on the wet grass and his flesh piles out in every direction, and the boy sees blood from where he landed on the shards of broken glass. The man picks up his fish for a moment and looks at it, then the tank, then back at the smoke, and he sets the fish gently down before hustling to the parking lot where even he is enveloped into the gathering crowd. Lots of people are hugging. Others yell into phones over the throb of the fire alarm. A group of three women stand shoulder to shoulder, motionless. Maybe the heat from the fire is driving the mosquitos away, the boy thinks. How else could those women stand so still?

Miss B's door is still closed. Hers is a first floor unit, sheltered by the stairwell. For most of the summer she'd left her door open and lay in a cloudy blue nightgown, watching television with picture frames on tables all around her. He'd sit on the top step, stoning the cars and listening to her television, breathing the smell of lotion and soap that rose with the heat from her apartment. Only when darkness pushed moths and mosquitos to her light would she close her door. The apartment building used to be a roadside motel, and people said that Miss B was old enough to be a leftover whore, or even the ghost of one, and still now, with the

smell of burning drywall and glue, this thought brings a hum over his body.

He cannot see the door to his own apartment and so thinks too of his mother. He thinks then of the wart lady from the Department, how she'll probably show up at some point and put a hand on his shoulder. Whenever she does that he always checks to see which hand: the smooth and clear left one, or is it the right, bumpy and unknowable as the mountains on the globe of homeroom? He turns and looks back up the darkness of the four-wheeler trail. The guy who mows the lawn said he took those trails clear to Bangor once. But the boy has only made it as far as Hesta Hill and the burnt-out carcasses of trucks at its base.

He thinks about heading back up, but then the fire alarm shorts out. He can still hear a pulse, though, the fire trucks moaning up South Street. So he stays. Firefighters pour out before the wheels even stop. Two rush to different parts of the truck, pulling levers and turning knobs. Three more raise a ladder to the roof at one end of the building, nearest to where the fire began. One firefighter climbs the ladder and passes a second ladder up over the roof, then he climbs down and another races up with a chainsaw. This one tears into the asphalt shingles, then kicks a hole down into the building with one foot still on the ladder. As soon as he does, the fire seems to slow for a breath. But then it turns like a dragon stung from behind to retrace over its own back burn. The firefighter retreats from the roof. Another stands under the ladder, pulling it taut into the ground and staring at his feet. Another flakes the hose along the closest stairway. Then they all stand by, motionless. In their helmets, they all look the same to the boy.

A pickup truck speeds into the lot and Chief Howland steps out, holding a radio to his mouth as his bulk compresses through the truck's door. He wears jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and a helmet. Even the boy can tell he'd been in the middle of something else. The Chief gave a presentation to his gym class once, booming about what he called "exit drills in the home."

"If you wake to smoke or fire," said the Chief, "you're gonna have a plan ready and execute it."

Now, looking at the Chief, the boy again imagines himself knowing what to do.

"You'll be on autopilot," the Chief had said.

The Chief yells at his men. He points, turns his back on the fire to use his radio. The fire surges but everyone stands still, helmets angled down. The Chief mouths into his radio over the clatter of breaking glass. The hose crew starts spraying from the ground. They spray not where the flames are glowing hottest, but rather halfway down the complex, at the point where the fire turned back on itself. The boy figures they are sacrificing half the building, trying to push and draw the fire to keep it there. He thinks Chief Howland is a genius. But the lost half is the half with his apartment. Miss B's apartment, too. The smoke blows left and he catches a glimpse of her door, now as black as the trucks on Hesta Hill.

An ambulance arrives, a red hatchback just behind it. Like the firemen, his mom steps from the car before the wheels stop. She puts both hands over her head and stares at the rubble. A gaunt man with a goatee climbs from the driver side and follows her slowly to the crowd. The boy thinks his name is Joey. His mom is wearing blue and red flannel pajama pants, a black hooded sweatshirt. The boy reminds himself that she has arms and a stomach in there somewhere, that, though she's so skinny now, she can't possibly be hollow. Joey lights a cigarette and passes it to the boy's mother, then sees someone in the crowd and walks away. His mom holds the cigarette to her mouth but only bites her thumbnail, running the other hand over her taut blond hair.

The boy remembers her chewing at that same nail years ago in a hospital. He doesn't know why he was there, but he remembers coughing up blood and white foam over his mom's shoulder and her sitting by his side and chewing at that nail as if the answer lay just behind its edge. He remembers two hospitals, actually, and how she only released her thumb to ask questions of the white coats that came and went. Now the same look casts over her face a moment, but then she seems stung and pulls a phone to her ear.

He hunkers down under a spruce, out of sight just in time as she turns and walks to the back of the crowd, squarely facing his direction and yelling into her phone. Something about sheets, about Joey's place, about "no idea" and "that little shit." So he watches the hoses get coiled, the armory of firefighting tools eventually clicked into place on the trucks, the people milling around and talking with hands on each other, a few women crying, men smoking cigarettes and kicking at the pavement by their cars, a single stretcher rising into the ambulance and then the

slippers and flip flops and black boots all shuffling off and disappearing and he lays alone until morning. That is the apartment.

After the apartment he and his mom drop their few possessions in a back room at his aunt's house on Lowe Street, right behind Wendy's. It is an old colonial, boxy and solid like his aunt, and he can walk from there through the brick downtown to the boat landing. The house's gray paint is peeling away but his aunt wears her gray hair pulled back tight in a ponytail. The ponytail seems like the only thing she has in common with his mom. She pinches at his arm the day they arrive, tells him they are going to have fun and that she has satellite. She gives him a plastic bag with new shoes, three hooded sweatshirts of different colors, and a deck of cards. Later that night the boy's mom says that his aunt is lucky, that her husband died in an accident at the pulp mill years back. There is disability, worker's comp, federal aid.

"The million dollar ticket and ain't earn a cent of it," his mom says to the glow of her phone that first night. "Only works the dollar store for the extra brandy and cigarettes."

With his aunt working days and his mom mostly staying with Joey, the boy regularly skips school. At the house he digs around for loose change and then sits at Wendy's, disassembling a neat stack of french fries orchestrated by the blond girl that works the fryer.

When he's collected all the obvious change from the desks and dressers, he begins crawling on all fours into his aunt's closets. There is a walk-in tucked off her bedroom and, inside it, a long stretch of cabinets on one wall, draped with soft sweaters and scarves. He checks each one. Nothing. Then at the deepest corner his fingernails find emptiness at the back frame, a crevasse at the wall. He pulls out sweatshirts and a hair dryer and when he pushes on the cabinet's back panel it swings up and out into a cavern. He fetches a lighter from her dresser and crawls inside. It is big enough for his whole body, maybe a grownup even. No shelves, no boxes or clothes, but plenty of room to sit up and hide.

He uses the lighter to examine the corners of the room and finds emptiness, then five plastic army figures: three little men with machine guns and two with only camo pants. He lines them up in a row. It makes no sense for a twelve-year-old boy to play with these men and he knows

his mother would tell him so. But he knows too that nobody will ever see him here, and so he fetches a flashlight and sets it upright like a torch and plays in its shadows for hours, marching the men ragged out into the dark corners, then bringing them center and fighting them to the death.

That night when he comes down his aunt is out and a new man is there, sunken back into the couch next to his mother. This one looks older than Joey, heavier in the neck and veins. The man leaves a hand on his mom's leg, the other up on top of his short gray hair and neither one looks at him. He feels the cabinet has made him invisible somehow but then stumbles over an empty beer can. His mother looks at him and points upstairs.

The next morning everyone is gone again and so the boy sweeps out the compartment, then begins wiping it clean with paper towels. Pressing the towels to the walls he feels indentations and pushes away grit and dust to feel what he's found. He cannot read but knows his letters and says them aloud as some solemn code to his flashlight.

"KJL, LPL, SDA, FRP, TKK."

He goes downstairs with the army men and soaks them in warm water, then crawls back into the compartment with a loaf of bread and lays still a very long time in the dark.

When he finally comes down that night the new man is over again. This time the man and his mother are both asleep on the couch. His mom's shirt is pulled up past a breast. The man is in boxer shorts next to her, his arm wrapped over her stomach and his face twisted up into a pillow. Her breast lays there and the boy watches it rise and fall with her breath and feels nothing. There is a lone needle stuck like a javelin into the couch cushion at the man's side. The boy picks it up and the smell reminds him of the baking soda and vinegar volcanoes he used to make with his mom.

There is a pounding then and the boy, startled, fumbles the needle and it falls to the floor. His mom's eyes open and she sees him and looks confused as to who he is but she stands. The pounding returns and the boy realizes it is at the front door.

"Shit," his mom says. She kicks the man on the couch in his ankle. The man stirs, then lays down on the space she's made. His mom shakes her head and slips outside, her skeleton so narrow that it seems to the boy she never even opened the door. From the kitchen he can see it is the wart

lady outside, standing next to a stone-faced officer and talking to the boy's mom. He ducks down for fear they'll see him. When he emerges from the kitchen his mom is standing over the man. Without a word, the man stands, walks straight at the boy, and punches him in the chest, knocking the boy's wind out and cracking a wooden arm on a rocking chair when it catches his fall.

The boy climbs back to the compartment once his breath returns, listening to his mom yell at the man, and then to the silence. Soon he hears his aunt come home. They must think he's snuck out because his mom and aunt don't muffle their voices but rather yell and scream words like "chair" and "drugs" and "kin" and "family" and "bitch" and they all float up to him. He lays absolutely still so they won't find him, and eventually falls asleep. Hours later he wakes and sneaks out past his aunt's bed. She sleeps on top of her blankets with her legs propped up by pillows and a photo of her husband on the bedside table. She wears a long blue t-shirt that exposes her legs from the knees down and the smell of her bedroom reminds him of Miss B.

He winds down the stairs, wondering whether his aunt would mind him borrowing a knife. In the living room he sees his mom has already packed their three cardboard boxes, really just folded them closed again. She's set them by the front door. He pulls a paring knife from a magnet on the kitchen wall and clenches it between his front teeth like an assassin as he crawls back inside the compartment, leaving his initials but taking the soldiers, and that is the house.

Next is the trailer, just as the nights get cold. It sits on the uphill edge of a trailer park, a twenty minute walk from town. Muddy ruts lead up from County Road and spread out between the buildings. Nobody tells him whether it is good or bad. The outdoor light on their trailer looks expensive though, like it belongs at the motel back in town. It has a gold metal frame over the bulb, the same color as the basketball trophies in his school. It is screwed onto a sheet of plywood that covers a hole in the trailer near the front door. Inside the trailer someone—the last tenant, he guesses—drew a bullseye on the plywood. When he gets close enough he can make out thousands of nicks and holes all over the wood and he wishes he'd kept his aunt's knife.

He looks for a compartment where he might stash the army figures but the closest thing is a set of exposed metal posts by the toilet. So they spend their time in the right pocket of his shorts. The left has a hole in it. Joey comes back. His mom sleeps a lot.

One day the boy realizes that the trailer park is on the backside of Hesta Hill. Only a short climb up through a soggy field scattered with alders and clinging blackberry bushes. He traverses to a rock ledge just below the hill's summit. From the ledge he can see the parking lot of his old apartment building. Despite the firefighters' efforts, there are now excavators landscaping for what he's heard will be a Tractor Supply store come winter. He watches them work, and as dusk descends so does he, only to see two police officers at the trailer's front door, talking to his mom. The wart lady is there as well, kneading her hands together. She looks from one part of the yard to the house, then to another part of the yard, and then back. The way her head jerks makes him think of a crow in the road, wary and exposed but looking for something to peck at.

He tucks inside after they leave but his mom is still awake, sitting at the kitchen table. Without looking up from her phone she tells him to get his ass to school. Then she does look up and says that she and Joey cannot have cops coming by, that if he were a little more grateful he'd try to make something out of himself instead of dragging the pigs home with his shit.

"I don't have time for this, Johnny," she says.

Just then Joey's red hatchback pulls into their dooryard and his mother stands. When she moves to her bedroom to get dressed the boy moves away, out the door and around the trailer before Joey even sets a foot in the mud of their yard.

The boy climbs again to the ledge and there thinks about Miss B as he looks down on the lights of town and the smooth lot where the apartments once sat. He understands Miss B died in the fire, whatever that means. The little girl from Apartment 16 told him it means Miss B went off to heaven but he knows that is bullshit. Looking at town now, he knows Miss B was not sent anywhere at all but rather broken down, just like his mom's card table and the few squirt guns he'd managed to lift from the dollar store before the fire. They'd all added fuel to the fire that consumed them, a fire that saw soft cheeks the same as a nightgown, lotion, a mattress, or walls. When the fire was done, her heat had radiated out into the night, making the parking lot warmer for a moment before

the wind carried it off and returned her to whatever she was before the apartment complex, before he ever laid eyes on her. And she is out there now, the boy decides, because it doesn't make sense that heat can up and disappear. Maybe move on, spread out, break down even, but not disappear. Where would it go?

It is dark when he comes down, silent in the trailer. There is enough light from the hallway to see them both in the bedroom. A needle rests on an overturned plastic bin by the bed. She is completely naked, streaks of red crawling out from her arms and legs and stomach. Joey wears only a white t-shirt, grease stains on the sleeves. His penis is limp and dead, like a fish washed up between them.

The boy goes back outside. His mind rattles between Miss B's warmth, the tools lashed to the fire truck in town, the feet shuffling and hugging out in front of him at the apartment, the compartment and his aunt's thick fingers. He'd seen a red gas can. It was in an old dog house behind the trailer. Now he watches his hands shake it and listens to something slosh. There's an extension cord under a corner of the trailer. With the cord tucked into his armpit and the can in his left hand, his right opens the trailer door slowly and he sees the bedroom. A soda bottle worth of gas lands on the foot of the bed, only inches from their feet. Then the can tracks fuel backwards out the bedroom door. Quickly now, his hands pull the door shut behind him and tie the extension cord tight around the knob, then the other end into the bathroom and around the exposed metal beams. The cord does not stretch and he imagines Chief Howland watching with approval at how cleanly this boy throws a hitch. Even on autopilot. The bedroom window is boarded in, he knows. The fire will spread quickly to the sheets, the half-opened cardboard boxes of clothes by the bed.

There is a white matchbook in his hands, the one his mom uses on her cigarettes. Little blue letters spell "Big Up" on the front. He trembles just long enough to appreciate the sensation. Then two cardboard matches swipe the ignitor strip and fall to the stain of fuel, and he knows this time there will be no mistake.

He walks out into the trees to wait for the firemen with their water and chain of command, the shine of their trucks, the traffic control, the people in the other trailers holding one another on their lawns, the warmth of his mother spreading out to what it once was, the hugs and

maybe a night or two back in his aunt's closet, and even for the wart lady putting her infected hand on his as she asks him "why" as the detective sitting next to her leans forward, and the boy reaches for the bag of chips they bought him and counts the cinder blocks in the wall and just shrugs. And that is the trailer.

Laughing

Tessa Cunningham

I giggle as I give explicit instructions
on what to do if I scream.
You're not supposed to joke about that—
but I do. It reminds me of laughing

as I recount memories of abuse.
My therapist. Serious. Says:
“Do you think you use humor to cope?”
& I think: what else am I supposed to do

except laugh. I can't help
but wonder if that girl walking home
a few weeks ago laughed too. Wonder
If she didn't think anything
of five men approaching until she was
face to face with their most intimate parts.

Imagine her kicking one exactly as taught.
Imagine her laughing at him doubled over,
grabbing his scrotum and screaming for air.
Maybe he laughs too, about the look on her face,

Maybe feels fear. The girl might turn them in.
Shame. He knew he shouldn't have gone along
in the first place. What will his mother think?
Then, I think: Maybe he looks like my ex-boyfriend.

The one who passed my body around at a party,
so men could take turns fondling my breasts.
I was too drunk to find my shirt—exposed.
When I woke up, I left, laughing.

Postpartum

Grace Gilbert

soiled browning bowls roll
slow ovals around the kitchen counter.

a girl is plucking strawberry stems
from her sister's tangles.

under the halflight of the halfhouse
brooms are noble steeds, but only after dusk
when the girls *shhhh* play on cardboard carpet, a courtesy

to their woman whose limp ashen arms
hang from the sofa, her fingertips skim

pooling cough syrup.
there is a smudged reflection in the window

of tiny mouths prodding the sinking sofa body
with *mommy* as if magic! like the mouths in the movies

she will wake gently, blossom into muffin baking
and woodland whistling. but they wear

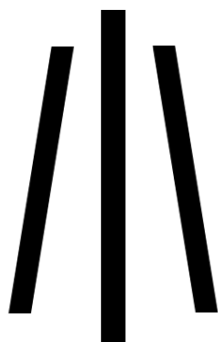
yesterday on their bodies and their woman is a cornerstone
of rot.



Kupka's World

Callie Parrish

Acrylic paint on paper



Interviews and Reviews

Poetry, Mon Amour: An Interview with Conor Bracken

Vinh Hoang

Conor Bracken's poems appear or are forthcoming in the *Adroit Journal*, *At Length*, *Forklift OH*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Love's Executive Order*, and *The New Yorker*, among others. His chapbook, *Henry Kissinger, Mon Amour*, selected by Diane Seuss as the winner of the 2017 Frost Place Chapbook Competition, was published by Bull City Press in September 2017.

Vinh Hoang: I've been trying to do some research on you (as any decent journalist should, I'm told) and I came up with nothing but poems. It seemed to me that Conor Bracken is a very private person, and maybe that's because his poems do his speaking for him. Where or how did you start your journey as a poet and an artist?

Conor Bracken: I guess yeah, you could say I'm a relatively private person, though hopefully not reclusive. I kept a blog for a bit while living overseas, but that's probably the most open I've been to the internet (please don't read it, it's unnecessarily loquacious).

I came second in a short story contest in seventh grade, and I remember writing stories for assignments as a kid, but I never really started writing until my last year in high school, when I wanted to parse a peculiar blend of trauma and angst. Rhymed quatrains kind of stuff. I imagine a lot of us turn to writing for similar reasons: to reduce the cognitive load life impinges on us, to put thoughts down for posterity, to experiment.

Senior year of high school, my English teacher had us read poems aloud to the class. I had forgotten the assignment, so when it came due, I was massively unprepared. I also didn't realize what I was reading: Countee Cullen's "Incident," a poem which draws some of its power from the studied use of a racial slur. There I was in class, made uncomfortable by being unready, and made even more uncomfortable by a piece of language—that poem has power. That it could shock a white teenage slacker into consciousness was incredible to me. I guess that I write because I, too, want to make people uncomfortable.

It wasn't until late in college, though, after doing dismally bad in engineering weedout courses, that I began to take writing more seriously. I took a couple of classes with Erika Meitner and she was the first poet I ever saw draw breath and then use it to talk about my poems. She was incomparably generous (still is) and read my maladroit Eliotic imitations, and got me thinking about audience and contemporaneity in ways I never had before. We're so often made to cut our teeth on the work of dead people, it's hard to then realize that literature is a living, multiform, evolving creature. Erika helped me see that.

VH: I could not find said blog, so I guess Google was on your side this time. Who says being loquacious on your own blog is a crime? Your high school English class experience seems like a trial by fire induction into the world of poetry for you.

I may have lied when I said your reading at Brazos was my first encounter with your poetry. *The New Yorker* featured your poem "Damaged Villanelle" this year. There were copies of it in the University of Houston English department building. I stumbled on the poem, and I did not make that connection until now. From there to here, as we're nearing the end of 2017, how has the year been for you? You have the poem in *The New Yorker* and your poetry chapbook, *Henry Kissinger, Mon Amour*, won the 2017 Frost Place Chapbook Competition. Is it fair for me to say that's it been a good year for your poetry?

CB: You're definitely right in saying it's been a good poetry year for me—winning the Frost Place Chapbook Competition was a complete surprise, and getting to work with the incredible indelible humans at Bull City Press, The Frost Place, and the Frost Place Poetry Seminar, has been an incomparable set of experiences. I feel extremely fortunate. Same goes for *The New Yorker*, which, aside from some Robert Service and (very accomplished) birthday card "Roses are red" poems from my family, formed my first sustained engagement with poetry, by the living or the dead.

It's been a weird year to have a good year. In the face of the continuing degradation of American norms and values, the global increase of

nationalist xenophobia, what feels like the concerted rise of strongmen to power and influence, [hurricane] Harvey, shootings, and so on, it's weird to have portions of my life that are a net positive while the progress of civilization is being rolled back (or at least its failings violently exposed). It's weird to be a writer in these times, too, a poet in particular because W.H. Auden, who set such a coruscating example of engagement and prosody in "September 1, 1939," denounced poetry as "mak[ing] nothing happen" (And yet he kept writing it, which I find a little odd; why not run guns like Rimbaud? Build furniture like Oppen?).

Success, after years of rejection and dismissal, is great, but I struggle with understanding and being patient with what poetry can actually do to disrupt the carousel of tragedy and injustice. I recently read a quote from an artist, that went something like, "I can't solve problems but I can at least make them so obvious that people can no longer ignore them." There's a great project going on right now called *Love's Executive Order* where Matthew Lippman posts a poem a week that attends to life in the Trump era which provides some solace (and which took one of my poems this year, too). The poems refuse to look away from the current state of affairs, instead burrowing more deeply into them. I think that's important—to be unflinching. To be able to say, on the one hand, yes Keats truth beauty beauty truth and all that, but on the other hand, I am ambivalent (in the more classic connotation of deeply torn) about the opportunity to admire beauty when this moment has been purchased at whose cost?

VH: I'm not sure I could answer that question even if it weren't rhetorical. I think it certainly puts things in perspective. I want to say that the recognition of your work is, at the very least, a little light blooming amid the darkness. You mentioned the unflinching artist's gaze and your desire to draw your audience into discomfort. Two of your other poems, "Elegy For A Classmate" and "I Worry That in the Blue Mornings" came to mind because both touch upon the subject of American gun violence-related tragedy. The first deals with, I believe, the Virginia Tech shooting where you were a student at the time. The second deals with the murder of two television reporters in Virginia in 2015. These hit close to home for you as a Virginia Tech student and Virginia native.

In the wake of the recent Las Vegas shooting, they are incredibly relevant. I felt an unnerving nonchalance evolved from the numbness in the face of the violence.

I also find it interesting that it almost feels like you share a sentiment with Auden. The quote you shared from the unnamed artist talks about keeping an eye on the state of affairs, the injustice, the tragedy, so that someone or something else can make something happen. To have you, a poet, have doubts about the potency or usefulness of poetry is both humbling and terrifying because it calls into question its relevance. It seems like your art form is fighting you. How do you deal with this?

CB: That's a really good question, and I think one that I (hopefully) will be working to answer, in my poems and in everything that happens around them, for the rest of my life. In some ways, I like how you phrased that: me being in conflict with my materials. It is important to be ambivalent about the form in which one works because without that ambivalence, that impatience with the limitations, one won't try to remake or hack or innovate on the form itself. Without it, one will fall back into old habits—one's own or one's culture's own—and be contented with the same kind of modalities and bromides that have, through long use, lost their ability to shock or riddle or smirk.

This impatience, though, definitely has a negative obverse to it, which I think is what Auden was lamenting—that we write because we want to have a positive effect upon the world around us. We write about rapture and beauty and love (and we write them in poems because we may have an eye for detail, but not the endurance race of fiction) while forces that don't give two shits about our work strive to commodify and subdivide those experiences. What happens if art isn't a sufficient bulwark against those forces? On my better days, I'm able to summon up enough faith in humanity to feel that the contest between excess and parsimony, the self and the many, will sustain a balance in the ecologies of need and love, but my better days aren't often very consecutive. And on the less better ones, I see the work I put into my poems, and I see the world outside them (which is enormous and beautiful and bleeding) and there is no connection between them. That can be disheartening.

But this is also why poetry is so important: we're still reading poems from millennia ago, and are able to find ourselves in it, in all our follies and feelings. Poetry (and to some degree the poems that make up poetry) is more patient than the humans that it flows through. Poems posit, by their very existence, an audience patient and engaged enough to care about their existence. Somehow, that audience still exists and even grows, and rises to meet poetry as it asks to be met.

It's funny. I write and dislike poetry for the same reason: because I'm impatient, and want to be patient. Ultimately, this points past poetry and back to me, which is that I'm impatient with myself (why haven't I perfected the self? Why am I unable to convince family members that we should regulate assault rifles? How am I hungry again?). This makes a lot of sense when I think of it through the lens of Tony Hoagland's assertion that poetry traffics in repressed energies: I'm trying to excavate the many layers of myself with some weird old tool I'm still learning to wield.

VH: We began outward, and now we look inward as you touch upon poetry's introspection and your self-excavation. Thank you for the segue. When I was at your reading at Brazos Bookstore, you gave us some insight as to your purpose for *Henry Kissinger, Mon Amour*. I'm paraphrasing from memory, so I apologize if I butcher your words. I think you said that you were trying to reconcile your position as a white heterosexual male in America today with your consciousness of the system that has been propped up by injustice. Henry Kissinger goes from representing America overseas to representing the problems of America's white patriarchy. In some ways, I think you volunteered to be the audience that you wanted to make uncomfortable. What has the collection of poems achieved for you in terms of what you set out to do, has it been a catharsis, a release?

CB: I'd say that paraphrase is about right: in *Henry* and elsewhere, I'm trying to square the amount of power that automatically accrues to me, due to my embodied and disembodied privilege, with my ambivalence about how that power has been historically produced and leveraged by people in my same position (i.e. hegemonically). And though using that as fuel for the poetry generating machine which produced *Henry* has been rewarding, interesting, surprising, and growth-inducing, I wouldn't say

that *Henry* has helped me fully purge or gain enough perspective on the issue. *Henry* has taught me things, but hasn't released me from much aside from the need to think through Henry Kissinger as a particular avatar, and time lived in Buenos Aires as a callow young man.

I like what you say about volunteering to be my own audience. I'm always interested in how writers think of their audiences. Whatever we want the poem to do, we need to think of who it's doing that to, right? For a long time, I wrote poems that were for me and me alone, without realizing it. There's still a component of self-entertainment and self-laceration in my poems, but less so than before—they have more of a desire to communicate than commemorate. I've heard people describe poetry as 'speech overheard' (I'm thinking of Ange Mlinko's book *Marvelous Things Overheard* in particular), which implies a certain privateness to the communication, in terms of who's listening, and in terms of how it's being said. We all have private or idiosyncratic languages with ourselves, our friends, our families, our colleagues. But we have little control over who elects to be a part of our poem's audience. It's interesting to think of how poems blend private and public speech, how they do and do not disclose their inner selves (or the inner selves of their authors/speakers), and how that either fascinates or repels us as readers (I'm convinced a lot of older poems are kept around on our syllabi and reading lists because their mysteries are still not fully available to us, as individuals and as a culture).

I'm moving outward again though, when we're supposed to be moving inwards. I guess in some ways, a reason I'm still one of my audience members is because it's hard for me to imagine many people beyond myself being interested in the ways I'm airing the mustier parts of myself out. And yet when I read the poetry of others, I find myself so often transfixed, surprised, delighted, and more ready to agree that it is through the individual we can best see the workings of the whole.

VH: I want to take a step back to ask you about the process itself. I like what you said before in defense of poetry. Poetry that came a millennia ago are still being read because they exist in a continuum and that they possess unrevealed mysteries. However, you and every poet that came

before and every poet that will come after knows that poems must be created first. In some parts of this interview, I think you've given us some glimpses into how poets and their body of work enable the audience to be captured and affected. How would you describe *your* process? Where does it begin for you?

CB: That's such a great and difficult question. For so long, I was really bad at answering it (now, I hope I'm only mildly bad at answering it). It used to be that I would write every day (on the advice of Bob Hicok), so the process was less aleatoric, more workaday yeoman-like. I would wait in front of my screen for some piece of language—a phrase, an image, one word sometimes—to excite me, and then I'd riff on that until I had something that seemed to move and shimmy. Those poems were very indebted to the kind of offhanded, freewheeling motility of Ginsberg, O'Hara, Koch, the Terrance Hayes of *Hip Logic*—then I started reading Levis, Gilbert, Linda Gregg, Laura Kasischke—more meditative, flinty, deliberate poets, who didn't turn as often but turned with a lot of intention. It was a sea change, and I worked more revision into my process than before. Now, when I start a new poem, it often grows out of some sort of crisis of faith, where my love for and wonder at the world is tested by something—myself, an event, a shift in perspective. And once that joins up with language that crackles and a narrative or image that carries more power than I can articulate, I've got something. There are many avenues to getting there, though. Ultimately, by the end of the process, what needs to feel right about the poem before I can leave it alone is an inevitability. If by the time we get to the end of it we don't feel some sort of punch or latching shut or sewing up, some lid settling softly on an opening the poem has made in the silence, then I'm still not done, and need to reorder things. Thankfully, I've got some great workshop friends, who are smart and candid and not as intoxicated by the writing process, who help me figure out whether or not this inevitability is there.

VH: I find the advice you received from Bob Hicok, about writing every day, is always suggested to prose writers. That they must push themselves to sit down and write every day. You mentioned before that poets have an eye for detail, but they lack the endurance of fiction. You also said that there's always a need to “hack” and innovate the “living, multiform,

evolving creature” of literature. At times, the boundaries between prose and poetry are stretched to the point of creating an overlap between the two forms of written word. What are your thoughts about what poetry can glean from other art forms, whether it be prose or otherwise? I had a professor once suggest that poetry had a greater likeness to cinema than prose due to its focus on imagery and sound. Conversely, what can other art forms, namely prose, derive from poetry?

CB: Yeah, I’ve heard that Haruki Murakami and Ernest Hemingway share a similar work ethic/regimen, writing a certain amount of words every day (and stopping when they know where they’ll begin the next day). As I’ve begun to understand my interests, obsessions, poetic ancestors, formal preoccupations and ambitions, I haven’t found that method to work for me as a poet, unless I have a sense of a long project ahead of me (like *Henry*, for instance). One method I have found helpful—or metaphor, really—is from visual art, wherein the artist or their assistants produce small studies or sketches as a means of perfecting parts, skills, and/or techniques needed for a larger piece that’s underway. Though I don’t write every day anymore, I do tend to write a lot (a couple times a week, at least, otherwise I’m kind of a mopey dolt). This means that I write a lot of crap, that either gets to be revised, or lost forever in some digital catacomb. But I think that everything I work on (and this grows out of Hicok’s advice) has some ultimate value to me and my work, helping me figure out subtler aspects of tone, turns, rhythm, etc. which may or may not have a direct effect upon what I’m working on more deliberately elsewhere.

A family friend—an orthopedic surgeon with a great family, nice cars, but few books—asked me after a well-known venue picked up a poem of mine what it took for me to write the poem. The poem itself took an afternoon to write (don’t we wish all were like that) and I told him this. But I also told him it took me probably ten years to learn how to write it, thanks to reading villanelles by Thomas, Plath, Tracy K. Smith, Bishop, and others, not to mention tuning my ear on the soundboard of contemporary and classic anglophone poetry, and writing hundreds and hundreds of stanzas no one will ever see, turning over the subject matter and and lexical textures until I had a better sense of how they fit with

one another. In a way, the lessons I learned from every poem, failure or success, I'd written before that one helped ready me for the onrush of it. A kind of 10,000 hours thing, almost (though I don't think we're born with all the poems we'll ever write inside us; poetry is embodied, but not biological).

So I think that there's a lot that poetry can gain in terms of metaphors for methods from other fields. In terms of the converse, I'm a little apprehensive to say what other fields or media might gain from poetry (I know what I do and don't like about poetry, but I can't speak for anyone else really). Brevity, associative logic, a certain clarity of image over reason or argument, an infatuation with the texture of language—I think these are all extremely important to the workings of poetry, and to the renovation of our relationship with language, which is both tool and miracle, a technology that can pass the salt or bring us epiphany. I gravitate towards prose writers who share these concerns (Toni Morrison, Lydia Davis, Faulkner, Amy Hempel), and I guess all artists—verbal or otherwise—can find value in the way successful poems create and resolve tension musically, while juggling doubt and certainty about whatever themes they're scoring.

VH: You mentioned before that you were moving outward again with your poetry. I took that to mean you were working on another project now that *Henry* has reached bookstores. What's next for you?

CB: As of right now, I'm redoubling focus on my longer manuscript, in which some *Henry* poems appear, and from which the writing of *Henry* formed a break. Where *Henry* focuses on a particular villain, who is totally unsympathetic, the longer manuscript has more diffuse targets, who are, aside from one, more complicated and damaged than they are straightforwardly evil. I've been working on this for about four years now, and it keeps morphing the more I touch it, but it finds itself concerned with (gun) violence, (white) masculinity, neoimperialism, faith, and song.

Aside from that, I have been working for about two years on translating from French to English a book of poems by the Moroccan Berber writer Mohammed Khair-Eddine. It's a fascinating and complicated task, as

his speaker is enraged at the language he expresses himself with, so is constantly bending and twisting it, while still conveying harrowing screeds in the voice of someone leaning into their dispossession so wholly that they have found their way back to power (A model, in some ways, for the stance that the speaker in *Henry* operates, albeit with more political baggage).

VH: I am definitely looking forward to the extended manuscript as I hope all our readers will be. Thank you again for setting time aside so that our readers could peek into your brain. Do you have anything you want to leave with us? An insightful poem? A joke?

CB: It's been my pleasure Vinh; thanks for asking me such great questions! How about a poem *and* a joke?

Say You Love Me

Jack Gilbert

Are the angels of her bed the angels
 who come near me alone in mine?
 Are the green trees in her window
 the color I see in ripe plums?
 If she always sees backward
 and upside down without knowing it
 what chance do we have? I am haunted
 by the feeling that she is saying
 melting lords of death, avalanches,
 rivers and moments of passing through.
 And I am replying, "Yes, yes.
 Shoes and pudding."

And here's the only joke I reliably remember:

Why do ducks have webbed feet?
 To stamp out fires.

Why do elephants have flat feet?
To stamp out flaming ducks.

A graduate of Virginia Tech, a former poetry editor for Gulf Coast, and the assistant director of a university writing center, Conor received his MFA from the University of Houston, in Houston, TX, where he and his wife currently live.

Gilbert, Jack. "Say You Love Me." *Refusing Heaven*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, pp. 8. Print.

Meaning in Macabre: Suffering and Healing in *A Little Life*

Austin Svedjan

A Little Life

Novel

2015

Doubleday

Is it possible for those who suffer, whether from mental illness, chronic pain, or emotional trauma, to ever “get better?” To become “normal” again, perhaps even to regain a previously stolen happiness? And—arguably more importantly—should those who have suffered desire to rid themselves of that suffering? Hanya Yanagihara, author of 2013’s *The People in the Trees*, provides perspective to profound philosophical questions like this and more in her second novel, *A Little Life*.

“Wasn’t friendship its own miracle, the finding of another person who made the entire lonely world seem somehow less lonely?”

In just under 800 pages Yanagihara tells the story of four college friends: Jude, JB, Willem, and Malcolm. While all of these characters play major roles in the story, after about a hundred pages or so, it becomes apparent that the novel will center predominately around Jude. Ironically, *A Little Life* chronicles Jude’s entire life, though not in the typical bildungsroman fashion. The novel moves through time in irregular, non-linear forms, exploring the inner emotions of Jude and eventually revealing a past more horrific than many authors would care to conceptualize.

While reading the heavier bits of Yanagihara’s descriptions of Jude’s suffering—the shortlist of recollections including child prostitution, domestic abuse, and rape—one can easily find themselves forced to take breaks just to save their own lucidity, as Yanagihara compels the reader to empathize almost *too* much with Jude. However, what is perhaps more agonizing is the knowledge that Yanagihara, taking a cue from Hemingway,

refuses to completely draw the curtains. Instead, the reader is kept at a far, albeit still uncomfortable, distance from the full record of Jude's trauma, where the imagination is left to fill in the more sinister corners of his past. It is not a pleasant experience by any means, and adds to the overall sense of dread that Jude experiences.

Though his past is what ultimately drives the plot, Yanagihara instead focuses the novel on Jude's life *after* this trauma, once he is expected to carry on with life, and explores how one who has suffered trauma readjusts into society. He is disabled by a previous injury from childhood that is described as "an insult" to the body, and one from which he will never recover completely, and that is so agonizing he at times begs for "interlude[s] of numbness. "Yanagihara has dealt Jude the worst of cards so to speak, so much so that "[f]airness itself seemed to hold little interest for him." And while Jude's past is traumatic, Yanagihara presents everyday life after as the climax of his suffering. Jude constantly cuts himself, and purposefully deprives himself from feeling the joy shared by those around him. Yanagihara never completely deprives him of hope however, and even describes him at times as an optimist, writing: "Every month, every week, he chose to open his eyes, to live another day in the world."

"But what was happiness but an extravagance, an impossible state to maintain, partly because it was so difficult to articulate?"

Despite all that has happened to him, as the book progresses the reader continues to root for Jude, presumptuously hoping that Jude will "get better," and that this story will have a happy ending. Yanagihara does not write the resolution of the novel to cater to the audience, but rather to present a soberingly realistic description of chronic pain and suffering. It is natural for the reader to be hopeful for the protagonist, and I suspect Yanagihara wishes for us to do this as well; but from the novel comes Yanagihara's message: Should those who have suffered want to get better?

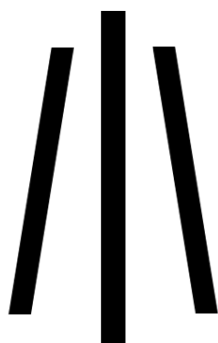
At a time when society is growing more focused on providing resources to those who are suicidal, including hotlines, support groups, therapy, and medication—and rightfully so—Yanagihara asks what it

means to *want* to die. In the United States, several states have passed *Right to Die* legislation, which allows for the assisted euthanasia of any terminally ill person wishing to peacefully die via a lethal dosage of medication. However, in several countries—most notably in the Netherlands, who legalized voluntary euthanasia in 2001—people can legally end their lives with a physician's assistance. Legally accepted reasons range from depression to chronic exhaustion, and the procedure may take place as early as 12 with parental consent, 16 without.

So, after reading the novel, one must ask oneself: Does Jude suffer from an innate mental illness that can be repaired with proper medication and therapy, or does he simply no longer wish to live?

To answer these deeply personal questions for the reader was not the intention of Yanagihara when writing the novel, but rather to simply ask the question, to provoke the reader into thinking critically on how we as a society view mental illness and suicide. Put best by Yanagihara: "We have such small lives, all of us. And this is the story of one of those lives."

"Things get broken, and sometimes they get repaired, and in most cases, you realize that no matter what gets damaged, life rearranges itself to compensate for your loss, sometimes wonderfully."



Hurricane Harvey Project

Hurricane Harvey Project

In August 2017, Hurricane Harvey devastated the Houston community. The storm caused significant damage to the Texas coastal region, an area so many call home. As a community we came together to repair the physical damage. In response to the psychological damage, *Glass Mountain* called for poetry, prose, and art representative of the experience of those affected by Harvey.

The following poem was selected by our editorial staff in hopes that it might catalyze healing in the Houston community. To view the rest of our evocative submissions, visit our online magazine, *Shards*.

The First Man I Dated in Houston Was Named Harvey

Paige Leland

He asked where I was from,
asked if I had heard of people like him
in Michigan.

He asked if I was ready for him,
if I was into it.

He said everybody wants to be
with the guy on TV.

When I boarded up the windows,
he said I must like playing hard to get.

He said he was strong, powerful,
the biggest I'd ever seen.

He said he was a bad boy.

He said if I told him no, he would
destroy the home I made here.

He said he knew I wanted him.

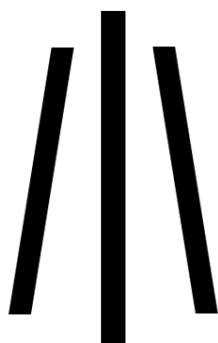
He said he liked me,
couldn't wait to be together.

He said he could show me
how to be confident,
how to break
in the windows, flood the porch.

He said he would come back for me,
no matter what.

He said I should be grateful,
that he was one of a kind.

He was best friends with the Gulf
and he knew how I loved the ocean.



Contributors

Matthew Barrett was born 1983 in Corpus Christi, TX and later moved to Houston, TX where he would graduate high school. After graduating from Westfield High School in 2002 Matthew would commit the next four years of his life to the United States Marine Corps where he would complete a tour of Operation Enduring Freedom. Upon finishing his contract, Matthew worked for several years before deciding to return to school at the University of Houston to pursue his artistic passions through Photography & Media Productions. Matthew is currently a junior that has previously been published in the 10th Anniversary volume of *Glass Mountain* for photographic work.

D.M. Becker is currently a full-time student at North Central College majoring in English Writing with a minor in Film and Screen Studies. She has a passion for writing different genres in different styles, but her favorite genre is fantasy for teens and young adults. She loves listening to movie soundtracks when writing and often thinks through her writer's block by taking a walk in the great outdoors. Her short stories have previously appeared in *Senses: An Anthology*, *30 N.*, *The Vehicle*, and *Sun and Sandstone*.

John Chavers enjoys working as an artist and photographer. His work has been accepted for publication at *Cream City Review*, *3Elements Review*, *JuxtaProse*, *Camas Magazine*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Permafrost Magazine*, and *The William and Mary Review*, among others. This April he will be a guest artist with The Association of Icelandic Visual Artists (SiM) at Korpúlfsstaðir in Reykjavík.

Jane Costain is a freelance writer and poet who lives in Denver, Colorado. She is a long-time member of the Colorado poetry group, the Gamuts. Although she has written poetry for many years, she has only recently begun to publish some of her poems.

Tessa Cunningham works as a technical writer and holds a degree from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. Her poem “Bibliophile” was published in the Spring 2014 issue of *Prologue*. Her essay “You are What You Drink: A Feminist Critique of Milk and its Consequences for the Female” was featured in the Fall 2014 issue of *Sloth: A Journal of Emerging Voices in Human-Animal Studies*. She currently lives with her partner and pitbull in Longmont, Colorado.

Kelly Doyle is a student studying English/Creative Writing and Psychology at Emory University. She is an editor for *Cleaver Magazine* and Emory’s literary magazine, *Alloy*. Her fiction has appeared in *Firewords Quarterly*, *Stories Through the Ages—College Edition*, and on campus publications. She hopes to pursue a career in writing.

Lupita Eyde-Tucker was raised in New Jersey and Guayaquil, Ecuador. She writes poetry in English and Spanish, and has studied poetry at the Bread Loaf Translators Conference, and the Palm Beach Poetry Festival. Her poems have appeared in *Garnet & Black Quarterly* and *Naugatuck River Review*.

PM Flynn is a North Carolina writer. He holds an AAS computer degree from the College of The Albemarle and a BS in English from East Carolina University. He likes butterflies, identifies with hummingbirds (they don’t know all the words to the songs they sing), and likes to make up stories sometimes. He co-wrote a nonfiction book called *Assassinations: The World’s Clandestine Killer Elite* with Bob Chapman. Never-ending-the-less, his creative writing is published in many fine print and online anthologies, newsletters, and literary magazines and reviews, including *Helen Literary Magazine*, *The Fictional Café*, *Main Street Rag*, and *The Grassroots Women’s Project*; mostly poetry, which most agents do not represent, to his chagrin.

Estefania Garcia is a Houston artist who works with printmaking and traditional and digital illustration mediums. She enjoys illustrating characters and stories that are based on the every day life and explores the relationships between the ordinary and the fantastical. Her art influences include Mary Cassatt's prints, Hayao Miyazaki films and Jamie Hewlett. Estefania is currently in her senior year at the University of Houston's School of Art.

Grace Gilbert is currently studying creative writing at SUNY Geneseo in Western New York. Her hobbies include eating manchego cheese on the floor of her dorm room, daydreaming about Sir Elton John, and whispering the word "gazebo" to herself until she dissociates from the English language. Grace's poetry and a work of creative nonfiction have been published in the SUNY-wide literary journal *Gandy Dancer*.

Bianca Glinskas considers poetry a horizon—an unreachable destination she can't help but set out for anyway. She hails from SoCal where she recently received her BA in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing from California State University Long Beach. Her work recently appeared in *Ordinary Madness*. When she isn't writing or reading poetry, she enjoys yoga, playing the viola and eating too much mac 'n' cheese.

Vinh Hoang is a storyteller, writer, and aspiring filmmaker residing in Houston, Texas. He is currently an undergraduate enrolled in the University of Houston, where he studies Creative Writing and works as the Reviews and Interviews Editor for *Glass Mountain*. He has a passion for the arts and the many mediums of storytelling.

Jury S. Judge is an internationally published artist, writer, poet, photographer, and political cartoonist. She is the cartoonist for the *The Noise*, a literary arts and news magazine. Her *Astronomy Comedy* cartoons are also published in the *Lowell Observer*. She has been interviewed on the television news program, *NAZ Today* for her work as a political cartoonist. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BFA from the University of Houston—Clear Lake in 2014.

Candice Kelsey is a passionate educator who has been working with teenagers for 18 years. She earned her master's degree in literature from Loyola Marymount. Primarily a poet, she has been published in *Poet Lore*, *The Cortland Review*, *Hobart Pulp*, *Burningword*, *Wilderness House*, *Leveler*, and more. Candice is also the author of a book exploring social media's impact on adolescent identity. She lives in Los Angeles where she carves out a life with her four children and nine pets; she enjoys listening to opera any chance she gets!

Paige Leland is a serial Cap'n Crunch eater, elephant collector and native of Mid-Michigan who graduated with a BFA in Creative Writing last December. Her poetry and prose have appeared in *Chicago Literati*, *The Tahoma Literary Review*, *The 3288 Review* and elsewhere. She currently lives in Houston, TX, where she is the managing editor of the new literary magazine, *Goat's Milk*. She plans to spend the remainder of the year writing and to pursue an MFA in Poetry next fall.

Victoria Marino lives in the Philadelphia area with her cat Flower. Her nonfiction creative writing piece titled "Red and Blue" was previously published in *Glass Mountain*.

Candice Mazon is a third-year medical student at Drexel University College of Medicine. Her work has been published in *Journal of Medical Humanities* and *in-Training*, an online magazine for medical students.

Sandeep Kumar Mishra is a writer, poet, and lecturer in English Literature. Last year his work published in more than 50 national and international magazines. He has edited a collection of poems by various poets—*Pearls* (2002); wrote a professional guidebook—*How to be* (2016); and edited a collection of poems and art—*Feel My Heart* (2016).

After serving eight years in the United States Air Force, **Rebecca Oxley** attended the University of Houston. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English/Creative Writing in 1999. That year she won the Howard Moss Undergraduate Poetry Award. Since then she has taught, raised children, trained dogs, and worked on her craft. In 2016 she was chosen as a juried poet for the Houston Poetry Festival and was published in the Festival Anthology.

Callie Parrish is a senior mathematics major with a physics minor at the University of Houston. She had her painting, “Houston We Have a Problem,” previously published in *Glass Mountain*. She is also a member of the Bitner research group and hopes to one day to study quantum anomalies and to find a general way of predicting them and where they will end up in any system so that they aren’t such a pain in the ass to deal with. Or to at least prove that it’s impossible to do so. She has a tendency to take on impossible tasks and everybody thinks she is insane as a result of her strides towards the impossible. She used to create cartoons, illustrations, and write for *The Daily Texan* and *The Daily Cougar* with her comic strips “Crazy Callie” and “Tier One.” She’s also been working on a math/art serial comic book she hopes to get published one day.

Ethan Plaut is an attorney and aspiring writer who lives on a three generation farm in rural eastern Maine. His legal writing has been published in *Ecology Law Quarterly* and this is his first piece of published fiction.

AJ Perez, 22 years old, was born and raised in Houston, Texas. In his free time, he began creating collages in his 9th grade art class. He has since explored painting in and out of the academic setting. His interest in the visual arts later expanded with an interview/discussion podcast he is currently developing with a launch date of Fall 2018. He is currently a senior at the University of Houston, double-majoring in History and Painting. His work is privately housed throughout the United States. His website can be found at: aj-perez.com

Isabella Ronchetti is a young artist and writer originally from San Francisco, California. She spent a few years studying in Florence, Italy, and is currently living in Virginia. She enjoys spending her free time reading psychology books, running, and people-watching. Her writing and artwork have won awards and appeared in magazines such as *FishFood Magazine*, *Glass Kite Anthology*, *The Sigh Press*, and *Canvas Literary Journal*.

Patricia Schlutt recently graduated from Aquinas College and got married. She spent the summer and fall working on a farm and backpacking in Italy and Spain with her husband. Her interests include immigration, ecology, ancestry, gender, and spirituality. Outside of writing, she bakes chocolate cakes, cares for her twelve chickens, and travels as much as possible. She has been published in *The Rectangle*, *Mangrove Journal*, *The Great Lakes Review*, and *Sampler*, among others.

Austin Svedjan is a Houston-based aspiring essayist and critic. Currently earning his B.A. in English Literature at the University of Houston, he also works as the Social Media Editor for *Glass Mountain*. His June essay "Pride is A Parade, But Also A March" was recently published by *Drunk Magazine* out of Brooklyn, NYC.

Tamika Thompson is a writer, producer, journalist, and the co-editor of *POC United*, an anthology series for writers of color. Her work has been published by *The Matador Review*, *Huizache*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, *MUTHA Magazine*, and PBS.org among others. She is at work on her first novel.

Caleb Westbrook is an emerging writer with an undergraduate degree in literature and both undergraduate and graduate degrees in religion. His poetry is an ongoing exploration of faith, especially the tension and interaction between immanence and transcendence, the seen and the unseen. Over the past few years he has bounced around a lot, which culminated in teaching abroad in El Salvador and falling in love. He now teaches in the Kansas City area where he continues writing and waiting for his fiancée's immigration to the U.S. He blogs at abigcupofbooks.com.

Poetry & Prose Contest

Glass Mountain, the award-winning undergraduate literary journal at the University of Houston, announces the annual Poetry & Prose Contest.

\$5 per submission

Deadline: January 10, 2018

Each category of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry has a prize bundle of \$100 and free registration for the 2018 Boldface Conference!

Winners will be published in *Glass Mountain's* spring Volume 20. Runners-up will be considered for publication. Participants must not be currently enrolled in a creative writing MFA or Ph.D program, nor hold a graduate degree in creative writing.

For more information on guidelines and how to submit, visit:
glassmountain.submittable.com/submit



Boldface Conference

Founded by the *Glass Mountain* staff in 2009, the Boldface Conference is the country's only literary conference specifically geared toward emerging writers. The intimate conference experience includes daily workshops, readings and open mics, craft talks, master classes, professionalism panels, social events, and more. Boldface is an experience for emerging writers like no other!

Boldface is held on the University of Houston campus each May and is attended by as many as 100 writers from around the country.

Early-bird registration for the 2018 Boldface Conference opens January 1, 2018! Visit boldfaceconference.com for more information and to register.

To inquire about scholarships or group discount rates, email:
boldfaceconference@gmail.com